

CEMETERY SCULPTURES AND CULTURAL MEMORY: DOCUMENTING ABEOKUTA'S FUNERARY ART FOR HERITAGE PRESERVATION AND NOLLYWOOD ENGAGEMENT

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Abstract

This paper examined cemetery sculptures in Abeokuta, Nigeria, as vital repositories of cultural memory and heritage. Funerary sculptures, ranging from busts and full body portraits to angelic figures and etched gravestones, served not only as memorial markers but also as symbolic archives of Egba identity, spirituality, and social history. Despite their importance and cultural significance, these works remain underdocumented, poorly preserved, and increasingly vulnerable to urban expansion and neglect. Drawing on graphic fieldwork, visual documentation and interviews with local sculptors and caretakers, the study provided a stylistic and material analysis of selected cemetery sculptures across Abeokuta metropolis. Findings revealed that these monuments embodied layered narratives of lineage, belief systems and cultural continuity. The paper argues that cemetery sculptures are more than funerary objects, they function as open air museums, sustaining communal values across generations. Yoruba art has long served as a language system of symbols and motifs, transmitting memory and meaning across time, yet Nollywood has not fully explored these sculptural resources in its visual storytelling. To prevent further loss, the study recommended comprehensive documentation, inclusion of funerary art in cultural curricula, and heritage preservation initiatives that recognized cemeteries as cultural archives. Ultimately, preserving these monuments ensures the continuity of Yoruba cultural memory, strengthens Nigeria's broader heritage discourse, and provides authentic resources for Nollywood film production.

Keywords: Cemetery, Sculpture, Cultural Memory, Heritage Preservation, Abeokuta, Nollywood

INTRODUCTION

Background to the study

Cemetery or funerary sculptures are three-dimensional artworks created for burial spaces as markers of remembrance and reflection. They employ symbolic motifs such as angels, doves, crosses, and ancestral figures that embody cultural and spiritual values. Materials range from marble and bronze to cement and carved stone, while forms vary from realism to abstraction. Beyond their memorial role, they are creative expressions shaped by religious, cultural, and historical contexts—valuable as both art and heritage. Conceptually, this study draws on funerary art, cultural memory, and visual semiotics, viewing cemetery sculptures as sculptural texts that mediate between the living and

the dead. As sites of memory, they encode indigenous iconography and symbolic codes that express communal belief systems and continuity.

Within this framework, cemetery sculptures act as cultural scripts preserving Yoruba values found in egungun traditions and symbolic imagery. As Laurajane Smith (2006) argues, heritage involves processes of meaning-making, not just monuments. Abeokuta's cemetery sculptures thus represent vernacular heritage with potential for historical awareness and preservation (Atanda, 1980; Adekoya, 2015). Yet, while funerary art attracts global study, Nigerian examples remain underexplored. Yoruba palace and masquerade arts have gained attention, but cemetery sculptures are marginalized, even though Nollywood frequently employs cemetery settings. This study examines Abeokuta's funerary art as sites of cultural memory and explores their relevance for heritage preservation and cinematic storytelling.

Historically, funerary art has served as a visual record of identity and belief across civilizations (Carroll, 1967; Bascom, 1973). Among the Yoruba, death marks passage into ancestral existence (Lawal, 2001), and commemorative effigies or carved posts once preserved social memory. In Abeokuta, stone and terracotta grave sculptures encode beliefs about life and afterlife. Permanent grave sculpture emerged during colonial influence, replacing ephemeral *àkó* effigies (Poynor, 1987; Akintonde, 2004).

To situate Abeokuta's funerary sculptures within a broader art-historical continuum, it is important to acknowledge earlier traditions of sculptural realism in ancient Nigerian art that inform later commemorative practices. Fagg (1977) and Willett (2002) observe that ancient Nigerian sculptural traditions, particularly those of Ile-Ife, display refined naturalism that has often been described as superficially resembling classical Greek art. In analyzing Ife terracotta and bronze heads, Blier (2015) highlights their anatomical accuracy, balanced proportions, and subtle facial modeling, qualities commonly associated with classical sculptural ideals. Dark (1973) similarly notes that Benin royal heads and commemorative bronzes employ idealized realism to convey authority, identity, and cultural memory.

Rejecting diffusionist interpretations, Lawal (2012) argues that such realism reflects indigenous aesthetic philosophies rather than external influence, while Ben-Amos (1995) situates Benin naturalism within localized court traditions and advanced metallurgical practices. This indigenous classical realism provides a historical framework for later Yoruba commemorative forms,

including funerary sculptures in Abeokuta, where sculptural likeness functions as a visual strategy for remembrance, status affirmation, and ancestral continuity.

The subject matter is particularly peculiar to Abeokuta of Egbaland due to the city's distinctive historical evolution, cultural identity, and funerary traditions. Abeokuta, as the ancestral homeland of the Egba people, possesses a rich legacy of sculptural practice shaped by its 19th-century formation as a refuge settlement and its subsequent development into a politically and culturally significant Yoruba center. This unique history fostered a strong consciousness of lineage, status, and memory, which is vividly expressed in its cemetery art. Unlike many other Yoruba towns, Abeokuta's cemeteries display a remarkable concentration of personalized sculptural forms—ranging from naturalistic portraiture to symbolic grave markers—that reflect both indigenous beliefs and external influences such as Christianity and colonial aesthetics. The city's long-standing engagement with formal education, missionary activity, and artistic production further contributed to the evolution of funerary sculpture as a hybrid visual tradition. Consequently, cemetery sculptures in Abeokuta are not merely memorial objects but culturally specific expressions of Egba identity, making the subject uniquely grounded in the historical, social, and artistic landscape of Egbaland.

However, Colonial contact further reshaped Yoruba funerary practices through Western realism, cement, and bronze (Kalilu & Akintonde, 2013). Memorials such as *Elerede* in Akure and *Sòjà Ìdùmòtá* in Lagos demonstrate this hybridization. By the mid 20th century, artists like Ben Enwonwu expanded public sculpture, a development later seen in Abeokuta cemeteries like Lantoro, where Yoruba and Western styles merged (Adisa, 1999; Akintonde, 2004). Abeokuta, the Egba capital in Ogun State, remains rich in heritage expressed through ancestral effigies and symbolic grave markers. Yet many are undocumented, decaying, or excluded from contemporary narratives. This study explores these sculptures as repositories of cultural memory and creative potential. Through documentation and digital archiving, it bridges traditional art with Nollywood's visual storytelling, emphasizing their value for heritage preservation, tourism, and Nigeria's creative economy. Despite their significance, many are threatened by neglect, vandalism, and urban expansion (Adeyanju, 2004; Adekoya, 2015), while Nollywood has yet to fully harness their cultural and visual potential.



Figure 1a: Father Coquard.

Fig. 1b: Old building of Sacred Heart, Isale Ake

Photography Courtesy: Seyi-Gbangbayau. 2025.

Statement of the Problem

Despite its long history and cultural richness, Abeokuta's funerary art remains largely unstudied, undocumented, and underutilized in Nigeria's heritage and creative discourses. Cemetery sculptures—busts, full figures, etched portraits, and angelic monuments—stand as silent archives of Egba identity, spirituality, and social history. Yet these sculptural traditions face neglect, environmental decay, and destruction from urban expansion. The absence of structured documentation and scholarship has led to deterioration and the gradual loss of cultural memory. Equally concerning is their exclusion from Nollywood, Nigeria's globally recognized film industry. While the industry frequently dramatizes death, ancestry, and spirituality, it rarely employs authentic cemetery sculptures in its visual storytelling. This omission creates a disconnect between tangible heritage and cinematic representation. Thus, the problem is twofold: the material decline of funerary art as cultural heritage and its invisibility in creative media. Without intervention, future generations risk losing vital symbols of Egba identity while Nollywood continues to rely on generic or foreign visual tropes. This study addresses these gaps by analyzing Abeokuta's funerary art as both cultural heritage and a creative reservoir for film practice.

Scope of the Study

The study focuses on selected cemetery sculptures in Abeokuta, Ogun State, Nigeria specifically busts, full body figures, etched portraits, and angelic monuments. It does not attempt to survey all Yoruba funerary monuments but concentrates on Abeokuta as a representative case due to its

Literature Review

African Cultural Heritage

According to Abiodun (2014), Yoruba art functions as a visual language where symbols communicate lineage, belief, and cosmology. Within this framework, funerary sculptures embody spiritual and social narratives. Okeke-Agulu (2015) interprets African art as a negotiation of postcolonial identity and continuity. Similarly, Lawal (2001) and Drewal (1992) describe funerary works as visual texts that instruct and commemorate. Falola and Genova (2006) emphasize material culture's epistemic role, while Eyo (2008) views funerary sculpture as a lens into indigenous aesthetics. Seyi-Gbangbayau (2023) identifies cemeteries as repositories of cultural memory relevant to heritage and media. Collectively, these scholars establish funerary art as an archive of intangible heritage with contemporary relevance.

Theoretical Review

The study draws on Cultural Memory, Visual Semiotics, and Performance Theory. Assmann (1995) situates memory in symbolic forms, aligning Yoruba funerary art with intergenerational knowledge transmission. Drewal (1992) and Barber (1987) show that Yoruba art functions within ritual performance cycles, turning sculpture into a living enactment of memory. Barthes (1977) and Kalilu & Oladugbagbe (2013) employ semiotic analysis to decode posture and iconography in funerary art. Schechner (2003) extends this to performance, linking sculpture with masquerade and ritual as acts of communal remembrance. Together, these theories frame funerary sculpture as dynamic cultural performance rather than static artifact.

Documented Practices

Ethnographic accounts by Akintonde (2021) and Odiboh (1984) document Yoruba funerary symbols while warning of modernization threats. Seyi-Gbangbayau (2023) views public art as a tool for sustainability and heritage education, highlighting cemeteries as creative spaces for Nollywood. Haynes (2016) critiques Nollywood for superficial depictions of cultural heritage, while Ugochukwu (2014) urges deeper integration of indigenous artifacts in film. Adepegba (2018) and Omibiyi-Obidike (2019) promote digital archiving to preserve funerary sculptures for future generations. Collectively, these studies underscore both neglect and potential—emphasizing the need for preservation and creative re-engagement.

Summary of Literature Review

Yoruba funerary sculpture serves as a vessel of cultural memory, identity, and spirituality. Conceptually, it embodies communicative and mnemonic value (Abiodun, 2014; Okeke-Agulu, 2015). Theoretically, it aligns with cultural memory, semiotics, and performance (Assmann, 1995; Barthes, 1977; Drewal, 1992). Empirical studies (Akintonde, 2021; Seyi-Gbangbayau, 2023) highlight neglect and creative possibilities, while Haynes (2016) and Ugochukwu (2014) expose Nollywood's underutilization of indigenous heritage. The gap this study addresses is clear connecting cemetery sculpture preservation with cinematic application to strengthen Nigeria's cultural and creative identity.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative, interpretive, and exploratory research design, suitable for examining the aesthetic, symbolic, and cultural significance of cemetery sculptures within selected burial grounds in Abeokuta, Ogun State, Nigeria. The research is rooted in the disciplines of Sculpture, Art History, Cultural Anthropology, and Heritage Studies, and employs methods that prioritize visual analysis, cultural interpretation, and contextual documentation.

Study Area

The research was conducted in selected historical and contemporary cemeteries within Abeokuta, including:

Lantoro Cemetery (This is divided into two sections. One for the First Baptist Church and the second for group of churches under the name Lantoro Missionary Cemetery). Others include: Cemetery along Ogbe Road, Adekunle Compound, Ita Adekunle, Ile Ogunsuada, Ikija, Old Sacred Heart Hospital, Ake. Selected family and community burial sites in core traditional neighborhoods such as Kolobo and Ake. These locations were chosen based on their historical relevance, variety of sculptural expressions, and access to visual and oral records of funerary practices. However, among all the public cemeteries visited, only the ones at Lantoro have sculptures and some individual family graveyards



Fig. 2: Lantoro Missionary Cemetery Fig. 3; First Baptist Cemetery, Lantoro

Photographs courtesy: The Researcher, 2025

Data Collection Methods

The study employed four major qualitative data collection techniques:

- 1. Field Observation and Visual Documentation:** Systematic on site visits were undertaken to observe, photograph, and record various sculptural forms and motifs on graves, tombs, and memorials. Notes were taken on:
 - i. Material composition (cement, marble and fiberglass)
 - ii. Iconographic content (crosses, angels, busts, religious symbols)
 - iii. Condition and degradation levels
 - iv. Spatial and stylistic arrangements
 - v. Photographs were used as primary visual data for post-field analysis.
- 2. Semi-Structured Interviews:** Interviews were conducted with one local sculptor and two masons who specialize in funerary art, three cemetery caretakers and two elders familiar with local burial traditions
- 3. Archival and Literature Review:** Relevant academic literature on funerary art, Yoruba visual culture, memory studies, and Nollywood aesthetics was also consulted.
- 4. Data Analysis:** The sculptures were analyzed stylistically and material wise

Ethical Considerations

Respect for the sacredness of burial spaces was maintained throughout the study. No sculptures were altered or removed, and photographs were taken only after verbal consent where appropriate.

Names of deceased persons or families were documented the report after permission was granted by the cemetery caretakers

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

1. Stylistic and Material Analysis of the Sculptures

A. Contextual Significance

The cemetery sculptures of Abeokuta are vital cultural artifacts serving as visual memorials that honor the deceased and celebrate lineage and social identity. Their presence in burial spaces reflects a Yoruba tradition of using art to sustain memory and communal values. Unfortunately, the practice is fading, making documentation and preservation essential. This study analyzes selected cemetery sculptures in Abeokuta, examining their media, styles, and conditions to reveal their historical and cultural relevance. Through description and symbolic interpretation, the analysis highlights their importance as visual records of Egba heritage and recommends their preservation and integration into Nollywood for cultural continuity.

B. Descriptive, Material and Symbolic Analysis

Total number of sculptures analyzed: 18

Concrete Busts – 7 (1 female, 6 males; Figs. 4–10)

Full-size Concrete Portraits – 2 (Figs. 1 & 11)

Full-size Fiberglass Male Portraits – 2

Relief Portrait Etchings – 4

Angel Figures – 3

C. Material and Stylistic Analysis

C.i. Reinforced Concrete: (9 works: 7 busts and 2 full-size)

Style: Realism

The adoption of reinforced concrete marks a transition from temporary funerary expressions to enduring memorialization. Its durability aligns with Yoruba beliefs in ancestral permanence. Though

common in construction, its sculptural adaptation reflects technical mastery and realism that deepen both symbolic and aesthetic appeal.

Scale and Presence: The busts are slightly larger than life, suggesting elevated status, while the two full figures—a standing male and seated female—are rendered life-size. Their monumentality conveys dignity and remembrance. The male figure (Figs. 1 & 12), adorned in grey attire with beads and white hair, evokes authority and ancestral wisdom. The seated female (Fig. 11), dressed in white iro and buba with a modest gele, symbolizes maternal purity and transition, reflecting Yoruba cosmology where white signifies peace and spirituality.

Stylistic Orientation: Realism represents the cultural documentation of all the works captured in this research including the concrete sculptures. All nine concrete portraits employ realism, reflecting the Yoruba idea of continuity between life and the ancestral realm. Attention to facial expression, hairstyle, and attire preserves individuality and transmits cultural identity. These sculptures thus serve as visual documentation of Egba lineage and social values.

Gender Representation: Male figures dominate (7 of 9), each personalized with symbols of status or profession. The two female figures, particularly the seated one, embody dignity and motherhood, balancing the gender narrative in Yoruba commemorative art. Their portrayal reinforces the cultural esteem of women as nurturers and moral anchors within ancestral memory..



Fig 4: Chief O. Kuforiji, 1935

Fig 5: S.O Ladele, 1998

All the above sculptures are found in the cemeteries at Lantoro

Photographs courtesy: The Researchers, 2025



Fig.6; Mariam Badamosi, 1987

Fig.7: Pa T.O.Amosu, 1993

All the above sculptures are found in the cemeteries at Lantoro

Photographs courtesy: The Researchers, 2025



Fig 8: Unnamed Figure.

Fig 9: Chief S.O. Kuforiji, 1998

All the above sculptures are found in the cemeteries at Lantoro

Photographs courtesy: The Researchers, 2025



Fig. 10: Sir J. Caxton Idowu, 1994, Kolobo, Abeokuta

Image Courtesy: Nifemi Gbangbayau, 2025



Fig 11: Madam P. Majekodunmi,

1928, Ita Adekunle, Ikija Road



Fig. 12: Rev Father Coquard (same in fig. 1)

1933, Isale Ake

Photographs courtesy: The Researchers, 2025

C.ii. Fiberglass Sculptures

Number: 2

Medium: Patinated fiberglass

Style: Naturalistic/Idealized **Scale:** Full body, 7 ft.

Artists: Unknown.

Year of production: Unknown

C.ii.a. Chief Ogunsuada (Fig. 13)

Once installed on a colonial balcony, his agbada, fila, and beads projected Egba nobility. Now displaced to a dark room after urban redevelopment, the statue reflects the fragility of cultural memory amid modernization.

C.ii.b. Chief Akinolugbade (Fig. 14)

A towering funerary figure at Owu, Abeokuta, positioned before the hospital bearing his name. This seven feet fiberglass sculpture epitomizes Yoruba cemetery art, blending reverence and sculptural grandeur.



Fig 13: Chief Ogunsuada, Ikija.



Fig.14: Chief Akinolugbade, Owu, Abeokuta

Image Courtesy: The Researcher, 2025. **Image Courtesy:** Nifemi Gbangbayau

C.iii. Etching Portraits

Number: 3 (2 reliefs, 1 outline) Medium: Marble Style: Stylized Realism & Semi-abstract
Line Drawing

Figs. 15–16 (Mrs. B. Sotiloye–Oke, 2024; Mrs. O. O. Adeyi, 2023) feature etched female portraits rendered in delicate realism that preserves facial likeness. Fig. 17 (Sola and Pa Otolorin) shows a simple line drawing on grey marble—less detailed yet emotionally resonant, symbolizing memory’s endurance.

All portraits are centrally positioned on gravestones framed by modest architectural borders and vegetation, reflecting Yoruba reverence for nature and ancestry. The use of granite and marble underscores durability and communal respect for permanence.

C.iii.a. Cultural Preservation

These portraits function as open-air archives, recording hairstyles, attire, and genealogies that connect generations.

C.iii.b. Aesthetic Value

Their emotional realism humanizes the deceased, while the blend of modern etching and traditional mourning reveals Nigeria’s evolving funerary aesthetics.

C.iii.c. Nollywood Potential

Such portraits provide authentic cemetery imagery and visual cues for character development, offering Yoruba perspectives on death and ancestry—key themes in Nigerian film.

In essence, the three gravestone portraits—two etched and one outlined—serve as cultural and aesthetic landmarks that bridge memory, artistry, and cinematic interpretation. They stand as living archives, preserving indigenous identity while enriching Nigeria’s creative and visual heritage.



Fig.15: Mrs B.Sotiloye-Oke, Fig 16: Mrs O.Adeyi, Fig. 17; Sola and Pa Otolorin

Burial place for two people

The above images are from Lantoro cemetery

Photographs courtesy: The Researcher, 2025

Civ. Sculptures of Angels

Number: 4 Medium: Marble & Concrete Style: Symbolic Realism Height: Approx. 5 ft. (Figs. 18–22)

Angels embody peace, protection, and afterlife guardianship. Some resemble classical male figures common in Greco-Roman funerary art, symbolizing eternal youth and strength, yet resonate with Yoruba memorial practices that highlight virtues of the deceased.

Figs. 21–22 show angels from the tombs of Prof. S. Tomori (1984) and Chief E. Laleye (1971). Tomori's kneeling angel symbolizes humility and prayerful intercession. Laleye's fragmented angelic head, though damaged, retains spiritual significance, symbolizing both resilience and fragility of memory. These hybrid forms merge Christian and Yoruba cosmologies (e.g., Egungun traditions), creating a shared spiritual language.

For Nollywood, such imagery offers visual metaphors: the kneeling angel as divine presence, the broken angel as disrupted heritage. Their cinematic use could deepen narratives of faith, ancestry, and identity.



Fig.18: Marble (Unknown date) **Fig. 19:** Male figure. **Fig. 20:** Back of Fig. 19

The above images are from Lantoro cemetery

Photographs Courtesy: The Researcher, 2025



Fig. 21: Kneeling Angel on the tomb of **Fig.22:** Broken Angel- on the tomb of

Prof S. Tomori, 1984

Chief E. Laleye, 1971

The above images are from Lantoro cemetery

Photographs Courtesy: The Researcher, 2025

Conclusion and Recommendations

This study shows that cemetery sculptures in Abeokuta preserve collective identity, spirituality, and history while offering underexplored resources for Nollywood. More than memorials, they function as visual archives of lineage, aesthetics, and ancestral reverence.

Recommendations and Policy Statement

Cemetery sculptures in Abeokuta should be systematically documented through photographs, oral accounts, and stylistic analysis to preserve their artistic and cultural essence. Collaboration among filmmakers, historians, and sculptors will enrich Nollywood's visual authenticity, while incorporating funerary art into fine arts and cultural studies curricula will promote heritage awareness. Cemeteries should also be conserved as cultural heritage sites to inspire community pride and heritage tourism.

Policy Statement:

Government and cultural agencies should adopt a preservation policy that recognizes cemetery sculptures as national heritage. Such a policy should support documentation, conservation, and creative engagement, ensuring these monuments continue to sustain cultural memory and identity.

Future Research

Future research should compare cemetery sculpture traditions across Nigerian cultures to highlight regional variations in funerary symbolism, while also investigating digital heritage tools such as 3D scanning, VR, and AR for preserving and interpreting these works in scholarly and public contexts.

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