YAW OWUSU SHANGOFEMI: AN AFRICAN-AMERICAN’S BLACKSMITHING CAREER IN CONTEXT

By

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A THESIS PRESENTED TO THE GRADUATE SCHOOL OF THE UNIVERSITY OF FLORIDA IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF MASTER OF ARTS

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This document is dedicated to the graduate students of the University of Florida.
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Abstract of Thesis Presented to the Graduate School of the University of Florida in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of Master of Arts

YAW OWUSU SHANGOFEMI: AN AFRICAN-AMERICAN’S BLACKSMITHING CAREER IN CONTEXT

By

Jody Nicole Berman

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Chair: Robin Poynor
Major Department: Art and Art History

Yaw Owusu Shangofemi has been practicing the art of blacksmithing for over twenty-five years. Informally beginning his career in metallurgy through the craft of jewelry making and welding, Yaw officially began his exploration of the blacksmith trade in 1976 when he apprenticed himself to Phillip Simmons, one of the most revered blacksmiths in America today.

Through his apprenticeship, Yaw’s blacksmithing career became a continuation of a tradition of African-American blacksmithing. His artwork and style are unique but of course not without precedent. He has clearly been influenced by his experience as an apprentice in Phillip Simmons’s shop. While the apprenticeship has undoubtedly contributed to his skill in the domain of iron fabrication or more specifically in the making of utilitarian objects such as gates and tables, it is his artistic aptitude that has compelled him to create ironwork sculptures that transcend conventional utilitarian function and move into the realm of art. He has thus retained certain stylistic elements of
Phillip Simmons’s shop in his utilitarian productions, yet he has been able to surpass the influence of his apprenticeship by expanding his artistic oeuvre to include sculptural forms and incorporating iconography that he has embraced through his involvement and interest in African cultures.

He has studied the religion, art and traditions of both the Akan and the Yoruba, and he continues to embrace these cultures in order to reclaim the African heritage of his ancestry. Yaw’s participation and interest in African culture has added ramifications when one considers the fact that through the “Middle Passage” of the African slave trade, there exists the likelihood of an African blacksmithing tradition that has survived in the Diaspora. The African slave trade was one of the largest population movements in the world and it is unfathomable that these people were brought overseas without the survival of any of their cultural heritage. In order to allow for a more accurate and complete appreciation of Yaw’s experience as a blacksmith, Yaw’s blacksmithing career will be explained as an episode within the larger framework of the history of iron smelting and iron working in the African and the African-American traditions.
CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

Yaw Owusu Shangofemi has been practicing the art of blacksmithing for over twenty-five years. Informally beginning his career in metallurgy through the craft of jewelry making and welding, Yaw officially began his exploration of the blacksmith trade in 1976 when he apprenticed himself to Philip Simmons, one of the most revered blacksmiths in America today.

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One paradigmatic example of an artwork created by Yaw that contains the propensity to be both a functional object and an artwork is the buzzard sculpture (Fig. 1).
With its wings outstretched and about to take flight, the bird is depicted by Yaw at an extraordinary moment in time. The large perch on which the vulture balances precariously recalls iron forms of colonial Charleston through the scroll motif that has also become a trademark in Phillip Simmons’s oeuvre of designs. The base of the sculpture, created out of railroad hooks, evokes the implication of the railroad in the exploitation of African descended people as slaves in United States of America, yet at the same time recalls a major manifestation of the Yoruba deity of iron, *Ogun*, an important element of the African religion Yaw adopted.¹

Yaw created the buzzard sculpture for the *Gelede* women’s society at Oyotunji African village near Sheldon, South Carolina. The theoretical foundations of Oyotunji village were formed out of a reaction to the second-class citizenship accorded to African-Americans living in the United States. The iron sculpture was commissioned by the *Gelede* as a ceremonial object to be utilized during Yoruba rituals. The sculpture stands in front of one of Oyutunji’s community shrines and is a reminder of the religious practices and cultural heritage of the village.

Yoruba religion is not the only African based affiliation Yaw has, for he has also been engaged in Akan culture. He has studied the religion, art and traditions of both the Akan and the Yoruba, and he continues to embrace these cultures in order to reclaim the African heritage of his ancestry. Yaw’s participation and interest in African culture has added ramifications when one considers the fact that through the ‘Middle Passage’ of the African slave trade, there exists the likelihood of an African blacksmithing tradition that has survived in the Diaspora. The African slave trade was one of the largest population

movements in the world and it is unfathomable that these people were brought overseas without the survival of any of their cultural heritage. In order to allow for a more accurate and complete appreciation of Yaw’s experience as a blacksmith, his blacksmithing career should be understood as an episode within the larger framework of the history of iron smelting and iron working in the African and the African-American traditions.

Since this tradition began on the African continent, the importance of iron working in Africa should be discussed first. Iron working has played an important role in the development of many African cultures, and many kingdoms specifically allude to the role of iron in the formation of their political systems. N.J. Vander Merwe spoke of iron as “a catalyst which woke a continent from the slumber of the Stone Age,” and anthropological evidence suggests that this statement is basically accurate. Prior to the introduction of iron on the continent of Africa, the everyday processes of life were much more arduous. With the advent of the Iron Age in Africa, the agriculture of the land was much more easily developed. The shaping and chopping of wood became far more expediently accomplished and the creation of weaponry far more advanced. Academic studies of ironworking traditions in Africa include the research of Patrick McNaughton whose study of the smiths of the Mande is presented in his book The Mande Blacksmith: Knowledge, Power and Art in West Africa. The study, although focusing on the Mande culture, points towards the importance of iron within societies, and includes an analysis of the types of iron implements that are created by the Mande people. Research by

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2 N.J. Van der Merwe. *Iron Age Studies in Africa* (Claremont, South Africa: South African Archaeological Society, 1979) p. 1

Eugenia Herbert also focuses on the importance of iron, although more specifically on the role of iron as relates to gender roles and the structure of power within societies. Other pertinent research concerning the role of iron in Africa include, Peter Schmidt’s book *Iron Technology in East Africa: Symbolism, Science and Archaeology*⁴ and Randi Haaland and Peter Shinnie’s book *African Iron Working: Ancient and Traditional*.⁵ Schmidt discusses the profound changes that iron smelting has undergone as a result of the erosion of the local economy. Schmidt’s research is significant in that it examines the ramifications of economic degradation to the technological knowledge and advancement within the blacksmithing tradition. The book edited by Haaland and Shinnie is a compilation of several essays that discuss the nature and development of iron smelting as it relates to African archaeology and history. Overall the book focuses on the technological aspects of iron working in different regions of the African continent, and hypothesizes as to how and why the indigenous methods have transformed as a result of societal changes.

The ironworking practices of Yoruba cultures are more directly related to the study of Yaw’s ironwork. Within the Yoruba belief system, there is a religious connotation to the blacksmithing trade. As stated above, according to Yoruba mythology, Ogun is the god of iron and war. He is viewed as having two distinct personalities. On the one hand, he is the purveyor of civilization whose tools prepare the land for communities. The knives, adzes, chisels and axes are shaped under his auspices by the smiths working within his

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domain. On the other hand, weaponry such as swords and spears are also within his province. These are the paraphernalia of war and devastation and relate to the destructive powers of Ogun. These paradoxical associations of the iron deity are understandable given that it was with the advent of iron that both technological advancements and atrocities toward humanity occurred. Scholarship concerning this area of interest includes Sandra Barnes’s collection of essays *Africa’s Ogun: Old World and New* and Cornelius Adepegba’s book, *Yoruba Metal Sculpture*. Barnes’s research into the field of Yoruba iron working and that of others contributing to the volume focuses on the technology of iron as it relates to the mythology of Ogun in Yorubaland and across the Atlantic. The presence of a g-d of iron within the religious pantheon of Yoruba culture signifies the enormous importance of iron to the culture. Adepegba’s book is an account of the history of metal sculpture in Yorubaland. He addresses the socio-historical question of how the patronage of the metal arts has affected the art form and analyses the stylistic differences between recent and past metal sculptures.

While ironwork played an important role in the development of the many cultures in Africa, it was especially significant in the new cultures to evolve in the Americas, as Africans were taken across the Atlantic as early as the beginning of the 16th century to work as laborers for Europeans in the new world. Africans served not only as agricultural laborers but also as artisans and craftsmen in the Americas. No discussion of the African Diaspora is complete without mention of the work of Melville Herskovitz. His research on cultures of the African Diaspora was groundbreaking, and his assertion that African retentions remain within the Diaspora was unprecedented. Herskovitz maintained that the

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survivals of ‘Africanisms’ within the Diaspora have caused African-Americans, to a certain degree, to be more African than American. This interpretation has been in accordance with separatists on either side of the color line. Nevertheless, Herskovitz’s research has remained significant within the field of Diaspora studies and his postulations continue to be influential.

I have drawn much of the recapitulation of the African-American iron working tradition through my research into John Vlach’s writing on the topic. These works include: The Afro-American Tradition in Decorative Arts\(^7\) and Philip Simmons: Charleston Blacksmith\(^8\). Vlach has done extensive research into the ironworks of Charleston, and his biographical study of Philip Simmons remains the primary document regarding this celebrated blacksmith. Ade Ofunniyin, the grandson of Philip Simmons, has completed extensive anthropological research in the field of blacksmithing as it pertains to his grandfather, the African Diaspora, and the continent of Africa itself.\(^9\) Ade has served as an invaluable resource for my exploration of the sculptural traditions of African and African-American ironworking. His continuous input throughout this endeavor has been vital to my efforts, and his experience as a Yoruba practitioner has given me insight into the religious aspects of ironworking in the African Diaspora.

During the last century, there has been a vast amount of research on the topic of the African Diaspora, which continues into this century. However, for the purposes of

\(^7\) John Vlach. The Afro-American Tradition in Decorative Arts (Cleveland, OH: Cleveland Museum of Art, 1978)


Carl Hunt, a historian, was one of the original researchers to study the Oyotunji village in South Carolina. His dialogue with the village members and king is an important touchstone in the study of this amalgam of African and African-American cultural histories. Clarke’s fieldwork on the village is significant in the study of the interplay between race, difference, and the politics of authorizing knowledge. The ethnography addresses the idea of ‘blackness’ and the cultural politics of difference based on religious, legal, and historical institutionalized strategies of power.15 Robert Farris Thompson’s research was specifically important to my study in that he remains a leader in the field of


Yoruba arts of Africa and the African Diaspora. His conjecture that the ‘altar’ is an artistic performative installation space that becomes consecrated through ritual has been a pioneering statement within the study of African Art.

The information concerning Yaw Owusu Shangofemi specifically was collected through numerous recorded and non-recorded interviews that were conducted between him and me, and with his associates, especially Ade Ofunniyin. I transcribed the recorded interviews and re-assembled the quoted material, to give as accurate of an illustration of his artistic and personal identity as possible.

This thesis is organized into seven chapters. Chapter 2, IRON IN AFRICA AND THE DIASPORA, discusses the socio-historical effects of the introduction of iron in Africa. The role of the blacksmith within certain African societies is considered in terms of the public’s understanding of the blacksmith and his iron-work creations. In chapter three, YAW OWUSU SHANGOFEMI--A BRIEF BIOGRAPHY, the biographical aspects of Yaw’s life are recounted so as to situate him within the expansive framework of an African-American blacksmithing tradition. Chapter four, PHILIP SIMMONS: CHARLESTON BLACKSMITH, presents Philip Simmons as a celebrated blacksmith, and as a purveyor of the blacksmithing tradition through his position as a mentor to Yaw and other apprentices. Discussion of the history of blacksmithing in the Charleston region, and the socio-historical aspects of the former slave-holding city is also included. Chapter five, YAW’S APPRENTICESHIP TO PHILIP SIMMONS AND CONVENTIONAL IMAGERY, describes the conditions of Yaw’s apprenticeship within Philip Simmons’s shop, and how Yaw’s ironwork reflects the influence of the apprenticeship. The continuous working relationship between Philip and Yaw is noted,
even after Yaw left his apprenticeship in order to establish his own blacksmithing business with Philip Simmons’s grandson, Ade Ofunniyin. Chapter six, THE OYOTUNJI EXPERIENCE, recounts Yaw’s involvement with the Yoruba village, and the subsequent effect that it has had on his ironwork sculptures. Several specific sculptures are discussed in terms of their cultural and religious significance within the Yoruba tradition. Chapter seven, CONCLUSIONS, gives a synopsis of both Yaw and Philip Simmons’s position as blacksmiths working in the tradition of African-American iron working, and reflects on the societal changes that continue to affect their work.
CHAPTER 2
IRON IN AFRICA AND THE DIASPORA

The smelting of iron has been described as a “procreative process whereby the union of the primal elements – earth, air, fire and water – conceives iron as its offspring.”\(^1\) The natal analogy of blacksmith work has been documented in ancestral origin myths, which often places the blacksmith as the catalyst for the transformative process. Metaphors of conception and birth come alive through the construction and manipulation of the iron ore compound. However, the blacksmith is also associated with the powers of destruction, for “as surely as the hoe can cultivate the land, it can with equal efficiency lead to the depletion of it; and as surely as the blade can harvest the crops, it can be used to maim or kill.”\(^2\) This duality between life and death is inherent in many of the mythological associations of the blacksmith.

These paradoxical associations of the blacksmith can be witnessed in various Sub-Saharan African societies. In many African societies, the blacksmith is glorified and vilified, feared and despised, allowed exclusive privileges and bound by individualized regulations.\(^3\) The reasons for these conflicting interpretations vary; however, it would suffice to say that it involves the blacksmith’s dual and integral position in society. For instance, the blacksmith’s ability to create the implements necessary for utilitarian,

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\(^2\) Ibid., p. 9

spiritual, and social purposes has made his position in society imperative to the effective functioning of all elements of the community. Conversely, the systematic segregation of blacksmiths by certain African societies has been interpreted as a method of ensuring that the smiths do not become “too powerful.” Thus the smith is left in the conflicting and often precarious position of being both revered and resented for his abilities.

Many African ancestral belief systems concerning blacksmiths maintain these paradoxical associations. For example, Ogun is one of the many deities of West African pantheons. He is the Yoruba god of hunting, iron and warfare. Any blacksmith in Yoruba society would be spiritually associated with the deity - Ogun. In the Yoruba belief system Ogun embodies two disparate ideologies. On the one hand, he is the terrifying warrior equipped with weapons to violently defeat his adversaries. On the other hand he is civilization’s ideal male: a charismatic leader known for his sexual prowess and virility; he nurtures, protects and relentlessly pursues truth, impartiality and justice. These differing manifestations of Ogun correlate to the destroyer/creator archetype. Thus devotees of Ogun often proclaim, “Ogun has many faces.”

For over two thousand years the utilization of iron has effectively transformed the continent of Africa. While no Bronze Age formally existed in sub-Saharan Africa, by 500 B.C.E iron-ore technology disseminated outward from Egypt until reaching the rest

6 Ibid.
7 Ibid.
of the vast expanse of the continent. Once unleashed, the knowledge of iron-ore manipulation allowed for great changes in Africa’s topography and civilization.

The Iron Age flourished in Africa and spawned new kingdoms that were supported by trade, iron being the trade good. Thus, when Europeans met the African shores, they brought with them inexpensive iron to exchange for human slaves. This phenomenon was supported by the fact that the demand for iron in Africa exceeded the capacity of local production, creating a ready market for the Portuguese and others who followed. This affected local production tremendously, and by 1920 indigenous furnaces ceased to produce native iron altogether, because of the ease of importing the metal.

The history of iron metallurgy in Africa and its devastating connection to slavery has led to both technological advancements and enormous humanitarian digressions. Through the exchange of iron for slaves, Africans were taken from their native lands to the New World. Through the Middle Passage, the African slaves retained the skills that they possessed. Elliot P. Skinner, author of *The Dialectic Between Diasporas and Homelands*, points out “African labor did much to facilitate the rise of industrial capitalism, and with it European hegemony over the globe.” The inhabitants of the continent of Africa became a productive resource for European exploitation because Africans had achieved the level of agricultural, pastoral, and technical skill that was

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9 Ibid.  
10 Ibid.  
11 Ibid.  
12 Ibid.  
needed for the transformation of the New World into plantations and mines. Without the skill and manpower of these persons, it would have been nearly impossible for Europeans to undertake the prospect of settling and developing the land.

Records of contributions of Africans and their descendants to the skilled labor force in the Americas have consistently reflected the magnitude of blacksmithing in the African tradition. As one scholar, John Vlach, has pointed out, “Once we understand that Blacks were commonly employed in the metal trade – that in some places they dominated the smithing craft – we can recognize that the potential existed for an Afro-American tradition in blacksmithing.”

Many plantation owners kept slaves that were skilled in the field of blacksmithing, and evidence seems to suggest that the work was completed by workshops rather than by individual craftsmen. The ability of these smiths was a valuable resource and their work was crucial to the financial prosperity of these plantations. Aside from carpentry, there is no other art form in which African and African-American talent is articulated more fully than in the field of blacksmithing. For the purposes of this thesis I will endeavor to trace Yaw Owusu Shangofemi’s artistic journey as a blacksmith in an attempt to place his artistic career in the broader historical framework of an African and African-American blacksmithing tradition.

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14 Ibid., p. 13.
16 Ibid., p. 108
17 Ibid.
18 Ibid.
CHAPTER 3
YAW OWUSU SHANGOFEMI – A BRIEF BIOGRAPHY

Yaw Owusu Shangofemi was born as Paul Burns Jr. on January 1, 1947, in Brooklyn’s St. Mary’s Hospital to Evelyn and Paul Burns. Although Yaw was not aware of its importance at the time, he grew up in Weeksville, Brooklyn, a historical ‘Free Black’ settlement established in the 19th century whose residents established schools, churches, and benevolent associations and were active in the abolitionist movement.¹ However, the historical significance of the Weeksville Township was not ‘rediscovered’ until 1968 when Yaw had already lived there for several years.

In Brooklyn, Yaw and his family lived in a house that was formerly condemned. The city opened up a number of such properties for minorities to occupy; his parents became the superintendents of the ailing building.

Yaw recalls that he first became interested in art and music at a very young age. He remembers, “I used to draw dinosaurs and I was doing a good job, so my mother would say –‘Oh wow you got the details.’”² To explore his musical talent, he played the flute in fifth grade. When he chose to go to the all boys East New York Vocational High School for cabinetry and carpentry, he also studied drafting. He recalled the time he spent in High School, saying,

¹ www.weeksvillesociety.org/introduction.html This website is dedicated to the preservation of the Weeksville township and includes information on the archeological aspects of the historical town. The website is maintained by the Weeksville Society and includes information about visiting and supporting the society.

² Interview with Yaw October 4th, 2004, at his home in Hawthorne, Florida.
I did drawing then, and I was a genius at [taking] a shape, and if you break it down and you put it back together. I could look at something and tell if it went together or not, so I knew I was going to build something, and in the beginning I thought I wanted to build houses. That’s why I went to vocational school; but little by little I used to draw more. I used to draw portraits and I used to draw some scenery, but I started drawing more things that had to do with music - John Coltrane. I drew him and musicians. As a matter fact I used to draw right from the album cover, drawing what I see. I never did any tracing. I got the proportions.3

Music and musicians have been a great influence on Yaw, and he speaks of it often when reminiscing about the different periods of his life. He himself is a musician. In addition to the flute, he plays the drums and keyboard. He attributes some of his earliest memories to his introduction to jazz by his neighbor and best friend’s father, who, in Yaw’s words, was a “jazz enthusiast.” Yaw recalls:

[Mr. Brown] used to buy all the new jazz records, and he had the only stereophonic set in the building, so I used to go to his house and listen . . . . all the latest ones and Latin and jazz, so I think that’s how I started to play the drum.4

At seventeen Yaw enlisted in the army with the permission of his parents and spent his eighteenth birthday in Germany. He said of the experience:

I just wanted to get out of Brooklyn. I wanted something different...[and]...the guy said that “I can guarantee you that if you sign up you will go to Germany”... and I was kind apprehensive . . . [but] . . . I went to Germany, and I was there for three years.5

The army gave Yaw the chance to travel, and fortunately he did not have to serve combat time during the Vietnam War. He spoke fondly of his experience in Germany when he said,

Oh I enjoyed it. There was nice jazz, nice environment. I got to learn a lot and I had different opportunities. I met new people, and you find out people are people. I met more Africans, South Africans. They were dancers and performers; I met a lot of

3 Ibid.

4 Ibid.

5 Ibid.
jazz musicians. I even met my cousin over there playing the saxophone at the E.M. club, which is the army enlisted man’s club.\textsuperscript{6}

Yaw left the army in the late 1960s, during a tumultuous time in American history - the Civil Rights Movement. The era was marked by extreme social unrest. An unprecedented amount of energy had formed against the second-class citizenship accorded to African-Americans. Resistance to racial segregation and discrimination with strategies such as civil disobedience, non-violent protest, marches, boycotts, freedom rides, rallies, and legal action received national attention as newspaper, radio and television reporters and cameramen scrambled to document the struggle to end racial inequality. Upon leaving the armed services, Yaw was back in New York, an epicenter of much of the Civil Rights movement.

During that time period in Africa, Ghana was liberated from the British mandate. Ghana’s independence had unleashed considerable sentiment among American blacks, who over the years had maintained a sentimental if not vocal interest in the affairs of blacks on the African continent.\textsuperscript{7} As a result of this awareness, an interest in Ghanaian culture and religion developed, and avenues for this interest were established. For example, an Akan temple in Queens, New York, was founded in 1967.

The religious leader Nana Yao Opare Dinizulu I headed the temple, which he established after a trip to Ghana in 1965.\textsuperscript{8} On his trip to Ghana he visited the Akonedi shrine and received divination, which directed him to his ancestral home, and he was

\textsuperscript{6} Ibid.


\textsuperscript{8} Ibid.
initiated into the Akan religion. When he returned to the United States, he brought three Akan shrines with him and in 1967 he established the traditional Akan religious and cultural organization, Bosum Dzemawodzi, in New York. Yaw became involved in the Ghanaian Akan religion through this temple. Yaw recalled his introduction to the Ghanaian religion:

I used to go to their Bembes . . . where they get together to call the spirits... They used to have them in Long Island City. The people said I could come if I wanted to, and I started going, and I got involved, and I got the different spiritual work done for me, and I got interested in the religion.

It was through his involvement in the Akan temple that his name was changed from Paul Burns, Jr., to Yaw Owusu. Names in the Akan language have significant meanings. A day-name indicates the day of the week a person was born. Yaw or Yao is a day-name that indicates he was born on a Thursday. Owusu signifies noble birth. Yaw explained that he did not choose the name but that a priest gave it to him.

Presently, Yaw is known by his Akan day-name, but the transition was not immediate for acquaintances. For example, when asked if his mother espoused the Ghanaian name given to him, he reminisced on a conversation they had:

She calls me both, she said “I name you Paul so I don’t know what you talking about, you can’t change your name.” I said “mamma those aren’t our names

9 Ibid.
10 Ibid.
11 Interview with Yaw September 29th, 2004, at his Hawthorne home.
12 The following names are associated with the days of the week and are dependant upon whether the person is male/female: Sunday = Kwesi/Esi, Monday = Kwondwo/Adwoa, Tuesday = Kpbena/Abena, Wednesday = Kweku/Ekua, Thursday = Yaw/Yaa, Friday = Kofi/Efua, Saturday = Kwame/Ama.
anyway you know, get real.” She said “you know you are right, you know,” cause my mother was really a Garveyite.13

Yaw continued his involvement in the Akan temple after leaving the state of New York. He was married through the temple and he also continues to use Akan imagery such as *adinkra* symbols in his artwork today (Fig.). He traveled to Ghana in the 1990s where he had a deeply moving spiritual experience. He recalled,

I always wanted to go to Ghana because of the Akan religion . . . [Ghana] really touched me, the beauty of the land, the birds and the waterfalls . . . And while I was in Ghana I had some spiritual work done for me . . . I had gone to a festival and the priests kept looking at me and talking to each other . . . and they come and tell me later that I need spiritual work done, they need to bathe me. So they took me in their shrine and bathed me and sat me in front of their throne room, which in Ghana they invoke their orishas [deities] in stools, so there was a whole shrine room full of stools that they got me in front of . . . There was a whole lot of power coming out of there. That was a serious experience. Yeah, so after that experience, it touched me so that the whole drive home, which was all along the Cape Coast, about three hours, no words came out of my mouth. I was like silent, everybody said, “You alright? Yaw, you O.K?” I was like in a deep meditation. It was a serious experience.14

From the 1970s onward Yaw continued his affiliation with the temple and his interest in African culture with its inspirational and artistic power.

Soon after his return from Germany, Yaw became a mailroom clerk in the School for the Visual Arts. This proved to be a place of great opportunity and serendipity because while Yaw was employed there, the founder and director of the school, Silas Rhodes, happened to see some of his drawings in the locker room and was impressed by

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13 Interview with Yaw January 20, 2005, at his Hawthorne home. ‘Garveyite’ is a reference to Marcus Garvey, the founder of the Universal Negro Improvement Association. He was a proponent of the twentieth century Pan-African or ‘Back to Africa’ movement.

14 Ibid. Stools are the central symbols of Akan civilization. Throughout the Akan region in Ghana, important persons will commissions carved stools for daily and/or ceremonial use. At their death it is believed that one’s soul is then transferred to their own stool. The stool would then be blackened by community members and placed within a sacred ancestral shrine. Thus, these sacralized ‘shrine rooms’ are representative of the state’s dynastic history. H.M. Cole and Doran Ross. *The Arts of Ghana* (Los Angeles, CA: U.C.L.A Press, 1977) p. 67
them. Upon seeing them he told Yaw that he would arrange it so that he could take free, non-credit classes. Yaw began taking three classes each semester. Commenting on the experience, Yaw recalled, “I met all the different arts students. Everyone, - young, old, black, white; so I learned more from the students than from the class. Seeing the experience and the technique, I learned a lot.”¹⁵ Yaw stayed at the Manhattan School for the Visual Arts for three years and then became a gallery assistant. As he puts it, “I graduated from the mailroom.”¹⁶ From that point on, he had numerous other vocations that utilized his artistic talents, such as doing backdrops and scenery for display advertisements and printing signs. Then he began working as a painting restorer for Braun and Zachau in Manhattan. He had gained the expertise necessary to work for them through his schooling at the Manhattan School for the Visual Arts and through his experience in the field of carpentry. He worked for Braun and Zachau for a few years, learning how to do wax and glue relining and framing.

“And after that, the arts really wasn’t paying the bills,”¹⁷ so Yaw began attending Brooklyn College, which was a requisite for his employment at an organization called Model Cities. Yaw worked as a community specialist recruiting people under city agencies for different positions. While the job did not include any art, it was financially rewarding.

In 1974 Yaw left his job and New York to move south with a girlfriend to Cocoa Beach, Florida. Her aunt lived there and was able to “show them the ropes.”¹⁸ After

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¹⁵ Interview with Yaw October 4th, 2004, at his Hawthorne home.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid.
living in Florida for a few months, Yaw briefly found a job picking oranges, but he then found a job at a children’s home about sixty to seventy miles away from where he was staying. Since he had experience with social work from his job at Model Cities, he and his girlfriend were hired to be ‘house parents’ or foster parents to about twenty children with the United Methodist Church.

After leaving that position, he began working at the YMCA doing cultural enrichment activities in the black community. Yaw says “I was doing drumming and dancing at that time and ever since New York.”19 He also worked with the Y athletics department, specifically with the basketball team.

He stayed with the YMCA about a year but then moved to Orlando to work with an African dance troupe for the Disney World hotels. He did not remain in Orlando for very long and soon moved to Charleston, South Carolina, where a fateful meeting changed the course of his life.

While in Charleston, Yaw had obtained work welding in a shipyard. He was introduced to Karim Abdul because they had drumming in common. Karim and Yaw soon became friends, and when Karim witnessed Yaw’s talent for welding, he made a considerable suggestion. Yaw recalls,

Because I was doing the welding and beating and banging and bending all the rest in the shipyard, so [Karim] said . . . “If you can do that, if you can twist stuff like this,” (see I was also making jewelry with him)...He said “if you can twist stuff like this, you should work with Philip Simmons. You are welding already.” So he introduced me. So that was the first time I got to see what goes on in the blacksmith shop.20

19 Ibid.

20 Interview with Yaw September 29th, 2004, at his Hawthorne home.
CHAPTER 4
PHILIP SIMMONS: CHARLESTON BLACKSMITH

Philip Simmons operated and managed a blacksmith shop in Charleston, a city very well known for both its modern and historical decorative ironwork (Fig. 2). Philip Simmons designed and produced a good number of the ornamental ironworks for which the city has been recognized. He began practicing his trade at the age of thirteen. He is presently ninety-three years old.

Philip Simmons’s work has been researched by the scholar John Vlach and has more recently been popularized through the efforts of the Historic Charleston Foundation, which sought to revive the city’s deteriorating historical landmarks. Philip Simmons was initially integrated into the city’s preservation and tourism plan as an artisan capable of replicating and maintaining the ironworks of the homes, churches and other historical buildings.¹ He then was absorbed into the tourism movement as he became more renowned as an artisan in his own right.² His identity and artistic career were popularized as a ‘bridge’ between the antebellum customs of iron working and South Carolina’s African heritage tradition.³

South Carolina has long been recognized as a state associated with an African or slave related past. From the founding of the city of Charleston in 1670, Africans were

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² Ibid.

³ Ibid.
imported into the region, first in small numbers from the West Indies and then in even
greater numbers directly from Africa. Advertisements in local newspapers have
provided insight into the origins of more than 120,000 people transported from Africa
between 1716 and the end of the legal trade in 1807 (Fig. 3). The importation of slaves
directly from Africa continued in the South until 1859, when the last consignment landed
in Mobile, Alabama. According to the table, eight coastal regions of Africa are
recognized: Senegambia, Sierra Leone, the Windward Coast, the Gold Coast, the Bight of
Benin, the Bight of Biafra, Angola (including the Congo), and Mozambique-Madagascar.
This chart however, is only a reflection of the importation trends during the time period
and should not be understood as an accurate reflection of the African influence in the
South Carolinian region.

South Carolina also became the first state to have a slaveholding majority in its
white population. According to Manisha Sinha author of The Counter-Revolution of
Slavery: Politics and Ideology in Antebellum South Carolina, “More than any other
southern state, South Carolina represented ... American slavery.” The state had been part
of the slave trade since the colonial period, and with the expansion of the cotton
production industry of the late eighteenth century, came an upsurge in the demand for
slave labor. During the eighteenth century, the majority of the population in South

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4 Marquetta Goodwine, editor. The Legacy of Igbo Landing (Atlanta, GA: Clarity Press, 1998) p.54
5 Ibid.
6 William Arnett and Paul Arnett, editors. Souls Grown Deep: African-American Vernacular Art of the
South (Atlanta, GA: Tinwood Books, 2000) p. 52
7 Ibid., p.12
8 Manisha Sinha. The Counter-Revolution of Slavery: Politics and Ideology in Antebellum South Carolina
Carolina were slaves, and by 1850 the growth of plantation slavery had “converted the state into one gigantic black belt” (Fig. 4). From 1820 to 1860, the proportion of whites in the state’s population fell and many more whites migrated out of the state rather than into it (Fig. 5). Therefore, slavery, more than any other issue, determined the geopolitics of the Carolinian state, and the slaveholding planter-class became the foremost spokesman for southern slavery.

The fact that South Carolina was so heavily dependant on the labor of these enslaved Africans laid the groundwork for an African/African-American tradition in the arts and culture of the region. Several scholars have documented examples of African retentions and continuities in African-American woodcarving, pottery, quilting, basketry, architecture and blacksmithing. Babatunde Lawal, a leading researcher in the field of African art commented on African retentions in the Diaspora when he wrote,

African-American . . . art is, as it were, a tree with African roots and American branches. The cuttings were transplanted from Africa at the inception of the slave trade. Although North America has transformed the tree to the extent that its Africanity is not readily apparent today, the roots are still spiritually attached to the motherland, through African retentions and continuities in physique, behavior, disposition, dress, linguistics, aesthetics, religion, burial customs, folklore, poetry, music and dance.

These retentions indicate that Africans and African descended people endeavored to replicate forms with which they were familiar. They did not abandon their artistic cultural heritage in the Diaspora, although they assimilated many aspects of New World

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9 Ibid., p. 10
10 Ibid., p. 11
11 Ibid., p. 13-14
culture. The slaves of South Carolina labored for three centuries, often in considerable isolation, both on large plantations and in villages, as well as separated on the Sea Islands off the coast. This situation allowed for many cultural traits from African homelands to be continued as well as to be combined with the European traits that they learned.

The Sea Islands have been regarded as the most purely African of all African-American areas in the country. Many aspects of culture connect the Sea Island communities to specific areas of Africa. The mystical beliefs in magical practices, with tales of conjuring, root doctors and hexes, lend themselves to such interpretations. The kinship patterns, religious practices, polygynous marriage, extended family, and the composition of the household all reflect African precedents. 13

The inhabitants of the Sea Islands are also known as the “Gullah” or the ‘Geechee’ people. The African-derived customs of these people have been able to flourish primarily because of the reduced interference of the whites in comparison to other areas of the United States. 14 The Gullah were initially recognized because of their preservation of African culture through their use of the African based ‘Gullah’ language15 (Fig. 6). This isolation arose partly out of environmental factors. For example, the inhabitants of the islands were generally resistant to benign tertian malaria and yellow fever that ran rampant in the damp environment. As the Gullahs began to migrate out of the islands, the

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name ‘Geechie was applied to those former-residents that moved to the mainland.\textsuperscript{16} Many of the ‘Geechee’ people have relocated to the city of Charleston.

Recently, the city of Charleston has been singled out as a historical attraction because it was the major city of one of the founding colonies, and it was a staging ground during both the Revolutionary War and the Civil War. Furthermore, South Carolina contains several expansive plantations near Charleston that are part of a history of antebellum southern traditions. The Gullah-Geechee people have long been associated with the city, and Charleston was also the site of the famed Denmark Vesey Conspiracy.\textsuperscript{17} Factors such as these have led to the promotion of Charleston as tourist destination into the ‘pastoral’ antebellum years of the American past.

Philip Simmons’s popularity through the efforts of the Charleston Historic Foundation has had mixed reactions. While most people agree that Phillip Simmons’s talent is undeniable and thus his renown warranted, there are also political and ideological claims at stake. Philip Simmons’s promotion by the Charleston Heritage Foundation has been viewed as a calculated method for the city to mask Charleston’s volatile relationship with its African-American community. According to Ade Ofunniyin, Philip Simmons’s grandson,

Important to the development and marketing of these attractions was the need for state and city planners to . . . enkindle a history that would not be offensive to the visiting public. It was essential that the representation of Charleston’s history be

\textsuperscript{16} Ibid., p.63

\textsuperscript{17} Ibid., p. 78 Denmark Vesey, a free man of color, is credited with planning an insurrection among the slaves in Charleston. The catalyst had been the city’s campaign of harassment against the black Methodist Church, an organization that boasted some three thousand members. The revolt was planned for July 1822 but before it could be consummated, was betrayed by enslaved African informants when they notified the local authorities. Trials and interrogations quickly ensued, after which thirty-seven of the accused were banished, while thirty five, including Vesey were executed.
reinterpreted to downplay the many sensitive issues that still haunted the landscapes of the city’s changing communities.\footnote{Ibid., p. 9.}

Nevertheless, while Philip Simmons’s renown may be met with conflicting views of ideology versus accurate history, the significance of his artistic career as a blacksmith is indisputable.

Philip Simmons grew up on Daniel Island, one of the Sea Islands across from the Cooper River (Fig. 7). He led the life of a farmer and fisherman with his grandparents until the age of thirteen, and they conveyed to Philip the ethics of hard work.\footnote{Ibid., p. 1} His great-grandparents had been slaves, and his grandparents knew the value of independent work. Philip quickly learned the conditions of hard work, and this became a routine that he never abandoned. Philip grew up in a home that was built by his grandfather, a fact that was significant to him. He was once quoted as saying of the home,

\begin{quote}
My grandfather built it. He was everything. He was a poor man. He wasn’t a professional. He built his own house, wasn’t a professional house builder. He wasn’t a professional fisherman. He wasn’t a professional farmer. But that’s the thing that he done.\footnote{Ibid., p. 2}
\end{quote}

While Philip admired the resourcefulness of his grandfather, it is also important to note that this home was built in the tradition of the Anglo-American plantation era.\footnote{Ibid.} Furthermore, these types of homes were surviving remnants of an Afro-Caribbean plan that was initially used in Barbados, the immediate homeland of the first black settlers of the Sea Islands. Homes of this type were built on the Sea Islands until quite recently.
John Vlach, a folkloric historian and author of the book *Charleston Blacksmith: The Work of Philip Simmons* states,

The impact of Philip’s Sea Island childhood was particularly significant in terms of his sense of ethnic and regional identity. While he has lived and worked in the black community of Charleston most of his life, his first seven years were spent almost exclusively in the presence of blacks.22

Philip does identify himself as Geechee, the local term for a Sea Islander. This identity becomes more significant when one understands the political and social ramifications of being ‘Gullah/Geechie’ in Charleston. Charleston has long maintained a distinct black subculture of its own tied to a history of urban servitude, manumission and the independence of free black tradesman.23 As noted by John Vlach, “To identify oneself as Geechie is to confirm one’s status as an outsider.”24 As noted above, one identifying trait of the Gullah/Geechie people is their distinct speech pattern. Philip’s speech is strongly influenced by the rhythms and sounds of Gullah, the African based Creole speech spoken among the island communities.25 Though his speech has been somewhat modified by his deliberate attempts to use ‘proper English,’ Creolists would undoubtedly recognize his accent and vocabulary as Gullah.

The historical, decorative ironwork of Charleston had always fascinated Philip. On his way to school, Philip would gaze at the ironwork creations as he passed by them 26 (Fig. 8). When the schoolteacher would allow time for drawing, Phillip sketched designs

22 Ibid., p. 8
23 Ibid.
24 Ibid.
25 Ibid., p. 9
26 Ibid., p. 11
based on ironwork. Philip once said, “Tell you what get me eager to draw, because I seen so much ironwork around Charleston – the early craftsmen and I’d like it. That’s what get me to start drawing and I do my drawing.”

Philip Simmons began his formal interest in blacksmith work when he, like Yaw, witnessed the activity of a blacksmith shop. Philip was enraptured as the blacksmith Peter Simmons and his apprentices created an iron hinge. “Brother this is some action,” Phillip thought to himself as he stood in the doorway with several other people, watching with amazement, as ironworks in the blacksmith forge were produced. Apparently, Peter Simmons was quite well known in East Charleston for his ability to “fix anything” (Fig. 9).

Peter Simmons’s son Lonnie Simmons was an apprentice in the shop at that time. He said of his father’s reputation, “Oh he [Peter] showed off . . . And he’s makin’ music with it. ‘Boom toochy-toom, toochy toom toom te toochy toochy toom.’ And the people just stand there. Oh, he show off, man.”

This reference to music in connection to the blacksmithing trade has been noted by several scholars who have done research within the field of blacksmithing. For example, Patrick McNaughton, a researcher of the Mande people has stated,

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27 Ibid.

28 Although they share the same last name, according to John Vlach, there is no familial relationship between Peter and Phillip Simmons. However, according to Yaw, it was later discovered that Peter and Phillip were distant cousins.


30 Ibid.

“Often when the [blacksmith] worked, they created a lively atmosphere in the neighborhood…with patterns of rhythms that resemble drum beats…smiths generally know many rhythms. In fact, learning [the rhythms] is an apprentice’s first task of fundamental importance.”

Yaw has also acknowledged the importance of sound quality to his blacksmithing work. He has remarked that he owns an anvil that he does not use because “the sound is bad.” He demonstrated this when he hammered on two anvils, one with ‘good’ sound quality and one with ‘bad’ sound quality. Apparently the rhythm of the hammering on the anvil acquires pleasing articulation when it is utilized and performed through the creation of ironworks.

Philip acknowledges it was a scene much like the one that Lonnie described that first drew him to Peter’s shop. Master Blacksmith Peter Simmons had spent his early childhood in slavery and grew up during the Reconstruction era. He had learned his trade from his father, Guy Simmons, who had worked as a plantation blacksmith. At the time when Philip observed Peter Simmons, Peter was a sixty-eight year old powerhouse, not showing any signs of slowing down.

Philip continued to visit the shop on his way home from school each day. Initially, Peter refused to allow Philip near the forge because he thought it to be too dangerous for a boy Philip’s age. Philip however, was persistent and was eventually given a promise by Peter to let him work “when you get to be thirteen.” Philip anxiously awaited this

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33 Interview with Yaw September 29th, 2004, at his Hawthorne home.


opportunity and he agreed to work each day after school. At that time there was no shortage of black craftsmen in the city of Charleston. Blacks had long constituted a major element in the Charleston labor force.36 According to Vlach, “Wherever records are available to assess the participation of blacks in skilled occupations there are always abundant references to the tasks of the blacksmith.”37

The practice of slaves hiring themselves out as skilled craftsmen had been a common occurrence in Charleston for decades. The profits earned through these arrangements were split between the enslaved person and his master. This practice led to some resentment among white workers since blacks accepted extremely low wages and thus undercut the open labor market.38 In fact, records indicate that a nearly complete economic parity was achieved between black and white smiths in Charleston’s history.39 Therefore, since blacks were employed in the metal trades -that in some places they dominated the smithing craft— it seems obvious that the potential existed for an Afro-American tradition in blacksmithing.40

Since records have indicated that scores of the captured African-born slaves were master artisans in their homelands, it is not unimaginable that they created New World objects through the scope of the Old. Though they may have easily adapted to many

36 Ibid.


39 Ibid.

aspects of Western culture, they did not abandon their artistic heritage upon arrival in the United States. While European blacksmithing techniques were introduced in the Diaspora, and resulting adjustments were made to satisfy tastes, the combination of African elements with the European model is resultantly undeniable. As Toni Morrison stated during an interview on the topic of African-American art, “black [art] is remembering and describing” an “exorcism” of black history.”

Philip’s explanation for his success as an apprentice to Peter Simmons is a simple one - he stayed and, therefore, he learned. Peter began by assigning mundane chores for Phillip to accomplish. As Philip became more skilled, Peter’s trust in him increased, and so he also increased Philip’s pay. Phillip said of the experience,

[By] that time I’d know my way around the shop pretty good. I could straighten iron, heat ‘em and bend ‘em myself. The Old Man’d step out the door and say, “Bend it, its in the fire, hot, turn it.” That’s when I got eager to learn the trade, when I could do things on my own. So I would get me a little practice. So there it is. As he would get confidence, then he would launch out the bigger things or more particular thing. When I make a mistake, he would stop everything. Some people will tell you you’re wrong and keep going working. He stop everything and explain it to you.

Philip began as an apprentice to Peter Simmons, working his way up to being his partner, and eventually taking over the shop altogether. His blacksmithing career has

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41 Toni Morrison, born 1931 in Lorain, Ohio, is a celebrated contemporary American novelist. Awarded the Nobel Prize for literature in 1993, Morrison powerfully evokes in her fiction the legacies of displacement and slavery that have been bequeathed to the African-American community. Morton, Eric. ‘Comparing Yoruba and Western Aesthetics: A Philosophical View of African American Art, Culture and Aesthetics.’ Ijele: Art E-Journal of the African World: 1, 1. www.ijele.com/vol1/morton.html


43 Ibid., p. 19
become well known and a great deal of the ironwork in Charleston was created or restored by Philip Simmons’s blacksmithing shop.

One of the most celebrated ironwork designs that Philip created is the snake gate at the Christopher Gadsden House (Fig. 10). Like much of his work, the snake gate was commissioned through the Historic Charleston Foundation. The motif of the expansive gate commemorates Gadsden’s development of the “Don’t Tread on Me” flag that was used in the Revolutionary War. Philip’s inclusion of the snake-emblem thus highlights this interesting element of history. More importantly, however, the creation of this gate marks the beginning of a new episode in the Charleston blacksmithing tradition. This gate is the first work in the long tradition of ornamental ironwork to include a sculptural representation of an animal. According to Philip, composing the snake motif was somewhat complicated:

We made the gate in about eight days, you see. I think we been almost as long on the snake as we been on the whole gate. I start with a piece five-eighths inch by two and one-half inches. That’s big metal. I think I went to the junkyard and pulled it in. You heat and beat, heat and beat, heat and beat. That’s the name of the game.

44 Ibid., p. 54.

The land, on which the snake-gate stands, was owned by General Christopher Gadsden (1724-1805) of Revolutionary War distinction. He is best known for designing in 1775, the Revolutionary flag, called the ‘Gadsden’ or ‘Rattlesnake’ flag, which bears the motto ‘DON’T TREAD ON ME’. Each of the rattles represents one of the break-away colonies. This flag became the most popular symbol of the American Revolution, and predates the stars and stripes motif that was adopted as the official American flag in 1777. [This information was taken from a web site devoted entirely to the Gadsden flag. Information contained on the website was written by Whitten, Chris. http://www.gadsden.info/ Follow link to ‘history’ and ‘Christopher Gadsden.’]

45 Ibid., p. 54

46 Ibid.

47 Ibid.
The more you look down, the more you see. It’s like you never goin’ finish. I been just as long on the head as I been on the body of the snake.48

Philip went on to elaborate on the difficult time that he had in making the snake’s eyes accurate:

There was a complicated thing about it, putting the eyes in him [so] he’ll be looking at you when you go there . . . the eye, I had to make several changes...The eye was complicated. You put the eye in it and you just see something that look like a dead snake. He look dead...You got to get that eye set that he look live. That’s the important thing about the snake... to look live.49

According to Vlach, Simmons regards the snake gate as one of his best, perhaps at the top of his personal list of achievements.50 There were no other ironwork gates in all of Charleston history that displayed animal motifs. This form is Philip’s invention. While Philip applies the style of English ornamental ironwork to his discipline, he has elaborated in his line of work to include the imagery of his imagination. Through his skill, Phillip has become the most celebrated member of the blacksmithing community in Charleston and quite possibly in all of the United States. Philip’s works are part of the Smithsonian collection and are exhibited in the South Carolina State Museum, and he was named a ‘Living National Treasure’ by the Smithsonian Institution.

48 Ibid.

49 Ibid., p. 55

50 Ibid.
CHAPTER 5
YAW’S APPRENTICESHIP TO PHILIP SIMMONS AND CONVENTIONAL IMAGERY

By the time Philip first stood at Peter Simmons door, and then when Yaw stood at Philip Simmons door, blacksmithing had been an African-American tradition in Charleston for over two hundred years. It is important to note that while many came to Peter Simmons’s and Philip Simmons’s shops to learn the trade of blacksmithing, most did not have the endurance and ambition to leave the shop as blacksmiths. When Yaw met Philip Simmons and saw the work that he and his workshop produced, he became completely fascinated by the artful and magnificent creations of his blacksmith shop. Yaw began his pursuit, as Philip had earlier, by visiting the blacksmith shop daily.

Yaw began his experience in the blacksmith shop by watching the work, noting how Philip and apprentices Ronny Pringle, Silas Sessions and Carlton Simmons manipulated the iron, forming different shapes and designs with each coal heating and with each firm bang of the hammer (Figs.11-12). Yaw stated of this preliminary phase, So in the beginning, they [Ronnie, Silas and Carlton] were like an initiation, really. “Lets see if the guy, is he gonna stick or is he gonna just come by and come a few times and never come back anymore?” So in the beginning they really didn’t show me a lot. But they really didn’t understand that I had the artist condition in my head that if I see you do something, I am going to know how to do it. You don’t have to show me how to do it. If I saw you making something a certain way, then I would go and get my forge and try it, and try it until I got it. A lot of the things they did not teach me. I just sort of do it, you know. But I had knowledge of the ironwork and that was why I was able to do it. You gotta have some knowledge of heating and bending before you go into that.1

1 Interview with Yaw September 29th, 2004, at his Hawthorne home.
During the apprenticeship Yaw continued to do shipyard work in order to support himself financially. When his workday in the shipyard was complete, he would travel to the blacksmith shop to begin his hours in apprenticeship. He further elaborated on this initial phase of his apprenticeship and his relationship with the other apprentices:

In the beginning they were kinda, they don’t want to teach me anything. They look around and I be there the next day and the next day and they were like “this guy ain’t giving up, huh.” As a matter of fact a few times I was there I used to see that they used to try and turn their backs and do something, and I used to run around and check out what they was doing, and I said “Ahaha, I saw that you was trying to hide it from me,” and Ronnie said “Heheh.” I say, “You ain’t hiding from me. You better wait until I build this.”

Yaw acknowledged that eventually Ronnie and Carlton “loosened up” and began to show him more when they realized he was serious about learning the trade.

Apparently, Silas Sessions was far less secretive about the trade than Ronnie and Carlton were. Yaw also pointed out that Philip was always available for instruction. Yaw said of his mentor,

Philip was still working then, and Philip, he would show you anything that you wanted to learn. He showed you. He taught everyone that came to the shop; he didn’t care what color you was. He would teach anybody that wanted to learn the trade and you were serious. He would teach you or he would discuss it with you.

Beyond Philip’s generosity in teaching, Yaw was further impressed by his work ethic. Phillip was an amicable teacher, but also a demanding one. Yaw noted,

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2 Ibid.
3 Ibid
4 Silas Sessions, also know as ‘Si’ had been apprenticing to Philip Simmons, along with Carlton and Ronnie for over twenty-five years. One day in 1996 Silas Sessions mysteriously disappeared after going for a walk down the street. His whereabouts remain unknown and no traces of him have been found.
5 Ibid.
If he [Philip] is gonna do a job, he definitely has to do it right. He takes his time. He plans. But his work ethic as far as doing a job well was one that he would instill on all of us. You know he was strict about it. It had to look, it had to BE right, to come out of his shop. And if something was wrong, he would make you go back and do it over, or take it down and do it right. So he took his time with the work as far as how it was finished, as far as design\(^6\) (Fig. 13).

During the time of Yaw’s apprenticeship to Philip, he relocated from Charleston to John’s Island. This relocation gained significance when Yaw discovered that his maternal grandparents were from that island. He recalled,

As a matter of fact my mother and father were orphans so I really didn’t know a whole lot of history about my family, and my mother asked me why did I move to Charleston? She said “Your grandparents come from Charleston; I didn’t even know you knew.” So I said “okay that’s why I am here.” She said “they come from John’s Island.”\(^7\)

John’s Island, like Daniel Island, was home to a number of people of African descent who have become known as the Gullah or Geechie community. The original inhabitants of the Sea Islands primarily lived off of the land in isolation. As already mentioned, through their seclusion, the Gullah were able to preserve their cultural heritage and a number of Africanisms seem to have survived. For example, Sea Islanders relied primarily on plant remedies in childbirth, sickness and emergencies. In the beginning of the twentieth century, displays of local medicinal plants were common in the Charleston City Market and on the streets and in the grocery stores.\(^8\) Perhaps the most highly recommended remedy was ‘Life Everlasting’ [*Gnaphalium obtusifolium*], a bitter herbal medicine used for the treatment of the common cold. A chest rub mixture made

\(^6\) Ibid.

\(^7\) Ibid.

\(^8\) [http://www.co.beaufort.sc.us/BFTLIB/gullah.htm](http://www.co.beaufort.sc.us/BFTLIB/gullah.htm) This is the website for the Beaufort county public library. The information on the website was written by Dennis Adams, the Information Services Coordinator and Hillary Barnwell, the Beaufort Branch Manager
from the plant, whiskey, lemon and turpentine was widely used during the influenza epidemic of 1941. The plant could also be put into a pillow or smoked as an inhalant for the treatment of asthmatic symptoms.

While Yaw was in Charleston, and after he had been apprenticing in the shop for a while, he became acquainted with Philip Simmons’s grandson, Ade Ofunniyin. Ade had joined his grandfather’s shop as a blacksmithing apprentice. Ade and Yaw became lifelong friends after sharing many experiences there. Ade said of the time,

Working in my granddad’s shop was a difficult experience for both Yaw and I because my granddad had two – at the time there were three blacksmiths that worked with him. Si, Ronnie and Carlton. They were all my cousins and hired. Ronnie and Carlton were very, how should I say, they were very protective of their territory – which was the blacksmith shop. And for some reason they felt threatened by me and expressed on a number of occasions that Yaw and I grew up in New York and, you know, had no right to come to Charleston and make claims on what they imagined was theirs.

The circumstance that Yaw and Ade shared allowed them to become closer friends and eventually led to their becoming business partners and housemates. Shortly after Ade came to Charleston as an apprentice, he bought the house next door to Philip’s home and shop. Both he and Yaw moved into the home and created a separate shop space of their own. Ade said of the move and of the businesses partnership:

Okay, so we created a space to work out of, but Yaw was far more skilled than I was, cause he had apprenticed with my granddad before, and he had trained as an iron fabricator and had experience, you know, working as a metal worker outside of blacksmithing. So soon thereafter, soon after we got up this shop on this space that

9 Ibid.
10 Ibid. Yaw uses the plant ‘Life Everlasting’ regularly, as it presently grows wild in abundance all around his Florida property.
11 Interview with Ade Ofunniyin September 14th, 2004.
12 Ibid.
we used as a shop, I started commissioning, looking for work for us to do. In our relationship, that was my strength\textsuperscript{13}(Fig. 14).

Ade and Yaw worked out of the shop next door to Philip Simmons’s for approximately six months before moving to another shop a few blocks away on Cooper Street. He and Yaw commonly referred to the shop as Archie Ellis’s place after the man who owned it. They named their business the ‘Charleston Blacksmiths’ after the book by John Vlach that recounted Philip Simmons’s career. Even their business cards featured their celebrated mentor. Ade was able to secure several blacksmithing commissions for their business because he also worked as a preservation specialist for the Historic Charleston Foundation. He concedes that he was hired for that position because of his maternal relation to Philip Simmons. Ade and Yaw remained at that shop space doing blacksmithing work for three to four years.

While Yaw and Ade had established their own blacksmithing business, they never disassociated themselves from Philip Simmons’s shop. Ade and Yaw acknowledge that Philip continued to serve as their mentor, and he was always available to instruct them. Yaw once said of his connection to Philip’s shop and of the stylistic similarities of their work,

\begin{quote}
You know when the blacksmiths work in the same shop, their signature is the way that they do things. Like if you look at the way that we make our scrolls you would know what shop it came from, cause Philip makes his scrolls different than any other blacksmith shop that I’d seen, cause everyone does it different. Like the pecan leaf design is Philip’s design. It’s akin to that shop and the way the scrolls are tucked - that is the main thing.\textsuperscript{14}
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{13} Ibid

\textsuperscript{14} Interview with Yaw September 29th, 2004, at his Hawthorne home.
Ade added, “It’s Philip’s signature, but we have the authority to sign it. It came out of his shop.”

Several stylistic references to Philip Simmons’s shop can be observed within the corpus of Yaw’s ironwork designs. The scroll design that Yaw spoke of as the “main thing” that indicates a technique originating in Philip’s shop, is observable in much of Yaw’s ironwork. For example, in the Charleston circle (Fig. 15), Yaw re-created a design that he learned during his apprenticeship in Philip’s shop. The model was created with a series of eight S-shaped volutes that consecutively surround a small central ring. Encircling the series of volutes is a larger circle within a square frame. Within the four corners of the design are double-scrolled designs that are bent inward towards each other. The Charleston circle is a design that is repeatedly used in both Philip’s and Yaw’s ironwork creations.

An alternative example of the scroll motif arising in Yaw’s ironwork is observable in a large gate that Yaw created for a home on Wentworth Street, in downtown Charleston (Fig. 16). This gate is particularly comparable to a gate that Philip’s shop created for a driveway on Murray Boulevard (Fig. 17). Both gates incorporate an elaborate assemblage S and J curves of various sizes. In the mid region of the two doors of the gates, the S and J curves are joined in a formation that produces vertically aligned heart shapes. A twisted bar runs through the center of the hearts and through each half of the two gates. Both examples include a crowning formation of elaborate S curved volutes of various sizes, with the largest two scrolls of the entire designs, meeting the

15 Interview with Ade Ofunniyin September 29th, 2004, at Yaw’s Hawthorne home.

16 Interestingly, the heart shape design on this gate is equivalent to an adinkra symbol, within the pictograms used by the Akan people of Ghana. Specifically, it is the sankofa symbol that is interpreted as
dividing bars at the center of the gate. Philip’s gate is wider and attached to brick columns topped by a cement sphere finial whereas Yaw’s gate is more vertically condensed and attached to pinnacle-banded cement columns. Obviously the allotted space has dictated a portion of the overall design. Contrastingly, Yaw included two horizontal bars on each gate that enclose a scrolled design and serve to divide the entire gate into four sections. While there are definite differences between the two gates, the similarities are more numerous and signify the stylistic influence that Yaw has received from his apprenticeship in Philip Simmons’s shop.

A further example of the affinities with Philip shop that Yaw preserves in his work is the David Star Gate (Fig. 18). This gate is similar to Philip’s Star and Fish Gate (Fig. 19) in several respects. Compositionally they both include a star form in the upper center quadrant. Philip has included a small five-pointed star within a larger five-pointed star reminiscent of the star of the American flag. Yaw has included the six-pointed Star of David, an image that came to him in a dream. On the flanking panels of the David Star Gate, Yaw has incorporated the pecan-leaf design that he attributes to Philip’s influence. Moreover, Yaw has included a Charleston circle in the lower center quadrant of the gate that echoes the circle around the five-pointed star in Philip’s design. The Charleston circle was formed out of several scrolls, which (as fore mentioned), is a pattern from Philip Simmons’s oeuvre. Similarly, within the Star and Fish Gate, Philip included scrolled designs in the center region, at the top and bottom of the star, and at the crown of the gate in an elaborate configuration. This crowning area would be the most apparent stylistic element shared by the two gates. Compositionally they are nearly identical, with only minor variations within the designs. The spear shaped form in Philip’s design is left
open to pierce the space above it, whereas Yaw’s design adds a scrolled piece of metal to
top and seal it. Philip has included a fish [the spot tail bass], in the lower region of his
gate, whereas in Yaw’s gate there is no animal design. While Philip’s gate was created
over a decade prior to Yaw’s, the precedent for the David Star Gate is clear. The David
Star Gate can be understood as homage to Phillip Simmons’s methodology and a
reflection of Yaw’s imagination.

While Yaw is preserving the ironwork tradition that was imparted to him through
his apprenticeship to Philip Simmons, he also maintains a working and personal
relationship with his mentor beyond these stylistic references. Yaw commented on the
continuity of his relationship with Philip:

Philip and my relationship is an ongoing one. I would call Phillip and tell him the
job, and he would instruct me on how to price it, how to charge it, and a lot of
times how to put it together as well - right over the phone. That’s the working
relationship, as far as him giving me the insight on how to figure and design the
work.17

Both Yaw and Ade continued to consult Philip on fabrication concerns, pricing
matters and all other affairs that related to blacksmithing. In fact, when Yaw and Ade
refer to Philip, they both call him ‘granddad,’ and Ade calls Yaw ‘brother.’ Ade states,
“My grandfather became both of our grandfathers. That has been our relationship.
Everyone who knows us.”18

Aside from the influence and instruction that Yaw has received from working in
Philip Simmons’s shop, Yaw is a very talented iron-working artist in his own right. Ade
recollected the first time he became aware of Yaw’s iron working ability. It was during

17 Interview with Yaw September 29th, 2004, at his Hawthorne home.
18 Interview with Ade Ofunniyin September 14th, 2004.
the period that they were working next door to his grandfather’s shop. He related a story where they were commissioned to build a stairwell that they had to transport down a major street in Charleston, and into an alleyway. He stated,

By the time we completed that set of stairwells, it was so huge, I had no idea how huge it was going to be, and I certainly had no idea how to fabricate it, but Yaw had the experience and so we fabricated it between my yard and the house where we were living and my granddad’s yard. My granddad had the experience and the equipment. So we didn’t even have the proper equipment to transport the stairs, we held up traffic and there were cars and horns blowing, and it was a mess... and when we got to the alleyway it was too big to fit. We had to cut the stairs and reassemble it in the alleyway. It was pretty amazing. By the time we did that and the owner stood back and looked at it and says “this is incredible that you were able to do that.” – I was overwhelmingly confident in Yaw’s abilities and I was tickled with working with him as I was engaged in my own apprenticeship. That was one amazing experience.19

Another story that Ade relates about his partnership with Yaw also concerned his grandfather Philip Simmons and the moment that he and Yaw stepped out on their own from their apprenticeship. Ade and Yaw both agreed that this was one the most memorable experiences of their blacksmithing career. The story indicates the relationship between Philip and his apprentices and the extraordinary way that Philip had become a grandfather figure to all of them.

The job at hand was a historical property, like much of the work that came into Charleston blacksmith shops. Apparently someone had been driving drunk and ran into an aluminum gate in front of a historical property. Yaw and Ade were invited to assess the job and to bid on it. As Ade described:

So at that time, in our experience, we would also go to granddad to get his approval or his insight about different jobs and we asked granddad about this job and how much he felt we should bid on it. So he went down and looked at the job with us and of course he didn’t think we should bid on the job because he didn’t think we could do it. And when we talked past that, the figure that he gave us for doing the

19 Ibid.
job was four thousand . . . and, uhm, my business sense told me that was a problem. So, I figured the job, brother and I, and we figured that we didn’t want to do the job aluminum anymore, that we wanted to do the job in iron. So we bid a higher bid for the job at eight thousand and twenty five dollars.\textsuperscript{20}

As it turned out Yaw and Ade had only under bid another contractor by twenty-five dollars and that other contractor was Herbert De Costa. Herbert De Costa was the contractor that Philip Simmons worked for, and if Herbert De Costa had gotten the job, he would have gone to Philip Simmons’s shop and commissioned him to do the job for four thousand dollars, collecting the difference for himself.

This “stepping out” on Philip Simmons’s reputation was an enormous step for both Yaw and Ade, partly because they had gotten a job for twice as much as Philip would have charged. Ade acknowledges that the low prices that his grandfather has always charged his customers have been a source of contention among his apprentices. He stated, We got a job for twice as much as my granddad would have charged and my cousins’ arguments have always been that my granddad allows himself to be exploited because, you know, he’s old school. You know, and they figured he was just keeping his customers happy. And everybody knows that about him, you know.\textsuperscript{21}

During the construction of the gate, Philip was clandestinely monitoring Ade and Yaw’s progress. Yaw said of this occurrence, Matter fact we didn’t know he was there until Ade looked around and he said “look down the street.” Philip was sitting about maybe a half a block or so away. He said “ain’t that granddad.” I said “that’s him.” And he was sitting down the street watching us put the gate up. He was supervising from down the street.\textsuperscript{22}

Ade added,

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{20} Ibid.
\item \textsuperscript{21} Ibid.
\item \textsuperscript{22} Interview with Yaw September 29\textsuperscript{th}, 2004, at his Hawthorne home.
\end{itemize}
My granddad was monitoring us like a hawk. I mean we would be at this site, by the time we got to the site to do the installation and on more than one occasion, we would look down the street and granddad would be off in the distance, watching us. Which is something he always did, you know because he was very, very, very protective of his reputation and you know, me being his grandson, and stepping out, you know we were really stepping out on the strength of my granddad’s reputation.23

The construction of the iron gate was a success, and the owner of the property was astounded, (Fig. 20) so much so that he wrote a flattering letter to Ade and Yaw in appreciation of their work. Ade recalled:

Once we got that gate installed, it was like we stood back, and the gate was opened, and when you know that you got it right, all you got to do is just tap the gate ever so gently and it just eases its way and it just falls in place, like magic. It was astounding!24

Yaw exuberantly stated of the remarkable moment:

When we put it in place, the first time we welded it in and just pushed it like that with our finger, the gate just went ‘click’ and locked perfect. We said we ain’t gonna touch it again. Yeah, the manager couldn’t believe it. He said “just like it was.” And the gate is still standing.25

Ade summed up his and Yaw’s position at the conclusion of these two major projects when he said:

By the time we did the stairs and did the gate, I was like totally confident that we could do this. You know, and the interesting thing that began to happen at about that time too, my cousins that used to argue with us all the time, well things shifted tremendously. I mean everybody was listening.26

The success of ‘stepping out’ on their own had solidified Yaw and Ade’s blacksmithing partnership and they continued to work together on several different

23 Interview with Ade Ofunniyin September 14th, 2004.

24 Ibid.


26 Interview with Ade Ofunniyin September 14th, 2004.
projects throughout South Carolina. They have also remained close friends since their meeting and they continue to share many other experiences.
CHAPTER 6
THE OYOTUNJI EXPERIENCE

One experience that Yaw and Ade shared was their participation in the Oyotunji village. Oyotunji is a community of African Americans who established an African society to recreate Yoruba culture in the United States. The choice to recreate Yoruba culture in the United States is not surprising in that the Yoruba are one of the largest and best known African ethnic groups. The Yoruba culture has also had the most widespread influence of all African people that were brought to the New World through the West African slave trade. It was actually through the diasporic relationship of the Yoruba in the Caribbean that Oyotunji was founded.

Oseijiman Adefunmi Efuntola I, born Walter King, founded Oyotunji village in the 1970’s. He is the original leader of the movement and maintained his role as the Oba or king of the Oyotunji African village until quite recently¹ (Fig. 21). The community actually began in Harlem, in the 1960s, but it was relocated to the more rural setting of Sheldon, South Carolina. Named a decade later, a portion of the members of the Yoruba temple moved out of New York because they realized that they could not properly practice their culture in an urban setting.² To solve this problem, Adefunmi announced in

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¹ Walter Serge King I will be referred to as Adefunmi, the Yoruba name he acquired upon conversion to the orisa religion. Oba Adefunmi died in February of 2005.
² Ibid., p. 35
1972 that there would exist an African state in the United States, and community members began making plans to find land for the proposed state\(^3\) (Fig. 22).

While Adefunmi was the founder of the village, many of the influential values that he espoused originated with ideas that had resonated from his childhood memories of his father. According to one biographer “The most powerful and formative influence in Serge’s early life was provided by his father” and thus the foundation of Oyotunji owes much to him.\(^4\) Adefunmi’s father was deeply involved with the Black Nationalist Movement and specifically with the ideas of Marcus Garvey and the Moorish Science Temple Movement.\(^5\) Adefunmi’s father took him to rallies, lectures and speak-outs concerning equal rights for Blacks in America. Both of his parents encouraged Adefunmi to learn about his African heritage, and during his teenage years he developed a strong interest in African culture. As a result of his revolutionary-minded upbringing, Adefunmi retained his interest in Africa for the remainder of his life.

In 1956, Adefunmi made three visits overseas that affected him profoundly. He first visited Egypt, which rekindled his desire to learn about African culture. Later that year he visited Cuba and Haiti and then decided to establish an African society called the ‘Order of Damballa.’ The society was named after the Haitian deity Damballa that was transported from Dahomey to Haiti through the trans-Atlantic slave trade.\(^6\) While the lack

\(^3\) Ibid., p. 35


\(^5\) Ibid.

\(^6\) *Damballa* is the most important god of voodoo-religion in the Caribbean. He is a snake-god and lives in the trees near springs. He is also a fertility god and the father of all the loa or voodoo divinities. In Haiti he is called Bon Dieu or ‘good god’ and his wife is the rainbow goddess *Ayida Weddo*. His holy color is white. Within the precincts of Oyotunji, one can recognize the snake imagery associated with *Damballa*, which
of participation by members in the society disappointed Adefunmi, his interest in African
culture did not wane. With the independence of Ghana in 1957, he became recognized as
an African-American cultural leader.

The independence of Ghana had unleashed a significant sentiment among African-
Americans who had maintained an ideological connection to the continent of Africa.
Adefunmi organized a parade to celebrate the independence of the formerly colonized
country and with it, galvanized his position as an African-American cultural leader in the
community. He began advocating the observation of an Afro-centric lifestyle, such as the
wearing of African garb and a natural hairstyle. He then founded a Yoruba temple in New
York. Adefunmi had initially become acquainted with the Cuban form of the Yoruba
religion – Santeria, when he was initiated in 1959 in Matanzas, Cuba, into the cult of
Obatala, the creator orisha or deity, considered to be the king of all other divinities.

In the Santeria belief system, the Yoruba orishas or deities are paralleled with
various Catholic saints. For example, the Yoruba orisha - Shango is paired with the
Catholic Saint Barbara, because they have certain attributes in common. They are both
have royal associations. St. Barbara was the daughter of a king and Shango was a king of
Oyo. Hence, Shango and St. Barbara are often depicted as wearing a crown of royalty.
The colors red and white are their identifying colors of their being, along with a
connection to the powers of the thunderstorms.

also references Adefunmi’s participation within the Haitian form of the Yoruba religion. Blier, Suzanne

37. According to the Oxford Dictionary of Saints, there is no historical evidence to suggest the existence of
St. Barbara and several cities (Rome, Tuscany, Nicomedia, Heliopolis) claim to be the site of her death.
She is the patron saint of miners and soldiers who are in danger of sudden death.
In the hagiography of St. Barbara, her father is struck by lightening after he has his daughter killed. *Shango*, associated with thunder, punishes with lightning, and he “has the ability to show one the truth just as quickly as the lightening of a storm.”¹⁸ Whenever lightening strikes, the Yoruba priests of *Shango* search for meteorites that have fallen to earth and Neolithic stone axes that are found on the ground. *Shango* devotees believe that these stones contain the power of *Shango’s* fire.⁹ The meteorites and Neolithic stone axes are collected and placed within the *Shango* shrines.¹⁰ Through the association of the storm with the saint and the orisha, both St. Barbara and *Shango* are also linked to warfare.¹¹ Given that they are both associated with the idea of the military, they are often pictured with the sword as their symbol. This type of African/Catholic parallelism originated from the suppression of the African slaves and their forced conversion to Catholicism. In order to retain their religious heritage, the enslaved people made associations with the Catholic saints as they continued to practice their own religion clandestinely.

Adefunmi became disenchanted with the Afro-Cuban religion because of its syncretism of Yoruba deities with ‘caucasian’ Catholic saints.¹² As a dissenter, he

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¹⁸ http://carlos.emory.edu This information was taken from the website for the Michael C. Carlos Museum at Emory University. The museum boasts a large collection of West African art from the 19th and 20th centuries.

⁹ Most of the stones that are collected are neolithic stone axes. In fact the double form of the axe has become the symbol of *Shango*. Lawal, Babatunde. *Yoruba Sango Sculpture in Historical Retrospect* (Dissertation submitted to Indiana University, 1970) p. 45

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.

decided to revise the Yoruba-based, yet European-influenced Cuban religion and to recreate it in its African form in the United States.\textsuperscript{13}

As previously stated the Yoruba religion originated in West Africa and was transported across the Atlantic through the export of African slaves. The religious system of the indigenous Yoruba of Nigeria and of the Yoruba inhabitants of Oyotunji is multifaceted and includes a hierarchy of deities called orishas.\textsuperscript{14} The Yoruba believe in a Supreme and omnipotent ‘Being’ that they call either \textit{Olorun} or \textit{Oludumare} along with a pantheon of other deities that are seen as the intermediaries between ‘The Creator’ and humankind.\textsuperscript{15} Participants at Oyotunji observe the Yoruba religion, attempt to live a Yoruba lifestyle and carry out African cultural practices. Carl Hunt, author of \textit{Oyotunji Village: The Yoruba Movement in America} describes Oyotunji’s religious practice:

\begin{quote}
Religion forms the foundation and the all-governing principles of life for them. As far as they are concerned, the full responsibility of all the affairs of life belongs to the Deity; their own part in the matter is to do as they are ordered through the priests and diviners whom they believe to be the interpreters of the will of the Deity.\textsuperscript{16}
\end{quote}

The ideological foundations of Oyotunji village were also based on political and cultural activism associated with the Civil Rights movement and Black Nationalism. It was a direct outgrowth of the Pan-African movement in America. Participation in the village was seen as a means of resistance to the dominant ‘white’ culture of American society. According to chief Afolabi, a member of the community, “They realized that

\textsuperscript{13} Ibid., p. v.
\textsuperscript{14} Ibid., p. 74.
\textsuperscript{15} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{16} Ibid.
Western man would never do right by Black Americans and concluded that Black and White people are different and have different destinies.”17

The choice to use Oyotunji as the name for the village reflects these ideological foundations. The city of Oyo in Nigeria is the capital of the kingdom of the same name (Fig. 23). At one time Oyo was the largest and most powerful of all Yoruba kingdoms, in fact, an empire that covered all of Western Yorubaland. Oyotunji can be translated as ‘Oyo rises again’ or ‘Oyo again awakes’, expressing the desire to revitalize Yoruba culture.18 Adefunmi obviously had aspirations of creating Oyo’s reawakening through the founding of Oyotunji village. The village was to serve as a site for the initiation and training of priests and other adherents. One informant told Hunt, “They have established the only Black community in America where the way of life is based solely upon African customs.”19

Yaw became a member of the society in 1978 and eventually moved into Oyotunji village, while continuing his blacksmithing and shipyard work. He remained there for two years. He has said of the experience, “We had no electricity and no running water, so it was a shock in the beginning. Living off the land, living naturally, but after a while, I saw that it really was a benefit to me as far as getting my body, getting in shape.”20 Yaw continued:

You had to work in the village. You had to be in their exercise program, which started at like six a.m., and you had to show up to do exercise, and then you had to show up to do dopwe, which was the work detail. You worked part of the day, and

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17 Ibid., p. 35.
18 Ibid., p. v.
19 Ibid., p. 117.
20 Interview with Yaw September 29th, 2004, at his Hawthorne home.
then the rest of the day belonged to you. So it was a good experience, and
everything was organized. It was a good experience to work together with the folks
there and the structure. They had a structure like the ogboni society. They had the
men’s and women’s society and the different egbe’s [societies]; Shango society for
the people of Shango and Yemaya for the people of Yemaya society.21

When asked about how his experience at the African village of Oyotunji in South
Carolina compared to his experience on the continent of Africa, he stated:

Well, what I saw in Africa was in some cases, if you wasn’t in the country, was
more modern. People living in houses with air conditioning, and you know, the
only place you saw where people live like in Oyotunji was in the country, out in the
bush. People still lived like in Oyotunji where they didn’t have electric and running
water and all the rest of that.22

It was during the time that he spent in Oyotunji that Yaw Owusu became Yaw
Owusu Shangofemi. ‘Shangofemi’ can be interpreted, as ‘Shango loves me’. Shango, is
the Yoruba orisha or deity of thunder. Yaw explained:

They decide through readings and stuff as far as what your ‘head’ is and what your
orisha is. They did readings and they took me down to the river where they do a
spiritual bath. They do a reading and then they tell you what your name is after
that.23

21 Ibid. The Ogboni society is an important institution that fulfills a number of political, judicial, and
spiritual functions. Before the era of colonialism, in Yorubaland, this council of respected elders exercised
tremendous power and influence in its various roles involving the selection and removal of kings, judicial
hearings, and punishment of offenders who violated the sanctity of the Earth [Ile].

Yemaya is a divinity that lives and rules over the seas and lakes. The colors blue and white are associated
with her domain. She also oversees maternal matters, since she is considered to be the ‘mother of all.’ Her
name, a shortened version of Yey Omo Eja can be translated as ‘mother whose children are the fish,’ to
reflect the fact that her children are so numerous that they are uncountable. Robert F Thompson. Face of
the G-ds: Art and Altars of Africa and the African Americans (Munich, Germany: The Museum for African
Art, 1993) p. 181

22 Interview with Yaw September 29th, 2004, at his Hawthorne home.

23 Ibid. In the Yoruba language, the word ‘ori’ denotes both the ‘head’ and ‘destiny.’ There are also
differentiations between the ‘inner’ and ‘outer’ head. The ‘ori inu’ is the inner head and relates to the
spiritual essence of an individual. The ‘ori ode’ is the outer head and is indicative of the visible, physical
appearance of a person. This differentiation between the inner and outer head is reflective of the Yoruba
concept of a person having interior and exterior aspects. It is believed by the Yoruba that ideally the inner
qualities should govern the outer qualities of a person.
At that time it was revealed to Yaw that his orisha was *Shango*, hence his third name Shangofemi. Various Yoruba narratives explore the many aspects of this fierce and brave *Shango*. The colors red and white and the double-headed axe make symbolic reference to the orisha. A shrine to *Shango* would surely contain these references and each orisha is appeased through specific offerings and chants. Yaw was also given *Elegba*, the trickster, and orisha of the crossroads, and *Ogun* the orisha of warfare and iron. He explained, “First I was given *Elegba*, then *Ogun*, then *Shango*. *Elegba* is the gatekeeper that opens up everything, and *Ogun* is what I do.”

His full name, Yaw Owusu Shangofemi, further denotes the synchronistic nature of African religious practice in the United States. Albert J. Raboteau, author of *African Religions in America: Theoretical Perspectives*, has pointed out, “Many scholars have commented on the openness of African religions in Africa and in the Americas to accepting the ‘g-ds’ of others, whether Europeans, Native Americans, or other Africans.”

This synchronistic nature became evident in Yaw’s participation in both the Yoruba and Akan religions simultaneously. After all, his full name contains a connection to both. When Yaw was asked how he viewed the Akan and Yoruba African religions, whether or not he had fundamentally ‘chosen one over the other’, his response to this inquiry was, “Nah, I haven’t. I feel like it’s all the same. It’s all the same. You know,

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24 Ibid. When Yaw stated “*Ogun* is what I do,” he is making reference to his blacksmithing career, since iron working is considered by the Yoruba, to be within the realm of *Ogun*.


26 Ibid., p. 25. In 1957, Walter ‘Serge’ King was also previously known by the Ghanaian name, Nana Oserjeman.
there is one creator; people call him by different names. It’s all the same. People just want to call him by their special name.”

Both religions influence Yaw’s life and his artwork. Juxtaposition rather than blending seems to be the most accurate description of this phenomenon. In Yaw’s words, “The Akan religion is similar to the Yoruba religion. Just the orisha are different... you know they really have orishas that deal with the same. You know, iron, fire, earth. Its really the same, just different names.”

This improvisatory approach has commonly been viewed as an ‘African’ trait. For example, many scholars have correlated jazz music with its improvisational and eclectic qualities to expand on this topic. The jazz musician plays his instrument within a band of other musicians. The syncopation of his notes are influenced by, as well as influence, those of the other musicians playing with him. The musician listens intently until the moment when he captures the audience’s attention with notes that he has created and recreated while playing the song. Diversity is favored over purity, assemblage and appropriation rather than homogeny and consistency. Leroi Jones, presently known as Amiri Baraka, a Black Nationalist poet, commented on this phenomenon in his work *Blues People*:

The African cultures, the retentions of some parts of these cultures in America, and the weight of the step-culture produced the American Negro. A new race. I want to use music as my persistent reference just because the development and

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27 Interview with Yaw September 29th, 2004, at his Hawthorne home.

28 Ibid.


30 Ibid.
transmutation of African music to American Negro music (a new music) represents to me this whole process in microcosm.\textsuperscript{31}

Music and the spoken word, both primordial means of expression, give creative form to time and space. The musician is inspired by sounds, whether of musical origination or from the sounds of everyday life. To improvise is to take these sounds and make them one’s own. This means of expression allowed African slaves to symbolically travel to Africa’s past and the New World’s present through the African-American aesthetic of continuity of change. In an African religious or artistic context the same would apply. According to John Vlach, “Given the preponderance of improvisatory activity in speech and music in black culture, it should be expected that black craftsmen would also employ an improvisatory approach.”\textsuperscript{32}

In a similar manner, Yaw’s experiences in Oyotunji village and within the Akan community have influenced his life and consequently his artwork. Yaw’s deliberate inclusion of African subject matter has become a feature of his artwork that differentiates his work from that of his mentor, Philip Simmons. Yaw actively cultivates African themes in his artwork whereas Philip’s artistry seems to suggest it only indirectly at best. While one cannot divorce a person from his cultural heritage, Yaw has purposefully sought connection to his African heritage in ways that Philip Simmons has not. Ade Ofunniyin once commented on this distinction: “Brother [Yaw] has the ability to be a better artist than my grandfather, because he has the fifth element -- the spiritual.”\textsuperscript{33}

\textsuperscript{31} LeRoi Jones. \textit{Blues People} (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1963) p. 153

\textsuperscript{32} Ibid., p. 109

\textsuperscript{33} Interview with Ade Ofunniyin September 14\textsuperscript{th}, 2004.
When Yaw was asked how he would compare his work to Philip Simmons’s, he said, “Well, you know, I have been incorporating more African motifs in my work. Plus I still use the traditional scroll and designs [of Philip’s shop], with the African motifs.”34

Much of Yaw’s artwork makes deliberate reference to his affiliation with the Yoruba and Akan faiths. For example, in the 1970s Yaw created a large sculptural personification of the Yoruba orisha *Ogun*. (Figs. 24-25) *Ogun* is the orisha of iron and warfare and is spiritually linked to Yaw through his blacksmithing profession. Yaw created the large-scale *Ogun* sculpture using a variety of geometric shapes that refer to the figure of a man. The life-size sculpture has its arms outstretched and a face formed by flat and beveled pieces of iron. The sculpture was created out of leftover portions of iron. The many meanings of *Ogun* are revealed in a vast array of rituals, myths, symbols and artistic representations.35 Yaw commented on the sculpture, “When I knew how to weld I always did art pieces. I’ve done *Ogun* in the iron, I did that in Atlanta, I think around 1970... It was a beautiful piece, a one of a kind piece.”36

Yaw went on to tell of a situation where the sculpture was altered because it became a point of conflict between him and Carlton, an apprentice in Phillip Simmons’s shop. Yaw stated, “Carlton changed [the *Ogun* sculpture] over because the piece I made had a big penis on it, and with their Christian-ness, they said ‘oh no you gotta cut the penis off,’ so he cut the penis off the sculpture.”37

34 Interview with Yaw September 29th, 2004, at his Hawthorne home.
36 Ibid. Interview with Yaw September 29th, 2004, at his Hawthorne home.
37 Ibid.
The unfortunate defacement of the work highlights the antagonistic circumstance that oftentimes arises between Christian and African religious customs. Whereas the phallus on the sculpture was included to refer to *Ogun’s* virility, in the Christian perspective it became a signifier of overt sexuality, and it was removed to protect modesty. Culture contact has resulted in the reinterpretation of signifiers. Africans reinterpreted Christianity according to African perspectives and values, and conversely, they also reinterpreted African forms in terms of Christian perspectives and values.\(^{38}\)

Sadly, Yaw was forced to leave the sculpture behind with Ade when he moved back to New York in 1989 to care for his ailing mother. The sculpture was then left in the care of Carlton. Both Yaw and Ade assume that the sculpture was sold and thus its whereabouts today are unknown.

Today both Yaw and Ade live in the town of Hawthorne, Florida, due east of Gainesville. Yaw moved to Florida, from New York, in 2003. Yaw’s home is located off of a winding dirt road on the ten acres of rural property that he owns. It seems appropriate that in order to get to his home one must cross the railroad tracks that are viewed by the Yoruba as a manifestation of the powerful g-d of iron and warfare – *Ogun*.

Next to his Hawthorne home, Yaw has built an iron fabricating shop. In the shop, one can observe several signifiers of his understanding of himself as a blacksmith working in the African American tradition. For example, within the shop is a large poster of Phillip Simmons (Fig. 26) over Yaw’s main work area. It seems to convey the message that even today and in Hawthorne, Florida, Phillip Simmons caringly watches over and guides his ‘grandson’ apprentice. This is further denoted through Yaw’s ironwork

creations that display the influence that he has received from Phillip Simmons and his blacksmithing shop.

A spray-painted Ghanaian *adinkra* symbol commands attention on the outside wall of the shop (Fig. 27). *Adinkra* symbols are symbolic ideograms used to decorate colorful patterned cloth (Fig. 28). This particular symbol [Gye Nyame] is ubiquitous in Ghana and it is by far the most popular for use in the adornment of arts. The Gye Nyame’s meaning has been translated as ‘except for g-d’ and can be thought to represent the omnipotence of g-d and that one should always have confidence in one’s abilities to do things, ‘except’ for what g-d forbids. Yaw’s placement of the *adinkra* symbol on the exterior wall of his blacksmith shop refers to the continual Ghanaian cultural and religious inspiration that he receives and applies to his work and lifestyle (Fig. 29).

A sculptural representation of the deity of hunting, iron and warfare – *Ogun* dominates the wall next to the *adinkra* symbol (Fig. 27). Yaw recently created the sculpture out of automobile parts. The abstract image of geometric forms refers to the image of a man. To denote *Ogun*’s virility a large phallus is notable. The presence of a phallus is common in Yoruba sculpture that references *Ogun*. For example, Oke Mogun is a site in Yorubaland, where it is believed that *Ogun* carved a likeness of himself (Fig. 30). The carving and erecting of the stones may date back to the first millennium C.E.39 According to Robert Farris Thompson, author of *Face of the G-ds: Art and Altars of Africa and the African Americas*,

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Two of the liths read like blades. Augmenting rhythms enliven their arrangement: the small stone at left abuts a slightly taller stone; then comes an incredible jump in scale to one huge standing force--- the phallus of Ogun . . . The ‘blades’ and phallus embody danger and intimidation. 40

Thompson suggests the two smaller stones are bladelike, thus befitting the orisha of metal while the largest stone, as a phallus, denotes Ogun’s primordial masculinity.

On an interior wall of the blacksmithing shop and across from Yaw’s work-table, the word Ogun is also colorfully spray-painted in vertical blue, green, gold, red and black letters (Fig. 31). Ogun, being the ‘road-slashing orisha of iron,’ is, for Yaw, the vital force behind his blacksmithing profession.

Ogun’s role as the giver of ashe for smithing is further signified through a shrine to Ogun positioned behind Yaw’s blacksmith shop (Fig. 32). The Ogun shrine is located on the ground, in a wooded area. The altar makes symbolic reference to Yaw, as a blacksmith and a hunter, and thus an active Ogun devotee. It contains various iron pieces and it receives continuous sacrifices for the placation and appeasement of Ogun. Yaw has placed items such as automobile parts, railroad pieces, a rifle, a chain, horseshoes, a scythe, a knife blade, and other tools of his existence within the altar. The objects have been arranged in a somewhat symmetrical manner.

The shrine is a constantly changing manifestation of the face of Ogun. Objects are added or removed as needed; in some cases tools may be placed in the altar to gain ashe or power. Flanking the shrine on either side are curved screen-like metal forms that seem to help enclose the material within it, serving as visual parentheses. A scythe rests diagonally in the posterior section of the shrine, along with elements such as an adze, chains, railroad pieces and a fireplace grill in the frontal area. The automobile parts that

40 Ibid.
Yaw used to create the fore mentioned Ogun sculpture, are noticeable within the shrine, since this photo was taken before Yaw created it. Also included in the assemblage is a cast iron pot and pan, a lawn maintenance device, a wrench, a wagon wheel and several saw blades. All of the paraphernalia within the shrine make reference to the constructive and destructive powers of Ogun.

Yaw’s shrine conforms to the Yoruba convention of building Ogun shrines with a variety of metal objects. This can be observed if one compares Yaw’s Ogun shrine to another Ogun shrine in Benin City, Nigeria (Fig. 33) or the Ogun shrine in Oyotunji, South Carolina (Fig. 34). Each altar includes a myriad of iron objects, from tools to weaponry. The palm fronds of the Nigerian and Oyotunji examples frame the altars, whereas in Yaw’s, his entire altar is situated within the natural surrounding of the forest floor. The Nigerian shrine and Yaw’s shrine each includes a piece of red fabric to refer to the iron deity. The paraphernalia within all of the shrines may be placed there in order to become more effective and then removed when it is needed for use. As pointed out by a Yoruba religious practitioner,

\[\text{The altar becomes Ogun once you have placed two pieces of iron together and poured oil on it. The shrine needs food to be active. Then you can offer prayers to it. As soon as it is put together it stays Ogun and will be Ogun forever after. By dismantling the iron one takes Ogun away.}\]

\[41\text{Ibid., p. 182.}\]

\[42\text{Ibid., p. 147.}\]

Thus a piece of iron metonymically summons Ogun and also refers to the entire spirit of blacksmithing work. With each specific incantation and offering, the altar to Ogun is ritually given ashe-drenched material to persuade the orisha to deal favorably with its devotees. The shrine is in a constant state of expansion and transformation as it
evolves with its collection of energized matter. The space becomes a testimonial to
Yaw’s involvement in the Yoruba lifestyle, culture and heritage. Its placement alongside
the blacksmithing shop signifies Ogun’s vital connection and importance within Yaw’s
work.

Rather recently Yaw created an iron ceremonial sculpture for the Gelede or
women’s society of Oyotungi village (Figs.35-44). The etymology of the word Gelede
reveals its primary concerns and its ultimate meaning. Ge can be translated as “to soothe,
to placate, to pet or to coddle”; ele refers to a woman’s ‘private parts’, it can be those that
symbolize the mystery of womankind or to her life giving capability; de means “to soften
with care or gentleness.”43

In Yoruba belief, women, especially elderly women, posses extraordinary powers
equal to or greater than those of the g-ds and ancestors.44 This understanding of
womankind is reflected in various praises that refer to them as “our mothers,” “the g-ds
of society,” and “owners of the world.”45 The powers that women possess are neutral.
They can be either beneficent or destructive.46 Womankind can bring prosperity, health
and fertility to the land and its people, or they can bring destruction – epidemic, drought
and pestilence.47 Collectively these ideas convey the importance of Gelede and they give
insight into how women are perceived within the society. Interestingly, the Yoruba g-d

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44 Ibid.

45 Ibid.

46 Ibid.

47 Ibid.
Ogun has been thought of in a similar manner. Ogun has been understood as civilization’s ideal male. On the one hand he is believed to be the all-powerful and terrifying warrior. Conversely he is also known for his sexual prowess and virility; he nurtures, protects and relentlessly pursues truth, impartiality and justice.48 These differing manifestations of Ogun and the perception of the Gelede society both correlate to the destroyer/creator archetype.

The g-d of iron, hunting and warfare also plays a central role in many Gelede societies.49 Not surprisingly the representation of Ogun is almost always included in the Gelede masquerade. The opening incantations of masquerade performances always make many references to Ogun.50 For example, a Gelede incantation recorded in 1971 makes several references to Ogun.

Ogun koko ni muna ni muna
Ogun f-aya re si baluwe
Ogun p’oni’da
O p’awon bere kojo
Ogun eri mo fun e du ngo fun e l’egungun pon la
Iba baba o o oko dodo dodo dodo bi’mo sa dodo
O se pon janna bi’mo s’ile Ijana
A gbo s’oko luku oko ero oja
A’rayaba ma p’oko mo


50 Ibid.
Ogun the brave one in firing, in firing

Ogun left [killed] his wife in the bathroom

Ogun killed the swordsmen

He destroyed them with one blow

Ogun, I asked you to chase them, not to lick their bones

Honor to one whose penis stood up to father a child in the room

He made his penis lengthen to father a child in the house of Ijana

We heard how the penis struck those in the market

Ogun, the one who saw the king’s mother and did not cover his penis\(^{51}\)

Ogun serves as a tutelary guardian deity and supporter for the other Gelede masqueraders.\(^{52}\) Through the creation of the sculpture in iron for the Gelede society, Yaw spiritually joined these two manifestations of masculine and feminine capability.

The Gelede society in Oyotunji commissioned Yaw to create a functional piece of artwork for use during anointing ceremonies where it was intended to hold ashe or energized matter. Yaw created a life-sized buzzard with its wings outstretched perched on a staff over six feet in the air. Birds have been a common symbol that alludes to the ‘mothers’ in a ritually transformed state.\(^{53}\) A song offered in one Yoruba community was demonstrative of this association.

Olajogun apake ko ba ni jo

Gbogbo eye ko ba ni jo.

Honored elder apake come and dance with us

\(^{51}\) Ibid., p. 42

\(^{52}\) Ibid., p. 89

\(^{53}\) Ibid., p.71
All birds come dance with us.\textsuperscript{54}

Another poem proclaims,

Iyami Osorongo afinju adaba ti nje laarin ilu

Afinju eye ti’nje ni gbanba oko ap’eron mahagun

Olokiki oru

A ti ori je apa a t’edo je okon.

My Mother \textit{Osoronga}, famous dove that eats in the town

Famous bird that eats in a cleared farm who kills an animal without sharing with anyone

One who makes noise in the midnight

Who eats from the head to the arm, who eats from the liver to the heart.\textsuperscript{55}

Yaw has stated that the sculpture is one of his favorite pieces to date. He said, “The women’s society wanted something to anoint [with], to put their \textit{ashe} on, so I gave them one wing that I had finished. They took it and did a ceremony with it and they brought it back...When they brought it back, I made the rest of it.”\textsuperscript{56}

To create the bird, Yaw drew inspiration from vultures: “I studied the way the vulture fly, how they spread their wings . . . there’s one right there [he points to the sky] yeah we talkin’ about you.”\textsuperscript{57}

Yaw had also looked to books for further inspiration and for modeling the creature’s anatomy. He has attributed the choice of bird to his Nigerian friend Yinka. During a visit to Yaw’s home, Yinka told him which bird was appropriate to create for

\textsuperscript{54} Ibid., p. 71

\textsuperscript{55} Ibid., p. 74.

\textsuperscript{56} Interview with Yaw September 29\textsuperscript{th}, 2004, at his Hawthorne home.

\textsuperscript{57} Ibid.
the Gelede society. The reason for its appropriateness according to Yaw is that “The bird deals with the ancestors and had to do with Oya of the graveyard . . . The vulture is the bird. Because the [Gelede society] didn’t tell me what bird to use.”

The base of the sculpture was created out of the heavy hooks that hold down railroad track (Fig. 42). Four pairs of hooks are placed within a double circle crossed by an X. These hooks were recovered by Yaw along the railroad that runs parallel to his Hawthorne property. While the entire iron sculpture can be seen as a manifestation of Ogun’s power, the inclusion of the track hooks adds further significance since the railroad and train are symbolic of Ogun’s persona. Thus Ogun has presently become associated with professions such as taxi or bus drivers, those who depend on vehicles for their livelihood. The train, along with its locomotive, the railroad track crossing continents and linking the many parts of the world, becomes a prime symbol of the powerful orisha of iron. Railroad spikes and rails figure in many African-American Ogun shrines. Thus the reference to this powerful manifestation of Ogun is not only descriptive but also meaningful.

Yaw has avowed that during the process of creating the large sculpture, live vultures were constantly and inexplicably surrounding his shop. He observed,

When I was making the turkey vulture, vultures came from all over and sit up in the trees while I was making it. They act like they were my models. One came out here one day and Ade said, “look at him up there in the tree with his wings outstretched.” He was saying “this is how the wings should go, stretched like this” . . . we said “look at this.” Then we saw one day about seven or eight of ‘em

58 Ibid.

gathered in the tree behind us and sat in that tree. We said, “they must know what’s going on here in the shop.”

Yaw also discovered that he had created the perch that the bird stands on from an Egyptian design:

The idea just fell in my head while I was making it and through dealing with the Egyptian art from being in NY, seeing so much of it and I used to make ankhs and as a matter a fact I made it first and then I realized what it was, you know, I made the design and then I said “oh that looks like Egyptian.”

Yaw explained that the scrolled staff is reminiscent of an Egyptian design that he saw (Fig. 43). He compared it to the staffs that Egyptian royals held when they were pictured in the imagery on the walls of the Pyramids and portrayed on papyrus paper.

One similarity that Yaw and Phillip Simmons seem to share is their source for inspiration. Both Yaw and Phillip have claimed to receive ideas for their designs in supernatural ways. As John Vlach points out, “Phillip walks a fine line between his own ideas and the requests of his customers. Over the years Phillip has learned that the plan of a design will eventually come to him. He does not develop it outright; he waits for it to arrive.”

Yaw added, “You know [Phillip] dreams. You know a lot of the designs he does, you know, he’ll say he is gonna sleep on it. He sleep on it and then he comes the next day, or a few days later, he will give you his design.”

60 Interview with Yaw September 29th 2004, at his Hawthorne home.
61 Ibid.
63 Interview with Yaw September 29th, 2004, at his Hawthorne home.
During the creation of the vulture, Yaw often stated that ideas were coming to him in dreams as well. This organic way of creating art has been a characteristic that Yaw has always had in common with his mentor, Phillip Simmons. Both Phillip and Yaw have commonly used their visions or dreams for the content of their work. This phenomenon can be understood as a connection to their heritage. Countless African and African-American artisans have claimed to receive their inspirations through spiritual or supernatural manners. According to John Vlach, “Black artisans see themselves as moved by exterior forces outside of their control.”

One example of this phenomenon is apparent among the Gola of Liberia. They believe that an artist’s spiritual guardian or jina supplies him with the ability or neme to create a good mask or statue. In Gola communities sculptors are routinely characterized as dreamers. Another example comes from the Ga people of Ghana. According to the Ga, a people heavily influenced by the Akan culture, the inspiration and ability to make artful pieces of work is said to come from a higher deity or spirit. William Arnet author of the book *Souls Grown Deep: African-American Vernacular Art of the South* commented on this occurrence when he stated,

> Although the rituals accompanying the artistic process vary from one African culture to another, the Supreme Being is regarded almost everywhere as the ultimate source of the creative principle in cosmos, and the one who delegates the tutelary spirits that inspire and guide artists.

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65 Ibid., p. 109

66 Ibid.

It can be deduced therefore, that inherent in African art objects is an element of divine inspiration and a relationship with the spirit world.\textsuperscript{68} Hence, by receiving inspiration for their artwork through visions and dreams, Phillip and Yaw are not only united to other African-American artists, but to African artists as well.\textsuperscript{69}

When Yaw was asked how he differentiates between art and strictly utilitarian objects, he had this to say:

Well really I see gates and fences, regular plain gates and fences I wouldn’t say that they was artwork, straight up and down plain. The art is when you get into designing something . . . that has shape and form and design, you know, and then I would say that that was art -- functional art you know. Just like that star gate that Phillip did for the demonstration at Washington, D.C., and he made it on site. It was a gate but it was really a piece of art, it was functional art. ‘Cause I feel like in the African society things were artistic but everything had a function, even the vulture that I made for the women’s society. It’s art but not only art; it has another function you know: Living Art.\textsuperscript{70}

Ade added to this idea of “Living Art” when he commented on the Gelede sculpture:

But it’s not even an art piece. Presently it’s an art piece, but when it is imbued with the \textit{ashe} then its no longer an art piece. It’s a ceremonial object . . . To the [outside] viewer it’s an art piece, but to the purpose that it was created, it’s a ritual object... I think that when something moves to the fifth dimension it’s not art; in fact, out of that dimension it subsumes its position as art.\textsuperscript{71}

This idea of ‘Living Art’ objects and the ritual significance that they contain can be better understood when one realizes that in most African languages, there is no word for


\textsuperscript{70} Interview with Yaw September 29th, 2004, at his Hawthorne home.

\textsuperscript{71} Interview with Ade Ofunniyin September 29th, 2004, at Yaw’s Hawthorne home.
art, in the Western sense of the meaning. That is not to say that Africans do not make a
distinction between a routine everyday object and a product of artistry, created with the
skill used to make it beautiful. In much traditional African thinking, art is a sign of
culture and one’s ability to fashion the merely useful to his desire. Rowland Abiodun
states that within the field of Yoruba aesthetics specifically, five essential components are
required to understanding the concept of Yoruba art; they are: Ase, ori, iwa, ewa and ona.
These five ideas encompass the Yoruba methodology for evaluating the phenomena of
creativity and beauty.

_Ashe_ is literally translated as “power” or “authority” however, the actual meaning is
exceedingly more complex. _Ashe_ refers to the vital energy, the power, and the great
strength in all things of the universe. It can also refer to the divine energy manifest in
the process of creation.

_Ori_ is the “inner spiritual head” in humans or one’s “personal destiny.” _Ori_ has
been understood as the enabling power that represents the ‘potential’ that life holds.

_Ewa_ is a term that means “beauty.” It is primarily is used to denote the qualities of
beauty (or essential nature) in a person or object that have been captured by the artist.

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74 Ibid.
75 Ibid., p.12
76 Ibid., p.13
77 Ibid.
Lastly, *ona* is translated as ‘art’ or the ‘artistic ability to create.’ Within Yoruba philosophy, art cannot be defined outside of the context of the processes of creation, or the artist’s ability to manifest the first two contextualities in order to give the physical object embodied meaning. Since the vulture sculpture was created within the conception of Yoruba art, it is contingent on the associations that are incurred through these contextual classifications.

Furthermore, given that the sculpture is viewed as a ‘ritual’ object by the *Gelede* society, the term art merely describes the object as artistically rendered. After all, the *Gelede* vulture, like most Yoruba artworks, was created for a ritual purpose, not for ‘arts sake.’ As stated by Robert Farris Thompson, “A thing or a work of art that has ashe, transcends ordinary questions about its makeup and confinements: it is divine force incarnate.”

Presently the vulture sculpture stands in front of the *yemaya* shrine in Oyotunji village (Fig. 44). It is utilized during *Gelede* ceremonies when the ashe-imbued matter is placed in the small bowl underneath the bird and procured for anointing purposes during the ritualized ceremony (Fig. 43).

Like the mask in the African masquerade, it is the ritual use of an artful object that holds the most importance and meaning. When the ceremonial event has concluded, the object then becomes a signifier of the performed ritual, an indicator of performed rituals and the symbolism that they comprise. Meaning is imbued into an artwork through its

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78 Ibid.

79 Ibid.

function in the ceremony, and, according to the Yoruba belief system, the spiritual energy *ashe* builds up increasingly in an object when it is utilized within more and more ritual contexts. Thus, the object is imbued not just with meaning, but with the mounting *ashe* as well.

Yaw has also produced other ceremonial artworks that include bird imagery, specifically, sculptural forms that symbolically refer to the orisha of herbal medicine, *Osanyin*. He has formed iron work replicas of *Osanyin* imagery that he viewed in Robert Farris Thompson’s book *Flash of the Spirit: African and Afro-American Art & Philosophy* (Fig. 45). The prototype for one such example was created in Bahia, Brazil by an Afro-Brazilian blacksmith named Jose Adario dos Santos (Fig. 46). In both Yaw’s and Jose’s works, a stylized bird surmounts six sharp pointed bars of iron radiating outward from the base of the sculpture. According to Thompson, the sculpture can be interpreted in several manners: “In one version, [it suggests] *Osanyin* above the crossroads of *Eshu* and iron, or, in another, the bird of *Osanyin* above the sharpened points of *Ogun*’s iron, or, in still another, the bird of *Osanyin* in the branches of a tree.”81 To support the interpretation of “*Osanyin* in the branches of a tree,” Thompson includes an example of a bird staff collected in Rio de Janeiro in 194182 (Fig. 47). In this example, the bars below the apex-bird suggest the branches of a tree, each surmounted by a bird. Thompson further states that this bird-tree arrangement suggests that *Osanyin*, the healer/herbalist who makes use of and guards the forest as his exclusive domain.83


82 Ibid.

83 Ibid.
Yaw has also created Osanyin staffs inspired by an image of an Osanyin staff in the book ‘Nine Centuries of Yoruba Art’ by Henry Drewel (Fig. 48). An unknown artist created the prototype for Yaw’s Osanyin staff in the 19th or 20th century. Like the Yoruba staff in the book, the Osanyin staffs created by Yaw, include two birds in their designs (Figs. 49-50). The bodies of the birds were created from flattened curvilinear pieces of iron that swoop up at the heads and tails of the fanciful creatures. They have long thin beaks and a scrolled piece of iron on top of their heads. Behind the birds’ heads two long, pointed pieces of iron radiate in the opposite direction from their beaks, and a semi-circular form is placed between the two birds, and is congruous to the shape of the flanking birds’ bodies. In Yaw’s version, an additional scrolled piece of iron is positioned at the point where the legs of the birds meet the top of the iron staff, and can be attributed to Phillip Simmons’s influence. In the Yoruba example, it is a curved and flattened piece of metal that meets the staff-pole. Also, the wing feathers of the two examples are dissimilar. In the Yoruba example, the wings are more easily differentiated from the feathers on the birds’ body. They are wider and flattened in a curved form that swoops upward towards the head of the birds. In Yaw’s version, the wings are placed at the sides of the birds’ bodies and are visually more incorporated into the rest of the anatomy of the creatures.

Yaw created the Osanyin staffs at his forge when it was located at Ade’s Hawthorne home. They were produced out of salvaged rebar. Unlike the Yoruba prototype, in certain areas on Yaw’s Osanyin staffs the rebar is left intact. The surface of the manufactured rod adds a varied texture to Yaw’s version and at the same time asserts Ogun’s presence in its iron structure. Several of Yaw’s Osanyin staffs have remained at
the site of their creation. These Osanyin staffs are appropriately placed near Ade’s personal garden and at sundown their magnificent silhouette is visible against each colorful sunset sky.

Another one of Yaw’s Osanyin staffs that was created in this style has been placed in the Ogun shrine of Baba Onabamiero Ogunleye. This Osanyin staff is approximately six feet high, larger than the ones in Ade’s garden (Fig. 51). The placement of the Osanyin staff within Baba Ona’s Ogun shrine is appropriate in that Ogun and Osanyin are spiritually linked through their defining abilities. Osanyin is known for his talent at identifying and harvesting the sacred plants from the forest. Ogun aids Osanyin by providing the metal tools that make the harvest expediently possible. As Thompson states, “He [Ogun] addresses the forest with a sharpened machete; his spirit moves in the clearing of the bush, in the hoes and knives of cultivators. Ogun served the very creator of the world ...by clearing the primordial forest with his iron.”84 The creation of the Osanyin staff in Ogun’s iron symbolically makes reference to this connection between the two orishas.

While Yaw created these Osanyin staffs from a single prototype, several other Yoruba staffs display similarities in their design. For example, a diviner staff pictured in Thompson’s book Flash of the Spirit: African & Afro-American Art & Philosophy, bears a striking resemblance in its form. Odeleogun, a master blacksmith of Efôn-Alaiye who flourished toward the end of the nineteenth century, created the Ifa-diviner staff.85 (Fig. 52). While Osanyin staffs are different from diviner’s staffs in several ways, one can see

84 Ibid.
85 Ibid., p. 45
that there are similarities in the anatomy of the birds. For example, both staffs include birds that are created out of flattened pieces of iron, with an upward swooping head and tail. While the birds’ anatomies on the Osanyin staffs are more exaggerated, the likeness is obvious. Unlike the Osanyin staffs, Nigerian diviner staffs customarily include only a single bird atop a single iron disk that covers four inverted iron bells, radiating outward from the staff below, with four more bells hanging in the opposite direction below. Both staffs, however, incorporate the scroll motif, yet the placement of the scroll on the two staffs is different. In Yaw’s version the scroll is placed on top of the head of the bird. In Odeleogun’s example, the scroll is located behind the bird’s head. The birds of Yaw’s Osanyin staff are far more linear and elongated in their contour, whereas on the diviner staff they seem to be squat and cowering in comparison.

Another one of Odeleogun’s staffs that relates to Yaw’s Osanyin staff displays further similarities in form (Fig. 53). This Osanyin staff is akin to Yaw’s in that it displays a multitude of birds radiating outward from a single protruding staff. Odeleogun’s staff contains the sixteen birds that enable it to be quite powerful. The elevated and largest bird in the center is said to have additional significance. According to Thompson,

This strong and elegant bird-staff carries within its forms a universal thought: the triumph of the mind over the annihilating circle of destruction and disease. The double, spiraled plume of the bird at the summit suggests double power held at once, and displays the ever-multiplying presence of Osanyin, or other healing spirits like Erinle.86

Unlike Odeleogun’s staff, Yaw’s staff does not obviously surmount one bird over all of the rest, and thus its meaning is abstracted. However, they both include the scroll

86 Ibid., p. 50
design and a likeness in the flattened and upturned bird anatomy with their thin beaks and elongated necks. In Yaw’s version the birds branch out directly from the staff pole whereas Odeleogun’s stand upon a dais attached to the staff by cross-formed supports. Several other examples of Yoruba and Yoruba Diaspora Osanyin staffs follow this general design (Figs.54-55).

Through the viewing of a variety of Osanyin and Ifa-diviner staffs, it becomes apparent that there is a convention of style within Yoruba practice. Due to Yaw’s application of this style, he is maintaining the Yoruba sculptural tradition and adapting and adopting the design for use in the African Diaspora.

Osanyin’s presence in the Diaspora is essential to Yoruba religious practice because each of the orishas are served by their own particular herbs, taken with permission from the realm of Osanyin. Yet for all this herbalist orisha’s power, the image of Osanyin is physically imperfect. He is said to have one leg, one arm and one eye, the physical consequences of an egocentric and wanton existence. According to Yoruba myth,

Diviner [Ifa] said he was suffering because he could find neither food nor sustenance because all of the work, which he might be doing with the leaves, was being done by Osanyin. Eshu [the trickster orisha and of the crossroads] said that he would help. Eshu caused the stones of the house of Osanyin to fall and maim the deity. Lacking a leg and an arm and an eye, he now needed a diviner [Ifa], urgently, to collect his leaves and continue with the curing of people. And since that time diviners and Osanyin have been working hand in hand.88

87 Ibid., p. 42
88 Ibid., p. 42-43
It is believed that Osanyin also failed to make a proper sacrifice commanded by Ifa and, consequently, lost his voice. From that point onward, whenever Osanyin opened his mouth to speak, only a high-pitched squeaky voice resonated from his lips. These physical abnormalities give the deity insight into the perils of the human condition.

The imagery associated with Osanyin alludes to his physical condition. For example, unlike the other deities of the Yoruba pantheon, Osanyin does not come to the body of a devotee as a possessor, but in the form of a tiny doll, given voice and motion by skilled ventriloquists who are also Osanyin priests and healers. According to Robert Farris Thompson,

Ventriloquism... is one of the marvels of the cult of the lord of the leaves not only in Nigeria but also in Cuba. His tiny voice is also heard in Brazil, where priest of ancestral spirits attached to their bodies small store-bought rubber dolls of the kind that squeaked when pinched, to suggest the tiny voice of Osanyin – an ingenious ‘bending’ of a modern object in the direction of tradition.

Osanyin’s high-pitched voice has also been characterized through other arts that represent him. For instance, certain groups in Nigeria claim that the sound of Osanyin’s voice relates to ‘a little bird that represents him.’ This explanation would account for the myriad of wrought iron staffs surmounted by bird imagery that are created for the realm of Osanyin. According to Ifa, there are sixteen styles of the Osanyin wrought-iron

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89 Ibid.
90 Ibid.
91 Ibid.
92 Ibid.
93 Ibid., p. 44
94 Ibid., p. 44
The designs vary from including one to sixteen birds atop the staff. The staff with sixteen birds or ‘heads’ is the most prestigious because the most powerful adherents gauge their power by sixteen. According to Thompson, “The divination literature tells us that proliferating bird motifs allude to an ancient time, when Osanyin was magician of the g-ds, working miracles with one, then two, then three, then four and finally, sixteen heads or birds.”

This persistent equation of the bird with the head is important to the understanding of the Osanyin staffs. In Yoruba belief, the source of one’s personal power and destiny is one’s head. It is through Ifa divination that one discovers what his or her ‘head’ is. This combination of Ifa divination imagery with Osanyin imagery is indicative of the equally dependent relationship between Ifa and Osanyin. It also further underscores the legend that concerned the original disfigurement of the herbalist orisha.

An additional reason given for the inclusion of bird imagery on the Osanyin staffs relates to the realm of witchcraft. Together the herbalist and the diviner struggle against witchcraft since it is believed to be the magical source of human pathology. It is believed that the witches transform themselves into night birds and thus are represented as such on the staffs of Osanyin and Ifa. The bird has been described as “a white bird with a long red beak and red claws [or] a brown bird like a bush fowl with a long red

95 Ibid.
96 Ibid., p. 45
97 Ibid.
99 Ibid., p. 145
beak.\textsuperscript{100} The common trait in each of these descriptions is the hot color red and the extended beak.

Many Yoruba songs concern birds and relate tales of a bird-witch in the night that stealthily preys on unsuspecting victims. For example, the song mentioned concerning the \textit{Gelede} use of the bird imagery refers to a “famous bird that... kills ...One who makes noise in the midnight.”\textsuperscript{101} It is believed that during these night visits the bird-witch “pecks the head of the sleeping target to suck out blood, causing illness or death . . . [or] eat the spirit of the individual.”\textsuperscript{102} One Yoruba priest in Nigeria was recorded as saying,

The witches are so terrible. Someone who holds the position of native herbalist must have the bird on his staff. The birds that kill people and cause sickness and make people afraid – when they see that the herbalist has the bird in iron on his staff, they will . . . fear him. . . It is not an ordinary bird. It is the form the elder takes to fly in the night, invisible except to the other witches.\textsuperscript{103}

In order to be protected from the night visits of these witches, some adherents placed the staff in the corner of the room next to their bed.\textsuperscript{104} They would “shake the staff each evening and rattle the bells [on the diviner staff] so that evil spirits will not come.”\textsuperscript{105}

Interestingly, a similar tradition is found among the Gullah/Geechie people of the Sea Islands of South Carolina. Many African-Americans of the Sea Islands have a belief

\textsuperscript{100} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{101} Henry John Drewal, and Margaret Thompson Drewal. \textit{Gelede: Art and Female Power Among the Yoruba.} (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1983) p.74.

\textsuperscript{102} Robert F. Thompson. \textit{Black G-ds and Kings : Yoruba Art at UCLA} (Bloomington, IN : Indiana University Press, 1976) Ch. 11/2

\textsuperscript{103} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{104} Ibid., Ch. 11/2

\textsuperscript{105} Ibid.
in multiple souls. It is believed that the soul leaves the body and returns to G-d at death, but the ‘spirit’ stays on earth, remaining involved in the daily affairs of its living descendants. The spirit of a dead or dying older woman may become a ‘hag’ or an old woman who “practices witchcraft and who bears a grudge against one of her neighbors.” Like the witch in the Yoruba belief system, it is during the night that the hag completes her malicious work. When night falls, the witch in Yoruba mythology, can transform her ‘heart-soul’ [okan] into a bird or animal. This occurs at night and her physical body remains in a deep sleep while her transformed ‘heart-soul’ moves abroad . . . If the witches’ activities are brought into the light of day, they lose their potency.

Similarly, in Gullah/Geechie folklore, the hag is free to leave her body [or shed her skin] when night falls and wander unseen through the land. When a hag is upon her victim, she ‘rides’ that person by sitting on the chest and face, weighing the sleeper down and meaning to choke or smother the ill-fated person. Akin to the Yoruba witch belief, by daylight, the hag must go back to the body or the skin that she had left behind. If she were kept from getting back into her skin by having salt thrown at her, she would quickly perish by sunrise. As previously stated, the Yoruba have the tradition of placing a diviner’s staff in the bedroom to protect from the night witches. In the Gullah tradition the protective placed object is the house broom. Interestingly both objects have a similar overall shape (Fig. 56). It is not inconceivable that African beliefs could have been the

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106 www.co.beaufort.sc.us/bftlib/gullah

107 Ibid.


109 www.co.beaufort.sc.us/bftlib/gullah
source for the Gullah belief of the night ‘hag’ or witch, although not specifically Yoruba. Yet, parallel beliefs would undoubtedly make it easier for a descendant of Gullah ancestors to understand and grasp such ideas in an adopted religion such as that of the Yoruba.

Through the creation of an Osanyin staff in the style of a Yoruba prototype, Yaw has perpetuated an African heritage tradition in the Diaspora. His construction of the staff makes reference to his ancestry, while continuing the African and African-American custom of creating art-objects through a traditional scope and style. While Yaw actively maintains the African legacy through his interest and involvement in African culture in ways that his forbearers have not, he re-invigorates the art-objects of his creation, through re-contextualization and innovation. James Baldwin once commented to Margaret Mead on this phenomenon:

The past is the present. I am one of the dispossessed. According to the West, I have no history; yet, my life was defined by the time I was five, by the history written on my brow. . . The political position of my father, whether or not he knew it, was dictated by his very honorable necessity not to break faith with the Old/New World. But the black American must find a way to keep faith with, and to excavate, a reality much older than Europe.\(^{110}\)

www.ijele.com/voll/morton.html
CHAPTER 7
CONCLUSION

Yaw’s blacksmithing work is inspired by his remarkable ability to incorporate his multifaceted life experiences. Between his early exposure to jazz legends such as John Coltrane, his mother’s ‘Garveyite’ outlook, and his interest in African culture, it is no wonder that his artwork is reflective of these encounters. With his interest in music, his visit to Ghana, an apprenticeship to Phillip Simmons, and his initiations into both the Akan and Yoruba cultures and faiths, Yaw reveals his understanding of his existence through his sculpture. Yaw maintains the African-American blacksmithing tradition, imparted to him through Phillip Simmons, who followed Peter Simmons, who in turn learned from his father Guy Simmons. As he embraces the teachings of this African-American blacksmithing lineage, he also reaches beyond those generations to seek a more ancient ‘African’ blacksmithing tradition in his devotion to Ogun – a roots heritage of iron-working as it were.

Whether it be in the curve of his scroll design, the meaning of an adinkra symbol or the purpose of a Yoruba herbalist Osanyin staff, Yaw actively draws upon inspiration from these resources to create objects of artistry that exemplify Diaspora Art. As John Vlach points out, “We see in [blacksmith work] the memory of Africa, the struggle to regain freedom and as much as possible to regain Africa and the heritage of African culture.”

While the slave trade affected the Yoruba Diaspora in unimaginable and catastrophic ways, the retention and perpetuation of Africanisms in the Diaspora reflects the triumph of an inexorable communal will. Yaw commented on this concept when he stated, “What I realize in a lot of the designs in Charleston and different places, are that a lot of them are African motifs. Somebody saw the motif and designed it but nobody [else] knew that it was an old African design.”

These survivals in the African and African-American blacksmithing tradition are reflective of the ‘inexorable communal will’ of the people. When Phillip Simmons once expressed uncertainty about the future of blacksmithing to his mentor Peter Simmons, he was simply told, “Boy, don’t worry. There will always be work for a blacksmith. Don’t worry about it.” Peter’s reassuring words have not been entirely contradicted. With the advancements of the Industrial Revolution and all that came with the conveniences of mass production, the blacksmith remains a part of the skilled convergence. With all of Yaw’s capability as an artist, there are countless pragmatic benefits to his trade. For example, he is often summoned by his associates to fix tools that would have been otherwise discarded. When a more specific iron object is needed or a store-bought tool requires an alteration to make it more functional, Yaw is the man for the job. His skill is both practical and evolutionary in nature. As long as metals are employed by people, the blacksmith will remain a notable member of society.

However, that is not to say that the role of the blacksmith has not changed. For example, in the past, blacksmith work was a trade that was imperative to the creation of

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2 Interview with Yaw at his Hawthorne home, September 29, 2004.

metalwork. Nowadays, with the advent of mass production, the role of the blacksmith has been decidedly more marginal to society and thus, the perception of ironwork has also changed. Phillip Simmons’s ironwork is no longer viewed as exclusively utilitarian; it has been recognized as sculpture and it is situated in prominent art collections, such as the Smithsonian Institution and the State of South Carolina Museum. The inclusion of ironwork in art collections has opened up the arena for it to be reconsidered in terms of aesthetic value, inventiveness, and tradition.

Yet, while our understanding of ironwork has developed in new areas, the nature of the work of the blacksmith has remained the same. Thus, one must ask whether our consideration of a work affects the work itself. I would venture to say not. Regardless of our determination of the ironwork as art or sculpture, the ironwork itself remains traditional - entirely. The classification is conventional as per the time period, but the trade itself is time-honored and evocative of an African precedent. As Phillip Simmons, the most widely revered African-American blacksmith in the United States has stated, “I build a gate and I just be thinking about two hundred years. If you don’t you’re not an honest craftsman.”

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4 Ibid., p. 17
Figure 1. Yaw Owusu Shangofemi standing with *Gelede* vulture sculpture, 2005. Photograph provided by Ade Ofunniyin.
Figure 2. Photograph of Phillip Simmons at his anvil. Phillip Simmons signed the image and gave it to Yaw Owusu Shangofemi (a.k.a Paul Burns) in August 2003. Photograph provided by Yaw Owusu Shangofemi.
Figure 3. Chart displaying the regions of Africa where slaves were taken from during the period of: 1716-1807. Goodwine, Marquetta. *The Legacy of Igbo Landing* (Atlanta, GA: Clarity Press, 1998) p. 56

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<th>Cargoes with count (1)</th>
<th>No. of slaves (2)</th>
<th>Cargoes without count (3)</th>
<th>Total cargoes (4)</th>
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\(^a\) Refers to Africa; no specific region is identified.
\(^b\) Does not include the many ships that brought fewer than 10 slaves and is thus an underestimate.
Figure 4. Map displaying the population percentages of blacks vs. whites in 1850’s South Carolina. Sinha, Manisha The Counter-Revolution of Slavery: Politics and Ideology in Antebellum South Carolina (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 2000) p. 118
Figure 5. Chart displaying the population percentages of blacks vs. whites from 1820 — 1860 in South Carolina. Sinha, Manisha *The Counter-Revolution of Slavery: Politics and Ideology in Antebellum South Carolina* (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 2000) p. 12

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Figure 6. Chart displaying the African linguistic sources of Gullah vocabulary.

Goodwine, Marquetta. The Legacy of Igbo Landing (Atlanta, GA: Clarity Press, 1998) p 61
Figure 10. Snake Gate, 329 East Bay Street, Charleston, S.C. Lyons, Mary. *Catching the Fire: Phillip Simmons, Blacksmith* (Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1997) p.6
Figure 12. Apprentices: Carlton Simmons, Silas Sessions and Ronnie Pringle putting up a gate. Photograph provided by Ade Ofunniyin.
Figure 14. Ade Ofunniyin (on left) and Yaw Owusu Shangofemi (on right) moving a table into a truck. The table frame was created by Yaw Owusu Shangofemi. Photograph provided by Yaw Owusu Shangofemi.
Figure 15. Charleston Circle created by Yaw Owusu Shangofemi. Photograph provided by Yaw Owusu Shangofemi.
Figure 16. Wentworth Street Gate created by Yaw Owusu Shangofemi. Photograph provided by Yaw Owusu Shangofemi.
Figure 18. *David Star Gate* created by Yaw Owusu Shangofemi, 2005. Photograph provided by Ade Ofunniyin.
Figure 19. Star and Fish Gate from the Smithsonian Collection. Vlach, John M. Charleston Blacksmith: The Work of Phillip Simmons. (Athens, GA: The University of Georgia Press, 1981) p. 78
Figure 20. Gate created circa 1975 during Yaw Owusu Shangofemi and Ade Ofunniyin’s business partnership. Photograph provided by Ade Ofunniyin.
Figure 21. Oba Adefemi Osijeman and attendants during religious birthday celebration of a Queen at Oyotunji village, 2005. Photograph provided by Jody Berman.
Figure 22. Sign at the entrance of Oyotunji village, 2005. Photograph provided by Jody Berman.
Figure 23. Map of Nigeria. Dorward, David ed. Yoruba: Art in Life and Thought (Victoria, Australia: African Research Institute, 1988) p. 40
Figure 24. *Ogun* sculpture in the foreground and Yaw Owusu Shangofemi working in the background, circa 1980. Photograph provided by Yaw Owusu Shangofemi.
Figure 25. *Ogun* sculpture standing in Yaw Owusu Shangofemi’s blacksmith shop. Yaw Owusu Shangofemi working in the background, circa 1980. Photograph provided by Yaw Owusu Shangofemi.
Figure 26. Poster of Phillip Simmons over Yaw Owusu Shangofemi’s workspace in his blacksmith-shop, 2005. Photograph provided by Ade Ofunniyin.
Figure 27. [Gye Nyame] *adinkra* symbol spray painted on the exterior wall of Yaw Owusu Shangofemi’s blacksmithing shop. Beside the *adinkra* symbol, is a sculptural representation of the orisa of iron and warfare – *Ogun*. The sculpture was created by Yaw Owusu Shangofemi, 2005. Photograph provided by Ade Ofunniyin.
Figure 28. Example of *Adinkra* cloth with Gye Nyame symbol among others.
Figure 29. *Adinkra* symbol iron sculpture created by Yaw Owusu Shangofemi, 2005. Photograph provided by Ade Ofunniyin.
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Figure 48. Osanyin staff, Nigeria. This staff was the model that Yaw Owusu Shagofemi used when he created his Osanyin staffs. This photo was taken from the book by Henry Drewel: Nine Centuries of Yoruba Art. (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1983) p. xv
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Figure 52. Diviner’s staff created by Odeleogun, a master blacksmith of Efon-Alaiye, late 1800’s. Thompson, Robert F. Flash of the Spirit: African and Afro-American Art and Philosophy (New York, NY: Random House, 1983) p. 46
Figure 53. Osanyin staff created by Odeleogun, a master blacksmith of Efon-Alaiye, late 1800’s. Thompson, Robert F. Flash of the Spirit: African and Afro-American Art and Philosophy (New York, NY: Random House, 1983) p. 50
Figure 54. Osanyin staffs displaying the sixteen bird motif. Thompson, Robert F. *Black G-ds and Kings: Yoruba Art at UCLA* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press: 1976) Ch1/6
Figure 55. Osanyin staffs displaying the sixteen bird motif. Thompson, Robert F. Black G-ds and Kings: Yoruba Art at UCLA (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press: 1976) Ch11/6
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Hawthorne, FL home.


Yaw Owusu Shagofemi interviewed September 29th, 2004, at his Hawthorne, FL home.

Yaw Owusu Shangofemi interviewed January 20, 2005, at his Hawthorne, FL home.
BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Jody Nicole Berman grew up in Port St. Lucie, Florida. She relocated to Gainesville, Florida, in August of 2000 when she became an undergraduate student at the University of Florida. Upon the completion of her bachelors’ degree in art History, she became a graduate student at the University of Florida and decided to specialize in the field of African art.