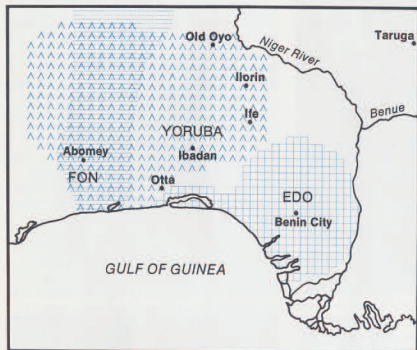


## Benin, Oyo, and Dahomey

Warfare, State Building, and the Sacralization of Iron in West African History

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- 1  
Map—Guinea Coast  
 ^^ The Oyo Empire,  
 18th century  
 □□ The Kingdom of  
 Benin, c. 15th-16th  
 centuries  
 — The Kingdom of  
 Dahomey, 19th century

### Note

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Editor



Along the Guinea Coast of West Africa there is a cluster of conquest states that rose to power in the period between 1400 and 1700 and dominated large areas of the forest belt for several centuries. Their domination was based on well organized and heavily equipped armies using a highly developed iron technology and, in some cases, mounted divisions. These states included the Edo kingdom of Benin, the Fon kingdom of Dahomey, and a series of Yoruba kingdoms, the most famous of which was Oyo (see map). All of these states based their political supremacy on violence and aggression.

It is no accident, we think, that these states also share a god, Ogun (Gu), whose character, exploits, and powers reflect their own accomplishments, including the extensive warfare that made them formidable powers in pre-colonial West Africa. Ogun is the god of iron and its multitudinous uses. In this essay we intend to introduce the history of iron and explain its role in state building along the Guinea Coast. Then we shall turn to the sacralization and deification of iron and its representation in the visual arts of these kingdoms.

### THE ESTABLISHMENT OF IRON TECHNOLOGY

The earliest known ironworking in sub-Saharan Africa is now believed to have occurred in what is today central Nigeria. At the site of Taruga an advanced iron technology existed as early as the 6th century B.C. (Burleigh, Hewson and Meeks 1977: 154-5). Archaeological excavations at Taruga uncovered wrought iron objects, quantities of slag, and over a dozen fur-



**2**  
Benin, Nigeria. Brass plaque representing a high ranking war chief in ceremonial regalia. In his right hand he carries a dance sword and in his left a spear. His immediate attendants carry shields and spears. 15-16th century. H. 18½". The University Museum, AF2066.

near the coast. Similar sites occur in eastern Nigeria and western Cameroon. The scale of smelting in these ore-rich areas was impressive. In the 19th century, for example, when smelting was dying out due to imported European iron, one Oyo site had a smelting population of 120 (Bellamy 1904: 101) and one Cameroon area had 270 smelters whose production exceeded the famous East African site of Meroë and was traded throughout Nigeria (Warnier and Fowler 1979: 329-50). Whether or not these smelting sites were the ones that were producing iron when the forest belt empires were formed is unknown. The significant point is that the raw material and an indigenous capacity to work that material clearly must have existed in this area.

It has been suggested that the possession of iron smelting knowledge and control of ore sources were critical to the conquering groups that expanded their polities into West Africa's kingdoms and empires (Davidson 1959: 82-3). In other words, iron was essential to successful warfare, and warfare was the mode of expansion and state building.

#### IRON, WARFARE, AND STATE BUILDING

By the time Portuguese explorers arrived in Benin in the late 15th century it was already an expanding warrior kingdom (Fig. 2). According to an account by the Portuguese sailor Duarte Pacheco Pereira, "The Kingdom of Beny is about eighty leagues long and forty wide; it is usually at war with its neighbours and takes many captives" (Hodgkin 1960: 93). While the Portuguese traded with the Benin kingdom intensively during this period, they sold it neither guns nor iron due to a papal ban (Ryder 1969: 41). Benin, then, had begun to expand its militaristic power without the aid of European imports. Iron goods were not lacking as this late 16th century Dutch account indicates:

naces, as well as domestic pottery and terracotta figurines (Shaw 1978: 79-80). By the end of the 1st millennium A.D., iron use and ironworking were widespread throughout Nigeria: in the northern savannah by the 1st or 2nd century (Connah 1981: 146-7; Shaw 1978:96-7) and by the 9th (Shaw 1970: 67, 260) in the southern forested area. Certainly at Benin by the 13th to 14th centuries iron smelting was well established (Connah 1975:34-5).

The smithing and smelting of iron was a prerequisite for state formation in this area of tropical Africa. Without an advanced iron technology the weaponry that made political expansion possible could not be manufactured. Control of iron and its sources, therefore, meant control of military force. While the lateritic soils in much of West Africa make possible small-scale smelting of iron, large-scale smelting depends on the occurrence of rich ore deposits. Several of these are well known in Nigeria, significantly concentrated around the capital city of Old Oyo, Ilorin to its south, and the Egbado area (Otta)



**3a-c**  
**a:** Benin, Nigeria. Brass altarpiece of the hand said to commemorate the early 18th century Ezomo Ehenua's assistance to King Akenzua I in overcoming a rival to the throne. H. 16". Photograph courtesy Dan Ben-Amos.

**b:** On the top of the altarpiece is King Akenzua I surrounded by attendants and European soldiers holding guns. At the center of the middle register is Ezomo Ehenua holding severed heads by a rope in his left hand and a two-edged sword in his right, the sheath under his left arm. Herbalists are at his upper right and left. To his right is a figure holding a long spear followed by a page holding a ceremonial sword representing power over life and death.

**c:** At the back of the altarpiece in the middle register a drummer beats a special war drum. At his upper right a figure holds a spear and at his lower right another holds a shield. At his upper left a soldier holds a single-edged sword and at his lower left one holds a bow and arrow.



They also have severall places in the Towne, where they keepe their Markets; in one place they have their great Market Day, called Dia de Ferro; and in another place they hold their little Market, called Ferro . . . They . . . bring great store of Ironworke to sell there, and Instruments to fish withall; and many Weapons, as Assagaies, and Knives also for the Warre. This Market and Traffique is there very orderly holden . . . (D.R. in Hodgkin 1960: 121-2).

With its army using a variety of weapons—shields, javelins, spears, assegais, bows and poisoned arrows, rapiers—the Edo expanded their empire. The variety of weapons used by Benin warriors, and indeed their glorification of military prowess, is represented in an 18th-19th century brass casting called *ikegobo* "altarpiece of the hand" (Fig. 3a-c). This sculpture belongs to the Ezomo, one of the two supreme military leaders and can be owned only by an individual who has achieved much by his own efforts whether in trade or war. The imagery of these sculptures extols such achievements, and the Ezomo's is hardly an exception. On it we see a

celebration of the owner's greatest achievement, the overthrow of a rebel chief (Bradbury 1973: 251-70).

From Dutch sources we learn that the king could "mobilize twenty thousand soldiers in a day, and raise in a short time an army of eighty thousand to one-hundred thousand men. Thus he is the terror of his neighbours and an object of fear to his own peoples." Headed by a general, noble warriors and common soldiers were well disciplined and brave; "they never leave their posts, even when they have death



4 Ekiti Yoruba, Nigeria. Wood and iron Ogun ceremonial axe. The importance of weaponry in these cultures is reflected in their transformation into ceremonial objects. H. 18½". Private collection. Photograph courtesy Pace Gallery, New York.

before their eyes" (Hodgkin 1960: 128-9). At its height during the 15th and 16th centuries the Benin kingdom reached its natural boundaries at the River Niger to the east and the sea to the south, and established suzerainty over Yoruba areas to the west and southwest up to the border of what was to become Dahomey. In the late 16th century it reached a common boundary with the kingdom of Oyo.

It is not known when the famed Yoruba kingdom of Oyo got its start. Its foundation is variously set in the 10th to early 15th centuries, with the 13th being the most favored. We do know, however, that as an empire it began to be important early in the 17th century, and by 1780 had attained its greatest size—greater than any other coastal African state—, stretching from the Niger River to the sea and from Dahomey to the Benin border in the east (Law 1977: 89). Like Benin, Oyo expanded without the aid of firearms, which were not used effectively until sometime between the 1820s and 1840s. Instead, Oyo's effectiveness in its military drives was based on two things: a mounted cavalry and a huge arsenal of iron weapons. The main weapon was the spear, although swords, javelins, clubs, and axes (Fig. 4) were also significant parts of the foot soldier's and cavalry's arsenals. Special divisions of archers made use of the bow and arrow. Oyo's army was highly organized, particularly the core divisions that came from the capital and were led by warrior chiefs who directly advised the king and who acted as a powerful check on his power. Recruits came from the provinces and tributary states (Smith 1973: 232-3).

Mounted horsemen had special significance in this part of West Africa. At the forest edge a cavalry was limited by the rainy season, its horses often were prone to disease borne by the tsetse fly, and the expense of importing horses, which could not be raised in this area, was high. Yet so great was the importance of the cavalry that Yoruba artists commonly idealized the equestrian warrior, and in fact portrayed the god of iron and warfare as a mounted, spear-bearing soldier (Fig. 5).

Dahomey, to the west of Oyo, traced its foundations to about 1625 (Akinjogbin 1976: 383). Long a tribute-paying state to Oyo, it expanded gradually and threw off the latter's yoke in 1818 to become the foremost power along the coast. Dahomey's economy was based on slave exports to Europe, and thus needed to mount an on-



going aggressive assault in surrounding territories to capture slaves. Indeed, Dahomey's fate was intimately bound up with its militaristic, slave-raiding endeavors, and its oral traditions confirmed this characteristic:

The King has said that Dahomey is an enemy of all the world, and that his chiefs must use as much force in killing an ant, as they would to kill an elephant, for the small things bring on the large ones.

The King has said that Dahomeans are a warrior people, and that in consequence, it must never come to pass that a true Dahomean admit before an enemy that he is vanquished (Herskovits 1958: 179-81).

Its traditions held that iron was the basis

5 Ekiti Yoruba, Nigeria. Wooden Epa mask of an equestrian warrior. H. 47". The University Museum, AF2002.

6 Yoruba, Nigeria. Brass and iron title staff in the shape of a smith's poker, belonging to the head of the blacksmiths. H. 12½". Museum of Culture History, University of California, Los Angeles, gift of the Ralph B. Lloyd Foundation, x70-690.

for this militaristic prowess. Iron must be cared for, said the king, or its owner would become a lizard with a black tail (i.e. he would die), whereas the owner who cared for iron would become a lizard with a red tail (i.e. he would live). (Ibid.)

The reliance of Dahomey on iron weaponry was made explicit by the relationship between smiths and the crown. All iron craftsmen were considered to work under the control of and at the behest of the king (Lombard 1967: 80). Similarly, the army was highly centralized and under the immediate authority of the king, including the famous divisions of women who lived on the palace grounds and who, along with other powerful and well organized divisions of male warriors, brought Dahomey international fame as a military power. The relationship between iron and kingship was also explicit in the Yoruba kingdom of Ife; the sacred meeting place of chiefs in the palace, where judicial matters were deliberated, was the Ogun room in which rested a huge lump of iron named Ogun-Lade after the society's first blacksmith.

Blacksmiths were given special treatment throughout West Africa (Fig. 6) (Barnes 1980: 12). In some societies, it was a serious crime to kill a smith. In others they could not be treated as prisoners of war but had to be given privileged care. Smiths, it might be noted, often traveled with their armies; this is believed to be one of the ways iron-working skills were initially diffused. Indeed, their capture may have been not only a fringe benefit but even an objective of warfare. Two of the ironworking guilds in Benin, for instance, traced their origins to the north of Benin and claimed they were forcibly brought to the capital of the kingdom during the reign of Esigie, one of the great 16th century warrior kings (Bradbury 1957-61: BS276-277). Wherever they were settled smiths acquired significant ritual status.



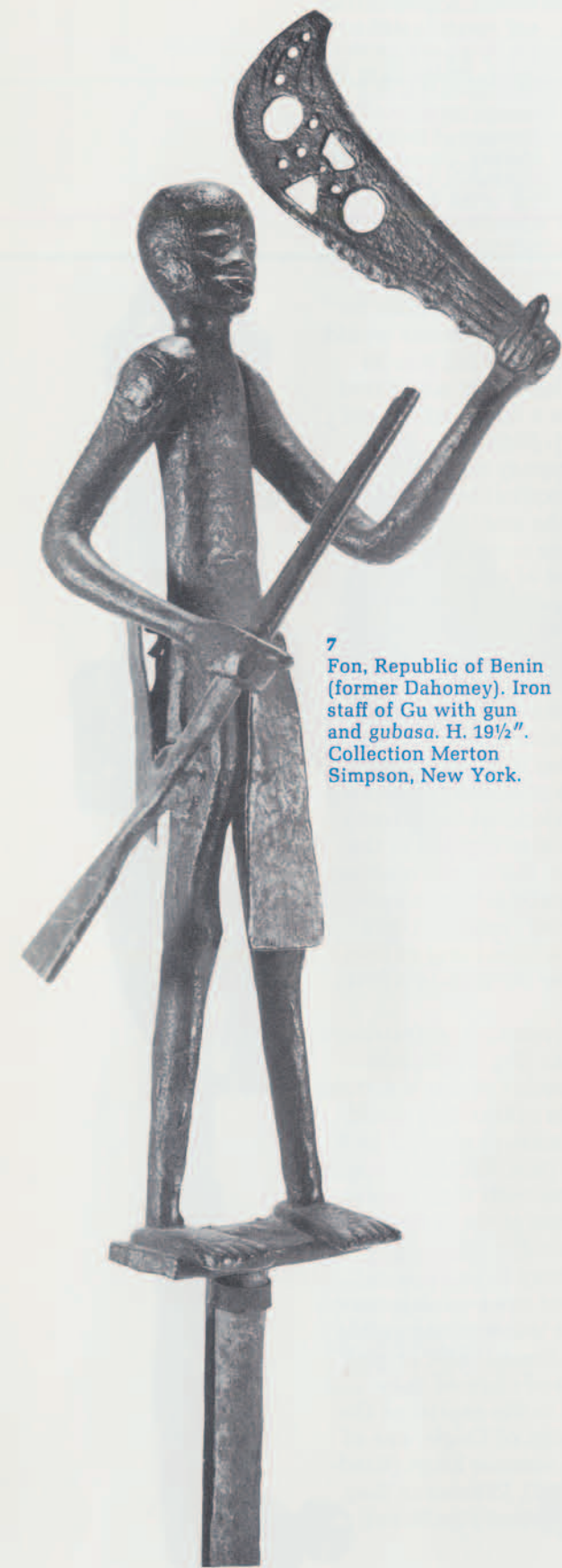
### THE SACRALIZATION OF IRON

Throughout West Africa iron was sacralized, its powers ranging from holy to profane, curative to punitive. It was sacrificed to, sworn upon, subjected to stringent taboos, or made into a shrine. This sacralization extended from the least imposing scrap of metal to the most imposing decorative art form (Barnes 1980: 8-13). Art and sacrality merged in iron objects among the Fon, Yorubans, and Edo who frequently used the warriors' weapons as the basis for aesthetic elaboration in iron. In Dahomey, for example, the *gubasa* was a ceremonial sword considered to be the emblem of Gu (the Fon counterpart of Ogun among the Yoruba and Edo) (Fig. 7). According to myth, when the creator came to earth he held Gu in his hand in the form of a *gubasa* and with it he cleared the forests, and taught men to build houses and till the soil. The creator then taught humans how to use metal so that they, too, could enjoy the power of Gu, a power that would enable them to secure food, cover their bodies, and protect themselves from the elements (Mercier 1954: 233).

Among the most common iron objects are miniature implements that serve as insignia of Ogun (Gu) (Williams 1973: 148-52). They are sometimes hung on iron necklaces or bracelets or attached to clothing, crowns (Fig. 8), or standards—all to signify the power of the iron deity. These miniatures include blacksmiths' hammers, tongs, pincers, and pokers; farmers' hoes, cutlasses, or knives; warriors' swords, daggers, spears, or bows and arrows; and such items as bells, gongs, state swords, scrapers, tattooing knives, and eventually guns. All of them carried supernatural force in that they protected the wearer, harmed his enemies, or brought good fortune.

In art, the tools of Ogun become emblems of his varied capacities; indeed they become a kind of short-hand or code that extends into many domains. In Benin, for example, representations of tools commonly appear on wrought iron staffs used by herbalists (Fig. 9). On the top of these staffs is a bird representing the mystical powers of the herbalist and below the bird are depictions of hoes, swords, and other iron implements. The staff itself is seen as flames shooting upward. Its praise name in Edo is *osun n'igiogio*, *osun* meaning the

power inherent in herbs and *giogio* meaning burning up with heat. In former times an herbalist used to accompany soldiers to war to assure success against their enemies, taking with him an iron staff as his means of protection. In the words of one Benin herbalist, "When an herbalist goes to battle, he cannot be caught because he will turn into a staff and spark fire, and nobody can come near" (Ben-Amos 1976: 249).



7  
Fon, Republic of Benin (former Dahomey). Iron staff of Gu with gun and *gubasa*. H. 19½". Collection Merton Simpson, New York.



8  
Fon, Republic of Benin (former Dahomey). Iron statue of Gu. The deity formerly held a sword in one hand and a bell in the other. Miniature iron implements decorate the crown. H. 65". Musée de l'Homme, Paris, 94.32.1. Photograph courtesy of the Musée de l'Homme.



9  
Benin, Nigeria. Herbalist's wrought iron staff. H. 42½". The Brooklyn Museum, gift of Mr. Elliot Pickett, 71.22.7. Photograph courtesy of the Brooklyn Museum.

Through their intimate connection with agriculture, hunting, craft skills, and even warfare, iron implements become a metaphor for civilization itself. This can be seen most vividly in the patterning of an 18th century Benin royal brass stool (Fig. 10a). The seat of the stool (Fig. 10b) is divided into three zones. At the top is the cosmos represented by the sun, the moon, and the cross, a Benin symbol of creation. At the bottom are depictions of the powers of the forest, the untamed wilderness: monkeys with snakes issuing from their nostrils, an image indicating terrifying supernatural powers, and the trunks of elephants grasping leaves, representing the herbal knowledge possessed by creatures of the forest. In the middle zone are symbols of civilization: the products of the smith. These symbols read out from the center towards the periphery. At the very center is the anvil—the ritual and technological heart of the smithy, the place where the heat of Ogun is tempered and controlled. On either side are the tools of the smith: hammer, knife, pincer, tongs, bellows, and blade. At the peripheries are the two main Benin ceremonial swords, emblems of the social status and powers of rulers who control life and death (Ben-Amos 1980: 30-1, 37).

Ogun himself is "a symbol of the superior, conquering culture" (Beier 1959: 43). Many oral traditions of the area capture the essence of the Ogun concept through the almost paradoxical themes of aggression and civilization. Thus Ogun in Yoruba and Edo liturgies is depicted as the aggressive, violent warrior who "strikes suddenly and devastatingly," who "has water but washes with blood." In Benin shrines, he is always depicted in a war costume, wearing or holding the tools and weapons of his varied occupations (Fig. 11). Often his costume and, significantly, his eyes are painted red. To describe someone as always having red eyes is a way of indicating his violent temper and capacity for causing harm (Ben-Amos 1980: 51). The ferocity of Ogun is captured in the following Yoruba praise poem:

Where does one meet him?  
One meets him in the place of battle;  
One meets him in the place of wrangling;  
One meets him in the place where  
torrents of blood  
Fill with longing as a cup of water does  
the thirsty  
(Idowu 1962: 89).



10a-b  
a: Benin, Nigeria. Royal brass stool. 18th century. H. 15½". Museum für Völkerkunde, Berlin, IIIc20295. Photograph courtesy of the Museum für Völkerkunde.

b: The seat of the stool.



11  
Benin, Nigeria. Mud sculpture on an Ogun shrine in the compound of Chief Ize-Iyamu, Benin City. The figure on the left wears a representation of chain mail. The basket holds pieces of iron and tools. Photograph courtesy Dan Ben-Amos.

Although the deity is fierce and terrible, he is not evil, for, as a civilized being, he demands justice, fair play, and integrity. If appeased, he is tolerant and protective, especially of the poor and dispossessed. After all, Ogun is the deity who taught human beings to hunt game, clear fields, open roads, and build towns. When the Fon creator finished his work he instructed humans that to overcome obstacles they must learn to use iron. For them, the sword embodied their beginnings. From the day of creation onwards the sword was given the praise name *ali-su-gbo-gu-kle*, the road is closed and Gu opens it (Herskovits 1958: 134-5).

The iron sword of Ogun encapsulates the twin meanings of aggression and civilization (Fig. 12). It clears the forest and builds the house. More significantly, it vanquishes the enemy and crowns the king. The culmination of the coronation ceremony of the king of Oyo occurs when the Great Sword, the Sword of Justice, is placed in the king's hands. Without it he cannot wield the supreme power over life and death. After an interval of five days, the king proceeds to the shrine of Ogun, the ultimate source of the sword; only after this may he enter the palace as ruler of his kingdom (Johnson 1969: 45).



12  
Abeokuta Yoruba, Nigeria. Brass and iron Ogun ceremonial sword. The handle is in the form of an elder smoking a pipe and wearing a hat of office. L. 22¾". Museum of Culture History, University of California, Los Angeles, gift of the Welcome Trust. x65-3613.

The use of ceremonial swords and the dramatization of warfare are important features of kingship rituals throughout the Guinea Coast. In Benin, for example, this is an ancient practice. The annual Ogun ceremony, *Isiokuo*, a mock battle, is said to date to the first dynasty of kings who ruled perhaps until the 13th or 14th century. It is through this intimate relationship with kingship that the power and character of Ogun acquire a profoundly historic dimension. For these kingdoms of the Guinea Coast, Ogun—progenitor of iron and warrior king—sums up a long rise to political supremacy.



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