

# YORUBA ORAL TRADITION

SELECTIONS FROM THE PAPERS PRESENTED AT  
THE SEMINAR ON YORUBA ORAL TRADITION:  
POETRY IN MUSIC, DANCE AND DRAMA

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## CHAPTER TEN

### IFA ART OBJECTS: AN INTERPRETATION BASED ON ORAL TRADITIONS<sup>+</sup>

Rowland Abiḡdun

The sculpture and apparatus of Ifá range from natural unadorned objects such as *ikin* (sacred palm-kernel nuts) to the highly sophisticated and sculptured *Àgéré Ifá* (a wooden vessel with lid). Other sculptures belonging to the divinities of Orí and Eṣù 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, Orí and Eṣù essentially overlap for efficient functioning.

Orúnmilà (the other name for the Ifá divinity is certainly the only Oríṣà whom tradition confirms as being present at creation, hence he is known as *Èlérifí Ipín* (witness at Creation). He knows,

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<sup>+</sup>As part of the programme of events during the Seminar in Yorùbá 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 *Ajerò* of Ijerò. 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 Ọrúnmilà.

Orí, 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 Orí 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 Ọrúnmilà to prescribe the necessary offerings and appropriate rites.

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

cause one to offend the gods.<sup>2</sup>

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 Ikèrin sums it all up in his remark on the role of ọpọ̀n when he says 'A fi pọ̀n Ifá le ni', (Ifá trays are carved to honour and praise Ifá).<sup>3</sup> 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 oríkí helps to sharpen our definition of his place among the ọ̀riṣà 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 ọ̀riṣà, 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 oríkí he is called 'A-jé-ju-oògùn', (the culmination of medicine), even though oògùn (traditional medicine) is the speciality of Ọsanyìn, the medicine deity. Ọrúnmilà is acknowledged by gods and men as Amòl-mòtán, (the incomprehensible) and as Agírí-ilé-ilógbón, (the learned-one-who-hails-from-the house-of-wisdom-and-knowledge). Ọrúnmilà, also known as Afèdèfèyò, 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 A-gbáyé-gún (regulator of the universe)<sup>4</sup>, and he is able to change the unfortunate destiny of emèrè to a better one. Ọrúnmilà 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 Ọrúnmilà 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. Ọrúnmilà finally ascended into heaven, but he gave ikin, the sixteen sacred palmdnuts to his children. He claimed that ikin would provide solutions to all problems on earth.<sup>5</sup>

From this story, it is clear that the most important link between mortals and Ọrúnmilà 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 Ọrúnmilà to men and gods. In Ifá divination, therefore, they

are viewed with the utmost sacredness as they communicate Ọrunmila's answer to questions asked him. In fact, we are warned against looking down upon ikin in the Yorùbá saying, 'Èni tí ó bá fi ojú èkùrọ́ wo Ọrúnmilà, Ifá á pa á'<sup>6</sup> (Whoever thinks Ọrúnmilà is not more than just palm-kernels, Ifá will kill that person). When Ọrúnmilà is called Ikú dúdú àtẹ̀wọ́ (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 Ọrunmila's praise names, 'Gbọ́lájókòó ọmọ ọkinkin tífí mériín fọ́n'<sup>7</sup> (Gbọ́lájókòó the offspring of the two tusks that make the elephant trumpet), further explains the nature of Ọrúnmilà. The elephant's trumpet in the above saying sings the elephant's praise. Ọrúnmilà 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 Ifá, and Ọrunmila's oríkí as 'Erinmí lóde Ọwọ́' (Erinmí deity in the town of Ọwọ́) some kind of curious

and mysterious distance between Ọrúnmilà and other beings can be observed. Erinmi is the deity of Ikú (Death) in Ọwọ.

Like Erinmi, we need Ọrúnmilà yet we do not know him sufficiently to be very close to him. Also like Erinmi he respects no one; all are equal before him. Even in Ọwọ, a traditionally sacred and revered town, Ọrúnmilà walks forcefully and fearlessly, 'Ọmọ arin tí í rin Ọde-Ọwọ sakasaka'. He is 'Olúwa mi Ọpòkí a - mú - idẹ - sojú'. (My Lord, Ọpòkí, 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 Ọrúnmilà as a man. The oríkí 'Ọkúnrin kúkúró òkè Igèṭí'<sup>9</sup>, (the short man of Igèṭí), may not refer so much to his physical person as to his character and personality. That a name such as Adúbíifá (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<sup>10</sup>. Whenever Ọrúnmilà is performing



some super-human task he assumes a new identity. On one such occasion, he is described as having no back-bone<sup>11</sup>, 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 Ọrúnmilà. It stresses Ọrunmila'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<sup>12</sup>.

The importance and worship of Orí cuts through the barrier of cult and persons. Devotees of all ọriṣà 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 Ọrúnmilà however, that one may know the 'content' of Orí and what can be done to improve it, hence Ọrunmila's oríkí 'Ó tún orí tí kò suàn ẹ̀',<sup>13</sup> (He who repairs the unfortunate orí). It is only Ọrúnmilà who is capable of rescuing the emèrè<sup>14</sup>. The following Ifá poem<sup>15</sup> relates how Ọrúnmilà came to the aid of Tàlàbí, the child of òòṣà, through his Orí, when he was being pursued by ẹ̀lẹ̀yẹ̀ (very powerful witches).

Ó sí sáré sí ilẹ̀kùn fún un.

Ó ní kí Tàlàbí ó sáré wọ̀lé.

Nígba tí Tàlàbí wọ̀lé tán,

Ni Ọrúnmilà bá sá pamọ̀ sí ẹ̀yìn ilẹ̀kùn,

Ó mú gbóńgbó lẹ̀wọ̀.

Bí àwọn Ẹ̀lẹ̀yẹ̀ ti ísáá wọ̀lé

Ni Ọrúnmilà ńlù wọn lókòpọ̀kan.

Bẹ̀ẹ̀ ni Ọrúnmilà ẹ̀ tí ó fi lu gbogbo

Awọn Ẹ̀lẹ̀yẹ̀ pa tán.

Lẹ̀yìn náà ni Ọrúnmilá wáá sílẹ̀kùn fún Tàlàbí

Nígba tí Tàlàbí ńlọ̀,

Ó gbàgbé àdà tó mú lẹ̀wọ̀ sílẹ̀.

Adá náà m̀be ńlẹ̀ Ọrúnmilà tí tí dònfolóníí.

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 Ọrunmila's  
house.

Adá Ọòṣà or Adá Tàlàbí mentioned above is the  
same one found in the Ifá priest's house today<sup>16</sup>  
as a symbol of Ọrunmila's victory over ẹlẹyẹ.

Even though Ọrúnmilà can effect the improve-  
ment of one's Orí, the element of the possibility  
of uncertainty concretized in the personality of  
Eṣù makes him and his role a crucial one in Ifá  
divination. Eṣu's indispensability in the order  
and harmony of the universe is summarized in his  
oríki<sup>17</sup>.

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. *ikir*, sacred palm-kernel nuts; *òpèlè*, the divining chain; *orón*, the divining-board; *iróké*, the divination tapper; *àdà òòṣà/Tàlàbí*, 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 *Orúnmilà*. Examples of these are *igbá odù*, a closed box or calabash containing emblems of the diviner's destiny given him at his initiation<sup>18</sup>. *Agéré Ifá*, carved wooden cup with lid used for storing the sixteen *ikin* and the seventeenth *ikin* called *olórí ikin*; *Apótí Ifá*, a wooden box or chest with a central compartment and four peripheral compartments for storing ritual materials; *òpá òrèrè* or *òpá òsooro* or *òsùn 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 ikùtẹ Ifá, beaded staff; adé babaláwo, Ifá priest's crown; àpòdo jèrùgbé, bag with beaded decoration; ikólàbà Ifá, beaded shoulder pieces; ikún pá Ifá, beaded arm bands; òdigbè Ifá, casket made with beads; and irùkẹrẹ, 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 Ọrúnmilà as has already been demonstrated above. While the importance of the other equipment is indisputable, none except ọpẹlẹ (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 Orunmila's omniscience and omnipotence when the latter departed for heaven. At this point, the concept of Orunmila as a physical, mortal man fades into the background while ikin emerges as the key or index to the infinite knowledge and wisdom of Orunmila, while at the same time projecting his esoteric nature. The blackness of ikin most probably symbolizes also the very deep and esoteric nature of Ifá which makes it impossible for anyone, including his priests, to totally comprehend Orunmila, let alone learn all his literature. As in the case with Erinmi, 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 *Orúnmílà* is never represented anthropomorphically in Ifá divination sculpture. Ikin, like any being or 'thing' in Yorùbá belief, possesses Orí which would represent Ikin's own essence of personality, and is called *Olórí-ikin*. Though this is physically different from the other sixteen *ikin*, it is an integral part of them in divination and all metaphysical processes<sup>19</sup>.

### Opón

*Opón*, 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 *iyèròsùn* (powder of the *irosùn* tree) and is used to record the relevant *odù* which appears in answer to the question posed. *Opón* 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 *Eṣù* 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 *ibô* (the interlace pattern), to more complex anthropomorphic representations and sometimes even those of machines such as motorcycles. Apart from the face of *Eṣù* however, no other element in the border decoration can be considered really constant.

Even though *opón* is now a common sight in the *babalawo's* house, it is doubtful if it was there from the beginning. An *Ifá* verse<sup>20</sup> states:

*Ilẹ̀ ni mo tẹ̀tẹ̀tẹ̀tẹ̀  
Kí n tóó tọ́pón.*

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 *opón* 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 *ikin* with him. Chief *Aláayè* of *Ikerin* who claims he has



carved over two hundred ọpọn, says 'A fi pọn Ifá lé ni' (ọpọn is designed to flatter and honour Ifá). The richness of design on the ọpọn, he also points out, is dependent on the amount of money the commissioner can afford. Judging from the ritual use of ọpọn 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.

Ọpọn is unique in its beauty and its symbolisation of the intrinsic nature of Ọrúnmílà. When in use, ọpọn 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 Àtẹ-Ifá, another name for ọpọn in some parts of Yorubaland, its primary function like that of any àtẹ (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 ọpọn instill a sense of balance and harmony in Ifa's devotees. The ọpọn reminds one of the attributes of Ọrúnmilá as 'Ọgègè 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 ọpọn. 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 ọpọn into two equal parts. The symbolic face of Eṣù heads this imaginary diameter or bisector which graphically confirms Eṣù's character as 'A ṣòtún-ṣòsì láí ní tíjù' (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 Ọriṣà in the

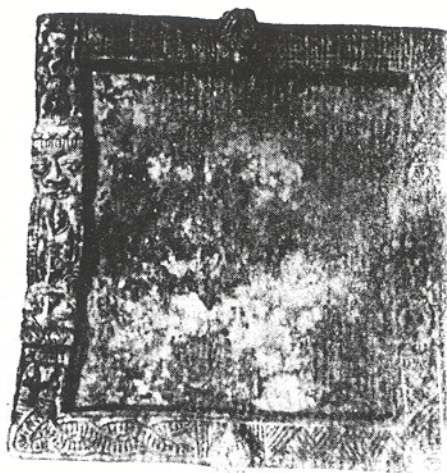
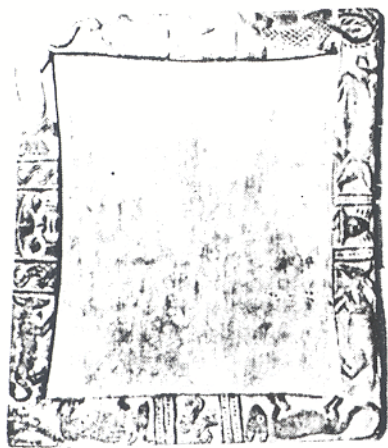
Yorùbá religious system. He maintains the precarious balance between the benevolent and the malevolent powers of the universe. As Ọta-òrìṣà (the cornerstone of all the gods), Eṣù lends his àṣẹ (the power of the word) to all of Ifa's utterances making them prophetic.

### Iróké

Iróké, the divining tapper with clapper, is used to invoke Ọrúnmilà during divination by gently striking the pointed end against the ọpọ́n. 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*



Plate 2 Ibo

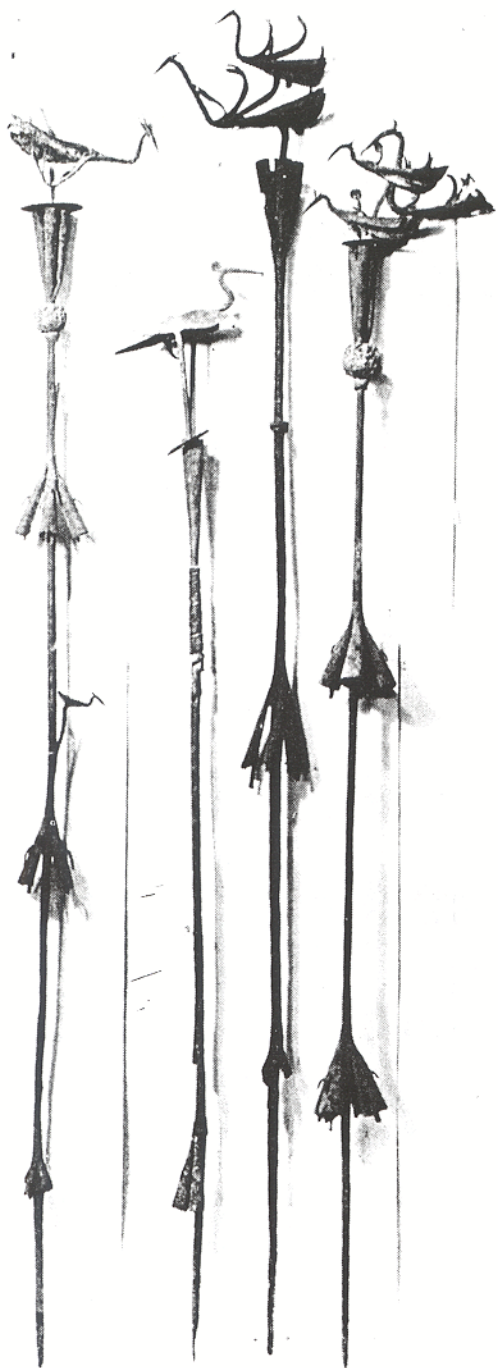
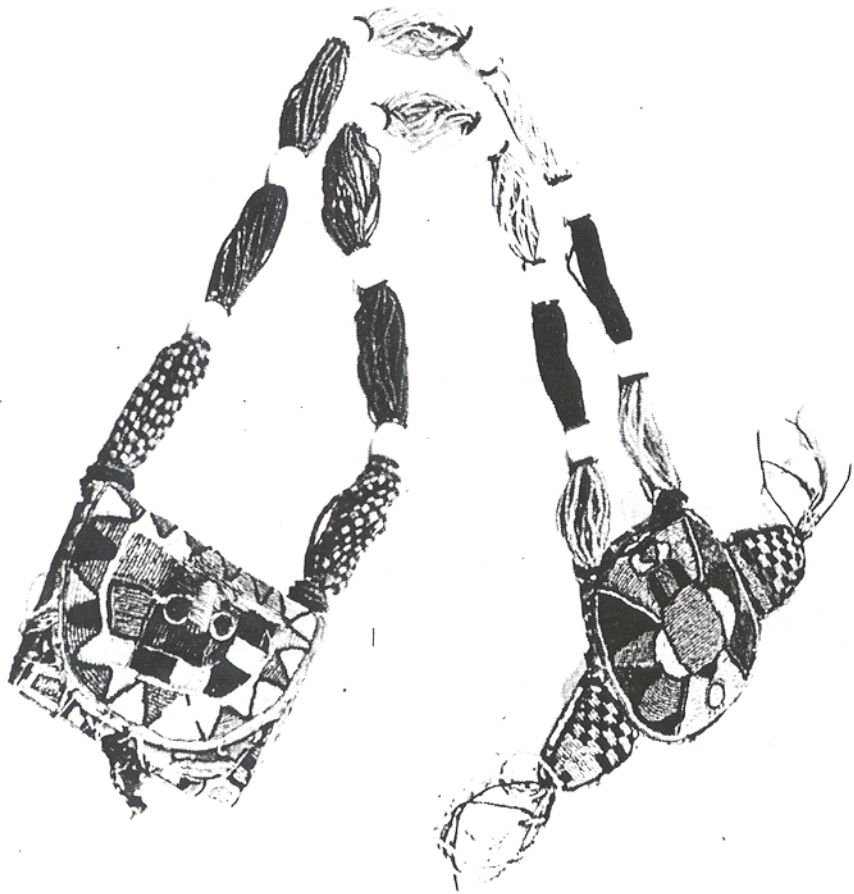


Plate 3 Opa Orere



*Plate 4. Apo 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 *iròkẹ́* examined emphasize material and worldly 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, *iròkẹ́* cost about 1,400 cowries.<sup>21</sup> 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. Irókẹ 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: Gbólájókòó, ọmọ ọkinkin tífí mériń fọn (he-who-controls-wealth, the offspring of the two tusks that make the elephant trumpet).

At the beginning of the Ifá divination process, the babaláwo gently taps the irókẹ against the edge of the ọpọn and recites the oríkí of Ọrúnmílà. This action is a greeting, and an invocation asking Ọrúnmílà 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 irókẹ becomes clearer and more interesting in the context of Ifá divination.

Orí is here symbolized by the topmost segment of irókẹ, 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 àyànmó, (that-which-is-affixed to one<sup>22</sup>). This is the most important section of the iróké, 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 še orí, a kì í fi i tẹlẹ<sup>23</sup> 'whatever we recognise as the head we must never place at the botton (or last).

When the two segments are viewed together they recall a traditional Yorùbá myth which deals with the choosing of Orí from àjàlá, 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 àkúnlẹ̀bọ (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-kneeling<sup>24</sup>). 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 Èlédá (creator) or taking an oath on a most important issue. The same applies to a woman holding her breasts.

The third segment of ìròkẹ̀, 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 Ibòrí Ifá

Agéré Ifá or Ibòrí 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 àgéré sculptures is unique in Yorùbá art<sup>25</sup>.

Agéré elevates ikin which, as I have mentioned, are more than the ordinary palm-kernel nuts in importance and significance because they represent Ọrúnmilá on earth. Agéré can be regarded as a 'mini' earthly 'temple' of Ọrúnmilá. The richness of design and high quality of workmanship and creativity involved in the execution of àgéré is reflected in its great value which, in Ifá literature, is put at 3,200 cowries<sup>26</sup>. Both the Ifá priests and their clients contribute to the iconographical and aesthetic elements of àgéré 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 àgéré sculpture honour and praise Ọrúnmilá. 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<sup>27</sup>.

Ijó ní ñ jó,  
Ayò ní ñ yò,  
Ó ñyin àwọn awoo rẹ,  
Awọn awoo rẹ ní yin 'Fá.  
Ó ya ẹnu kótó,  
Orin awo ló bọ sí i lẹnu.  
Ẹsẹ tí ó nà,  
Ijó 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 àgéré 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 Ọrúnmilá. Rare but not absent in àgéré 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 Ọrẹrẹ, Ọpá Ọsooro

Ọpá Ọrẹrẹ or Ọpá Ọsooro 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 Ọrẹrẹ is very important ritually in the implementation of Ọrunmila's orders. The bird(s) on top of the staff represent(s) ẹyẹ kàn<sup>28</sup> (one bird), referring to the pigeon which is sacred to Ifá priests and domesticated by most of them. Unlike the

birds on the ọsanyin staff which are believed to represent 'witches' (àwọn ẹlẹyẹ), ẹyẹ kàn represents a more constructive and positive power of implementation. The story of ẹyẹ kàn in Ifá relates how the 'first pigeon', ẹyẹ oko, which was bi-sexual, lived wild in the bush and remained childless for a long time and could not reproduce. Ẹyẹ oko consulted Ifá and performed ritual sacrifices, thereafter, it was able to reproduce and had two offsprings. From that time Ẹyẹ oko became known as Ẹyẹ ilé (pronounced ẹyẹlé) meaning 'bird of the home', and was domesticated. Ẹyẹle now symbolizes honour and authority, and stands on top of ọpá ọrẹrẹ used ritually in carrying out Ọrunmila's orders and in honouring him<sup>29</sup>.

Ó rúbọ tán,

Wọn ẹ́ Ifá fún un.

Wọn ní kó mú Ọsùn l'ọwọ

Lọ sí ọ́de Okò tí ílọ.

Wọn ní bó bá ti dóde Okò,

Yóó rí íyá alárá kan l'ọjúde Olókò,

Kí ó ẹ́ bí ẹni pé

Yóó fi Ọsùn ọwọ́ rẹ́ gún un.

Nígbà tó dóde Olókò,



Ó bèèrè ààfin Olóko.

Ó bá iyá aláró kan níwájú ààfin náà,

Ló bá pa guuru sí i,

Ó ẹ se bí ẹni pé

Yóó fi Osùn gún un.

Bèsé tí iyá aláró yẹ fún un,

Ló bá fi Osùn náà gún ilẹ.

Bí Osùn ti gún ilẹ,

Ilẹẹ jín lésẹkẹsẹ.

Igbà tí yóó wo abẹ ilẹ,

Ó rí ọpọlọpọ ilẹkẹẹ sẹgi.

He (Baba Awú sí) completed the ritual sacrifice,

Which was divined for him.

He was advised to hold ọsùn staff in his hand.

When proceeding to Okò which he had planned.

He was told that when he arrived at Okò,

He would find a woman dyer in front of the Oloko'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 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 Osùn staff.

With a clever dodge, the woman-dyer escaped him.

He struck the Òsùn staff into the earth.  
 As the Òsùn staff struck the earth,  
 The earth sank immediately.  
 When he (Baba Awúsf) looked inside  
 the earth,  
 He found a great quantity of precious  
 beads.

In the above poem, the staff brings prosper-  
 ity to a client who asks for Ifa's guidance and  
 complies with Ifa's injunctions. In other inst-  
 ances, the staff is used in effecting physical  
 healing, as the following poem<sup>30</sup> indicates:

Aṣṣṣṣ pa àjùbà ní fṣṣṣ lé orí  
 ṣràn geregere,  
 A dá fún Ọrúnmilá nílo gba ọpá ọtọ́ọtọ́  
 wáyé.  
 Ó mbo, ó bá arọ lónà.  
 Ó ní kí ló ṣe iwọ tí o rí wọ́ngu-wọ́ngu báyií?  
 Ó fi ọpá ọtọ́ọtọ́ọtọ́ kàn án,  
 Lésẹkannáà arọ nà.

The cultivator of a new farmland  
 usually stands high on heaps,  
 It was divined for Ọrúnmilá 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.

EjioGbê, the relevant odù from which the stories about Eyiḡle 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<sup>31</sup>. 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: Ikùtê Ifá (Ifa's sceptre), Adé babaláwo (Ifá priest's crown), Apòo jêrùgbé (Ifá priest's bag), Ikólâbâ Ifá (Ifa's shoulder piece), Ikún pá Ifá (Ifá priest's arm band), òdìgbê Ifá (casket for Ifá) and Irùkêrê<sup>32</sup> (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 *opón*, 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<sup>33</sup> explains this kind of phenomenon:

Ó dá ko kúkúndùkú tíí ṣọlọjà iṣu,  
Oun írùkẹrẹ tíí ṣọmọ Olókun Sẹnfadé.  
Wọn ní bó bá yẹ 'rùkẹrẹ tán, tó dẹ  
'rùkẹrẹ lórùn,  
Ó dẹni à-gbé-jó; ó dẹni à-gbà-yẹwò  
A-gbé-jó là á gbé 'rù ẹṣin,  
A-gbà-yẹwò ni tí 'rùkẹrẹ.

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

And the Horse-tail who was the child of Olókun Sẹnfadé. (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).<sup>34</sup>

A dífá fún Ọrúnmilà  
Níjọ tí Ifá ó joyè oðjfire.  
Ọba aládé, o jífire lónif,  
A bo ò jífire?  
Ọpùtùrù àparò,  
Ifá, o jífire.

It was divined for Ọrúnmilà  
On the day that Ifá would be installed  
as Oðjfire  
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 Ọrunmila's majesty. Ifá literature<sup>35</sup> states that Ọrúnmilà had a crown, òsùn staff, and slippers made of brass with which he adorned his person. His sons, Ajerò, Alárá, Ọlówò and a few others became ọbà, paramourts rulers in Yorubaland.

Today, during important ceremonies, 'when-  
ever babaláwo meet, they wave their beaded horse-  
tail in salutation'<sup>36</sup>. 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 privilege  
and honour conferred on them by the Ifá divina-  
tion 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 credi-  
bility 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 *Orúnmilá* 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; Abimbola, 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.



## NOTES

1. Èṣù will, however, certainly support those who perform sacrifices.
2. Sacrifices are made to Èṣù because he is the divinity charged with their delivery to the appropriate god. It is also believed that Èṣù's wife, Agbèrù, helps her husband in the fulfilment of this important role (Abimbola, 1975: verbal communication).
3. Interview with Chief Aláayè of Ikẹrin on April 3, 1974.
4. In practice, however, Ọrúnmílà functions more as the keeper and repository of the regulative principles of the Universe.

5. See Abimbola, 1969: pp. 38-39

Ó ní bẹ ẹ bá délé,  
Bẹ ẹ bá fówóó ní,  
Èni tẹ ẹ mọọ bi nù un.  
Bẹ ẹ bá délé,  
Bẹ ẹ bá fáyáá ní,  
Èni tẹ ẹ mọọ bi nù un.  
Bẹ ẹ bá délé,  
Bẹ ẹ bá fómọọ bí,  
Èni tẹ ẹ mọọ bi nù un.  
Ilé lẹ bá fẹẹ kọ láyé,  
Aṣọ lẹ bá fẹẹ ní láyé,  
Èni tẹ ẹ mọọ bi nù un.  
Ire gbogbo tẹ ẹ bá fẹẹ ní láyé,  
Èni tẹ ẹ mọọ bi nù un.  
Igbà tí wọn délé,  
Gbogbo ire náà ni wọn ní rí

Orúnmílà 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.

6. See Daramola and Jeje, 1970:230.

7. See Abimbola, 1968:46.

8. Ibid.

9. See Abimbola, 1968:46.

10. Abimbola, 1974: Verbal communication.

11. See Abimbola, 1969:85.

12. See Abimbola, 1969:85

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

Kò sóòṣà tíf dá níf gbè

Léyìn orí ẹni.

Orí pẹlẹ,

Atèté níran;

Atètè gbe ni kòòṣà.

Kò sóòṣà tíf dá níf gbè

Léyìn orí ẹni.

Orí pẹlẹ

Orí àbíyè

Ẹni orí bá gbẹbọọ rẹ,

Kó yò ẹṣẹṣẹ.

No god shall offer protection without sanction from Orí.

Orí, we salute,

Whose protection preceeds that of other gods.

No god shall offer protection without saction from Orí.

Orí, we salute,

Orí, that is destined to live.

The person whose sacrifice Orí chooses to accept,

Let him rejoice.

13. See Lijadu, 1972:1.

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

medicineman a liar.

15. See Abimbola, 1969:90.
16. 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 ...).
17. (See Daramola and Jeje, 1970:290):

Eṣù, ọta Ọriṣà,

Ọṣẹ̀tùrà lorúkọ bàbá mọ ọ,

Alágogo ijà lórúkọ iyá nípè é,

Eṣù Ọdàrà ọmọkúnrin Idọlọfin,

Ó lé ọ́ńń́ ọ́ńń́ ọ́ńń́ ẹ́sẹ́ ẹ́lẹ́sẹ́.

Kò jẹ, kò si jẹ kí ẹnì nǹjẹ, gbé e mí.

A kí í lówó láí mú tEṣù kúrò.

A kí í láyọ láí mú tEṣù kúrò.

A ọ̀tún - ọ̀sì láí nítijú.

Eṣù apata sọmọ ọlọmọ lẹnu.

Ó fi òkúta dípò iyọ ....

Eṣù má ẹ se mí, ọmọ ẹlòmíràn ni kí o se.

Eṣù the cornerstone of the gods,

Ọṣẹ̀tùrà 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 Ịdọlọfin,

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.

18. See Ojo and Morton-Williams, 1969:8.

19. Even though scholars have always thought the Olórí-Ikin (or Oduṣo) 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 rẹ sí ita', meaning Eṣù is mannerless (i.e. respects no one), which is why his shrine is kept in the open place (Daramola and Jeje 1970:287).

20. See Abimbola, 1968:43.

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.

21. See Abimbola 1968:26.

22. See Idowu, 1970:175.
23. See Daramola and Jeje, 1970:228.
24. See Idowu, 1970:175.
25. See Frobenius, 1913, I : 233, 235, 237 for more illustrations of àgéré sculpture, see also I : 246 for a similar judgement by Frobenius.
26. See Abimbola, 1968:26.
27. See Abimbola, 1968:72.  
Nowadays, native herbalists among the Yorùbá 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 Yorùbá society and most probably healers in general.
28. Abimbola, 1974: Verbal communication.
29. See Abimbola, 1969: 127-8.  
Èyèlé 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.
30. See Lijadu, 1972a : 71.
31. See Abimbola, 1969:13.
32. Ifá literature puts the price of beaded horse-tail fly whisk at 1,200 cowries . (Abimbola, 1968:26).

33. See Fabunmi, 1972:7.
34. See Abimbola, 1969:139.
35. See Abimbola, 1969: 34-36.
36. See Fabunmi, 1972: 67.

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