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POETRY IN MUSIC, DANCE AND DRAMA

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CHAPTER TEN

IFA ART OBJECTS: AN INTERPRETATION BASED ON ORAL TRADITIONS

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The sculpture and apparatus of Ifá range from natural unadorned objects such as ikin (sacred palm-kernel nuts) to the highly sophisticated and sculptured ìgéré Ifá (a wooden vessel with lid). Other sculptures belonging to the divinities of Òrì and Èsù can be found in the Ifá paraphernalia, not just because they are the closest to Ifá among all the other divinities, but because the roles of the three divinities Ifá, Òrì and Èsù essentially overlap for efficient functioning.

Ọrűmìlì̀ (the other name for the Ifá divinity is certainly the only Òrìṣà whom tradition confirms as being present at creation, hence he is known as Òlèrìlì Ọpìn (witness at Creation). He knows,

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†As part of the programme of events during the Seminar in Yoruba Oral Tradition held in January 1974 at the University of Ife's Institute of African Studies, an exhibition of Ifá art was arranged by the writer and opened by the Ajero of Ijeri. About fifty objects of Ifá divination were displayed. This paper is based on that exhibition.
therefore, the secret of creation and holds the key to the store of great wisdom and knowledge. He is second only to Olódùmarè, God the Creator, in this respect. The Babaláwo, his priests, recite the verses indicated by Odù, the relevant set of Ifá oracular formulae, in response to any question posed to Œrúnmilà.

Œrì, the divinity of the Head, is the embodiment of a man's past, present, and future and the essence of his personality. Since one does not know what Œrì holds in store for the owner, it is the individual's responsibility to do everything he can to avert misfortune. The only way to do this is through consultation with Ifá, whose priests, the Babaláwo, would ask Œrúnmilà to prescribe the necessary offerings and appropriate rites.

Apart from being a close associate of Œrúnmilà, it is the element of the possibility of uncertainty in Èṣù which makes his role a crucial one in the Ifá divination system.¹ It is for this reason that Ifá often prescribes that sacrifices be made to Èṣù to please him as he might otherwise not only upset things, but also
cause one to offend the gods. 2

Of all the Yorùbá divinities, Ifá is the most esoteric in nature. He acts and speaks, but has no physical form. There are Ifá sculptures and apparatus which are hardly more than utensils and cannot adequately reflect the greatness of this divinity. Chief Aláayè of Ìkèrin sums it all up in his remark on the role of òpóò when he says 'A fi pón Ifá le ni', (Ifá trays are carved to honour and praise Ifá). 3

At best, therefore, Ifá sculpture and apparatus can only complement the esotericism of Ifá as the supreme principle which restores order where there is confusion, brings certainty to uncertainty and thereby restores hope to the destitute.

Ọrunmila’s oríkì helps to sharpen our definition of his place among the Òríṣà in Yorubaland. Because he was a witness at creation, his own creation, therefore, must have preceded those of his colleagues and also remained a secret to all but God Himself. It also means that he has the unique advantage of knowing the destiny of everyone, including those of the other Òríṣà, for whom he also divines. As one who knows the
should not surprise us to find him possessing the attributes of these other Òrìṣà and in his oríkì he is called 'À-jé-ju-ògùn', (the culmination of medicine), even though Ògùn (traditional medicine) is the speciality of Òṣanyìn, the medicine deity. Òrùnmílàn is acknowledged by gods and men as Àmòl-mòtán, (the incomprehensible) and as Àgírí-ilé-ilògbôn, (the learned-one-who-hails-from-the-house-of-wisdom-and-knowledge). Òrùnmílàn, also known as Àfèdèfèyọ, communicates on both the universal and individual levels because he speaks and understands all tongues. Knowing the principles and laws according to which the universe operates, he is the only Òrìṣà capable of making possible those things which are apparently impossible, such as changing or postponing the date of a man's death. He is capable of infusing peace and order into the universe, hence, he is called Àgbáyé-ùn (regulator of the universe), and he is able to change the unfortunate destiny of emèrè to a better one. Òrùnmílàn is indispensable because of his wisdom and knowledge in heaven and on earth, hence the need to consult him every day, and before embarking
on any new activity.

He is Olúwa mi Ajíkí (My Lord, my morning incantation) and Olúwa mi A-tó-bá-jayé, (one who-is-sufficient-in-support-of-life). As proof of his indispensability, it is important here to mention that when Òrúnmílà was angered by one of his children, he threatened to leave the earth for heaven. There was chaos and unrest all over the earth; the natural order of all things and activities was subverted, everyone complained and sought alternative ways to peace and normalcy but their efforts were to no avail. Òrúnmílà finally ascended into heaven, but he gave ikin, the sixteen sacred palmnuts to his children. He claimed that ikin would provide solutions to all problems on earth.  

From this story, it is clear that the most important link between mortals and Òrúnmílà is ikin whose secrets and messages are interpreted by the Babalawó (the learned priest of Ifá). Thus the ikin are more than mere palm-kernels because of their extremely important role in the transmission of the wisdom and knowledge of Òrúnmílà to men and gods. In Ifá divination, therefore, they
are viewed with the utmost sacredness as they communicate Orunmila's answer to questions asked him. In fact, we are warned against looking down upon ikin in the Yorùbá saying, 'Ènì tì ò bá fi ojú èkúró wo Orùnmìlà, Ìfá á pà á'
(Whoever thinks Orùnmìlà is not more than just palm-kernels, Ìfá will kill that person). When Orùnmìlà is called Ikú dúdí àtèwò (black death in the palm), it is the power of the ikin which is referred to. Because no one, including the Babaláwo, can predict the outcome of divination, favourable or otherwise. The ikin are feared by both priests and supplicants. Another of Orùnmìlà's praise names, 'Gbólájókòò òmò òkinkin tì ì mèrìfìn rùn'
(Gbólájókòò the offspring of the two tusks that make the elephant trumpet), further explains the nature of Orùnmìlà. The elephant's trumpet in the above saying sings the elephant's praise. Orùnmìlà is here likened to the mighty and powerful elephant whose greatness is symbolized by its tusks which sing its praise.

From the ritual use of ikin in Ìfá, and Orùnmìlà's oríkì as 'Erínmì lóde Òwò' (Erínmì deity in the town of Òwò) some kind of curious
and mysterious distance between Òrúnmílà and other beings can be observed. Òrúnmí is the deity of Ikú (Death) in Òwọ.

Like Òrúnmí, we need Òrúnmílà yet we do not know him sufficiently to be very close to him. Also like Òrúnmí he respects no one; all are equal before him. Even in Òwọ, a traditionally sacred and revered town, Òrúnmílà walks forcefully and fearlessly, 'Ọmọ arín tí i rin Ode-Ọwọ sakasaka'. He is 'Olúwa mi Ọpọkí a – mú – ọdẹ – sojú'. (My Lord, Ọpọkí, who possesses brazen facial characteristics), making it impossible for anyone to influence him or his decisions.

The Ifá literature is rather silent on the physical characteristics of Òrúnmílà as a man. The oríkì 'Ọkùnrin kùkùrù ọkè Igẹ́tì', (the short man of Igẹ́tì), may not refer so much to his physical person as to his character and personality. That a name such as Adúblífá (Black-like-Ifá) would suggest Ifá to be incomprehensible or inscrutable rather than just dark-complexioned, is plausible considering that Ifá priests use iṣin (Blighia Sapida), a very black seed, to represent Ifá. Whenever Òrúnmílà is performing
some super-human task he assumes a new identity. On one such occasion, he is described as having no back-bone\textsuperscript{11}, a further confirmation of his supernatural nature.

Ifá literature provides some insight into the operation of the Ifá divination system, and especially, the omnipotence of Ṣrúnmílá. It stresses Ṣrúnmílā's crucial and close relationship and co-operation with Orí, the divinity of the Head, the embodiment of man's past, present and future as well as the essence of one's personality. Orí is also the personal ruler of the individual\textsuperscript{12}.

The importance and worship of Orí cuts through the barrier of cult and persons. Devotees of all Òrìṣà acknowledge the special place of Orí and always perform ritual sacrifices to him. The standard symbol of Orí is a small conical structure, usually kept in a similar but bigger structure called Ilé Orí. Orí does not always maintain the same measure of goodness, worldly success and long life for all beings. It is, therefore, the responsibility of every individual to seek recti-
fication of his own Orí (destiny) for the better. In the case of impending misfortune, the matter of its aversion lies entirely with Orí. But it is only through Òrùnmílà however, that one may know the 'content' of Orí and what can be done to improve it, hence Òrùnmílà's oríkì 'O tún orí tí kò suàn ṣe',¹³ (He who repairs the unfortunate orí). It is only Òrùnmílà who is capable of rescuing the emère.¹⁴ The following Ifá poem¹⁵ relates how Òrùnmílà came to the aid of Tálábí, the child of Òòṣà, through his Orí, when he was being pursued by ẹléyẹ (very powerful witches).

Ó sí sáré sí îlêkùn fún un.
Ó ni kí Tálábí ó sáré wọlé.
Nígbà tí Tálábí wọlé tán,
Ni Òrùnmílà bà sá pámọ sí ẹyín îlêkùn,
Ó mú gbóọgbọ lòwọ.
Bí àwọn Ẹléyẹ ti ńsaá wọlé
Ni Òrùnmílà ńlu wón lọkọ́kan.
Bẹ̀ẹ̀ ni Òrùnmílà ńṣe tí ó fi lu gbogbo
Àwọn Ẹléyẹ pa tán.
Lẹyìn náá ni Òrùnmílà wáá èlêkùn fún Tálábí
Nígbà tí Tálábí ílọ,
Ó gbágbe àdá tó mú lòwọ sílẹ́.
Adá náá mbe ńlé Òrùnmílà tí tí dònifolóní.
He (Ọrúnmilà) quickly opened the door, and asked Tàlàbí to run into the house. After Tàlàbí had entered the house, Ọrúnmilà hid behind the door. He held a cudgel in hand. And as the witches rushed into the house, Ọrúnmilà dealt a blow to each one of them. That was how Ọrúnmilà beat them all. The witches were all killed. It was after this that Ọrúnmilà opened the door for Tàlàbí.

When Tàlàbí was leaving the house, the cutlass he held, he forgot there. The cutlass is still there in Ọrúnmilà's house.

Adá Òdṣà or Adá Tàlàbí mentioned above is the same one found in the Ifá priest's house today as a symbol of Ọrúnmilà's victory over Ẹléye. Even though Ọrúnmilà can effect the improvement of one's Orí, the element of the possibility of uncertainty concretized in the personality of Esù makes him and his role a crucial one in Ifá divination. Esù's indispensability in the order and harmony of the universe is summarized in his oríkì.

I shall now attempt an interpretation of some Ifá sculpture and apparatus in the context
of their meaning and significance as can be discovered in Ifá divination literature.

The sculpture and apparatus of Ifá divination consist mainly of (a) those objects and equipment actually used in the act of divination e.g. ikin, sacred palm-kernel nuts; ṣpẹlẹ, the divining chain; opón, the divining-board; ọrọkẹ, the divination tapper; àdá òṣà/Tàlàbì, the ritual iron cutlass with a bell handle; and (b) those objects which embellish or adorn the Ifá priest's house and his person distinguishing him as the learned priest of the Ifá divination system and a devotee of Ọrùnmílà. Examples of these are ọgbá odù, a closed box or calabash containing emblems of the diviner's destiny given him at his initiation¹⁸. Agére Ifá, carved wooden cup with lid used for storing the sixteen ikin and the seventeenth ikin called olórí ikin; Apóti Ifá, a wooden box or chest with a central compartment and four peripheral compartments for storing ritual materials; opá ọrẹrẹ or opá ọsọoro or Ọsùn babaláwo, an iron staff usually standing in one corner of the vertical walls of the Ifá priest's house.
Other items in this category include beaded objects worn, held or used by the Ifá priest on important social and religious occasions. These are ikútẹ Ifá, beaded staff; adé babaláwo, Ifá priest's crown; ãpọ̀ jẹ̀rùgbé, bag with beaded decoration; ikólábá Ifá, beaded shoulder pieces; ikùnpá Ifá, beaded arm bands; òdìnìgbé Ifá, casket made with beads; and ìrùkẹ̀rẹ, beaded horse-tail fly whisk.

Ikin

Judging from its indispensability and the frequency of its use, ikin would appear to be the most important of all the items listed above. Most Babaláwo possess at least one set of sixteen ikin which they use for divination. They are usually very dark in colour or even jet black, and the natural patina of the palm-kernels enhanced by handling makes the ikin smooth and shiny. It is the only object thought to have been handed down from Òrùnmìlà as has already been demonstrated above. While the importance of the other equipment is indisputable, none except òpẹ̀lẹ (usually considered a poor substitute for ikin)
ever approaches ikin in sacredness and importance. From the time they could provide the answer to all human and divine problems, ikin ceased being ordinary palm-kernel nuts and became sacred. They became the earthly and physical symbol of Örunmílā's omniscience and omnipotence when the latter departed for heaven. At this point, the concept of Örúnmílā as a physical, mortal man fades into the background while ikin emerges as the key or index to the infinite knowledge and wisdom of Örúnmílā, while at the same time projecting his esoteric nature. The blackness of ikin most probably symbolizes awo the very deep and esoteric nature of Ifá which makes it impossible for anyone, including his priests, to totally comprehend Örúnmílā, let alone learn all his literature. As in the case with Erinmí, the relation of the client vis-a-vis ikin is ambivalent, a mixture of fear and indispensability. Ikin becomes metaphorically even blacker when both the Ifá priest and the supplicant realise that they cannot humanly influence their decisions in divination because of their physical remoteness.
Furthermore it would explain why Òrúnmílã is never represented anthropomorphically in Òfá divination sculpture. Ikin, like any being or 'thing' in Yorùbá belief, possesses Òrí which would represent Ikin's own essence of personality, and is called Olórí-ìkin. Though this is physically different from the other sixteen ikín, it is an integral part of them in divination and all metaphysical processes.

Òpóln

Òpóln, usually carved in wood, is a flat board, which can be either circular, semi-circular or rectangular. Most of them have decoratively carved borders often slightly higher than the rest of their surface, which leaves a depressed central section dusted with iyéòsùn (powder of the irosùn tree) and is used to record the relevant òdù which appears in answer to the question posed. Òpóln may range between twenty-seven and fifty centimetres in diameter and the border carvings must consist of one or more stylized faces (usually identified as the face of Esù by the babaláwo) with or without any additio-
nal decoration. When additional decorations are present, they are usually in low relief and range from simple geometric patterns such as Ṣe (the interlace pattern), to more complex anthropomorphic representations and sometimes even those of machines such as motorcycles. Apart from the face of Ọpọ̀n however, no other element in the border decoration can be considered really constant.

Even though Ọpọ̀n is now a common sight in the Ọpọ̀n’s house, it is doubtful if it was there from the beginning. An Ifá verse²⁰ states:

*Ilẹ ni mo tẹtẹtẹ
Ki n toọ toọ̀n.*

It was on the ground that I first printed divination marks

Before the tray was designed.

All the Ifá priests I interviewed contended that there is nothing unusual about divining on the ground where the Ọpọ̀n is not readily available, and that this is, in fact, often the practice in extraordinary circumstances such as when the priest is on a journey and has only the ikini with him. Chief Aláayè of Ikerin who claims he has
carved over two hundred ṣpỌn, says 'A fiṣpọn Ifá lé ní' (ṣpọn is designed to flatter and honour Ifá). The richness of design on the ṣpọn, he also points out, is dependent on the amount of money the commissioner can afford. Judging from the ritual use of ṣpọn one can assume that it came into the repertoire at a time when the Ifá priest's social importance and prosperity was increasing. Starting off as a wise-man or philosopher, it appears he soon became indispensable in the everyday affairs of men.

Ṣpọn is unique in its beauty and its symbolisation of the intrinsic nature of Òrùnmílà. When in use, ṣpọn is laid flat on its back so that no shadow is cast on its surface. For both priest and supplicant, this surface is the place where all shadows of fear and doubt are dispelled in times of anxiety and uncertainty. And as Atẹ-Ifá, another name for ṣpọn in some parts of Yorubaland, its primary function like that of any atẹ (display tray) is to display, illuminate, and reveal. Through the complete absence of any kind of distortion and the projection of perfection,
the circular, semi-circular and rectangular forms of ọpọ́n instill a sense of balance and harmony in Ifa's devotees. The ọpọ́n reminds one of the attributes of Ọrùnmilà as 'Ọgẹ́gẹ́ a-gbáyé-gún', that is, primeval order, the regulator of the universe, an attribute which qualifies him to heal miraculously and to normalize abnormal situations. In all actions and decisions, however, Ifá acknowledges the power of Eṣù symbolically, placates him and solicits his co-operation through the carved face(s) of Eṣù in the border decoration of ọpọ́n. During the divination process, the face of Eṣù or one of the faces of Eṣù (where they are more than one) on the border must face the Ifá priest forming a diameter (or a bisector as the case may be) dividing the ọpọ́n into two equal parts. The symbolic face of Eṣù heads this imaginary diameter or bisector which graphically confirms Eṣù's character as 'A ọ̀tún-ṣodí lái ri tijú' (one who belongs to two opposing camps without having any feeling of shame). By his position, Eṣù is rightly regarded by men and gods, as a most powerful and influential Òrìṣà in the
Yorùbá religious system. He maintains the precarious balance between the benevolent and the malevolent powers of the universe. As òta-òrìṣà (the cornerstone of all the gods), Òṣù lends his àṣẹ (the power of the word) to all of Ifa's utterances making them prophetic.

Iròkè

Iròkè, the divining tapper with clapper, is used to invoke Òrùnmílà during divination by gently striking the pointed end against the òpóìn. The tapper is a long, slim form usually carved in ivory, but sometimes in either brass, or in wood, and covered with beads. Tappers range between twenty and sixty centimetres in length and can be seen as a combination of three major parts:

(a) The topmost or pointed-end section is without decoration and may, or may not, possess the remaining bottom part before it is considered complete and suitable for use in actual divination.

(b) The middle section is usually just a human head or a kneeling nude woman figure holding her breasts. This section is normally found in
Plate 1. Opon Ifa
combination with the pointed end part but not necessarily with the lower end.

(c) The third and bottom section has no fixed subject matter. The majority of iroyi examined emphasize material and wordly success, for example, equestrian figures, music-makers, and so on. Like the middle section, this bottom part never exists by itself. It requires the two upper sections to make this third part complete and ritualistically usable. The kneeling women and the mounted figures in the second and third sections are rendered frontally, bi-symmetrically, and in stasis. There is little or no suggestion of movement and activity. Other than being reflective of intense concentration and perhaps energy, the faces show no expression of emotion. On the whole, the figures are highly schematized and the composition conventional. In the distant past, iroyi cost about 1,400 cowries. This is an extremely high price in the 'cowrie' period for a member of the middle class to pay for such an article. The use of the elephant tusk itself in traditional Yorubaland was limited
to people of high rank such as Ọba and a few very important chiefs and priests. Ìròkè is no doubt an indicator of the honour and prestige enjoyed by the Ifá priest who has gained professional success and consequently enhanced economic status through its use. Thus Ifá is appropriately hailed: Ọbọlajọkọ, ọmọ ọkinkin tìí mérin fôn (he-who-controls-wealth, the offspring of the two tusks that make the elephant trumpet).

At the beginning of the Ifá divination process, the Ọbaláwo gently taps the ìròkè against the edge of the ọpọn and recites the oríki of Ọrínmilà. This action is a greeting, and an invocation asking Ọrínmilà to reveal the Orí of the supplicant. In a sense, therefore, the tapping is the visible manifestation of a metaphysical 'switch' which starts off the divination process. Viewed from this angle, the iconography of ìròkè becomes clearer and more interesting in the context of Ifá divination.

Orí is here symbolized by the topmost segment of ìròkè, a conical superstructure on the head of the kneeling woman. It sits on top of the visible
physical head in such a way that its owner can never see it, thus creating a visual equivalent of the metaphysical distinction between the visible physical head and its invisible, unknowable counterpart which is the symbol of one's destiny. The placement of the Orí directly on the physical head is in agreement with the manner in which orí is supposed to become wholly part of one, once chosen, that is ḥyânmô, (that-which-is-affixed to one). This is the most important section of the Òròkè, not only because of its form which is constant, but also because it is self-sufficient in ritual use. A Yorùbá saying appropriately defines its place: ibi tí a bá fi ṣe orí, a kí i fì i tèlè 'whatever we recognise as the head we must never place at the bottom (or last).

When the two segments are viewed together they recall a traditional Yorùbá myth which deals with the choosing of Orí from Ḥájálá, the great sculptor of Orí in heaven. This is the most important event in the creation and life of any being. Humanity is here represented by a female figure because of her effectiveness in
the act of honouring and saluting the gods who all possess the surname ṣàkùnlẹ̀bọ̀ (the-ones-who-must-be-worshipped-kneeling-down). A woman's kneeling is symbolic of ikúnlẹ̀ abiyamọ, the kneeling posture of a woman experiencing the pains of childbirth during labour. This is the greatest reverence that can be shown to any man or god in Yorùbá tradition. To choose a good Orí, only the most sacred virtue of womanhood is appropriate at a time when man goes to Ajálá's house. Moreover, Orí is Akúnlẹ̀yàn (that-which-is-chosen-while-kneeling), and also Akúnlẹ̀gbà (that-which-is-received-while-kneeling²⁴). The nudity of the kneeling woman is proof of the solemnity and sacredness of this moment of creation. For nudity among adult Yorùbá is not considered normal except on very rare occasions like this, when one is communicating with one's Òrò (creator) or taking an oath on a most important issue. The same applies to a woman holding her breasts.

The third segment of iròkè, when they depict subjects like the horseman and another kneeling
woman, appears to be presenting wishes and desires in concrete terms. The horseman may be interpreted as a prayer to be socially and economically successful and victorious over one's enemies and the kneeling woman here, as a desire to be happy and to have cause to be grateful to the gods.

Agéré Ifá or Òbòrí Ifá

Agéré Ifá or Òbòrí Ifá is a carved container with a lid that holds the ikin, the sacred palm-kernel nuts. They vary in size but most fall between ten and thirty-five centimeters in height including the carved figures which hold up the bowl in a caryatid-like fashion. These carved figures show men and women rejoicing, making music and dancing to it, offering sacrifices, or expressing gratitude in the traditional manner. They are ordinary human beings, not godlike in their appearance, postures, movements or grouping. The artists' treatment of these figures is lively and naturalistic. The variety of poses, freedom of grouping and tri-dimensionality of vision in agéré sculptures is unique in Yorùbá art.
Agéré elevates ikin which, as I have mentioned, are more than the ordinary palm-kernel nuts in importance and significance because they represent Òrùnmílẹ̀ on earth. Agéré can be regarded as a 'mini' earthly 'temple' of Òrùnmílẹ̀. The richness of design and high quality of workmanship and creativity involved in the execution of agéré is reflected in its great value which, in Ifá literature, is put at 3,200 cowries. Both the Ifá priests and their clients contribute to the iconographical and aesthetic elements of agéré sculpture in that the priest may commission the vessel and/or the clients can present him with one as an act of gratitude following a successful divination.

Most themes of agéré sculpture honour and praise Òrùnmílẹ̀. People are shown celebrating their success and victories in great variety of ways. The dancers, musicians and smiling faces of celebrants remind one of the happy endings which characterize Ifá poems reporting successful divination.
Ijọ ní ì jọ,
Ayọ ní ì yọ,
Ọ nín àwọn awọn rẹ,
Àwọn awọn rẹ nín 'Fá.
Ọ yà ènu kótó,
Orin awo ló bọ sí i lẹnu.
Ésè tí ó ná,
Ijọ fà á.

He (the successful client) was dancing
He was happy,
He gave honour to the priests,
Who in turn praised Ifá.
As he opened his mouth,
It was the divination song that he sang.
As he stretched forth his feet,
Dance claimed them.

The figures in the sculpture of ìgérè are ordinary
men responding humanly and naturally to the success
of their supplication. In the conventional way
they drum, sing, and dance with horse-tail fly-
whisk in hand, ride on horseback with or without
a weapon (in the case of a victory in war or
success of a similar nature), and make ritual
sacrifice to express their gratitude to Òrúnmílẹ̀.
Rare but not absent in ìgérè sculpture is the
object of a cock biting a snake who in turn bites
tortoise. This is a form of prayer or desire for the gift of long life.

Ọpá Orèrè, Ọpá Osoro

Ọpá Orèrè or Ọpá Osoro is an iron staff usually carried vertically in the hand by the babaláwo but it may be stuck in the ground at important gatherings or occasion involving the presence of Ifá priests. In normal circumstances the staff stands in one corner of the walls of the priest's house. Usually between eighty-five and one hundred and forty-two centimeters tall, the staff is surmounted by a bird, or two birds, standing on a flat disc which rests on the inverted bottom part of hollow cones or bell shapes. Along its length at two different levels, two sets of four slim bell shapes are welded to the staff. Ọpá Orèrè is very important ritually in the implementation of Orunmila's orders. The bird(s) on top of the staff represent(s) ọyọ kán²⁸ (one bird), referring to the pigeon which is sacred to Ifá priests and domesticated by most of them. Unlike the
birds on the Ìsanyin staff which are believed to represent 'witches' (àwọn èlẹ̀yẹ), èyè kàn represents a more constructive and positive power of implementation. The story of èyè kàn in Ifá relates how the 'first pigeon', èyè oko, which was bi-sexual, lived wild in the bush and remained childless for a long time and could not reproduce. Èyè oko consulted Ifá and performed ritual sacrifices, thereafter, it was able to reproduce and had two offsprings. From that time Èyè oko became known as Èyè ílé (pronounced èyèlè) meaning 'bird of the home', and was domesticated. Èyèle now symbolizes honour and authority, and stands on top of ìpá òrèrè used ritually in carrying out Òrunmila's orders and in honouring him.

Ọ rùbọ tán,
Wọn ìẹ̀ ìfá fún un.
Wọn ní kò mú Òsùn ọ̀wọ̀ Lọ sì ọ̀dè Ọkọ tí níọ.
Wọn ní bó bà ti dòdè Ọkọ,
Yóó ri ́fí iyá aláró kàn lójúde Olókọ,
Kí ọ̀ ye bì éni pé
Yóó fì Òsùn ọ̀wọ̀ rè gùn un.
Nìgbà tó dòdè Olókọ,
O beere aafin Oloko.
O ba iyá aláró kan níwájú aafin náá, Ló ba pà guuru só i,
O se bí èni pé
Yóó tì Osùn gùn un.
Bè̀sè tì iyá aláró yè fún un,
Ló ba tì Osùn náá gùn ilé.
Bí Osùn tì gùn ilé,
Ilé jin lèṣekeṣe.
Igbà tì yóó wọ abè ilé,
O rí òpọlọpọ ilékeṣe sègí.

He (Baba Awúsí) completed the ritual sacrifice,
Which was divined for him.
He was advised to hold Osùn staff in his hand.
When proceeding to Òkò which he had planned.
He was told that when he arrived at Òkò,
He would find a woman dyer in front of the Olokó's palace.
He should pretend as if he would stab her with Osùn staff.
When he arrived at the premises of the Olókò,
He asked for the location of Olokó'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 Osùn 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.

In the above poem, the staff brings prosperity to a client who asks for Ifa's guidance and complies with Ifa's injunctions. In other instances, the staff is used in effecting physical aling, as the following poem indicates:

Asease pa ajuba nifi se le ori eran geregere,
A da fun Orunmilaa nilo gba opa otoototo wuye.
O niibo, o ba arọ lonan.
O ni ki le se iwo ti o ri wongu-wonu bayii?
O fi opa otoototo kan an,
Lesekannaa arọ na.

The cultivator of a new farmland usually stands high on heaps,
It was divined for Orunmilaa 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.
Ejiogbë, the relevant odù from which the stories about Eyéle and the power of Osùn staff are derived, is regarded as the first, the most important, and in fact, the 'father' of all odù. It is this Odù which brought honour and authority to Ifá. Today, symbolically through the Osùn staff, Ifá lends honour and authority to the presence of babaláwo, his priests.

Beads

Beaded objects are worn by the Ifá priest on special occasions, adding colour and dignity to his person: Ikùtẹ Ifá (Ife's sceptre), Adé babaláwo (Ifá priest's crown), Apọọ jérúgbé (Ifá priest's bag), Ikọlábà Ifá (Ifá's shoulder piece), Ikùnpá Ifá (Ifá priest's arm band), Òdìgbẹ Ifá (casket for Ifá) and Irùkẹrẹ (the horse-tail fly whisk). The beads employed in the decoration of these objects are of assorted colours and the artist combines them in designs to suit his often simple and two-dimensional motifs which may be either abstract or naturalistic.

The use of beaded objects by the Ifá priest is explainable in terms of his high socio-economic
status resulting from his professional success.

The Ifá priest may have started out as a philosopher or wise man as already pointed out above in the section on ọpọn, but through his elevated moral philosophy and healings of psychological and physiological ailments, he earned the respect and confidence of all. Thus the Ifá priest must have risen to the highest place materially attainable in society. The following verse\textsuperscript{33} explains this kind of phenomenon:

\begin{quote}
Ó dá ko kúkúndúkú tii ṣọlọjá iṣu,
Oun išùkẹrẹ tii ọmọ Olókun Sẹnifadé.
Wọn ní bó bá yè 'rùkẹrẹ tán, tò dè 'rùkẹrẹ lọrùn,
Ó dëni à-gbé-jó; ó dëni à-gbá-yèwọ
A-gbé-jó lá à gbé 'rù ेṣìn,
A-gbá-yèwọ ní tì 'rùkẹrẹ.
\end{quote}

It was divined for Kúkúndúkú (Sweet potato) who is the king of yams,

And the Horse-tail who was the child of Olókun Sẹnifadé. (Creator God).

It was predicted that by the time the Horse-tail had become famous, and prosperous,

He would become the focus of attention.

We dance carrying the Horse-tail,

We inspect the Horse-tail in admiration.
Like the Horse-tail, from a humble beginning, the Ifá priest has finally emerged prosperous and famous. Ifá became Ajíkí, (he who must be greeted and acknowledged at the break of day).^34

A diffá fun Òrúnmílà
Níjọ tí Ifá ó joyè oṣójìre.
Ọba aládé, o jìire lónìf,
A bo o jìire?
Opùrù àparò,
Ifá, o jìire.

It was divined for Òrúnmílà
On the day that Ifá would be installed as Ọṣójìre
The crowned king, good morning today.
I hope you slept well and woke up well.
Like the healthy bush-fowl,
Ifá, you wake up well.

As is implied in the poem above, only kings and important men can be greeted in the manner described, a pointer to the fact of Òrúnmílà's majesty. Ifá literature^35 states that Òrúnmílà had a crown, Òṣòmún staff, and slippers made of brass with which he adorned his person. His sons, Ajéró, Alárá, Òlówọ and a few others became Ọbara, paramount rulers in Yorubaland.
Today, during important ceremonies, 'when ever babaláwo meet, they wave their beaded horse tail in salutation' \(^{36}\). They also do it in symbolic celebration of their unique status in society. The use of beaded objects by Ifá priests therefore, must be seen as a priviledge and honour conferred on them by the Ifá divination process.

I have tried to show in this paper that oral traditions preserve religious beliefs and related artistic values, and that they are a vital link between religion and art. Basic formal elements in the plastic arts have been explained through formal analysis and their related symbolism in literature concerning the religion and rituals for which such art forms are used. In studying the art forms of an alien culture, scholars seldom allow that culture to speak for itself. The meaning and significance of objects tend to be distorted and even lost when interpreted according to the aesthetic tradition of an alien culture and especially when importance and credibility are given to secondary sources, simply
because these are in print, than to primary ones which consist mainly of oral traditions. In Yorùbá society, which is traditionally 'non-literate', oral traditions are immediately important as efficient means of preserving culture as well as recording history, and providing an indispensable body of research material for reconstructing the artistic values. Properly used, oral traditions can reveal forgotten meanings which are usually hard, or even impossible, to obtain from the most co-operative and intelligent informant.

The Ifá literary corpus occupies a prominent place in Yorùbá oral tradition. This is justifiable, since Ọrúnmílẹ̀ the Ifá divinity, is probably the only Yorùbá divinity that speaks, both about himself and about all things in the traditional society. For the field-researcher in Yorùbá studies, the Ifá literary corpus offers a unique contribution in terms of data. Fortunately, a considerable body of Ifá literature has now been published; Lijadu, 1972; Abimbọ̀la, 1968, 1969; Bascom, 1969, and more hopefully, will
be published in the near future. In the meantime, we can use the available material in the interpretative analysis of Yorùbá art.
1. Ešù will, however, certainly support those who perform sacrifices.

2. Sacrifices are made to Ešù because he is the divinity charged with their delivery to the appropriate god. It is also believed that Ešu's wife, Agbèrù, helps her husband in the fulfilment of this important role (Abimbọla, 1975: verbal communication).

3. Interview with Chief Aláyé of Ikẹrin on April 3, 1974.

4. In practice, however, Orúnmilá functions more as the keeper and repository of the regulative principles of the Universe.


O ní bẹ ẹ bá dẹlé,
Bẹ ẹ bá fọwọ̀ọ́ ní,
Eni tẹ ẹ mọọ bi nà un.
Bẹ ẹ bá dẹlé,
Bẹ ẹ bá fáyáá ní,
Eni tẹ ẹ mọọ bi nà un.
Bẹ ẹ bá dẹlé,
Bẹ ẹ bá rọmọọ bi,
Eni tẹẹ mọọ bi nà un.
Ilé ọ̀ bẹ fẹẹ kò làyé,
Asọ ọ̀ bẹ fẹẹ ní làyé,
Eni tẹẹ mọọ bi nà un.
Ire gbogbo tẹ ẹ bá fẹẹ ní làyé,
Eni tẹẹ mọọ bi nà un.
Igbà tī wọ́n dẹlé,
Gbogbo ire nàà ni wọ́n ọ̀ rì
Ọrúnmilà said:
When you arrive home,
If you wish to be wealthy,
(The ikin) is the one to whom the request must be made.
When you get home,
If you wish to have a good wife,
(The ikin) is the one to whom the request must be made.
When you get home,
If you wish to have children,
(The ikin) is the one to whom the request must be made.
If you wish to have a house,
(The ikin) is the one to whom the request must be made.
If you wish to have plenty of clothes,
(The ikin) is the one to whom the request must be made.
All the good things you want on earth,
(The ikin) is the one to whom the request must be made.
When they arrived home,
They had all the good things they had wished for.


7. See Abimbọla, 1968:46.

8. Ibid.


10. Abimbọla, 1974: Verbal communication.

12. See Abimbọla, 1969:85

The following Ifá verse emphasizes the all-important role of Orí in the affairs of all beings (Abimbọla 1968:100-101):

Kò sóọsà tif dá nif gbè
Lèyin orí èni.
Orí pèlè,
Atètè níran;
Atètè gbe ni kòọsà.
Kò sóọsà tif dá nif gbè
Lèyin orí èni.
Orí pèlè
Orí ẹbíyè
Èni orí bà gbẹbọọ rẹ,
Kò yọ ẹbẹbẹ.

No god shall offer protection without sanction from Orí.
Orí, we salute,
Whose protection precedes that of other gods.
No god shall offer protection without sanction from Orí.
Orí, we salute,
Orí, that is destined to live.
The person whose sacrifice Orí chooses to accept,
Let him rejoice.


14. Emèrè is a 'person reborn and having the power to consult with spirits' (Abraham, 1970:159). To rescue the emèrè's orí is considered a very difficult task indeed, for it makes many a herbalist and
This is an iron cutlass with a bell-handle, averaging about fifty-four centimeters in length. It is very simply constructed without any decoration. Quite often in the course of divination, the Ifá priest taps the ground around the tray with the flat side of the cutlass. (see also illustration ...).

(See Daramọla and Jeje, 1970:290):

Eṣù, ọta Orìṣà,
Ọṣẹtúrà lorúkọ bàbá mọ ọ,
Alágogo ijà lórúkọ iyá ìpè è,
Eṣù Ọdàrà ọmọkùnrin Ìdọlọ̀fin,
Ọ lé sọnọ sórí ẹsẹ ẹlẹsẹ.
Kò jẹ, kò si jẹ kí ènì ìjẹ, gbé e mí.
A kí i lówó lái mú tÈṣù kúrò.
A kí i láyi lái mú tÈṣù kúrò.
A ọgbún - ọsí lái nítíjù.
Eṣù apata sòmọ ọlọmọ lẹnu.
O fi ọgbùta dípò iyọ ....
Eṣù má sì mí, ọmọ ẹlọmírán ní kí o ẹsè.

Eṣù the cornerstone of the gods,
Ọṣẹtúrà is the name by which the fathers know you.
Owner-of-the-bell-of-trouble is the name by which the mothers know you.
Eṣù Ọdàrà, the man of Ìdọlọ̀fin,
He perches on top of another's foot.
He would not eat, he would not let him who eats, digest it.
One does not become rich without first setting aside Eṣù's share.

No one attains happiness without first giving Eṣù his due.

He (Eṣù) belongs to two opposing camps without having any feeling of shame.

Eṣù, he who pushes the innocent to offend others.

He substitutes rock for salt ....

Eṣù, do not tempt me, it is someone else's child you should tempt.


19. Even though scholars have always thought the Olórí-Ikin (or Òduṣó) to represent Eṣù, no oral tradition that I have studied supports such a contention. Moreover, whenever Eṣù is concretized in plastic form for purposes of worship, placation and sacrifice (known as Eṣù-Ejigun), he is always located well apart from the area of Ifá divination paraphernalia. Some Yorùbá believe that 'Eṣù kò ní iwà, a kò ilé rè sí ita', meaning Eṣù is mannerless (i.e. respects no one), which is why his shrine is kept in the open place (Daramọla and Jeje 1970:287).


Another interpretation of this verse is that accomplished Ifá priests started humbly by first divining on ordinary sand (as diviner-apprentices do even today) before they graduated and were qualified to use the board. This probably refers proverbially to the elevation of the priest's status through time.


25. See Frobenius, 1913, I : 233, 235, 237 for more illustrations of ågéré sculpture, see also I : 246 for a similar judgement by Frobenius.


27. See Abimbola, 1968:72.
Nowadays, native herbalists among the Yoruba advertise their trade and skill in writing on sign boards displayed conspicuously by the road side, thus demonstrating that the idea, at least, is not unacceptable to traditional Yoruba society and most probably healers in general.


Eyelé is very important symbolically in Ifá and for his priests. One might suggest that the choice of this bird and the story of its 'transformation' which is actually only elevation in status and importance is not unrelated to the Ifá priests' gradual attainment of their high socio-economic status in the society.


32. Ifá literature puts the price of beaded horse-tail fly whisk at 1,200 cowries. (Abimbola, 1968:26).

34. See Abimbola, 1969:139.

35. See Abimbola, 1969: 34-36.

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<td>Olu Daramọla and A. Jeje</td>
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