

YORUBA

NINE CENTURIES OF AFRICAN ART AND THOUGHT

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with Rowland Abiodun
Edited by Allen Wardwell

The Center for African Art
in association with
Harry N. Abrams Inc., Publishers, New York

Foluso Longe Sùn Re O
1940 – 1987

Yoruba: Nine Centuries of African Art and Thought is published in conjunction with an exhibition of the same title organized and presented by The Center for African Art, New York. At the time of publication additional presentations of the exhibition are scheduled at: The Art Institute of Chicago; The National Museum of African Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC; The Cleveland Museum of Art; The New Orleans Museum of Art; and the High Museum of Art, Atlanta.

The exhibition is supported by grants from the National Endowment for the Humanities; The National Endowment for the Arts; New York State Council on the Arts; and the Anne S. Richardson Fund.

Design: Linda Florio
Production: Red Ink.

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The Center for African Art.
54 East 68th Street
New York City 10021

Trade edition is distributed by Harry N. Abrams Inc., 100 Fifth Avenue, New York City 10011.

Library of Congress catalogue card no. 89-22182
Clothbound ISBN 0-8109-1794-7
Paperbound 0-945802-04-8

Printed in Japan

1/The Yoruba World



Map of YORUBALAND

0 20 40 60 80 100 Kilometers

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The Yoruba-speaking peoples of Nigeria and the Popular Republic of Benin, together with their countless descendants in other parts of Africa and the Americas, have made remarkable contributions to world civilization.¹ Their urbanism is ancient and legendary, probably dating to A.D. 800–1000, according to the results of archeological excavations at two ancient city sites, Oyo and Ife.² These were only two of numerous complex city-states headed by sacred rulers (both women and men) and councils of elders and chiefs. Many have flourished up to our own time. The dynasty of kings at Ife, for example, regarded by the Yoruba as the place of origin of life itself and of human civilization, remains unbroken to the present day.

In the arts, the Yoruba are heirs to one of the oldest and finest artistic traditions in Africa, a tradition that remains vital and influential today. By A.D. 1100 the artists at Ife had already developed an exquisitely refined and highly naturalistic sculptural tradition in terracotta and stone that was soon followed by works in copper, brass and bronze (Figure 10). Large figures portraying an array of social roles have been found in the region of Esie.

Of the series of remarkable Yoruba kingdoms over the last nine centuries, one of the earliest was Oyo, sited near the Niger River, the “Nile” of West Africa. Straddling this important trading corridor Oyo and its feared cavalry flourished between 1600 and 1830 and came to dominate a vast territory that extended northward to Borgu country, eastward to the Edo,

westward to the Fon, and southward to the coast at Whydah, Ajase, and Allada. In Allada the presence of the Yoruba divination system known as Ifa was documented in an early divining tray (Figure 11).

Another Yoruba kingdom in the southeast, Owo, maintained close ties to Ife and also experienced the powerful artistic and cultural influences of Benin between the fifteenth and nineteenth centuries. Both were changed in the process—Owo artists supplying fine ivory work to the court at Benin, and Owo royalty adapting and transforming many Benin titles, institutions, and the regalia of leadership in the process (Figure 4).

The Ijebu Yoruba kingdoms (1400–1900) of the coastal plain were shaped by many of these same factors. These Yoruba became masters of trade along the lagoons, creeks, and rivers as well as masters of bronze casting and cloth weaving (Figure 5). They were the first Yoruba to establish trading ties with Europeans in the late fifteenth century. Over the next four centuries, the Yoruba kingdoms prospered and then declined as the devastating effects of the slave trade and internecine warfare of the nineteenth century took their toll. The stage was set for the ascendancy of the British and the advent of colonial rule at the end of the nineteenth century.

One of the effects of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century disruptions was the dispersal of millions of Yoruba peoples over the globe, primarily to the Americas—Haiti, Cuba, Trinidad, and Brazil—where their late arrival and enormous numbers ensured a strong Yoruba character in the artistic, religious, and social lives of Africans in the New World. That imprint persists today in many arts and in a variety of African-American faiths that have arisen not only in the Caribbean and South America, but also in urban centers across the United

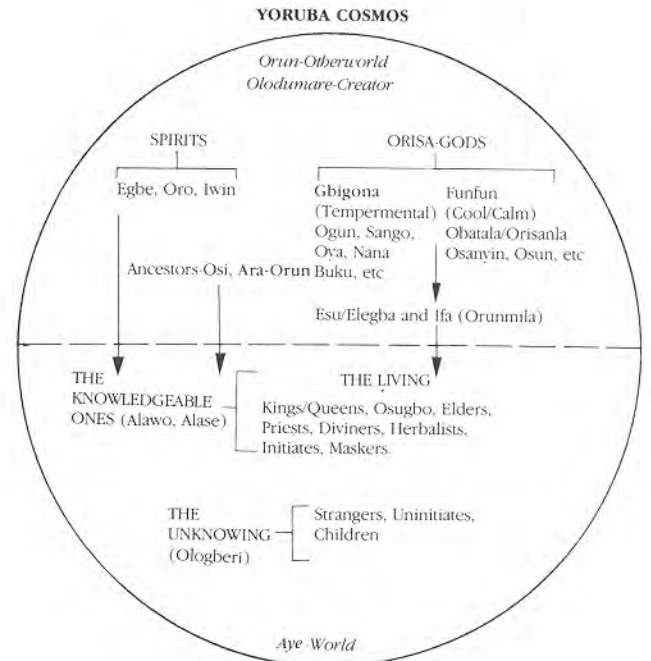
States.³ Yoruba philosophical, religious, and artistic tenets, ideas, and icons have transformed and continue to transform religious beliefs and practices and the arts of persons far beyond Africa's shores.

There are several fundamental concepts that are distinctive to a Yoruba world view. They provide a foundation for comprehending the dynamics of Yoruba art and culture through time and space. Furthermore, these concepts are expressed in words, images, and actions. All three modes of expression contribute to the shaping of Yoruba culture and our understanding of it. Here, we concentrate on concepts conveyed in words and images that seem to permeate a wide variety of forms, media, and contexts. In the Yoruba view, all the arts are closely related and are often meant to be understood and seen as images in the mind's eye. Such mental images (*iran*) are related to *aju inu* (literally "inner eye" or "insight").⁴ Thus, both the words and the forms considered in this chapter embody concepts that are pervasive and enduring markers of Yoruba civilization.⁵

The Yoruba Cosmos

The Yoruba conceive of the cosmos as consisting of two distinct yet inseparable realms—*aye* (the visible, tangible world of the living) and *orun* (the invisible, spiritual realm of the ancestors, gods, and spirits) (Figures 2 and 3). Such a cosmic conception is often visualized as either a spherical gourd, whose upper and lower hemispheres fit tightly together, or as a divination tray with a raised figured border enclosing a flat central surface (Figure 14). The images clustered around the perimeter of the tray refer to mythic events and persons as well as everyday concerns. They depict a universe populated by countless competing forces. The intersecting lines inscribed on the surface by a diviner at the outset of divination symbolize metaphoric crossroads, *orita meta* (the point of intersection between the cosmic realms).⁶ The manner in which they are drawn (vertical from bottom to top, center to right, center to left) shows them to be three paths—a symbolically significant number. These lines are always drawn by Yoruba priests at the outset of divination to "open" channels of communication before beginning to reveal the forces at work and to interpret their significance for a particular individual, family, group, or community. Thus the Yoruba world view is a circle with intersecting lines.

Such an image also has temporal implications since the Yoruba conceive of the past as accessible and essential as a model for the present.⁷ They believe that persons live, depart, and are reborn and that every individual comes from either the gods or one's ancestors on the mother's or the father's side. In addition,



2. A diagram of some of the key elements of the Yoruba cosmos. It consists of two distinct yet interactive realms—*aye*, the tangible world of the living and *orun*, the invisible realm of spiritual forces such as the gods, ancestors, and spirits. All beings, whether living or spiritual, possess life force, *ase*. Those wise individuals such as priests, initiates, diviners, rulers and elders who learn to use it for the benefit of themselves and those around them are known as *alase* or *alawo*. Drawing by H. J. Drewal.

rituals are efficacious only when they are performed regularly according to tenets from the past and creatively re-presented to suit the present.⁸

Orun: The Otherworld

Olodumare (also known as Odumare, Olorun, Eleda, Eleemi) is conceived as the creator of existence, without sexual identity and generally distant, removed from the affairs of both divine and worldly beings. Olodumare is the source of *ase*, the life force possessed by everything that exists. *Orun* (the otherworld), the abode of the sacred, is populated by countless forces such as *orisa* (gods), *ara orun* (ancestors) and *oro*, *iwin*, *ajogun*, and *egbe* (various spirits), who are close to the living and frequently involved in human affairs.

The *orisa* are deified ancestors and/or personified natural forces. They are grouped broadly into two categories depending upon their personalities and modes of action—the "cool, temperate, symbolically white gods," (*orisa funfun*), and the "hot, temperamental gods" (*orisa gbigbona*). The former tend to be gentle, soothing, calm, and reflective and include: Obatala/Orisanla, the divine sculptor; Osoosi/Eyinle, hunter and water lord; Osanyin, lord of leaves and medicines; Oduduwa, first monarch at Ile-Ife; Yemoja,

Osun, Yewa, and Oba, queens of their respective rivers; Olosa, ruler of the lagoon; and Olokun, goddess of the sea. Many of the “hot gods” are male, although some are female. They include: Ogun, god of Iron; Sango, former king of Oyo and lord of thunder; Obaluaye, lord of pestilence; and Oya, Sango’s wife and queen of the whirlwind. The latter tend to be harsh, demanding, aggressive and quick-tempered.

This characterization of the *orisa* has nothing to do with issues of good and evil. All gods, like humans, possess both positive and negative values—strengths as well as foibles. Only their modes of action differ, which is the actualization of their distinctive *ase* (life force), as expressed by their natures or personalities (*iwa*). Furthermore, the gods are not ranked in any hierarchy. Their relative importance in any given part of the Yoruba world reflects their relative local popularity, reputation, and influence, and the order in which they are invoked in ceremonies has to do with their roles in the ritual and their relationships to each other.⁹

The gods regularly enter the world through their mediums—worshippers who have been trained and prepared to receive the spirit of their divinities during possession trances in the course of religious ceremonies (Figure 6). When the gods are made manifest in this way, they speak through their devotees, praying and giving guidance.

While all the gods periodically journey to the world, two sacred powers, Ifa and Esu/Elegba, stand at the threshold between the realms of *orun* and *aye*, assisting in communication between the divine and human realms. Ifa, actually a Yoruba system of divination, is presided over by Orunmila, its deified mythic founder, who is also sometimes called Ifa. Esu/Elegba is the divine messenger and activator.¹⁰

Ifa offers humans the possibility of knowing the forces at work in specific situations in their lives and of influencing the course of events through prayer and sacrifice. The diviner, or *babalawo* (“father of ancient wisdom”) uses the rituals and poetry of Ifa to identify cosmic forces: the gods, ancestors, and spirits, and the machinations of the enemies of humankind personified as Death, Disease, Infirmary, and Loss; certain troublesome entities such as *egbe abiku* (spirit children), who may cause newborn children to die and be reborn frequently thus plaguing their parents until rituals and offerings can set matters right; and the sometimes evil-intentioned persons known collectively as *araye* (“people-of-the-world”) who include *aje* (witches), *oso* (wizards), and others.

While Ifa symbolizes the revealable, Esu/Elegba is the agent of effective action, who also reminds one of the unpredictable nature of human experience. Esu’s

constant and often unsettling activity reminds humans of the need for guidance in lives of engaged action. Esu, who bears the sacrifices of humans to the *orisa* and other spirits, is the guardian of the ritual process. A verse from Ifa warns that if Esu is not acknowledged, “life is the bailing of waters with a sieve.”¹¹

The ancestors (*oku orun, osi, babanla, iyanla*), constitute another major category of beings in *orun*. They are departed but not deceased. They can be contacted by their descendants for support and guidance and can return to the world either for short stays in the form of maskers called *egungun* (Figure 17), or as part of new persons in their lineages who are partially their reincarnation. A young female child revealed to be the incarnation of her grandmother, for example, will be named Yetunde (“Mother-has-returned”). The grandmother continues to exist in *orun*, but part of her spirit, or breath, *emi*, is a constituent element of the new child.

Aye: The World of the Living

Aye, the world, is the visible, tangible realm of the living, including those invisible otherworldly forces that visit frequently and strongly influence human affairs. The importance and omnipresence of the otherworld in this world is expressed in a Yoruba saying: “The world is a marketplace [we visit], the otherworld is home” (*Aye l’oja, orun n’ile*). A variant of this phrase, *Aye*



3. Calabash. Oyo, 19th century. The Yoruba conceive of the cosmos as consisting of two distinct yet inseparable realms, *aye* and *orun*. Such a cosmic view is often visualized as a spherical gourd, whose upper and lower hemispheres fit tightly together. Carved gourd, Diam. 9 3/4 in. Staatliches Museum für Völkerkunde, Munich.

I'ajo, orun n'ile ("The world [life] is a journey, the other-world [afterlife] is home"), contrasts the movement and unpredictability of life with the haven of the afterworld that promises spiritual existence for eternity.¹² Individual goals and aspirations in the world include long life, peace, prosperity, progeny, and good reputation. Ideally, these can be achieved through the constant search for *ogbon* (wisdom), *imo* (knowledge), and *oye* (understanding).

Yoruba society is traditionally open, but with a long history of monarchical and hierarchical organization. Nevertheless, decision making is shared widely—consensual rather than autocratic or dictatorial—and an elaborate series of checks and balances ensures an essentially egalitarian system.¹³ Just as all the gods are equal in relation to Olodumare, so too all lineages are structurally equal in their relation to the sacred king. At the same time, the possibility of mobility is fundamental, depending on how one marshals the forces in the environment. The situation is remarkably fluid and dynamic. Within this context, there is some recognition of rank, yet distribution of responsibilities and authority are given more importance than hierarchy. Seniority is based on the age of the person, the antiquity of the title, and the person's tenure in office. Such an ideal for social interaction is rooted in the concept of *ase*, the life force possessed by all individuals and unique to each one. Thus *ase* must be acknowledge and used in all social matters and in dealings with divine forces as well.

Ase: Life Force

Ase is given by Olodumare to everything—gods, ancestors, spirits, humans, animals, plants, rocks, rivers, and voiced words such as songs, prayers, praises, curses, or even everyday conversation. Existence, according to Yoruba thought, is dependent upon it; it is the power to make things happen and change.¹⁴ In addition to its sacred characteristics, *ase* also has important social ramifications, reflected in its translation as "power, authority, command." A person who, through training, experience, and initiation, learns how to use the essential life force of things is called an *alaase*. Theoretically, every individual possesses a unique blend of performative power and knowledge—the potential for certain achievements. Yet because no one can know with certainty the potential of others, *eso* (caution), *ifarabale* (composure), *owo* (respect), and *suuru* (patience) are highly valued in Yoruba society and shape all social interactions and organization.

Social processes encourage the participation of all and the contribution of the *ase* of every person. For example, members of the council of elder men and

women, known as Osugbo among the Ijebu Yoruba and Ogboni in the Oyo area, have hereditary titles that rotate among many lineages, and there are other positions that are open to all in the society, as well as honorary titles bestowed on those who have made special contributions to the community (Figure 19). Members stress the equality of such positions in emphasizing their distinctive rights and responsibilities. All are seen as crucial to the successful functioning of the society as evident in Osugbo rituals. The members share kola nut, the drummers play the praises of titles, individuals take turns hosting a series of celebrations, each person has the opportunity to state opinions during debates, and all decisions are consensual. Osugbo members stress the autonomy of their individual roles while at the same time asserting their equality in decision making. At various times some will dominate while others acquiesce, which is entirely in keeping with Yoruba notions of the distinctive *ase* of individuals and the fluid social reality of competing powers that continually shape society.¹⁵

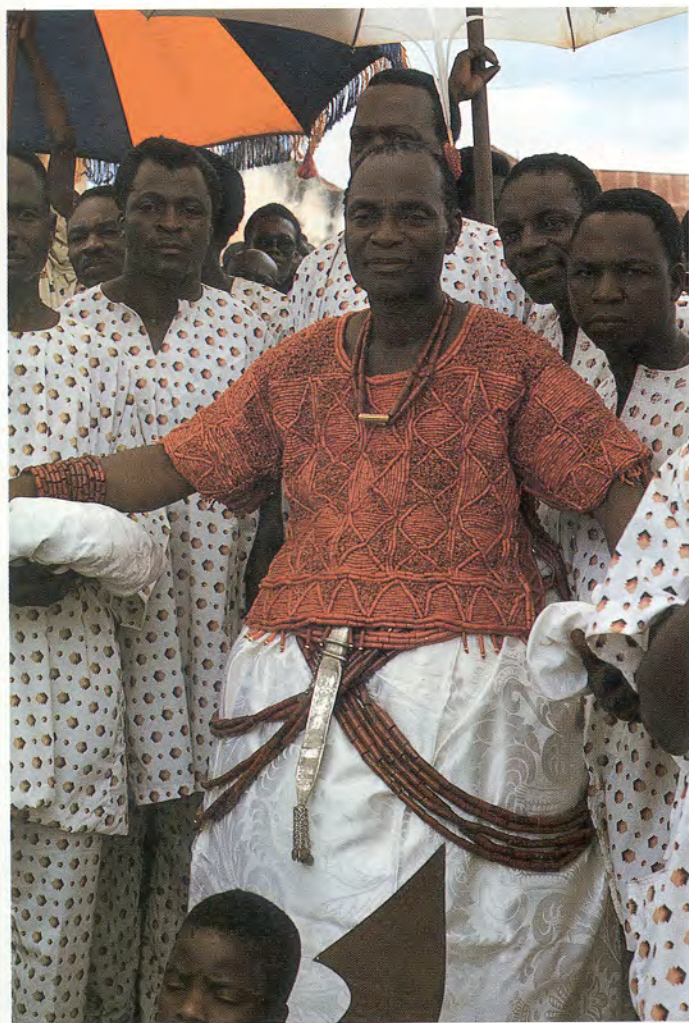
Rituals to invoke divine forces reflect this same concern for the autonomous *ase* of particular entities. Those invoked first are not more important or higher in rank, rather they are called first in order to perform specific tasks—such as the divine mediator Esu/Elegba who "opens the way" for communication between humans and gods. The recognition of the uniqueness and autonomy of the *ase* of persons and gods is what structures society and its relationship with the other-world.

Ase and Composition in Art for Ifa and Esu

The concept of *ase* seems also to influence how many of the verbal and visual arts are composed. In the visual arts, for example, a design may be segmented or seriate—a discontinuous aggregate in which the units of the whole are discrete and share equal value with the other units.¹⁶ The units often have no prescribed order and are interchangeable. Attention to the discrete units of the whole produces a form which is multifocal, with shifts in perspective and proportion. Such elements can be seen in Ifa trays and lidded bowls (Figure 8), veranda posts (Figure 9), carved doors (Figure 20), and ancestral maskers (Figure 18).¹⁷ Such compositions (whether representational or not) mirror a world order of structurally equal yet autonomous elements. It is a formal means of organizing diverse powers, not only to acknowledge their autonomy but, more importantly, to evoke, invoke, and activate diverse forces, to marshal and bring them into the phenomenal world. The significance of segmented composition in Yoruba art can be appreciated if one understands that art and ritual are integral to each other.

The design of Ifa sacred art forms both expresses the presence of a host of cosmic forces and recalls valuable precedents from the mythic past.¹⁸ Ifa divination trays, *opon*, by their composition, articulate a cosmos of competing, autonomous forces. The etymology of the term *opon* means “to flatter,”¹⁹ and the tray, through the artistry of its embellishments, is meant to praise the momentous work of diviners as they seek to disclose the forces active in a situation. The tray’s iconography is often documented in myth, which preserves the lessons of the past. More importantly, the arrangement of motifs in an object, together with efficacious invocations and actions enacted in its presence, not only acknowledge supernatural forces and events, but bring them into the present world from the other-world and the past for the benefit of devout Yoruba (Figures 12, 13).

One *opon* from the Ulm Museum, West Germany, collected at Allada during the first half of the seventeenth



4. The Oba Ogunoye II, Olowo of Owo, wearing his ceremonial costume during the Igogo festival. Stuck in his plaited hair are two white egret tail feathers. He wears a short-sleeve blouse made up of red tubular coral beads. On either side of his white skirt (Ibolukun) are suspended several rows of stringed red coral beads and a small ceremonial knife hanging down the center from beneath the beaded blouse. Igogo, Owo, Nigeria, 1975. Photograph by H. J. Drewal.



5. The Olowa, an Ijebu priest, wears an *aso olona*, “the artful cloth,” named for the richness and complexity of its woven designs. These and other woven cloths from Ijebu were traded widely in the Niger Delta. After the Portuguese established trading links with Ijebu in the late 15th century, Ijebu cloth was also traded to Brazil where it became known as *pano da costa*, “cloth from the [West African] coast.” Ijebu-Ode, Nigeria, 1982. Photograph by H. J. Drewal.

century, documents the antiquity of segmented composition (see Figure 11).²⁰ A large frontal face centered at the top has been identified by some as Esu/Elegba, the divine mediator, although others identify this face with other forces. Three calabash medicine gourds crown the brow, and two profile figures, one with a gourd at the end of a tailed coiffure, may be Esu/Elegba references. Arranged around the border are a myriad of images: quadrupeds, cowrie shells, birds, reptiles, women, men, and cultural items such as pipes, tools, swords, sheaths, axes, cups, brooms, shackles(?), drums, gourds, guns, market goods, and divination tappers. Things present in the world crowd the space and express a wide variety of themes: leadership, warfare, survival, fertility, protection, and sacrifice, among others. There is no unifying narrative; instead these diverse depictions convey the autonomous forces in the Yoruba cosmos that affect and concern the diviner and his clients. Each is given approximately equal visual impor-



6. Initiates of the god Omolu in possession dance during a ceremony. They wear the beads of their divinity as well as ritual fringed garments and carved wooden imitations of guns, symbolic of the generally aggressive nature of the god. During such spirit possessions, the gods assert their omnipresence and, speaking through their devotees, bless and guide the living. Egua, Egbado area, Nigeria, 1977. Photograph by M. T. Drewal.

7. Two animal maskers or “miracles” (*idan*) performing during an annual Egungun festival. Imasai, Egbado, 1978. Photograph by H. J. Drewal.

tance, thus evoking a dynamic and fluid cosmos of the same forces that “speak” through the verses (*ese*), recited by the diviner. The composition is segmented and egalitarian, with the marked shifts in perspective and proportion throughout the figured border.²¹ In keeping with seriate design and the autonomy of motifs, any visual element may be enlarged or reduced at the discretion of the artist.

A segmented composition and multiple proportions and perspectives are not the only features of composition in Ifa divination trays. There is also an explicit orientation and emphasis on four directions, the four quadrants between these, and the center of the tray. The four directions refer to the cardinal points. The orientation of a diviner’s shrine should be eastward, so that morning light enters the room. Frobenius, citing information received early in this century from diviners in





8. Ifa bowl, Osi-Ilorin, 19th–20th century. This splendid figured bowl was carved by Areogun (c. 1880–1954) of Osi-Ilorin to hold the materials of divination used by a priest of Ifa. A master of composition, Areogun arranged the figures in the low-relief carving to symbolize the Yoruba experience of the universe as one of continuous change and transformation, and interdependence and interaction. The sacrificial way of life is shown as the appropriate response for making one's way propitiously through this world. Wood. H. 23½ in. Holly and David Ross collection.

9. Veranda Post, Ekiti, 19th–20th century. Agunna (died c. 1930) of Oke-Igbira, near Ikole-Ekiti, was a carver of great originality. He saw the human figure in terms of fundamental geometric shapes. The veranda posts that he carved for the palace of the Owa of Ilesa and another at Ijero, which depict the same subjects, are conceptually more severe than this veranda post. In this carving, and in a similar one in the collection of the Staatliches Museum für Völkerkunde, Munich, Agunna clusters figures behind each of the principal figures, conveying a sense of the larger social world in which every individual exists. Wood, pigment. H. 58 in. Cynthia and Cecil A. Ray Jr.







10. Head of a Figure, Ife, 11th–12th century. One of the best preserved Ife terracotta heads. Its refined, idealized naturalism and sensitive modeling suggest its origins in The Early Pavement Era. Terracotta. H. 6¼ in. National Commission for Museums and Monuments, Nigeria.

11. Ifa Divination Tray, Aja Fon, 16th/17th century. Collected at Allada in the early 17th century. Its style and elements of its iconography suggest it was probably carved by an Aja or Fon artist who was familiar with Yoruba sacred art. L. 11 in. Ulmer Museum, Ulm.

12. Babalawo Kolawole Ositola beginning the rite of divination. He marks the crossroads pattern in the *irosun* powder on the surface of the *opon* Ifa and rhythmically taps the tray with an *iroke* Ifa while invoking the presence of ancient Ifa priests. Porogun Quarter, Ijebu-Ode, Nigeria, 1982. Photograph by J. Pemberton III.





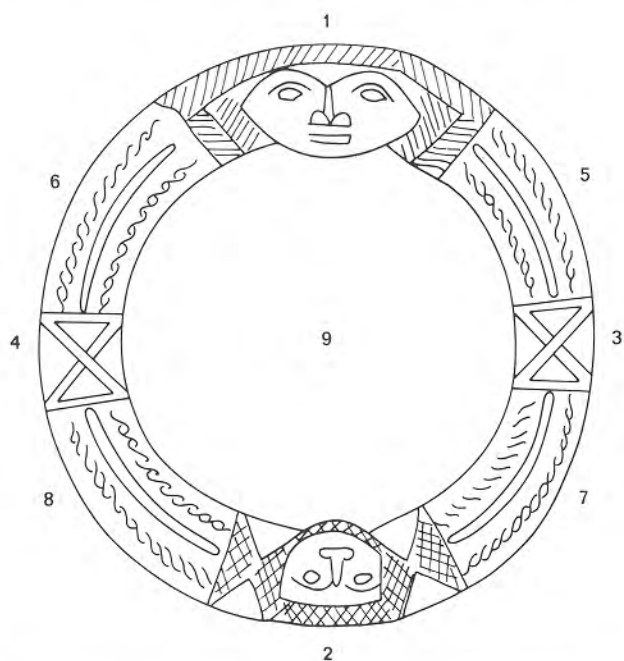
13. Ifa Tray, Ijebu, 19th–20th century. The bold composition of this divination tray is noteworthy. The face of Esu, guardian of the ritual process, appears at the top. It is unusually large, the lower portion is framed by a curve that sweeps into the central section of the tray where the priest would trace the marks of the Odu that would be revealed during the divination rite. Opposite the face of Esu, two kneeling figures grasp either end of the intertwined pattern. On either side of the tray are coiled snakes. Above them are pairs of intertwined fish. A simple design of juxtaposed triangles and circles completes the imagery. The total effect is a remarkable interplay of formal and geometric patterns and images of harmony and tension. The carving is a succinct expression of the dynamic at the heart of the Yoruba universe. Wood. Diam. 14 in. Barry D. Maurer.



14. Ifa Tray, Oyo, 19th–20th century. Thirty-one birds gather around the edge of this beautifully carved divination tray to witness the consultation with Orunmila, the *orisa* of wisdom. In the poetry of Ifa, birds are often associated with female power. (Some priests of Ifa assert that it was Odu, Orunmila's wife, who disclosed the secret of Ifa to him.) The iconography of the inner circle depicts two figures smoking pipes and the face of Esu, the *orisa* who transforms the sacrifices of men into food for the gods. At the bottom of the inner circle the carver depicts a crab and two mudfish, creatures which are like Esu in their ability to move in marginal realms. On either side of the face of Esu there is a motif often found in southern Yoruba carvings. It is a visual pun. On the one hand, it shows a face from which arms extend from the nostrils to frame the face, and three parallel lines which radiate from a conical crown. It also has the structural appearance of a mudfish. On the other, it is an image of kingship, for kings are marginal beings in whose sacred persons are combined the powers of men and gods. They thus become mediators between the realms of the human and the divine. Wood. Diam. 17¾ in. Peter Schnell.



15. Ifa Tray, Ekiti, 20th century. The three faces on this beautifully carved tray are similar to those found on carvings by Olowe of Ise (see Chapter 7), although it is doubtful that Olowe was the carver. On divination trays there may be from one to four faces representing the ever-observant Esu. In addition to the three faces, the carver has depicted Esu in action. The figure with the phallic hairstyle, an iconographic reference to Esu, forces a supplicant to her knees. Wood. Diam. 19 in. Drs. Daniel and Marian Malcolm.



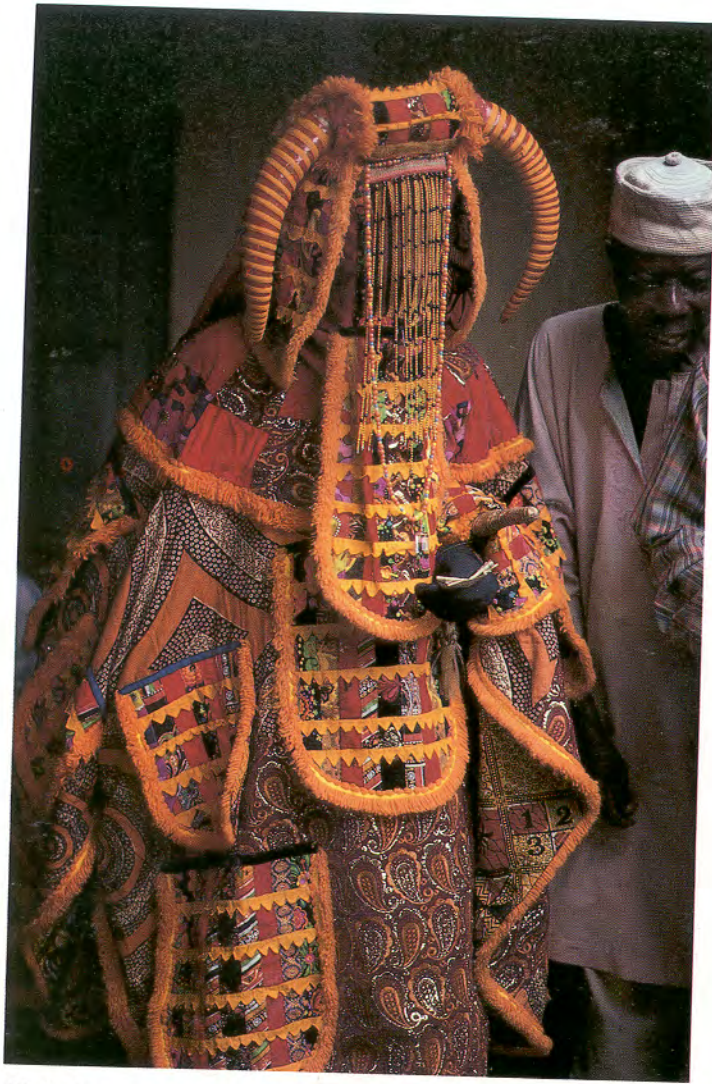
16. Divination tray inherited by *babalawo* Kolawole Ositola with numbers indicating the order and position of invocations, Ijebu, Nigeria. Drawing after a photograph by H. J. Drewal.

Ibadan, Ife, and Lokoja (Lokoya) recorded a myth explaining the origins of this practice: "Long, long ago, when everything was in confusion and young and old died, Olodu-mare (God) summoned Edshu-ogbe and said: 'Create order in the region of the sunrise.' To Oyako-Medyi: 'Create order in the region of the sunset.'

Next morning Edshu-ogbe created order in the east and in the evening Oyako-Medyi created order in the west."²² In divination trays, then, the compositional interplay of a circle and lines reflects the unity of the Yoruba cosmos populated by diverse, autonomous forces. It represents the intersection of cosmic realms at the metaphoric crossroads, and the cardinal directions and mythic personages associated with them.

The divination tray also speaks of legendary diviners and their exploits, which provide precedents for actions and remedies in the present. One old tray, discussed by its owner, the diviner Kolawole Ositola, has eight sections plus one said to represent ancient diviners (Figure 16). The diviner invokes each section as he "opens" the tray by inscribing lines on it at the beginning of a consultation. The main, often the largest, section is called Oju Opon ("Face of the Tray"; no. 1)²³ oriented opposite the diviner. The part nearest the diviner is the Ese Opon ("Foot of the Tray"; no. 2). At the right-hand side is Ona Oganran ("Straight Path"; no. 3), while the left is Ona Munu, ("Direct Path"; no. 4). As Ositola explained: "These are ancient forefathers. When you work, work, work, your name will remain in history. That Ona Munu is one of the hard-working, ancient diviners, and he became so famous that we shall remember his name forever."²⁴ Ona Oganran ("Straight Path") was also famous. His way was straight, meaning he was "a straightforward person. . . a good man." Straightness is a metaphor for openness, honesty, and trustworthiness. The upper right quadrant of the tray is Alabalotun ("One-who-proposes-with-the-right"; no. 5); the upper left is Alaselosi ("One-who-implements-with-the-left"; no. 6). On the lower right is Aliletepowo ("Early-riser-who-sits-down-and-prospers"; no. 7), and on the lower left is Afurukeresayo ("One-who-has-a-diviner's-flywhisk-and-is-happy"; no. 8). The center, designated the "leader," of the tray, where the verses of Ifa are marked, is the Erilade Opon ("Center-of-the-tray-has-the-crown"; no. 9). This point of intersection of paths and realms is thus seen and explained as a "crown," *ade*, a conical form with profound symbolic significance in Yoruba thought as we shall see.

After the diviner "greet" these nine ancients, he may then pay homage to his forefathers, the deities, and certain birds. These birds symbolize the diviner's ability to chant and also, according to Ifa lore, represent ancient diviners. As Ositola explained, "all the birds and animals have the knowledge of Ifa in the ancient times." Many stories in the Ifa corpus recount the trials and tribulations of these bird diviners. Their victories presage the success of the diviner who invokes their memory. In praising all the sections of the tray, the diviner alerts its spiritual powers, readies it for action,



17. An Egungun masker or "miracles," *idan*, performing during an annual Egungun festival. The success of their performance is judged by the fun and excitement they generate as they cavort about the area. They chase and grab the children in the audience who sometimes taunt them with abusive songs and challenges. Imosan, Nigeria, 1986. Photograph by M. T. Drewal.



18. Two ancestral maskers of the type known as *alabala*. The distinctive feature of their costume is a brightly colored patchwork facing said by Yoruba to "make the cloth shine." Its segmented composition reflects the belief in diverse and autonomous powers in the cosmos that must be evoked and marshalled for the survival and benefit of society. Ilaro, Nigeria, 1975. Photograph by M. T. Drewal.



19. Titled male elders in the council of female and male elders known as Osugbo among the Ijebu Yoruba Ogboni, the Oyo and others. They are Osugbo/Ogboni members seated in their lodge, *iledi*. Ibesse, Nigeria, 1977. Photograph by H. J. Drewal.

and, at the same time, focuses the attention of all those present on the divining process. It is also a means by which the diviner establishes his own powers of concentration.

Even more important, the diviner, by invoking famous past diviners, brings them to the consultation in the world from the otherworld. The divination session is similar to all Yoruba spectacles in that the invocation temporarily makes manifest an otherworldly reality.²⁵ Each section of the tray is a path and simultaneously a personified entity. All ways are recognized and invoked separately, some with attributes that distinguish their roles. For example, the diviners whose praise names are “The-one-who-proposes-with-the-right” and “The-one-who-implements-with-the-left” refer to the Yoruba belief about the use of the right hand in social/secular matters and of the left in sacred/mystical affairs. The diviner orients himself facing toward an open doorway or path. This direction must be kept clear during invocations to give free access to the forces called upon. The invocation and the presence of these forces assure success, their neglect courts disaster.

Just as guidance from Ifa mediates the interactions of spiritual forces and humans, so too does Esu/Elegba, a divine messenger, facilitator, transformer, and provocateur. Esu/Elegba, the embodiment of the principles of life force, action, and individuality, epitomizes much of the dynamism and vitality in the Yoruba world. He intercedes on behalf of humans in their appeals to spiritual beings, if appropriately treated and honored, but garbles messages and wreaks havoc if angered. Since Esu is crucial to persons’ positive relations with their divine origins and interactions, every individual has a personal Esu who assists in interpretations and actions in specific situations. Esu is also essential to the gods. His ritual objects often have faces pointing in opposite directions and/or figures playing flutes (Figure 24), references to his mediating and messenger roles. He plays the praises of the gods, encouraging them to enter the heads of worshippers during possession trance dances, as is done at Igbogila among the Egbado and Oho Yoruba (Figure 22).

Probably the most dramatic icon in Esu arts depicts projections bursting from heads (Figure 23). Such projections, in the form of long-tailed coiffures or peaked caps, blades, or phalluses surprise and amaze the viewer. At the same time, they evoke the union and passage between this world and the realm of divine forces, this life and the next. Both visibly and metaphorically they *command*, for they refer to potent medicines (*oogun ase*) that are embedded in the head and allow things to happen, life to be lived. The image of a projecting form is a fundamental motif in many Yoruba

art forms and in many spheres of Yoruba life.²⁶ It is particularly prevalent in Esu imagery because it announces the themes of existence and individuality. In the broadest sense, Esu/Elegba personifies action, generative power, and command—the *ase* that animates the Yoruba world²⁷ (Figures 25 and 26).

Because interpretations in matters involving supernatural forces can be personal, and because there are regional variations of practice, generalizations about Yoruba religious beliefs and practices are risky. The practice of Yoruba religion is dynamic, not rigidly proscribed. At its center is the use of *ase*, upon which one’s strength and effectiveness are dependent. Because it is essentially performative power, *ase* diminishes with inaction and strengthens with activity



20. The door and panels on the palace veranda in Ila-Orangun were carved in 1927 under the supervision of Ogundeji (c. 1870–1962), the elder and head of Ila’s carvers. Akobiogun Fakeye of Inurin’s compound carved the door leading to the room where the King’s crowns are kept on ritual occasions. His son, Adeosun, carved the panel above the door. The panel on the left was carved by Oje and other carvers from Aga’s compound and that on the right by carvers from Ore’s and Obajisun’s compounds. The frame for the panels was carved by Ogunwuyi of Ore’s compound. Ila Orangun, Nigeria, 1984. Photograph by John Pemberton 3rd.

As the diviner Ositola explained: “If a person neglects his or her shrine [by not offering prayers or gifts] the spirits will leave....All you are seeing are the images... The person has relegated the deities to mere *idols*, ordinary images.” Or as another priest declared, “If you don’t feed it, it will die.”²⁸ Art is important, therefore, in worshipping the *orisa*. The creation of artifacts for shrines and their placement is an act of devotion that equals the ritual significance of prayer or sacrifice. The Yoruba say that a shrine is the “face” (*oju*) of the divinity or the “face of worship” (*ojubo*).²⁹ The shrine is the place of meeting, of facing the gods and locating oneself relative to the gods. The objects on a shrine, in particular carved figures, are not images of the deity but of the worshippers of the gods. They provide images of devotion and represent the empowerment by the god of those who kneel and present sacrifices and offerings. Hence, ritual art both shapes and is shaped by the imagination of the artist who seeks to reveal the interrelatedness of the divine and the human through sculpted image, song and dance.

Within this dynamic ethos of constant flux, creation, re-creation, renewal, and action in a cosmos of *ase*, certain core principles can still be identified. These define and distinguish Yoruba religious thought and the arts that both shape and express it.

Ori Inu: Inner Head and the Concept of Individuality

The head, *ori*, is of immense importance in Yoruba art and thought. In sculpture its size is often enlarged in relation to the body (1:4 or 1:5) in order to convey its position as the site of a person’s essential nature (*iwa*), and her or his *ase* (see Figure 24). More precisely, this spiritual essence is sited in the inner head, (*ori inu*), a reflection of the Yoruba conception of self as having exterior (*ode*) and interior (*inu*) aspects. Inner qualities should rule outer ones, especially such qualities of mind as inner calm, self-control, and patience. A prayer: “May my inner head not spoil my outer one” (*ori inu mi ko ma ba ti ode je*), expresses this concern. *Ode* denotes the visible, physical appearance of a person. It may mask one’s inner essence, but it can also reveal it. Ideally it should express a confident nobility of mind and dignity (*tyi*), as exemplified in the unruffled facial expressions of sculptures (see Figure 9) especially exquisite Ife terracottas (see Figure 10). This eleventh/twelfth-century terracotta documents not only the antiquity of Yoruba civilization, but also a refined, idealized naturalism suggestive of a tradition of portraiture which celebrates individuals by means of likenesses.

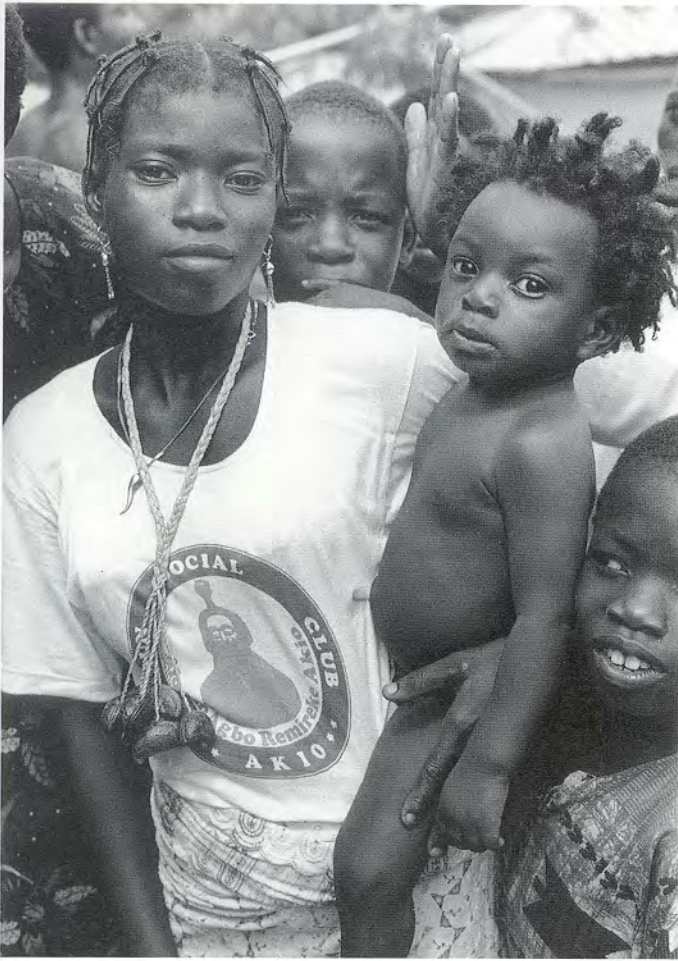
Almost from birth, the Yoruba perform elaborate rituals that reveal both the uniqueness of individuals and their inherent relationship to others. Newborns are

given special names, known as *oruko amutorunwa* (“names brought from the otherworld”) that reflect their spiritual nature as revealed by the ways in which they arrived, their origins and their special qualities and potential. For example, children born with their head inside the caul are called *amusan* if male, or *ato* if female. They are thought to have a special affinity with their ancestors and are destined to become active members in the *egungun* or ancestral masking society (see Figure 17). Those born with a head of thick, curly hair are called *Dada*, while those with soft, slightly curled hair that looks like sea shells are called *ekine* or *omolokun* and are associated with water spirits (Figure 21).

Names known as *oruko abiso* are given after birth and provide other clues to the nature of the person. *Oruko abiku*, for example, are names given to those who are reincarnations of themselves, that is, they are “children-born-to-die,” meaning to be reborn frequently. *Oruko eya* names are those given to partial reincarnations of an ancestor, such as a grandmother or grandfather. The reincarnation is partial because the *emi* (spirit/breath) of the ancestors continues to exist in *orun*, but part of it dwells in the newborn and may even appear in several children in the same lineage at the same time. These names indicate the spiritual qualities and propensities of the person, stressing their uniqueness and their connection to the past, the ancestors, and the spiritual forces in the universe.

Names such as *oruko abiso* or *oruko eyo* become the central focus in the verbal arts of *oriki* (praise poems) and *orin* (songs). These arts embellish the imagery associated with names. They serve to integrate their owner into an unbroken chain of relations from departed ancestors to living relatives, to celebrate the distinctive qualities and uniqueness of the individual, to invoke the spiritual essence of the person, and to elevate the person by encouraging perfection and “faultless performance.”³⁰ When such praises are voiced, the head becomes *wu* (“inspired” or “energized”) with the spirit of one’s noble ancestry, which is calculated to encourage high achievement. Naming is important because the Yoruba say, *oruko nroni* (“a person’s name directs actions and behavior”).³¹ It also encapsulates the person’s and the family’s history, for names are used to reconstruct historical circumstances. The enlarged head in Yoruba sculpture, therefore, plays several roles. It is the site of one’s spiritual essence, the place through which divine forces enter during possession trance, and a kind of visible *oriki* conveying a person’s dignity and pride in positive achievement.

Much of this personal information is often kept private, to be shared only among family members or very close, life-long friends. It is believed that enemies might use such knowledge to one’s detriment. In some



21. Children born with soft, curly hair are called *momolokun*, “children of the sea,” because of their spiritual affinity with water spirits. Their curly hair is allowed to grow long and is likened to sea shells. This *omolukun* is being carried by a woman who wears a T-shirt commemorating the annual water spirit festival. It pictures one of the maskers that appears during the occasion. Akio, Ijebu, Nigeria, 1982. Photograph by H. J. Drewal.

areas, for example, it is forbidden to call out a person’s name at night in order to avoid attacks by evil-intentioned persons or spirits. Protecting the privacy of the inner being ensures its well-being, wholeness, and vitality.

The privacy and uniqueness of a person are the theme of the *ile ori* (“house of the head”) in Figure 30, and the object it holds is the symbol, called the *ibori*, of a person’s inner, spiritual essence or individuality known as *iponri* (Figure 32). This potent symbol contains elements of *egun iponri* (ancestors), *orisa*, and *ewo* (potentials, restrictions)—everything that plays a significant role in the life of the person. The *ile ori* is a cloth and leather cylinder elaborately cloaked in cowrie shells, a primary sign of prosperity and good fortune. It is surmounted by a projecting stem, sometimes figured as, for example, an equestrian figure in leather on top of a conical, open-work crown.

In striking contrast to the stylized humanism of most Yoruba sculpture, the *ile ori*, with its *ibori*, is an abstract conical form, even though the objects are sym-

bols of individuality. These visual contrasts demonstrate how Yoruba artists convey ideas about the inner or spiritual life of persons through abstract forms while depicting the physical exterior of persons in realistic or figurative ways.

At the top of the *ibori* is a stem. It visually and actually commands the cone; it refers to the spiritual head’s link with *orun* and contains power substances that are intended to actualize this relationship. The cone, with or without stem, is a symbol of the *ori inu* (inner head), as are: the *osu* and *sonso ori* (projections) on the heads of *orisa* initiates; the headdresses of ancestral maskers; the crowns of priests, chiefs, and kings; and the sculptures in honor of Esu/Elegba.³² The cone is also an ancient Yoruba symbol of persons and their place in the universe. This is evident in the headgear of prominent persons represented in bronze and terracotta, and in the cone-shaped terracotta heads unearthed at Ife.

The cone-shaped *ibori* is a fundamental image that resonates throughout Yoruba culture. The form of an *ibori* and its *oke iponri* (summit), are made of the



22. Man playing a flute, assisting the drummers in calling down the *orisa* to enter the spiritual heads of their devotees during a ritual. Eg-bado, Nigeria, 1978. Photograph by M. T. Drewal.



23. Esu Dance Staff, Osogbo, 19th century. Esu, the guardian of the ritual way, bestows riches upon those who follow the sacrificial way of life and steals from those who do not acknowledge his authority, *ase*. Hence, Esu figures are often laden with beads and cowries, signs of wealth and power. The sexual symbolism in the myths and iconography associated with Esu is emphasized in this figure. Its owner encased the long phallic hair shape, a hallmark of Esu, in an elaborately decorated beaded sheath. Wood, beads, cowries. H. 18¼ in. Dr. and Mrs. Robert Kuhn.

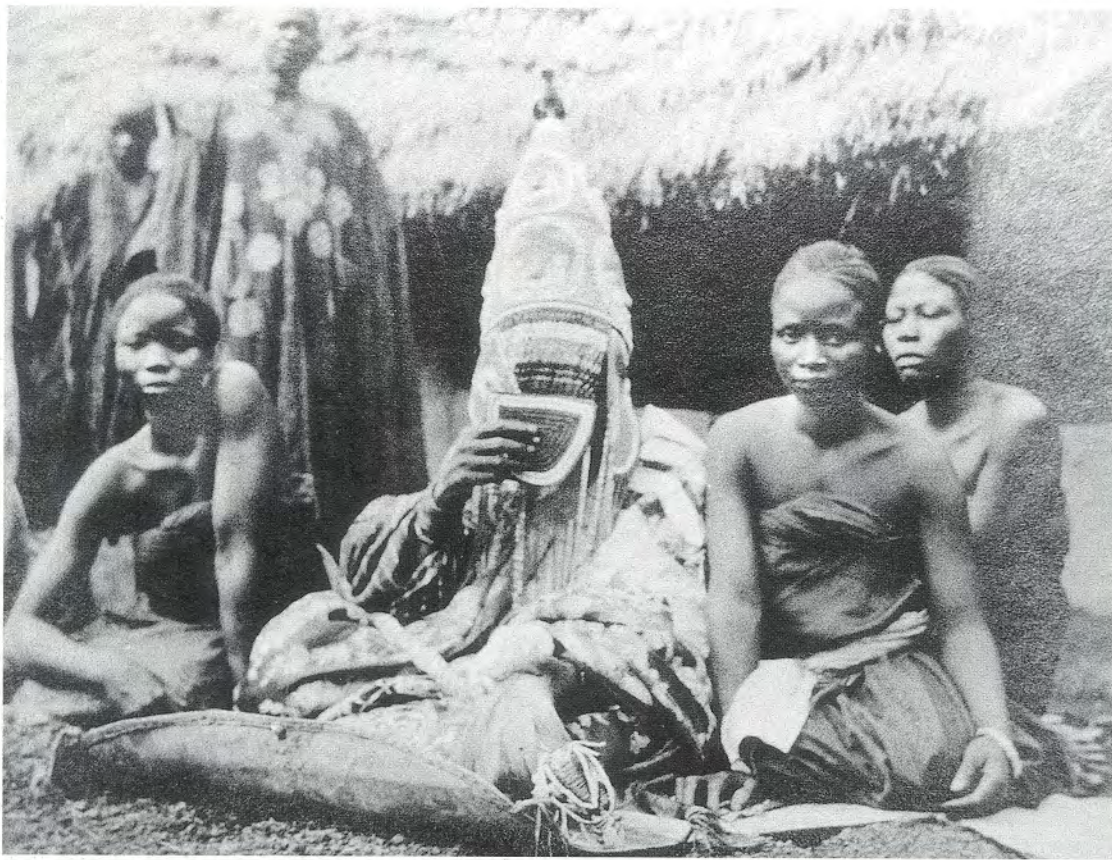


24. Esu Dance Staff, Ekiti, 19th century. Esu/Elegba, the divine messenger, facilitator, transformer and provocateur mediates between the interactions of spiritual forces and humans. He intercedes on behalf of humans in their appeals to spiritual beings, if appropriately treated and honored, but garbles messages and wreaks havoc if angered. Since Esu is crucial to peoples' positive relationship with their divine origins and interactions, each individual has a personal Esu who assists in interpretations and actions in specific situations. His ritual objects often have faces pointing in opposite directions and/or figures playing flutes, references to roles as mediator and messenger. Wood, indigo dye, beads, H. 16⅞ in. The University of Iowa Museum of Art; The Stanley Collection.

25. Esu Figures, Igbomina, 19th–20th century. The Igbomina Yoruba employ a distinctive ritual object for Esu, the messenger of the gods. It consists of a group of carvings, usually two pairs of male and female figures, to which long strands of cowrie shells, symbols of wealth, are attached. A third female figure, probably once part of a similar grouping which has been damaged, has been added. It is Esu who possesses the power to bring opposites together in fruitful relationships. Wood, cowrie shells. H. 13½ in Sol and Josephine Levitt.

26. At the time of the annual festival for Esu in the Igbomina town of Ila-Orangun, an Esu devotee from Obajoko's compound carries her Esu shrine to the market to dance in honor of her lord. The grouping consists of paired male and female figures. Beneath the cowrie shells, black seed pods cascade from the figures, suggestive of the wealth and fecundity that Esu can shower upon those who acknowledge his power. Ila-Orangun, Nigeria, 1977. Photograph by John Pemberton 3rd.





27. The Ataoja, Oba of Osogbo, wearing the great crown at the concluding rite of the Osun festival. Osogbo, Nigeria, 1965. Archives of the Institute of African Studies, University of Ibadan. Photograph by D. Simmonds.

28. The Ore of Otun with his wives. The King's face is not only covered by a veil of beads but is concealed by a beaded shield held over his mouth. In the past the faces of kings were not to be seen, for it is in the crown, not the face that royal power resides. The photograph was taken in the first decade of the twentieth century by an unknown photographer whose caption reads: "Ore of Awton." Tribal Photographs", Vol. 9, Foreign and Commonwealth Office, Library and Records Department, London, England.



29. The palace at Oyo with the Aremo, the son of the Alafin, and palace officials taken in the early twentieth century. "Photographs of Nigeria c. 1907-1912." Vol. 16. Foreign and Commonwealth Office, Library and Records Department, London, England.

30. House of the Head Shrine, Oyo, 19th-20th century. The "house of the head," *ile ori*, made of cloth and leather and covered with cowrie shells, holds the symbol of a person's spiritual essence and individuality, *ibori*. The shells are signs of wealth and well-being. The equestrian serves as an image of prestige. Together they proclaim the prosperity and good fortune resulting from a life well-lived. Cloth, cowries, fiber. H. 21½ in. The Seattle Art Museum; Katherine White Collection.





person's placenta and materials that represent deities or others, for example water (if river deities are present), stone (for Ogun), palm nut (for Ifa), mud (for Ogunbi, mothers, ancestors), and wind (for Oya, Sango, Oranfe). Other conical forms also refer to the *ibori*: various types of Esu/Elegba forms; *sigidi* (clay sculptures) for various purposes; face bells of the Ijebu; the *orun oba* of Ekiti; the concept of *okiti* ("mounds of agreement") establishing boundaries and marking momentous pacts; the *ebe* or conical earthen mounds holding the symbols of each of the sixteen major verses of Ifa in addition to one for Esu for certain Ifa ceremonies. In addition, umbrellas and peaked roofs seem to be part of this complex of *ibori* symbols.³³ The cloth cone of umbrellas, primary symbols of kings and their sacred heads, and the conical form of roofs can be seen in an early photograph of the Aremo, son of the Alafin, and other palace officials in front of the palace at Oyo (Figure 29). The pointed spires mark the location of the *kobi* (verandas) where the king sits for important meetings and during public rituals, making them the architectural equivalent to the conical crowns that cover and protect the king's sacred head during once-rare public appearances. The cone is also part of every version of the Yoruba creation myth: a creature descends and spreads earth on the surface of water to create a cone of land—the origin of the name Ile-Ife (Home-Spread). This cone is a primal image for *ase* in the world.³⁴ Rendered two-dimensionally, the cone is a triangle. It can be found in the triangles of cowries and leather panels on *ibori*, in the red, serrated border enclosing the ancestral spirit in *egungun* maskers (see Figure 17), and in amulets containing power substances (Figure 33). Furthermore, Yoruba artists often render the pubic area of both women and men as triangles, representing centers of great generative power, and given praise names such as "path to the otherworld," "power concealed," *egun*, or *oba ninu aye* ("the ruler of the world").³⁵ Pointed downward, the triangle becomes the symbol of the heart, an organ that figures prominently in certain rites as in the enthronement of kings.

It is the head that also links the person with the otherworld. When a child comes into the world, one of the first rites to be performed is *imori* ("Knowing-the-Head") ceremony during which a diviner determines from where the child comes—from the father's or mother's lineages, or from a particular *orisa*.³⁷ If the child comes from an *orisa*, it means the person should become a follower of that god. At the time of *orisa* initiation (which usually occurs during adulthood), the person undergoes elaborate instruction and preparations in order to be able to receive, that is, become a



31. Crown, Ekiti, 19th–20th century. The conical beaded crown with veil symbolizes the inner spiritual head of the king and links him with all his royal ancestors who have joined the pantheon of gods. Cloth, Venetian glass beads, fiber. H. 30 in. The Milton D. Ratner Family Collection.



32. Ori Container, western Yoruba, 19th–20th century. The *ibori* is made of various ingredients associated with one's ancestors, gods, and the restrictions or taboos (*ewo*) one must abide by. It thus contains everything essential to a person's life. All of these substances are tightly packed and covered in beads in an abstracted human form with a stylized head or conical form to convey something of the inner or spiritual life of individuals. Glass beads, cowrie shells, leather. H. 6½ in. Lent from the Alexandra Collection by Balint B. Denes.

vessel for, the spiritual presence or *ase* of her/his divinity during the trances that are an essential part of Yoruba worship. In preparation for such occasions, because it is the *ori inu* that receives the spirit (Figure 34), a person's head is shaved, bathed, anointed, inoculated, and painted with spiritually potent substances and symbolic colors possessing the *ase* to attract and direct spiritual forces in particular ways. When possession occurs, the Yoruba say that the gods have *gun* ("mounted") their worshippers. They are known as *elegun orisa* ("gods' mounts") or *esin orisa* ("horses of the gods").

Such a metaphor is remarkably similar to another used in relation to art. The Yoruba say that "proverbs are the horses of speech" (*owe, l'esin oro*). In other words, proverbs are succinct verbal evocations and embellishments of conversation that support, carry, and elevate speech, and intensify the expressiveness of ideas. Proverbs are verbal art, not simply verbal communication.³⁸ Thus we may understand Yoruba arts as embellishments that literally uplift and move their viewers by the beauty and power of their expressiveness.

The Oba's Crown: Symbol of Authority

Among all Yoruba peoples, the *ade* (crown) is the principal symbol of a king's authority. According to the Orangun-Ila, the crown is an *orisa* (Figure 31).³⁹ When the *ade* is placed upon the king's head, his *ori inu* (inner head) becomes one with all those who have reigned before him, who are now *orisa*.

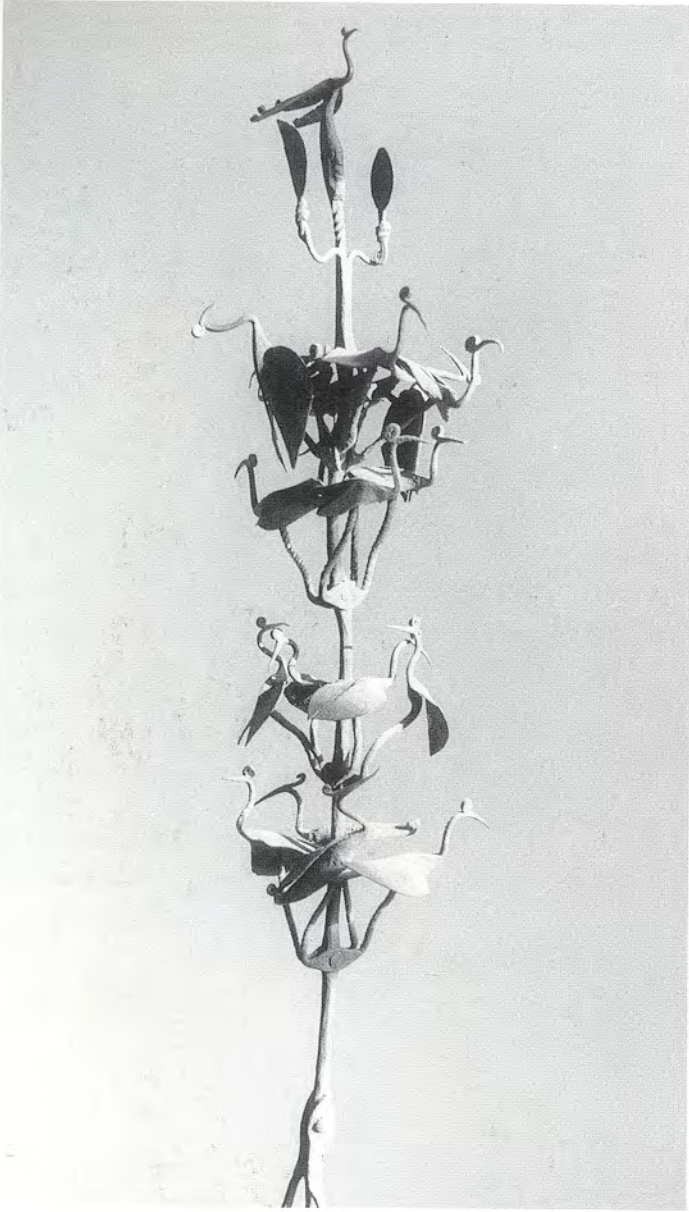
There is an ancient story that says that before he died, Oduduwa, the founder and first king of the Yoruba people, gave a beaded *ade* to each of his sons and sent them forth to establish their own kingdoms. Another version, with many variations, states that when Oduduwa was old and almost blind, his sons stole their father's *ades* and with the authority of the *ade* established their own kingdoms. Taken together, as they should be, the stories acknowledge the primacy of Ile-Ife as the earliest "crowned town" from which all Yoruba kings must trace their descent, and they reflect the tension that has existed over the centuries between Ile-Ife and other Yoruba kingdoms.

Certain local oral histories of some Yoruba subgroups (for example, towns and villages among the southern Ekiti, Igbomina, Ondo and Ijebu peoples) frequently suggest an origin other than Ile-Ife, a claim often supported by evidence derived from a people's material culture and religious practices. Nevertheless, since the mid-nineteenth century there has been a widespread concern to establish the authority of the *oba* (king) through an identification with Oduduwa and Ile-Ife. Over the centuries, and ever since the civil wars



33. Pair of Ibeji figures, Igbomina, 19th century. Pair of *ere ibeji* with carved Islamic amulets (*tira*) suspended from their necks. The carvings are in the style of Bogunjoko, master carver from Inurin's compound, Ila-Orangun, who died about 1870. Wood, beads, cowries. Courtesy of Sotheby's.

34. Those who receive the spirit of their divinity during possession trance are required to undergo extensive training. In preparing for such occasions, the heads of initiates are shaved, bathed, anointed, and painted with substances, colors, and patterns to attract and direct the spirits that will be important in the life of the person. Iparinla, Ijebu, 1986. Photograph by M. T. Drewal.

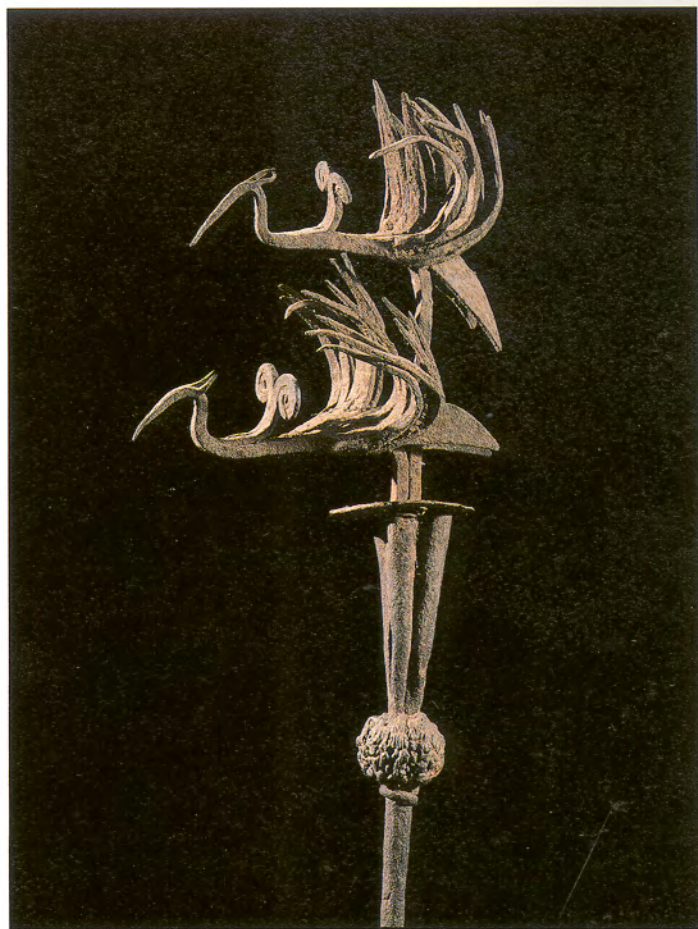


35. Staff with Birds, western Yoruba?, 19th–20th century. Many of the iron staffs for Osanyin, the deity of herbal medicines, consist of a ring on which sixteen birds are perched facing inward toward a large bird at the top of the central shaft. On staffs among the southwestern Yoruba, especially among those living in the Republic of Benin, the birds are arranged in several clusters along the upper portion of the shaft, with a single bird at the top, whose position is enhanced by two branches with large oval leaves. Iron. H. 44 in. Dufour Collection, France.

36. Staff with Birds, Southern Yoruba, 19th–20th century. The simple, graceful lines and energetic interplay of curves by which a blacksmith depicted the birds on this staff disclose an admirable artistic sensitivity. In the poetry of Ifa it is told that *eye kan*, (“the lone bird”), also known as *eye oko*, (“the bird of the bush”), was bisexual and could not give birth. After consulting Ifa and making the appropriate sacrifices, *eye kan* gave birth to male and female birds. In gratitude to Ifa, *eye kan* took up residence in the house of the diviner, and was henceforth known as *eye ile*, (“the bird of the house”). Iron. H. 45 in. Drs. Daniel and Marian Malcolm.

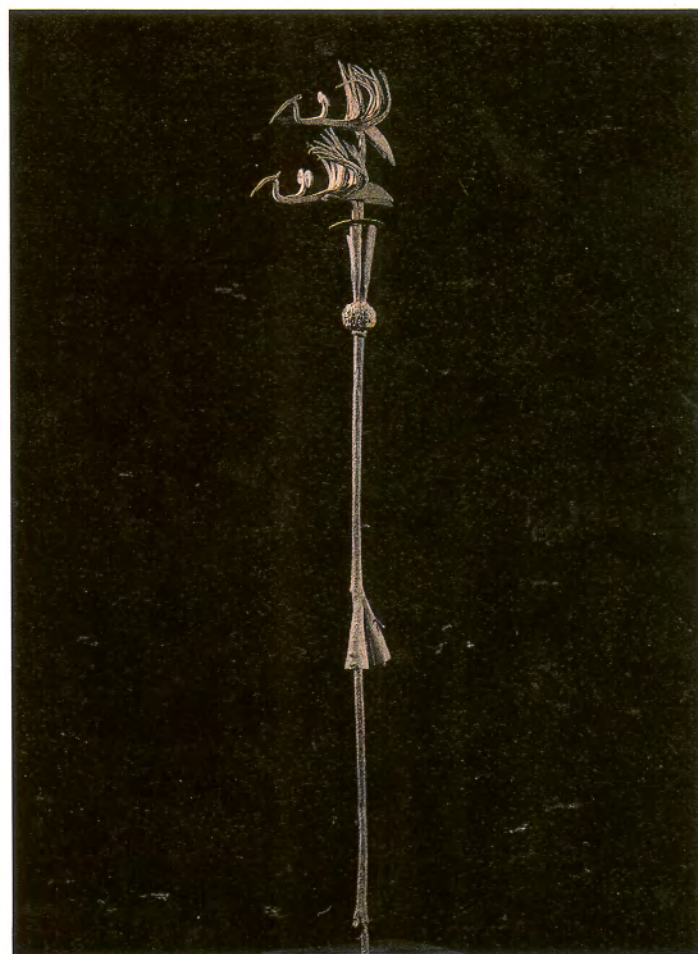






37. The bird on the top of the great beaded crown of the Orangun-Ila has the long white tail feathers of the Okin, which is often referred to as "the royal bird." Ila-Orangun, Nigeria, 1977. Photograph by J. Pemberton 3rd.

38. Staff with Birds, Southern Yoruba, 19th–20th century. Near the entrance door at the foot of a tree in the center of a compound one often finds a metal staff with a single bird or a pair of birds at the top, beneath which is an inverted cone piercing a sphere containing protective medicines. Many blacksmiths reveal a high order of artistic imagination as well as technical skill in their stylized depiction of birds. Iron. H. 39¾ in. Drs. John and Nicole Dintenfass.



that followed in the wake of the fall of the Oyo Empire, there has been among the Yoruba an increasing need to affirm a cultural center or hegemony, while also affirming their individual histories and distinctive modes of cultural expression. Hence, the importance of the Oduduwa tradition and the authority of the crown.

There is little information on the nature of the crowns and other regalia worn by the Yoruba *obas* from the sixteenth to eighteenth centuries, although

the strings of re-painted beads on the Oni's robes in the classical period may provide a hint of continuity, if, as is likely, the beads were of carnelian or other red stone of the types now often known as "Ilorin beads" in Nigeria, although, in fact, they came from farther west, passing through and often being processed in Ilorin. Certainly they have continued to reach Benin (whose kingship was under Ife influence) from at least 1550 to the present, and they have played an essential part in the regalia, along with the smaller beads of red coral whose origin is in the Balearic Islands.⁴⁰

One ancient crown of the Owa of Idanre, which was dated to the eighteenth century and in rather poor condition, was made of leather overlaid with a mixture of red stone and coral beads, strands of which cascaded over the face of the wearer.⁴¹ Another eighteenth-century crown from the Ijebu area was made of cowrie shells, which were in use in West Africa before coral.⁴² It is interesting because of the presence of three bird images.

In the nineteenth century European "seed beads"—tiny beads, about two millimeters in diameter and in a glorious array of colors—arrived in West Africa. Yoruba crown makers, such as the Adesina family in Efon Alaiye, soon put them to use with extraordinary artistry. The great crowns with veils of beads (*adenla*) are always conical in shape (Figure 27). In every instance the *adenla* is surmounted by the image of a bird. In a splendid study of the sacred regalia of the Olokuku of Okuku, the image of the bird has been identified with Okin, the "royal bird."⁴³ It is a tiny whitish bird with a very long tail feather; and it is this tail feather that is affixed to the image of the bird at the top of the *adenla* (Figure 37). The other constant image on an *adenla* is a frontal face. On some crowns there are faces on the front and back, and on others there will be as many as sixteen faces organized in a pattern over the entire crown. There is almost no agreement on the significance of the face. The Orangun-Ila and others have said that it is the face of Oduduwa.⁴⁴ Other persons claim that it is the "face" of the king, that is, the face of the *ori inu* of the one who wears the crown. The bead workers in Efon Alaiye have said that it was the face of *orisa* Olokun, god of the sea and "the owner of beads," but the Olokuku, king of Okuku, said that the double lines

under each eye "represent Ejiogbe," an *odu* of Ifa that is associated with the Olokukus.⁴⁵ In the face on the crown in Figure 31 there is a visual pun (and metaphor). At one moment the viewer may see the head of an elephant; at another moment, a human face.

The creation and consecration of a crown are attended by elaborate precautions and rituals. The crown makers move to the palace where they must work in secret while preparing the crown.⁴⁶ They first construct a cone of palm ribs, and then build it up with four layers of white cloth, fixed to the framework by applying damp corn starch. Whiteness has many subtle meanings and may refer in this instance to birth. As one diviner said, "We all come into the world in white [the caul]."⁴⁷ When the *oba* dons the crown for the first time, he is transformed into one whose head is empowered by an *orisa*.

The beadworker first offers prayers to Ogun, the god of iron and patron of those who use iron instruments, such as needles. Gifts of snail fluid to gain the composure for creating a momentous work and a tortoise to ensure the wisdom to complete the project successfully are then presented, after which the beadworker begins to sew the beads to the surface of the crown.⁴⁸ The multicolored beaded pattern refers to the gods in *orun* and their devotees in *aye*. The pattern and colors proclaim the power and authority of the sacred king.

Before a new crown can be worn, it must be prepared by herbalist priests. A packet of herbal medicines is secreted in the top of the crown. Hence, in Oyo, when the crown is placed on the Alafin's head at the time of his enthronement by the Iya Kere (one of the royal wives), she stands behind the king.⁴⁹ The one who wears the crown must never look within. To do so is to risk blindness. The power of woman is depicted not only in this ritual act of the Iya Kere, but also in the cluster of birds that appear on many of the great crowns.

There is a gathering of birds on staffs for *orisa* Osanyin, god of herbal medicines, (Figures 35, 36, 38) as well as on those carried by Ifa divination priests (Figure 41), suggesting an iconographic link with the birds on kings' crowns.⁵⁰ In almost all instances of Yoruba ritual art, birds are references to the mystical power of women, known affectionately as *awon iya wa* ("our mothers"), or abusively as *aje* ("witches"). As there are positive and negative valences to the mystical powers of women (and gods, spirits and ancestors), so too the substances guarded by the bird-mothers can either protect or destroy the person who wears the crown. Given the central role played by women in controlling, placing, protecting, and sacrificing to the crown, the birds signify that the king himself rules only with the support and cooperation of *awon iya wa*.

According to the Orangun-Ila: "Without the mothers I could not rule. I could not have power over witchcraft in the town."⁵¹

The beaded veil masks the identity of the *oba*. His awesome performative powers are intensified when he wears the crown. It is taboo for people to look directly at the head of the king because of the powers it embodies. In the past, judging from descriptions of the first audiences European visitors had with Yoruba kings, they were not to be seen at all but were hidden behind screens and sequestered within their palaces, as were the most powerful sacred objects used throughout Yorubaland. When the *oba* appeared in public wearing the veiled crown, he was surrounded by palace servants, wives, and drummers, with the great royal umbrella whirling above his head (Figures 28, 29). It would have been difficult to catch a glimpse of the crown and impossible to see the face of the one who wore it.

Concealment constitutes heightened spirituality. It is a way of conveying the ineffable qualities and boundless powers of the divine person of the *oba*. The veil, therefore, is a mask, hiding the face of the *oba* so that the power of the crown may be seen. It also moderates the penetrating, piercing gaze of one whose power is like that of a god. More importantly, as a person's *ibori* is guarded within its cloth, cowrie, and leather house, so too the king's inner, spiritual person is protected, enclosed within the enveloping form of the cone and beaded fringe of the crown.

For the Yoruba the *ase* of the crown is awesome. When the chiefs kneel before their crowned ruler, they greet the crown and the one who wears it with the salutation: *Kabiyesi! Oba alaase ekeji orisa!* ("Your Highness! The king's power is next to that of the gods!").

The Staffs of Osugbo

The Osugbo (Ogboni) is a society of male and female elders who are responsible for the selection, installation, and burial of kings, and who render judgment and stipulate punishment in cases of serious crimes in the society, including the removal of errant rulers.⁵³ The powers and pacts between women and men proclaimed by the birds on the beaded crown are seen again in paired images among this society. The primary symbols of Osugbo are the paired male and female brass figures called *edan*, castings on iron spikes that are joined at the top by a chain (Figure 42). The term is used in the singular, since each pair is viewed as one object. Likewise, a single *edan* always implies the existence of its mate of the opposite sex—concepts ancient in Yoruba art and thought, and in the symbolism of Osugbo.⁵⁴

Paired Osugbo brasses, especially those joined by a chain, evoke the importance of the bond between males and females, both within Osugbo and in the larger society. As diviner Kolawole Ositola, whose father was a titled elder in an ancient Osugbo lodge, elaborates, the chains

have joined [male and female] together to make one couple...because the two together have only one power...It's for oneness. It's for [the] oneness of Osugbo. You see, men and women, they all come to the world at the same time. There has never been a time when we have men and we don't have women. And there has never been a time when we have women and we don't have men. So everybody comes to play his role successfully...If you leave woman, then the role of the men cannot be played successfully. That's how they have been mixing every issue, and everyone has his own secrets, too. Men have the secret and women have the secret, just to trouble each other, just to add more salt to the world.⁵⁵

The casting process itself suggests a joining of female and male elements. Iron is put inside Osugbo brass castings, even when it has no structural function.⁵⁶ Iron is most often associated with men and male divinities such as Ogun, and brass with women and female deities such as Osun. In the *edan* castings, the two have been fused into one.

The theme of the couple also helps to explain the apparent visual emphasis placed on sexual identity in *edan* iconography. When *edan* depict heads without torsos, female and male genitals still appear—a visual reminder of the importance of the couple. Castings, portraying Osugbo members, usually depict nude figures with sex organs displayed. In initiation rites, the novice, who must be nude, is washed by the Oluwo, a titled elder, in the presence of other Osugbo members who are themselves nude. Similar procedures continue today where all Osugbo members and guests must remove footwear and bare their chests or shoulders before entering the courtyard of the lodge. Such acts connote honesty, openness, humility, and reverence—no secrets will be kept among the membership and, at the same time, no secrets will be revealed to outsiders.

Iwa l'ewa: The Beauty of Truth

Many authors have contributed to our understanding of Yoruba aesthetics,⁵⁷ the foundation of which is contained in the phrase *iwa l'ewa*, most often translated as "character is beauty."

The heart of the matter emerges in a detailed exploration of the meanings of *iwa* and its relation to *ewa* (beauty).⁵⁸ *Iwa* derives from the word for "existence" and by extension from the concept that "immortality is perfect existence."⁵⁹ *Iwa* has no moral connotations;





39. Textile, Ijebu, 20th century. This beautiful cloth consists of five basic juxtaposed patterns. The predominantly red strips with the green design are in the shape of an Islamic writing board. They alternate with the more traditional darker strips. The latter, however, are not uniformly arranged, but vary as single or paired placements. The weaver has enhanced the visual impact such weaving and dyeing techniques as an overlay pattern on the predominantly red strips, an occasional open-work pattern on the red, white and black strips, and the use of ikat dyed hand-spun cotton in the red and white stripe that moves through the gray area of the gray and red strip. Cotton, rayon. L. 91 in. Barbara and Richard Faletti Collection.

40. The head and shoulder scarves of this singer at a festival for Ogun, deity of iron and war, is made in part of ikat-dyed cotton. The warp yarn for the thread that varies from a dark to a lighter shade of blue has been tie-dyed before it was mounted on the loom. The process is known as "ikat" and entails tying lengths of hand-spun thread at various intervals before dipping the thread in vats of indigo dye. The thread "resists" the dye where it is tied, creating variations in the shades of blue. Egunsen Ipeja, Nigeria, 1982. Photograph by J. Pemberton 3rd.



41. Ifa priests leaving the palace in Ila-Orangun after divining for the King in preparation for the King's Festival. They are led by the priest whose turn it was to cast Ifa. He carries an *opa* Ifa as he leads the priests to the house of the Chief Priest, the Oloriawo Ifa. Ila Orangun, Nigeria, 1982. Photograph by J. Pemberton 3rd.

42. Pair of Edan Osogbo, Ijebu, 19th–20th century. Linked male and female figures in bronze are the symbols of Osugbo, the society of the elders whose moral and political authority equals that of kings and chiefs. Their heads, not their ascetic bodies, radiate with power, for their authority is the wisdom of those who have followed the ritual way of life. Nonetheless, their sexual identity is clear, as it is in the coming together of opposites, that the meaning of life is to be found. The left fist over right is the sign of Osugbo membership. Bronze, H. 11 in. The University of Iowa Museum of Art; The Stanley Collection.

rather it refers to the eternal constancy, the essential nature, of a thing or person—it is a specific expression of *ase*. Thus when art captures the essential nature of something, the work will be considered “beautiful.” That is the significance of the saying *iwa l’ewa*—“essential nature is beauty.” This can of course include subjects that are humorous (Figure 7), or terrifying (Figure 43), as well as those that are pleasing and admirable (see Figure 10). Beauty encompasses all, as long as the representation is appropriate to the subject.

In Yoruba thought, everything in existence possesses *iwa* and, when fulfilling its essential nature, is thought beautiful, *ewa*. Hence, the Yoruba are taught to “concede to each person [or thing] his or her own particular character [essential nature].”⁶⁰ In other words, the Yoruba ideally acknowledge and respect difference, which they recognize as an expression of *iwa*; they counsel *suuru* (patience) as a mark of respect for difference. Yoruba *onisona* (artists), no matter what medium they employ, must possess and manifest the attributes of good character in order to create beautiful forms. These include: *ifarabale* (calmness); *iluti* (teachability); *imoju-mora* (sensitivity, good perception, appropriate innovation); *tito* (lastingness, endurance genuineness); *oju-inu* (insight); and *oju-ona* (design-consciousness, originality).⁶¹ In addition, there is admiration for the visual (photographic) memory, which is expressed in the judgment that the artist is “one who sees well and remembers,” and the ability to concentrate that requires the attribute of patience. As the master sculptor Ebo Segbe explains, “A good artist must be a good person, of good character, friendly and interested in others, *fa enia mura*. He must not be ill-tempered, *ko gbodo kanra*.” And the body artist Ogunole added that artists must have a “cool and patient character,” *iwa tutu ati suuru*.⁶² When taken together, these attributes indicate that the Yoruba value reasoned openness and creativity—a mental outlook that carefully evaluates creative production in the past and the present in order to lead to new, appropriate, and efficacious creations in the future. Such a dynamic is one reason for the longevity, strength, and continuing vitality of Yoruba art.

43. Janus Plaque, Ijebu, 18th–19th century. This powerful bronze casting was probably once part of an Ijebu Janus image associated with the worship of water spirits. The metal loops by which the teeth are rendered are found on a number of Ijebu Agbo Janus headdresses. The inverted crescents on the forehead, however, are found on many Ijebu Osugbo bronzes. Bronze. H. 15½ in. Private collection.

