

Divination Tray

Date unrecorded

Yoruba peoples, Nigeria

wood

2005/1.259

This plate is an example of an *opon ifa*, translated to “divination tray.” Among the Yoruba peoples of Nigeria, these wooden plates are used to perform the art of divination, or *ifa*, for clients. Divination is the art of foretelling the future.

While the design and characters engraved on the *opon ifas* varies between trays, there is often a face carved at the top of the plate. This is the face of Eshu, the *orisha*, or god, that acts as a messenger between the spiritual and human realms. Eshu interprets the word of Orunmila, the all-knowing god whose wisdom is called upon in *ifa* readings.

To begin an *ifa* reading, diviners cover the *opon ifa* with a wood dust called *iyerosun*. The diviner then carries out a ritual by tossing palm kernels between their hands four times. With each toss, the diviner creates a single or pair of dots in the dust. Once the ritual is completed, the dots code for a category of the *Odu*. This is a sacred collection of verses that a diviner must memorize and be able to interpret to help clients apply it to their lives. The *Odu* is said to hold the secrets of the universe and gives the diviner a great deal of power and responsibility within their community.

The rules and rituals of *ifa* readings continue to be performed without variance after centuries and carries historical, spiritual, and religious value within the Yoruba community. The stereotype that Africa has no history can be countered by studying the history and usage of divination.

written by **MaKayla Duggan**