

**Speech given by H.E. HAROLD AUGUSTUS KOKO, Ambassador of Nigeria,  
at the opening of the exhibition “Ibeji – Twice Born” at the Museum of  
African Art, on December 29<sup>th</sup> 2015**

Excellencies,

Director of the Museum of African Art

Distinguished Guests

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Let me start by welcoming you all to this occasion of the opening of the exhibition of the Ibeji culture of the Yoruba people of South-West Nigeria and some parts of Benin Republic, in West Africa. It is an honour for me and my colleagues from the Embassy of Nigeria to be part of this event. It is a thing of pride for us, because this exhibition complements the work of the Embassy in projecting the culture of Nigeria in particular, and Africa in general abroad. In that regard, we appreciate the efforts of everyone that contributed to making this exhibition possible; from Dr. Marija Aleksić, the Director of this Museum and her staff, Boris Pavlich and family whose private collection of Ibeji sculptures are on display at this exhibition, Prof. Senka Kovač of the department of Anthropology of the University of Belgrade for her presence here, Aleksandra Bojović, curator of the Museum and author of this exhibition, and other contributors. We also appreciate the patronage of this event by the City Assembly of Belgrade and the Secretariat for Culture.

This exhibition show-cases twin sculptures of the Yoruba people from the Pavlich family Collection. The family lived in Nigeria in the 1970s where they became passionate collectors of African, and in particular, Nigerian art. This

collection of about 50 years old is adjudged by the curators of the Museum of African Arts as the most important collection of Nigerian art in Serbia. This collection of twin sculptures is a result of the appreciation and interest in the culture of twins in Yorubaland in Nigeria as well as the dedication and patience of their owners and keepers, Ljiljana and Boris Pavlich.

The images give us an insight into various aspects of the tradition of the Yoruba people. Demographically, they highlight the fact that the Yoruba people have an extraordinary high rate of twin or multiple births. The rate is 45 out of every 1000 births.

Secondly, they give us an understanding of the cultural heritage and beliefs of the Yoruba and other African tribes on the issue of twins. They attribute supernatural origins and spiritual power to twins. Early beliefs regarded twin births as evil occurrence. This changed from the 18<sup>th</sup> century to their being accepted as a blessing and good omen to the family into which they are born. According to these beliefs, every soul has a counterpart in heaven and twins are children born with their heavenly counterparts. This is why today in Yorubaland, children, especially twins, are treasured as the greatest wealth in life. In Yoruba language, the name of the twin sculptures is 'ere ibeji' which translates to 'ibi' (=born), 'eji' (=two) and 'ere' (=sacred image) meaning image of two births.

In Yoruba belief, the death of one or two of the twins, which was a frequent occurrence in traditional communities, was seen as bad fortune for the parents and society they belong to. Hence the sculpture or ere ibeji was made to represent or substitute the dead child. It was taken care of as if it were a living person, including feeding, bathing, clothing, caressing and performance of rituals. It is expected to avert evil from the family, bring good fortune, strengthen family love and ward off untimely death. On the other hand, if it is ignored or treated badly, it will bring misfortune and curses.

Thirdly, another aspect of tradition portrayed in the ibeji sculptures are the African artistic skills. More than 70 sculptures displayed at this exhibition belong to the rich sculptural tradition of the Yoruba people of Nigeria.

The people of Nigeria are noted for their artistic expressions and their wealth of cultural heritage. Many sites and elements of Nigerian culture have become part of UNESCO world heritage. The history of art in Nigeria is very long. The heads of the Nok culture discovered in the north-west and central parts of the country are the oldest known works of art in Nigeria and oldest sculptures in West-Africa, and are over two thousand years old. The ancient town of Ife in south-west Nigeria, which is another site of artistic activity, provides evidence of a thousand-year-old tradition of the Yoruba people. The city state of Ile-Ife flourished between the 12<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> centuries and is regarded by the Yoruba people as a sacred city and the cradle of their civilization. The art objects from this period, made of terracotta, bronze and stone, represent a highly developed artistry tradition acclaimed by international art scholars and historians.

The Pavlich collection featured at this exhibition is a continuation of this rich artistic tradition. The diversity and the artistic and emotional value of these ibeji sculptures attracted the attention and admiration of collectors of African art from around the world, including the Pavlich family. As a result, many of them have found their way into art collections in the western and other parts of the world.

This exhibition also features black and white photographs, double portraits from West Africa, illustrating the preservation of beliefs about twins. The photographs are courtesy of Angelo Micheli, a French historian of African art and curator, who has done research work on twins and photography in Africa.

Once again, ladies and gentlemen, I welcome you to this exhibition and invite you to savour the Ibeji culture – part of the rich African cultural tradition.

Thank you for your attention.