MEMORIAL TO WILLIAM FAGG

A TRIBUTE TO WILLIAM FAGG
John Picton, Guest Editor

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Cover: Head, Type 6 in Philip Dark’s classification of copper-alloy works from Nigeria. The head was probably made in Ijebu, about 20 miles (32km) west of Benin City. 21.8cm (8.6”), Royal Scottish Museum, Edinburgh (see page 60).
I first heard the name Fagg when I was a boy in Owo, western Nigeria, sometime in the fifties. Bill must have been visiting the town during one of his many research trips to that part of the country. My late uncle, Chief Justus Dojuma Akeredolu, who worked for the Nigerian Museum of Antiquities, Lagos, knew Bill quite well, and it was through him I came to know about this oyinbo (a term used for all Europeans) who had come all the way from England to study Yoruba art. It was not until much later, after deciding on a career in art history, that I realized how important Bill's contribution was to the field of African art history.

Henry Drewal, John Pemberton III, and I have dedicated our forthcoming edited volume, The Yoruba Artist: New Theoretical Perspectives on African Arts, to Bill's memory in recognition of his contribution to African art studies.

Most writers on African art refer to William Fagg. His meticulously researched field notes, lucidly written articles, and beautifully illustrated books not only made it easier for a Western audience to appreciate the unfamiliar aesthetic idiom of African art, but also did much to enhance the status of African-art scholarship on the international art scene. Scholars owe Fagg a debt of gratitude for his careful documentation of artists' names, their works, and in some instances their biographies. It was Fagg who documented the artistry of Olowe of Ise-Ekiti, Bamgboyé of Odo-Owa, Areogun of Osi-Ilorin, Agbonbiofe of Ifon-Alaaye, and Adigbologe of Abeokuta, to name only a few among the Yoruba. Thus, he played a leading role in debunking the myth of the anonymity of African carvers that was once prevalent among collectors as well as many students of African and Western art history.

Fagg foresaw some of the problems confronting the scholar of African art in the context of Western art historical studies. For example, in his 1973 article, "In Search of Meaning in African Art," he warns:


8. Esu sculpture carved by Taiwo (d. 1935) of Ore's compound. The blue and red colors of the cap, the medicinal necklace, and the stringed cowries all allude visually to the ase of Esu. Ila-Orangun, 1977.

Clockwise from top left:

psychology, philosophy, and anthropology. The methodological challenges of this situation, however, create an opportunity to seek new and contextually relevant theoretical alternatives based on African conceptual systems and oratures (see Hallen 1975).

This discussion, which aims to generate greater scholarly interest in the dimension of “soul”—what Fogg has called “energy or life force”—questions the adequacy of essentially formalist, self-referential, and Western modernist approaches to African art. My inquiry focuses on the concept of ase, an enigmatic and affective phenomenon in Yoruba art and culture, the creative power in the verbal and visual arts. We will consider the compelling aesthetic presence which results from the combination of artistic components purposely selected and designed to evoke ase in a thing or subject. I will draw mainly on my fieldwork in Yorubaland, as well as my knowledge as a person of Yoruba descent.

The concept of ase has intrigued many scholars of Yoruba culture both in Africa and the African diaspora. Still keeping more or less its original Yoruba meaning among Africans and people of African descent, ase remains foundational for religio-aesthetic discourse in Brazil, the Caribbean islands, and the United States. It will not be possible in this short essay to delve into all its multifarious and important manifestations; suffice it to say that the phenomenon and use of ase have extended far beyond Yorubaland and that it is fast becoming a Pan-Africanist term.

The Fon of ancient Dahomey, for example, developed two different but related concepts from ase: se, referring to divine and metaphysical aspects of ase; and ace (pronounced ache), representing the social and political dimensions. Similarly ase is used in Brazil to define the candomblé (houses of worship) otherwise called ilet-ase (ile-ase). Research confirms that in Cuba “the sacred world of the santeria is motivated by ache” (Murphy 1985:130).

In Afro-American culture, the ase concept is more implicit than explicit. Palpably felt in churches, “the spirit,” “the holy ghost,” or simply “power” embodies an essentially ase-type phenomenon. Quite often a church minister or person who manifests this spirit or power is highly regarded in the community and seen as one with leadership potential. In more secular contexts, in literary and oral traditions such as “signifying,” “playing the dozen,” “reading,” “toasts,” “loud-talking,” “dissin’,” “sneaking” and “rap,” there are reverberations of the structure and affective aspects of ase in varying degrees.

From this general observation regarding the appropriate and varied use of ase to describe sacred places, modes of worship, and frequently artifacts in Africa and the New World, we must acknowledge that it is the most important religio-aesthetic phenomenon to survive transatlantic slavery almost intact. A careful examination of the concept of ase in Yoruba thought, including all its verbal and visual referents, is nec-
We should not allow our attitude towards tribal art to be too much coloured by one of the major wrong turnings by revolutionary modern art and its expositors from quite early in the century—the "liberation" of artistic form from content or subject. (We may note in passing that this left form and style very much at the mercy of fashion, which is no doubt how they became commercially manipulable.)

(1973:160)

Such attention to form and obliviousness to content has characterized many collectors of twentieth-century art who collect African art as well. For them, "form" is the defining aesthetic factor: they have no real interest in understanding African art, or the culture from which it came. This association reached its fullest expression in the exhibition at New York's Museum of Modern Art, "Primitivism in Twentieth Century Art," in 1984.

Fagg's insightful observations on the nature of African art challenge scholars interested in pursuing the study of aesthetics in African art to frame such studies in terms of African concepts. Thus he wrote:

Tribal cultures tend to conceive things as four-dimensional objects in which the fourth or time dimension is dominant and in which matter is only the vehicle, or the outward and visible expression, of energy or life force. Thus it is energy and not matter, dynamic and not static, being, which is the true nature of things.

(1973:164)

In the terms "energy" and "life force" Fagg pointed to a dimension of African aesthetic sensibilities which scholars before him had failed to recognize.

In my own research, which spans a little over two decades, I have had occasion to address some of the aesthetic and methodological issues raised by Fagg. My approach is best expressed by a Yoruba proverb: "What follows six is more than seven" (Ogun ti o wa lehin Ofin, o fit Oye lo). The proverb suggests that we must look beyond what is easily observed if we are to understand something. Relating it to the study of African art, we must try to understand an artwork in its cultural depth, as the expression of the local thought or belief systems, lest we unwittingly remove the "African" in African art.

Let me illustrate what I mean by examining how audiences in Africa are...
affected by indigenous verbal and visual arts. For example, ritual objects gracing a shrine (Fig. 1) or masquerades danced in a festival (Fig. 2) must be seen in terms of the choice and arrangement of objects; visual forms, designs, colors; drumming sounds, spoken phrases, incantations; and movements, persons, groups. Most of these elements are unfamiliar to Western aesthetic sensibilities and create enormously complex religio-aesthetic problems for the researcher. The complex interplay of visual and verbal artistry does not lend itself to easy description, translation, and analysis, especially if we rely on the terminologies and theoretical constructs of Western academic disciplines such as art history.

4. Priestesses dance at the festival for the deity (orisa) Osun. Each carries on her head a brass bowl filled with the medicinal waters and herbs of this orisa, who cures the sick and blesses her followers with children. The brass bowl on the right is for orisa Esu, in the center for orisa Obalufon, and on the left for orisa Osun. Ila Orangun, 1982.

5. Odun Ere (Festival of Images). Annually during this festival, these images, depicting attributes of several orisa, are redecorated and displayed publicly by their devotees for having proved to be efficacious and responsive when consulted. Oshogbo, 1991.
essay if we are to understand its transatlantic manifestations.

In Yorubaland, depending on the context, the word *ase* is variously translated and understood as “power,” “authority,” “command,” “scepter”; the “vital force” in all living and non-living things; or “a coming-to-pass of an utterance,” a *logos profiaros*. To devotees of the orisha (deities), however, the concept of *ase* is more practical and immediate. *Ase* inhabits and energizes the awe-inspiring space of the orisha; their altars (*ojib-ibo*), and all their objects, utensils, and offerings, including the air around them. Thus, religious artifacts are frequently kept on the altars of the various orisha when not being used in public ceremonies. There they contribute to and share in the power of the sacred space, the architectural space where priests and devotees may be recharged with *ase* before undertaking a major task. For example, it is not uncommon for Sango priests to wield their *ose* when dancing during ritual performances to invoke Sango’s *ase*. The following description by John Pemberton III captures one such moment:

The female figure with the twin celts or thunderax of Shango, *edan ara*, balanced upon her head (Fig. 3) is an extraordinary image when seen in the hands of a devotee possessed by the *orisha*. Dancing to the piercing, cracking sounds and staccato rhythms of the *bata* drum, the possessed devotee, the *elegun-shango*, will wave the *oshe* with violent and threatening gestures and then, in an instant, draw it to him- or herself in a motion of quiet composure. The thunderbolts, like lightning, clearly convey the sudden, overwhelming, and seemingly capricious power of Shango.

(Pemberton in Fagg & Pemberton 1982:74)

*Ase* also pertains to the identification, activation, and use of the energy believed to reside in all animals, plants, hills, rivers, human beings, and orishas (Fig. 4). Potent medicinal preparations (*ogun*) may be taken orally or absorbed into the bloodstream through small cuts in designated places such as the lips. An efficacious use of *ase* also depends on verbalized, visualized, and performed characteristics of those things or beings whose powers are being harnessed.
It may be difficult to understand the above process if one is not familiar with the related concepts je ("to answer"), da ("to create"), and pe ("to call"). Consider the following Ifa divination verse:

The day Epe was created  
Was the day Ase became law  
Likewise, Ohun was born  
The day Epe was invoked  
Ase is proclaimed  
Epe is called  
But they both still need Ohun  
(to communicate).

Without Ohun ("voice," the "verbalization or performance of the word"), neither Epe ("curse," the "malevolent use of ase") nor Ase ("life-force") can act to fulfill its mission. This is why ase is often likened to a-je-bi-ina ("potent and effective traditional medicinal preparations which respond like the ignited fire") whenever a prompt and desired result takes place.

For our purposes, it is noteworthy that je or dahun (respectively, "to answer" or "to respond," as in a command) describes the efficacy not only of ase but also of art. I have discussed this elsewhere with respect to an important aesthetic category, iluti. Iluti (literally "good hearing") idiomatically refers to qualities such as obedience, teachableness, understanding and, above all, the ability to communicate. It determines whether or not a work of art "is alive" and "responds" (that is, je or dahun), and thus whether it fulfills the artistic intention with precision. Broadly, iluti is a call-response phenomenon which reinforces the Yoruba belief in the existence and power of primordial names for all living and non-living things. Thus, in choosing an orisa to worship or consult, the Yoruba look for those with iluti, the power to respond to petitions, as in the saving "Ebara to iluti la nbo" ("We worship only deities who can respond when consulted") (Fig. 5).

For a work of art to be said to have "the power to respond," the artist must have insight into his subject. He must possess oju-inu ("inner eye") by which he discerns the ite (essential nature) and understands the oriki (citation poetry) of his artistic subject. This is the special kind of understanding or aesthetic consciousness with which the artist perceives the individualized form, color, substance, rhythm, outline, and harmony of a subject. Such perception is acquired through familiarity with traditional sources like oriki, songs, relevant Ifa texts, and extant examples of the artifact, altar, or performance to be created. With oju-inu, an
that it is unsafe for anyone to obstruct them. The verbal complex of *ase* consists of potent, sacred orature characterized by a heavy use of esoteric metaphors in distinctive language patterns and poetic structures. Always performed and more incantatory than everyday conversational Yoruba, *ofo, ogun, ayefo, epe, esa,* and *odu-ifa,*11 all of which are featured in *ase,* use archaic words and terms in direct and authoritative sentences.

As mentioned earlier, the recipient of the *ase* must be correctly identified. Literally the sender “shoots,” “beams,” or “aims” his *ase* (that is, *ta ase*) at a targeted person or thing. This verbalization of *ase* forms part of a larger artistic device designed to provoke one’s essential nature and personal destiny (*ori-inu*) in order to influence or change its state of being with instantaneous certainty.

The procedures for the recitation of *ase* vary depending on its type and purpose. In some, the utterance of *ase* must be accompanied by the chewing of certain herbs, roots, or peppers. *Aga* (alligator pepper) is most commonly used. Another kind of *ase* calls for the licking of salt, honey, or especially prepared medicines stuffed in an animal horn while an incantation is in progress.12 Sometimes the sender must maintain a prescribed posture, such as standing on one leg, kneeling, or in the case of women, holding or lifting up the breasts and/or remaining naked during the recitation. Other conditions may include facing east or west, or toward a hill, river, or a designated altar/shrine at a specified hour of the day or night.

The following incantation by Chief M.A. Fabunmi, Òdole Atobase of Ife, is...
14. Ifa priests leave the palace after divining for the Oba in preparation for the King's Festival. They are led by the priest who performed the divination rite. He carries an Ifa diviner's staff called variously *opas orera, osun babalawo*, and *opas osoro* as he leads the priests to the house of the Chief Priest, the Oloriawo Ifa. The bells that hang below the surrounding bird are covered with palm fronds. Ila-Orangun, 1982.

An example of a type of *ase* known as *ohun-afọse* (“voicing *ase* and making it come to pass”):

*A-ase*, the empowered word  
comes to pass  
For as infallible divination  
belongs to Ifa  
So does prophetic utterance (*afọse*)  
belong to Orunmila  
It is the *ase* of the *egunno*  
vegetable that prevails in the family of vegetables  
While the Pantagruan monkey’s  
*ase* is law in the animal world  
Similarly *erekese* (a kind of cotton)  
is unsurpassed in its whiteness  
among all the cotton species  
As it desires, *elegbède* (a type of gorilla) produces musical  
sounds on any tree on which it  
rubs its palm  
Coming to pass and  
becoming fulfilled are qualities  
native to *lkakose* (a small  
endemic land snail)

The *ogbọ* leaf always complies  
with the order given it  
Igba (rope for climbing palm trees)  
unfailingly obeys the orders of its user  
The covenant reached between the  
rodent and the earth is an  
everlasting one  
*Orisẹ*, the Creator-in-chief, grants  
every desire that the  
chameleon presents to him  
While the cripple and the  
hunchback never reverse their  
*orisẹ*-given destinies  
Sango never turns down the plea  
of *orọgbọ* (Sango’s favorite nut)  
Nor does *Orisẹ* ever say no to the  
request made with *òbì* (*Orisẹ*’s  
preferred kola)  
*Obatala* never rejects white beads  
(his favorite color in beads)  
Small crawling ground insects  
ever challenge the authority  
of *ayẹtọle* (another insect  
species that lives in the earth)  
An *ọba* (the ruler of a city) never  
turns down propositions that  
would bring peace and  
harmony to his domain  
*Ojọ-oro* (water lettuce) never  
agonizes water  
Nor does *ọṣibata* (water lily) ever  
argue with the stream  
It is the nature of *ereun* (brown  
ant) to hang on unquestioningly  
to whatever shrub it is given  
*Ọkíra* (the sharp Ogun sword)  
always severs cleanly and  
completely  
*Ọkíra* never fails  
To (the sound made by the mouth  
when spitting) once spat out,  
the same saliva never returns  
to one’s mouth  
A body of water flowing  
downstream never turns back  
Speedily *ina* leaf burns (like  
poison ivy)  
The day a dry leaf heads for the  
ground, it never returns to  
spend the night on the tree top  
It is totally alien to  
Adigbonranku’s nature to  
postpone the date of its death  
for even one day  
Fulfillment is the one unchanging  
characteristic of Aidan fruit  
It is on the very day that a child  
quests for the sweet *ajiri* leaf  
that he finds it  
Likewise it is on the day that one  
consumes excessive alcohol  
that one exhibits the symptoms  
of drunkenness  
It is the day we prepare yam heaps  
for planting that the seedlings  
are interred into the soil  
The placenta at childbirth is  
always buried on the very day  
it appears
It takes only a day for a bush fire to destroy any tree.
A snake’s poison also takes no more than one day to do damage to the human body.
Urine passed on dirt ground is totally absorbed by the end of the day.
It is without delay that the monkey descends a tree covered by thick columns of black (soldier) ants.
Promptly children jump off trees wrapped around by iwerepe creeper (cow-tongue plant).
Swiftness and lack of ceremony attend the death of maggots.
Speedily may my request come to pass, speedily.

(‘Fabunmi 1972:31-33)\(^\text{13}\)

This ohun-afọse reveals an extensive knowledge of flora and fauna as well as a delightful insight into animal and human behavior. Since the main goal of ase is to promote respect, understanding, and control of the body of the orisha, the invocation of the orisha’s totality is to reinforce its sacred aura. Such invocations are the ritual poetry, oriki, which Karin Barber also appropriately calls “apologies, attributions and epithets” (1991:339) for people, places, things, and orisa. She notes that oriki “evoke a subject’s qualities, go to the heart of it and elicit its inner potency. They are ‘heave’ words, fused together into formulations that have an exceptional density and sensuous weight” (Barber 1991:12-13).

Oriki of famous Yoruba artists are very informative, revealing much of their background, status, and work. For example, in the oriki for Olowe of Ise-Ekiti given to John Pemberton III in 1988, Olowe is praised as “the one who carves the hard wood of the iroke tree as though it were as soft as a calabash.” Also mentioned in the oriki is Olowe’s status in his community:

Outstanding leader in war
Elemoso [Messenger of the king]
One with a mighty sword
Handsome among his friends
Outstanding among his peers
The awesome one who moves like a stream
That flows at its own pace and wherever it wills
That flows under the rock
Forming its own tributaries
Killing the fish as it flows.

(Abiobun, Drewal & Pemberton 1991:39)

Functioning essentially as a kind of oriki, visual art forms also carry condensed, highly charged and direct visual messages—aše—which are as powerful and efficacious as their verbal equivalents. The visual artist uses his or her oju-iye (“inner eye”) and oju-ona (“design consciousness”), important aesthetic attributes, to select, combine, and represent specific colors, patterns, motifs, and aspects of the subject matter in order to communicate its ase with the maximum visual impact (Fig. 8).

Orature recognizes the all-important place of ase in religious and political life. One ancient myth\(^\text{14}\) contains an account of how, at the request of Olorun (Creator-in-chief), Ogbon (Wisdom) presented obi-ase (“the kola nut of authority”) to all 401 orisa who were having a dispute over who would be the leader among them. Whoever succeeded in splitting the obi-ase would be declared the leader and henceforth control the destinies of the remaining orisa. All of them tried but only Ori succeeded. Thus, Ori became the ruler with the highest authority and the preeminent ase among all the orisa.

With his ase, Ori was able to deal with all opposition from his fellow orisa. In the Ifa text, the use of two verbs, dai and da, provides useful clues to the meaning and operation of ase, especially in its creative aspect. In the phrase pa obi-aše, “to split or separate the kola nut of authority into its constituent lobes,” the same verb pa (“to split”) can also mean “to create or fabricate,” as in pa-ju, “to tell or create a story.” Similarly, the verb da as used in the text has two meanings: “to fall, overpower, defeat” and “to create, install.” It would appear that the intention here is to present two different but related aspects of Ori’s ase: the superior force or authority which enabled him to make or break anything, and the ability to control the
personal destinies of every creature, including those of men and the orisa. This is confirmed in the following Ija verse:

Orisanla was the first divinity to defy Ori's authority
Ori floored Orisanla and put him in Ajalomo where destinies are molded
There, at Ajalomo, Orisanla became the firing expert of molded destinies
Next, Ori overcame Ija
And put him in charge of interpreting the mysteries of the sixteen sacred palm nuts of divination
Amakisi was equally subdued. And Ori placed him in the East
Whence he shines the morning light on earth
Ori defeated all the orisa,
And assigned them their different functions where they are revered today.15

Ori is thus the major and most pervasive symbol of ase in both human and spiritual realms. Furthermore, since ori literally means “head,” the utmost respect and honor given to this orisa are given to human and animal heads, because they control the rest of the body. These have also extended to virtually all political and spiritual heads and leaders, who are all believed to possess an ase similar to that of Ori, the leader of the 401 orisa in heaven.

On all occasions, sacred or secular, the indispensability of Ori is stressed. He is referred to as oke (“husband,” “master”), implying his invincibility and power to control or influence the outcome of any situation. Ase is located at the apex of a conically shaped shrine object known as ibori (Fig. 10), which symbolically represents ori, the authority, power, or force needed to accomplish all things. Likewise, every creature and personified force uses its ori to solve problems and surmount obstacles as is evident in the following incantation:

The Dog’s ori helps it to cut through the bush
Thunder uses ori to split the iroko tree
Every deer grows a pair of horns through ori
With its ori, fish swims without mishap in water
In like manner, lobster uses the head to find its path in the stream
Owatu rat’s ori helps it to go through caves
Ori precedes man
It also guides him,
Ori plans good things for its owner.16

In the visual arts, notably in sculpture, orio-ode (“physical head”) is the focus of much ritualistic, artistic, and aesthetic activity. Not infrequently the head is given a place of visual command by proportionally subordinating all other parts of the body to it. The enlarged head is further emphasized by detailed artistic treatment with elaborate coiffures, crowns, or other headgear. The face and especially the eyes, both known by the same word, ojii, are rarely surpassed in aesthetic appeal by other parts of the body (Fig. 12).

Because ase is believed to emanate from ojii, children and young people are forbidden to look straight into their parents’ or elders’ faces. It is even more dangerous to stare at the face of an oba, which is usually veiled (Fig. 13). Thus the respect received by the oba is like that accorded the orisa in the sacred space of the altar, ojii-ibo, where the ase of orisa may be palpably felt and communicated.17

The importance of ojii in art and ritual is clearly expressed in the axiom “Ojii ni oro o wa” (“Ori, the essence of communication, takes place in the eyes/face”). With a properly executed ojii either in a figurative sculpture or in a well-designed ojii-ibo for the altar of an orisa, concentration heightens, communication takes place, and supplication becomes more efficacious. Conversely, the absence of ori and ojii in any sacred and secular activity, whether artistic or not, would be tantamount to anarchy in the human and spiritual realms of existence. There would be no ase.

The following oriki links the attributes of the spiritual head with the physical one and acknowledges their indispensability:

Ori, cause and creator
Ori-Apere, who makes bean cakes but never sells them at Egbegbe market
(Or) the Great Companion who never deserts one
Ori, the master of all
It is Ori we should praise
The rest of the body comes to naught
When Ori is missing from the body
What remains is useless
What remains is incapable of carrying any load
It is the Ori which bears the load
Ori, I pray you
Do not desert me
You, the Lord of all things.18

Because the orio-ode (“outer, or physical, head”) is the locus of ase and also of personal destiny (ori-intu, “inner, or spiritual, head”), Yoruba people do not normally haggle over the cost of the services of a hairdresser or barber. For similar reasons, hairdressers or plaiters are seen as performing a duty. Although hairdressing is aesthetic and concerned with the beautification of the orio-ode, it extends to the spiritual realm, influencing positively the performance of ori-intu.

The regard for the inner spiritual head is similar to that accorded an oba, an olori (leader) of the highest status in the human realm. Thus, an oba is greeted as follows:

One-whose-authority-cannot-be-challenged
Who is endowed with ase
And ranks only with the orisa
The-personification-of-death-itself
Ultimate Father-Mother.19

A beaded conical crown (ade), the traditional symbol and vestment of an oba’s ase, echoes in form and function the ile-ori (house of ori) (Fig. 9), a lavishly decorated cowrie container which houses ibori, the symbol for ori-intu (Fig. 10). The veil which hangs from the rim of an oba’s crown hides the wearer’s humanity while revealing his divine status (Figs. 11, 13).20 In this position, an oba’s gaze and utterance, both charged with ase, require the veil as a barrier lest an accidental release of this vital force hurt anyone who is physically close to the oba when he is angered. The veil also ritually protects the wearer against malicious ase from without. In Ilesa, leading priestesses of Owari, who was the third or fourth ruler of Ijesaland, are also known to wear crown-like structures which veil their faces for similar reasons.21

A bird-like representation or actual egret tailfeathers call attention to the location of ase at the apex of the Yoruba conical crown. They allude to the oba’s

paramountcy in his domain, as "the egret is considered the leader among birds" (okin baba eye). It is also not uncommon to find red tailfeathers of the tropical African parrot on the crown of an oba and on the coffins of high-ranking and influential orisa priestesses in Owo. This hints at their unmistakable presence and power: "Olu-oidile kii wa nigbo ki ghgbogho eye ma mo" ("No bird ever fails to recognize the presence of the adult parrot in the forest"). The Yoruba believe that the feathers possess ase which can alter the nature of persons and objects. For this reason the red tail feathers are strictly forbidden in blacksmiths' workshops lest they alter the chemical properties of metals.

Another common symbol of ase often carried by an oba or his representative is opa-astr (the royal scepter) (Fig. 13). Commanding almost an equal degree of respect as the physical presence of an oba, opa-astr gives its authorized bearer the power to say or do anything without being challenged. Most Yoruba palaces have a shrine specifically built for the opa-astr or okute (its counterpart in some parts of eastern Yorubaland). There the scepters of past rulers are kept, and during the installation ceremony of a new ruler it is visited in order to effect a ritual transfer of ase.

Also in this category of staffs possessing enormous ase is the Ifa diviner's iron staff called opa ooren, ope aosoro, or osun babalawo (Fig. 14). It is carried vertically in the right hand by the babalawo (Ifa priest) and may be stuck in the ground at important gatherings. When not in use, osun babalawo stands in one corner of a room in the priest's house (see also Drewal & Drewal 1983b). Usually 55-142 centimeters tall, the staff is surmounted by one or two birds standing on a flat disc which rests on the inverted bottom part of hollow metallic cones or bells. Approximately two sets of four slim bells, also metal, are welded to the staff along its height at two different levels.

Osun babalawo is important ritual in the implementation of Orunmila's orders in Ifa divination. The bird(s) on top of the staff represents eyeken22 ("the single or lone bird"). Unlike those that surround the Osanyin staff, believed to represent various aggressive spiritual forces with which man must cope, eyeken represents a higher and superior power—the ase par excellence in Ifa divination. The story of eyeken from Eji-Ogbie in Ifa texts relates how, as eye-oko ("bird of the grassland," "wild pigeon"), it was hermaphroditic, lived wild in the forest, and was childless for a long time. After eye-oko consulted Ifa and performed ritual sacrifices, it was able to reproduce and had two offspring. From that time, eye-oko became eye-ile (pronounced eyele), meaning "bird of the home, domesticated pigeon."23 The bird(s) on top of the osun babalawo, thenceforth ritually called eyeken, came to symbolize the authority of Ifa and its ase to carry out all of Orunmila's orders and predictions. The following Ifa text shows how this staff was used to bring prosperity to a client who asked for Ifa's guidance and complied with Ifa's injunctions:

He (Baba Awusi) completed the ritual sacrifice, Which was divined for him. He was advised to hold osun staff in his hand. When proceeding to Oko which he had planned. He was told that when he arrived at Oko, He would find a woman dyer in front of the Oloko's palace. He should pretend as if he would stab her with the osun staff. When he arrived at the premises of the Oloko, He asked for the location of Oloko's palace. He met a woman dyer in front of the palace. He suddenly rushed at her, Pretended as if he would stab her with the osun staff. With a clever dodge, the woman dyer escaped him. He struck the osun staff into the earth. As the osun staff struck the earth, The earth sank immediately. When he (Baba Awusi) looked inside the earth, He found a great quantity of precious beads. (Abimbola 1969:127-28)24

In other instances, the staff has been instrumental in effecting physical healing as the following Ifa verse states:

The cultivator of a new farmland usually stands high on heaps, It was divined for Orunmila who was going to receive the healing staff from heaven and proceed to the earth. On his way he met a cripple, And he asked him, "what made you so crooked?" He touched him with his healing staff, And immediately the cripple was made straight. (Lijadu 1972:71)25

There are, of course, many ordinary items which may not be as visually imposing as the Ifa priest's staff but which are still considered important ase objects. These include household bowls, mortars, pots, knives, guns, bags, bracelets, beads, fans, stools, items of clothing, as well as flora and fauna associated with specific deities, but all may not always be featured on the orisa altar. Many of these end up being used as adile, which are ase-impregnated sculptural constructs usually placed on articles for sale but left unattended (Fig. 16). They may also be hung on or tied around fruit trees and placed at the entrances of farms and private dwellings to prevent theft. Anyone who violates this prohibition will, it is believed, suffer some calamity.

Also worth mentioning is the ase that can be carried or worn on one's person. For example, during the wars in pre-colonial times, ase was freely used by the military. War uniforms, hunters' vests, and jackets were heavily adorned with amulets and charms for defensive and offensive purposes. In Owo distinguished warriors wore ceremonial war dresses called orunjanran (Fig. 15).26 Onto the jacket of this impressive costume were attached ivory carvings of bells (omo) and animals such as the leopard, crocodile, monkey, and ram. When worn, the orunjanran jacket resembled a mobile altar and functioned more or less like one. Sacrifices were offered to it. Its ase was employed to instill fear in the enemy while enhancing the wearer's protection defense. All the animals represented on the ivory carvings have verbal referents in Yoruba, incantations which were the ase used to attract good fortune in wartime.

To summarize, ase is that divine essence in which physical materials, metaphysical concepts, and art blend to form the energy or life force activating and directing socio-political, religious, and artistic processes and experiences. Ase fundamentally informs the Yoruba aesthetic. It is affective, triggering an emotional response in the audience even when this may not be fully and immediately comprehended. Outwardly expressed through verbal, visual, and performing arts, ase imbues sound, space, and matter with energy to restructure existence, to transform and control the physical world.

Bill Fagg described this "conception" of energy or life force as being "more readily intelligible to those versed in modern physics than to other Europeans, and indeed...it would appear...to be closer to the objective scientific truth than is the static conception of matter by which we live" (1973:164). He proceeded, in his moments of intellectual playfulness, to develop this idea into what he called "a system of exponential curves." In spite of the obvious limitations of the use of this "system," the field owes Bill Fagg a debt of gratitude for calling attention to the crucial role of "energy" or "life force" in the study of African art. Clearly ahead of his generation of scholars, he anticipated culturally based studies in aesthetics and art criticism which look to the meaning as well as the form of African art, and which make full use of the philosophies of African peoples.

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This paper grew out of a much larger research project on Yoruba history, which was funded by the Social Science Research Council of the U.S. and conducted in collaboration with the University of Ife, Ile-Ife, Nigeria. I also gratefully acknowledge support from Amherst College in the form of a research grant which enabled me to complete the fieldwork. In addition, several scholars whose writings and conversations have had an impact on this work are Professors Wamba Ahimbisibwe, Akin M.O. Adeyemo, ife, G. Adekunle, E. Akinrodaju, M. A. Ogungbeseki, O. Ogunyemo, O. O. Oke, and D. D. Adeyemo. These scholars have all provided me with valuable insights and have been most generous with their time and ideas.

A version of this paper was presented as part of a series of lectures on "African Aesthetics," organized by the African Studies Program, University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, in spring 1983. It was also read at the University of Ife, Ile-Ife, Nigeria. I would like to express my gratitude to the organizers and participants of both these events for their kind hospitality.

I am grateful to Professor Olubayo Yari for drawing my attention to the Itu phenomenon in Brazil and ancient Dahomey (see also Cathye 1943). I am also grateful to Professor Dr. H. van den Enden for his manuscript, "Itu grouping," which was recently published in the journal "Cultural Studies" and which has been very helpful in my research.

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