

Bida, NIGERIA

The Wood Carvers of Bida

Found in the Shimini and Takoassa communities, Bida wood carvers are also known as “Egbas” or “Gbagba.” They have sustained these traditional practices for generations and are now adopting modern designs. The word Shimini means a skill learned and brought to the community for the benefit of all. In early years, there were no wood carvers in Bida. Shimini wood carvers were discovered during the reign of King Etsu Saba, a descendant of the Tsoede dynasty. He came across wood carvers when traveling to Lade village and later sent two people from Bida to Lade to learn this craft. After learning this skill, they returned from Lade as Shimini carvers in the year 1815 in Bida, later extending to Takoassa. As Egbas (wood carvers) they established carving settlements wherever they could find forests. They became specialized handmade carvers of items such as doors, seaters, musical instruments, canoes, chairs, and pistons, with each work carved using the most suitable wood for each craft.

The Wooden Twelve-Legged Stool

The wooden twelve-legged stool has cultural significance in the Nupe tradition. The customized handmade stool is intended for nobility and title holders in Nupe society. One example is a stool named as “Esa Sagi,” which is a stool for a woman with high ritual authority. The stools are designed based on the title holder’s status, their roles in society, and at times, based on the choice of the carver. Esa Sagi is also called “Masharuwa” by carvers. It is used when delivering or executing judgement as well as during decision making. The more legs there are, the wider the stool. The stool height varies from 1 to 2 feet with a surface area of about 1 to

1.5 feet radius, depending on the shape of the stool. It was once believed that during the reign of Etsu Saba, the King would address slaves while seated on the twelve-legged stool (Masharuwa) of Sagi Nchiko (i.e. the High Ranking Sagi). The stool was designed with a provision of a cup holder which is referred to as the Masharuwa Sagiko (i.e. the stool of High Ranking Sagi), showing the dignity attached to the personality of these stools. Another Emir, Etsu Saidu, used the Masharuwa stool for bathing. Other Masharuwa are carved with between six to ten legs, for spiritual activities and therapeutic benefits.

To start carving, a suitable tree is first identified, chopped down by axe, and then cut into shape. The carving method is subtraction with the patterns formed in the mind and interpreted on the wood, while the wood is marked with Bina, which is a drawing tool made with guinea corn stick filled with ecingi. Ecingi is a small indigo plant used as a dye to sketch the forms on the wood. Carvers use an axe to chop off a large part of the wood, starting from the middle and spreading out to shape. Three sets of working tools are used, known as Kekeregi, an adze of various sizes used as a trimmer by reducing the thickness of the wood to final shape. In the case of the twelve-legged stool, the legs are inscribed on the wood by dividing the width of the wood into twelve equal parts using ecin (color). The carving is done in a clockwise direction, moving from the first to the last leg position in a circle. It is finished with a smaller adze while designs are marked on the stool according to the desired purpose. The stool is then



polished with shea butter oil to smooth and protect it against wood insect damage.

Some notable design elements on the stools include the traditional knowledge of Nupe motifs which are inscribed on the surface signifying the preservation of folk art and symbols. The design elements are:

- i. Wara – Loose, open, separate
- ii. Eshigwakpa – dog elbow
- iii. Epawa sayi akun gbara dakun - snake skin, unless the lizards colony is troubled
- iv. Māsaka - a loom, weaving frame, wristband, said to act as a charm when boxing
- v. Cikã - uncultivated forest, bush, desert
- vi. Egbàwà - an axe scratch, scrape, or mark wish
- vii. Dzamigbãñ - bridle; bit to be weary; paralysis; lifeless; withered; faded and to unravel.

The twelve-legged Nupe traditional stools are used by high chiefs as chairs and are symbols of authority for a major decision making as well as for spiritual life. They are also used as prestige items only for market days or during important meetings. In the spiritual realm they are thrones for higher spiritual activities in the belief of occultism and healing by natural remedies.





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