

Eulogy by Dr. Bruce M. Haight for Lamidi Fakeye

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How to eulogize a man like Lamidi? I could do so in a book-length manuscript, and we produced one in his 1996 autobiography after working together closely both in Nigeria and the U.S. for 13 years. I could also remember Lamidi in one word – “remarkable.”

I find it very difficult to capture the essence of this man, this renowned, hard-working sculptor and interpreter of the Yoruba to the world, and this man whom I and my family counted as a close friend, in an intermediate-length essay. If I were to try, I would have to supplement the word “remarkable” with the word “paradoxical.”

Lamidi would relate to me that while he was still a teen, during WWII, both his mother and then his father died. These events he called “his great misfortune” because parents were crucial to the development of a young man’s life then. Lamidi was thrown on to his own resources. Quite frankly, he struggled for several years while seeking his way in life. It was imperative that he develop skills of interacting with others, find a way to begin his Western-style education, settle upon a profession, marry, etc. and all of these he would have to do largely on his own. How did he do so? He treasured the blessing his father gave him after his mother’s death in 1944:

You have a long way to go and you have to get ready for this life as a man. Do not allow anger to override you. You must try to be helpful to your neighbors. Try to be obedient and be hard working. Any of my children who is lazy will regret, after my death. He or she will come to my grave and weep and shout to me but I will turn deaf ears to him or her. Believe in One God and be truthful, even at the point of death. Never avenge any bad deed done to you by anybody. Do not serve as an obstacle to the progress of others.

This blessing became for Lamidi like “true North” on a compass: he could and did examine whatever he was about to do having first got his bearings by remembering his father’s blessing. Then he went forward. The results we all know – Lamidi became a unique, self-directed, trailblazing, confident and remarkable man in so many ways.

Lamidi struggled as a young man on his own during British colonial rule at a time when Western-style elementary education was scarcely available in his area, and secondary school and university education were virtually unattainable. Paradoxically, in 1978 he joined the faculty at the premier University of Ife, taught there for over two decades, and he later gained fame while traveling the U.S., Brazil and the Caribbean for decades as an artist representing his university.

Lamidi was not apprenticed as a sculptor in the normal way as a child – perhaps due to the depression. Instead, on his own, he used contacts through his Roman Catholic school to apprentice to George Bamidele Arowoogun, who himself worked for Father Kevin Carroll. It was

the two of them who would firmly direct Lamidi to more fully appreciate and commit himself to Yoruba traditional woodcarving using Yoruba-made tools. Paradoxically, it was a British priest functioning somewhat as a father figure, who helped Lamidi to choose the style in which he would work and gain his fame.

Lamidi's father was a priest for Ifa and Ogun. Lamidi was naturally immersed in traditional orisa worship as a child. While living with a brother in Osogbo in the early 1940s, he became a Muslim. He was confirmed in this choice by his father who, in his blessing, told Lamidi to "believe in one God...." Later Lamidi would affiliate with the Ahmadiyya, which group of Muslims welcomed Western education and took a more irenic approach to inter-religious relations. This attitude Lamidi found compatible with the long-standing Yoruba acceptance of orisa worship, Islam and Christianity in the same community – indeed in the same family. Paradoxically, Lamidi would spend his lifetime interacting skillfully with people of all three religious persuasions. For example, during the decade of the 1950s Lamidi was employed by Roman Catholics to carve doors and plaques for churches. These included not only characters that were identifiably Christian, but also included Muslims and traditional orisa worshippers as well. Lamidi, a Muslim, also taught Roman Catholic students how to carve traditionally during the 1950s and many of his university students after 1978 were also Christians.

It was common, when Lamidi converted to Islam in the 1940s, for Yoruba artists who became Muslims or Christians to give up figurative carving under pressure from coreligionists. Indeed, his older brother David did just that when he became a Christian. Lamidi would have to work out in his own mind a rationale for 3-D carving as a Muslim or severely curtail the scope of his carving. He was well aware that most Muslims forbade 3-D sculpture representing persons. Lamidi read the Holy Qur'an, where it was noted that the Prophet Sulaiman (King Solomon of Israel) employed artists to "decorate" the temple. Lamidi deduced that these artists must have trained under worshippers of other gods, just as he had, and that what thus made a sculpture acceptable or unacceptable to a true Muslim such as Sulaiman was its purpose. If the sculpture was for the worship of other gods, it could not in good conscience be carved by a believing artist. If it commemorated culture and was simply secular or was used to embellish a house of worship of God, it could in good conscience be carved by a believing artist. This was yet another paradox in Lamidi's life: he, a serious Muslim, carved 3-D sculptures employing Muslim, Christian and traditional orisa motifs with a clear conscience.

Lamidi's style began to become more elaborate after 1978 when he first was given his appointment at the University of Ife and he coincidentally secured a set of more modern chisels. While giving a slide lecture in Los Angeles in 1987, a member of the audience challenged him for this modified style arguing that Lamidi's father would never have carved a piece that looked as his then did. Lamidi responded quickly and tersely, "If my father had had chisels like these he too would have carved as I am now. What kept my father to a simpler style was not vision but technical ability." Having established his right to employ a more elaborate style, he did return to a more elegant style in the 1990s. Lamidi made a second shift in his style over the last decade after he retired from Obafemi Awolowo University and as he found new patrons. I asked him in November of last year why this new approach? "Bruce, you know that

when you retire you have more time to think and try new ideas. I have traveled widely. It is true that I do not carve as quickly as formerly, but an artist gets better as he gets older. I like my new ideas." Paradoxically, a sculptor known for his affirmation of tradition has also chosen to innovate within (and some might even say beyond) the traditional approach he was trained in. One of Lamidi's favorite sayings was, "It is good to live long." We are privileged that Lamidi lived long so that we could see how his style developed.

Perhaps the two most readily identifiable traits Lamidi possessed were his commitment to working hard and his ready friendship and smile. Lamidi had the ability to rapidly connect with so many different types of people, young and old, educated and uneducated, etc. Lamidi also had the determination to carve wherever he was and whenever he could. He loved to tell of someone walking along the street, seeing him as a young master carving just outside his studio, and the stranger pausing long enough to say "Ekuisse" (well done). He and his interlocutor would interact briefly before the stranger traveled on. I count myself fortunate that recently Lamidi came to the U.S. once again and I was able to say to him "Ekuisse" as I watched him carve. Well done, Lamidi. Thank you for all that you have done and been.