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# Understanding Yoruba Art and Aesthetics

## The Concept of Ase

ROWLAND ABIODUN

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, Bamgboye of Odo-Owa, Areogun of Osi-Ilorin, Agbonbiofe of Efon-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:



1. Sango shrine. Ijebu-Ode, 1982.



2. An Egungun masquerade performs with a drummer. Lagos, 1982.

PHOTO: HENRY JOHN DREWAL

3. Staff for Shango (*oshe Shango*). Yoruba, Nigeria. Wood, 39cm (15"). The University of Iowa Museum of Art, The Stanley Collection.

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” (*Ohun ti o wa leyin Offa, o ju Oje 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

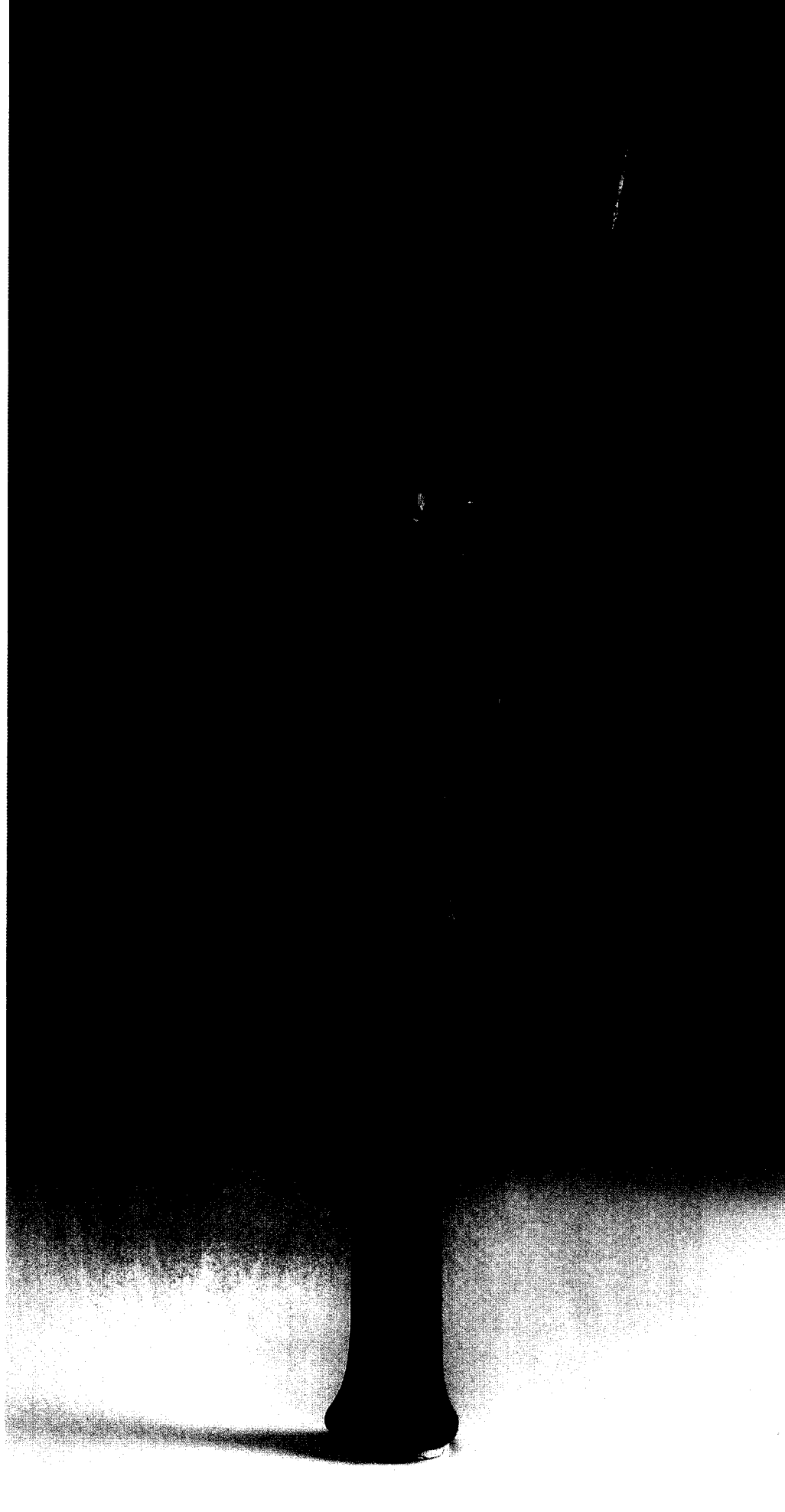


PHOTO: THE UNIVERSITY OF IOWA MUSEUM OF ART



PHOTO: JOHN PEMBERTON III

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.



PHOTO: MEHMEI SANFORD

PHOTO: HENRY JOHN DREWAL & MARGARET THOMPSON DREWAL



Clockwise from top left:

6. *Arugba* (female bowl-bearer) for an altar to Sango, owned by Sangodanduro Kilomonise. Aiyetoro, Egbado, 1978.

7. Shrine to *orisa* Obatala. Ile-Ife, 1989.

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.



PHOTO: PHYLLIS GALEMBO

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).<sup>1</sup>

This discussion, which aims to generate greater scholarly interest in the dimension of "soul"<sup>2</sup>—what Fagg 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



PHOTO: JOHN PEMBERTON III

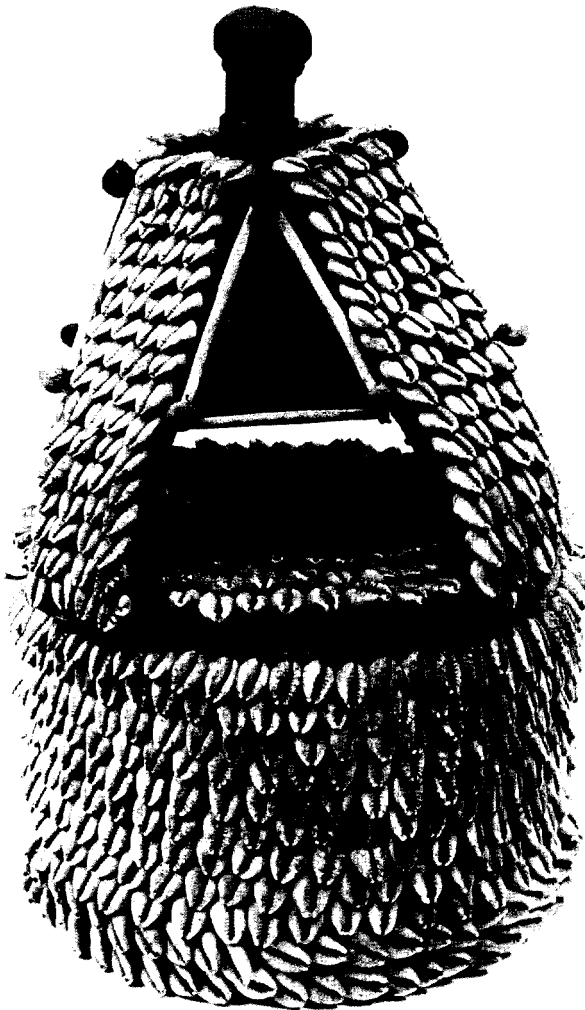
to delve into all its multifarious and important manifestations; suffice it to say that the phenomenon and use of *ase* have extended far beyond Yorubaland and that it is fast becoming a Pan-Africanist term.

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 *candomblés* (houses of worship) otherwise called *ile-axe* (*ile-ase*).<sup>3</sup> Research confirms that in Cuba "the sacred world of the santería is motivated by *ache*" (Murphy 1988:130).<sup>4</sup>

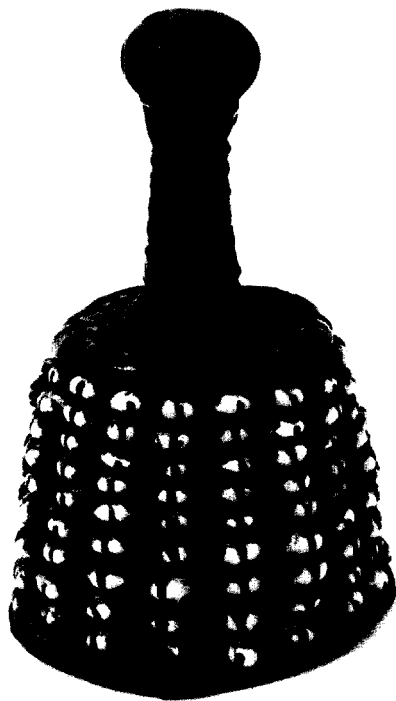
In Afro-American culture, the *ase* concept is more implicit than explicit. Palpably felt in churches, "the spirit," "the holy ghost," or simply "power" embodies an essentially *ase*-type phenomenon. Quite often a church minister or person who manifests this spirit or power is highly regarded in the 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'," "snapping" and "rap,"<sup>5</sup> 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-



Top: 9. "House of Ori" (*ile-ori*). Yoruba, Nigeria. Lidded openwork structure with leather, fiber, cowries; 37cm (14.5"). Fowler Museum of Cultural History, UCLA, X70.1169A, B. Gift of Dr. Lawrence D. Longo.

Bottom: 10. Shrine object (*ibori*), which is kept in an *ile ori*. Yoruba, Nigeria. Leather, cowries, canvas, 13cm (5"). Fowler Museum of Cultural History, UCLA, X67.2114. Gift of George G. Frelinghuysen.



essary 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 proforicos*.<sup>6</sup> To devotees of the *orisa* (deities), however, the concept of *ase* is more practical and immediate. *Ase* inhabits and energizes the awe-inspiring space of the *orisa*, their altars (*oju-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 *orisa* 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, crackling sounds and staccato rhythms of the *bata* drum, the possessed devotee, the *elegunshango*, 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 *orisa* (Fig. 4). Potent medicinal preparations (*oogun*) 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.<sup>7</sup>

PHOTOS COURTESY OF THE FOWLER MUSEUM OF CULTURAL HISTORY

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).<sup>8</sup>

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*.<sup>9</sup> *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 saying "*Ebora to luti la nbo*" ("We worship only deities who can respond when consulted") (Fig. 5).<sup>10</sup>

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 *iwa* (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

11. Crown. Yoruba, Nigeria. Beads, fabric; 76cm (30"). Fowler Museum of Cultural History, UCLA, X86-1081. From the Barbara Jean Jacoby Collection.

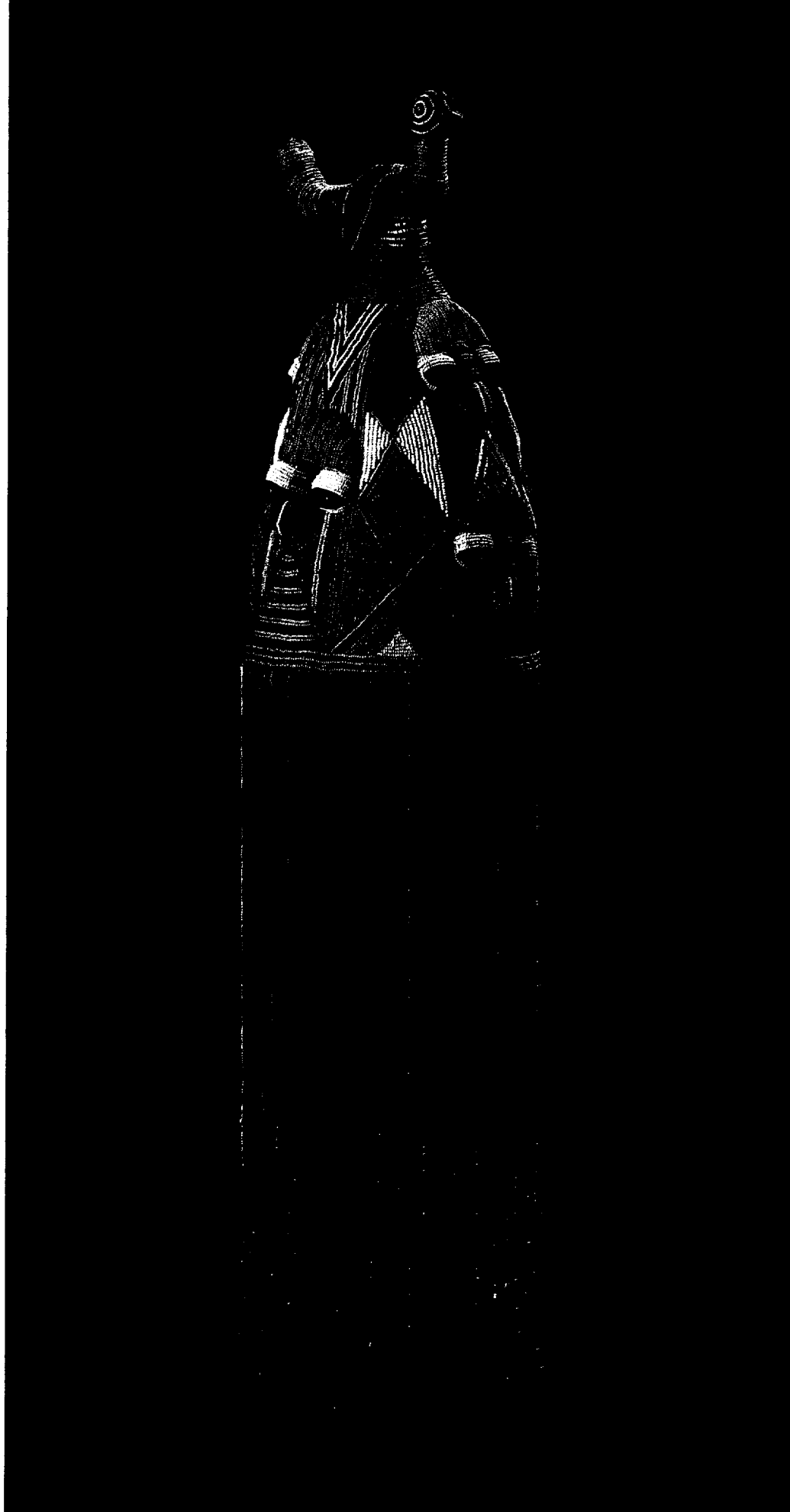


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PHOTO: ROWLAND ABIODUN

12. Detail of Epa mask carved by Fasiku Alaaye of Ikerin in 1972/73. Ikerin, 1973.

13. Oba Ajaloron of Ijebu-Ife, holding his *opa-ase*. Ijebu-Ife, 1982

artist may use the right colors, designs, and combination of motifs for, say, a Sango sculpture or Obatala shrine (Figs. 6, 7) or the costume for an ancestral masquerade, so as to imbue it with its proper identity and the *ase* of the specific *orisa*. Without this *ase*, many an attractive artifact would fail to make an appreciable religio-aesthetic impact.

One cannot confer *ase* on oneself. It is for this reason that the Yoruba say, "*A ki i fi ara eni joye*" ("One does not install oneself as a chief or ruler over a community or group of people"). It is, therefore, not uncommon to hear a question such as "*Tani o fun o ni ase?*" ("What/who is your sanctioning authority?"). Even an *orisa's ase* can be queried. There are episodes in myth where powerful and charismatic figures like Sango and Ogun ignore traditional procedures to become an *oba* (ruler, the highest position of socio-political authority). The results are calamitous. Like a scepter, *ase* must be received from a source outside, and higher, than oneself, which in part explains the custom of consulting Ifa before approval can be given to install an *oba* or an *olori* (community leader).

An important part of the installation ceremony of an *oba* is the voicing of his given and secret names in order to imbue them with the newly conferred *ase* manifest in the crown. On such occasions, the air and space between the one who vocalizes *ase* and the recipient are believed to be so powerfully charged

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*, *ogede*, *ayajo*, *epe*, *esa*, and *odu-ifa*,<sup>11</sup> 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. *Ataare* (alligator pepper) is most commonly used. Another kind of *ase* calls for the licking of salt, honey, or specially prepared medicines stuffed in an animal horn while an incantation is in progress.<sup>12</sup> 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, Odole Atobase of Ife, is



PHOTO: HENRY JOHN DREWAL & MARGARET THOMPSON DREWAL





PHOTO: JOHN PEMBERTON III

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 *opa orere*, *osun babalawo*, and *opa osooro* as he leads the priests to the house of the Chief Priest, the Oloriawo Ifa. The bells that hang below the surmounting bird are covered with palm fronds. Ila-Orangun, 1982.

an example of a type of *ase* known as *ohun-afose* ("voicing *ase* and making it come to pass"):

*A-a-se*, the empowered word  
comes to pass  
For as infallible divination  
belongs to Ifa  
So does prophetic utterance (*afose*)  
belong to Orunmila  
It is the *ase* of the *egunmo*  
vegetable that prevails in the  
family of vegetables  
While the Pantaguenon 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, *elegbede* (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 *ilakose* (a small  
tropical land snail)

The *ogbo* 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

*Orisa*, the Creator-in-chief, grants  
every desire that the  
chameleon presents to him  
While the cripple and the  
hunchback never reverse their  
*orisa*-given destinies

*Sango* never turns down the plea  
of *orogbo* (*Sango's* favorite nut)  
Nor does *Orisa* ever say no to the  
request made with *obi* (*Orisa's*  
preferred kola)

*Obatala* never rejects white beads  
(his favorite color in beads)  
Small crawling ground insects  
never challenge the authority  
of *ayetale* (another insect  
species that lives in the earth)

An *oba* (the ruler of a city) never  
turns down propositions that  
would bring peace and  
harmony to his domain

*Oju-oro* (water lettuce) never  
antagonizes water

Nor does *osibata* (water lily) ever  
argue with the stream

It is the nature of *eerun* (brown  
ant) to hang on unquestioningly

to whatever shrub it is given  
*Okira* (the sharp *Ogun* sword)  
always severs cleanly and  
completely

*Okira* 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 *oyin* 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

15. Ojomo of Ijebu-Owo wearing his *orufaran* war dress. 1975.

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-itch plant)  
Swiftness and lack of ceremony  
attend the death of maggots  
Speedily may my request come to  
pass, speedily.

(Fabunmi 1972:31-33)<sup>13</sup>

This *ohun-afose* 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 comprehensive control, one way of understanding this incantation is to regard it as an invocation of the totality of the *ase* of other phenomena in order to reinforce the *ase* of *ohun* ("voice" or "the performed word"). Such invocations are the citation poetry, *oriki*, which Karin Barber also appropriately calls "appellations, 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 'heavy' 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 *iroko* 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.

(Abiodun, Drewal & Pemberton  
1991:39)

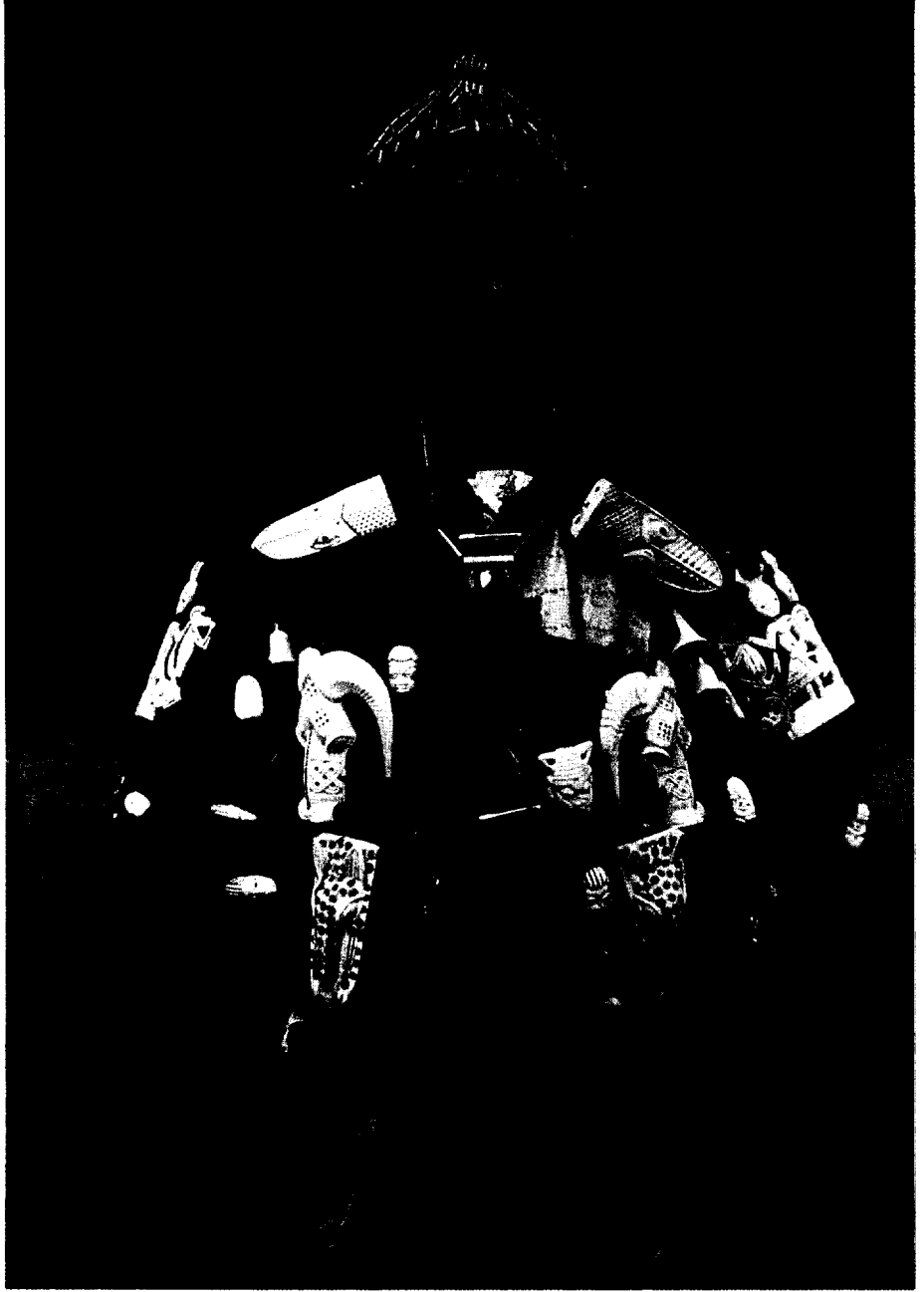


PHOTO: ROWLAND ABIODUN

Functioning essentially as a kind of *oriki*, visual art forms also carry condensed, highly charged and direct visual messages—*ase*—which are as powerful and efficacious as their verbal equivalents. The visual artist uses his or her *oju-inu* ("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<sup>14</sup> 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 hence-

forth 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, *pa* and *da*, provides useful clues to the meaning and operation of *ase*, especially in its creative aspect. In the phrase *pa obi-ase*, "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-itan*, "to tell or create a story." Similarly, the verb *da* as used in the text has two meanings: "to fell, 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 Ifa verse:

Orisanla was the first divinity to  
defy Ori's authority  
Ori floored Orisanla and put him  
in Ajalamo where destinies are  
molded  
There, at Ajalamo, Orisanla  
became the firing expert of  
molded destinies  
Next, Ori overcame Ifa  
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.<sup>15</sup>

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 *oko* ("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  
*Owawa* rat's *ori* helps it to go  
through caves  
*Ori* precedes man  
It also guides him,  
*Ori* plans good things for its  
owner.<sup>16</sup>

In the visual arts, notably in sculpture, *ori-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, *oju*, are rarely surpassed in aesthetic appeal by other parts of the body (Fig. 12).

Because *ase* is believed to emanate from *oju*, 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, *oju-ibo*, where the *ase* of *orisa* may be palpably felt and communicated.<sup>17</sup>

The importance of *oju* in art and ritual is clearly expressed in the axiom "*Oju ni oro o wa*" ("*Oro*, the essence of communication, takes place in the eyes/face"). With a properly executed *oju* either in a figural sculpture or in a well-designed *oju-ibo* for the altar of an *orisa*, concentration heightens, communication takes place, and supplication becomes more efficacious. Conversely, the absence of *ori* and *oju* 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  
Ejigbomekun market  
(*Ori*) 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.<sup>18</sup>

Because the *ori-ode* ("outer, or physical, head") is the locus of *ase* and also of personal destiny (*ori-inu*, "inner, or spiritual, head"), Yoruba people do not normally haggle over the cost of the services of a hairdresser or barber. For similar

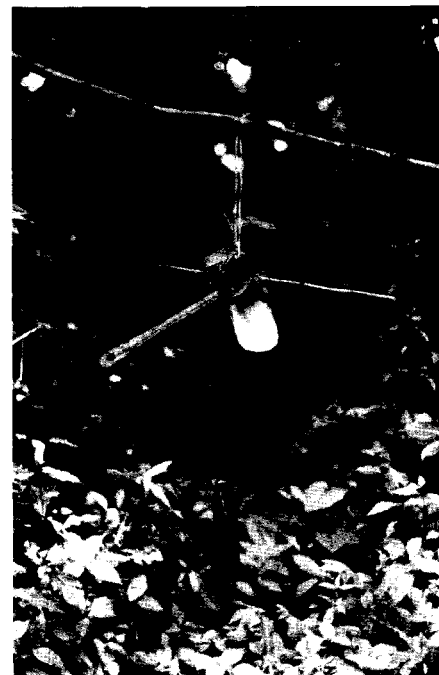
reasons, hairdressers or plaiters are seen as performing a duty. Although hairdressing is aesthetic and concerned with the beautification of the *ori-ode*, it extends to the spiritual realm, influencing positively the performance of *ori-inu*.

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.<sup>19</sup>

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-inu* (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).<sup>20</sup> 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.<sup>21</sup>

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*



16. *Aale*, an *ase*-impregnated sculptural construct. 1982.

PHOTO: HENRY JOHN DREWAL

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 coiffures of high-ranking and influential *orisa* priestesses in Owo. This hints at their unmistakable presence and power: “*Olu-odide kii wa nigbo ki gbogbo 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 tailfeathers 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-ase* (the royal scepter) (Fig. 13). Commanding almost an equal degree of respect as the physical presence of an *oba*, *opa-ase* 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-ase* 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 orere*, *opa osooro*, 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 85–142 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 ritually in the implementation of Orunmila’s orders in Ifa divination. The bird(s) on top of the staff represents *eyekan*<sup>22</sup> (“the single or lone bird”). Unlike those that surround the Osanyin staff, believed to represent various aggressive spiritual forces with which man must cope, *eyekan* represents a higher and superior power—the *ase par excellence* in Ifa divination. The story of *eyekan* from Eji-Ogbe 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.”<sup>23</sup> The bird(s) on top of the *osun babalawo*,

thenceforth ritually called *eyekan*, 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)<sup>24</sup>

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)<sup>25</sup>

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 *aale*, which are *ase*-impregnated sculptural constructs usual-

ly 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 *orufanran* (Fig. 15).<sup>26</sup> 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 *orufanran* 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 *awure*, 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. □

Notes, page 102

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**WILLETT, TORSNEY, AND RITCHIE:** Notes, from page 67

1. The work was eventually carried out by Craddock (1985) and Craddock and Picton (1986).
2. We are grateful to Dr. M. N. Leese of the Department of Scientific Research at the British Museum for helpful comments on Mark Ritchie's paper.
3. The analyses are drawn from published work of Dr. Otto Werner (1970) of the collection in the Museum für Völkerkunde, Berlin; Dr. Paul Craddock (1985, 1986) of material in the British Museum and elsewhere; Dr. Siegfried Wolf of material in the Völkerkundliche Sammlungen der Stadt Mannheim (1966) and the Museum für Völkerkunde, Vienna (1968); and Professor Thurstan Shaw (1969) of material in the National Museum, Benin City. Willett is grateful to Drs. Craddock and Hook of the British Museum Research Laboratory for undertaking the analysis of the twenty-two samples he obtained from specimens in the Field Museum, Chicago; the Royal Museum of Scotland, Edinburgh; the Art Gallery and Museum, Kelvingrove, Glasgow; and the National Museum, Lagos. He is grateful to the authorities of these museums for their permission to undertake this work.
4. We are grateful to Stuart Young for preparing the original graphs illustrating this paper (Fig. 2).
5. It should be noted, however, that crowns with a single wing appear on two plaques by which Fagg defines his Middle Period. See Tunis 1981. The Osemwede tradition may therefore refer to the doubling of the motif.
6. It should be noted, however, that Joseph Nevadomsky considers this to be an error and that the marks "signify determination, firmness, resolve or even maturity" (1986:42). Could it be that the blood is rubbed on the forehead in order to achieve these qualities?
7. It is to be noted that a cast in the Benin Museum of the Queen Mother head in the British Museum was labeled in 1961 as representing Iyoba (Queen Mother) Eson, the mother of Oba Ahenzae, four reigns, perhaps a century, later than Esigie. Presumably this identification was given by Chief Jacob Egharevba, who supplied the information when the museum was originally established. It is not clear whether he had some evidence for this assertion or whether it was simply his own interpretation.
8. These were illustrated in Willett 1973: pl. 22 and two of them in Eyo 1977:112.
9. Ritchie used computer program BMDP P2M.

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**ABIODUN:** Notes, from page 78

This paper grew out of a much larger research project on Yoruba art begun in 1972 and funded in part by the University of Ife, Ile-Ife, Nigeria. I also gratefully acknowledge support from Amherst College in the form of a research grant which has enabled me to continue the investigation. Among scholars whose writings and conversation have had an impact on this work are Professors Wande Abimbola, Akinola Akiwowo, Moses Makinde, Lorand Matory, Stella C. Ogunyemi, Olasope Oyeleran, John Pemberton III, Andrea B. Rushing, Natasha Staller, Olabiyi Yai, and the late Arthur Okuniga, Chief M.A. Fabunmi, and Pa David Adeniji.

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1. In his 1975 article Hallen notes: "...it is now recognized that science itself is not completely objective when it comes to the falsification of established theories and the proposing and testing of new hypotheses. The scientific establishment operates on the basis of paradigms that channel the scientist's vision so that certain theoretical perspectives on the world, e.g. materialism, are given a status privileged in excess of the criterion of mere truth or falsity" (1975:259).
2. The term "soul" has been used here to mean the philosophies of the African peoples (see Abiodun 1990:64).
3. I am grateful to Professor Olabiyi Yai for drawing my attention to the *ase* phenomenon in Brazil and ancient Dahomey (see also Carybe 1993).
4. Here, as in other parts of his book, Murphy succeeds in conveying the central role of *ase* in the Afro-Cuban religion of Santería.
5. For further discussion of some of these literary/oral traditions in Afro-American culture, see Alan Dundes (1981), Geneva Smitherman (1986), and Henry Louis Gates, Jr. (1988). I wish to thank Dr. E. Patrick Johnson for sharing with me his unpublished paper "Snap Culture: A Different Kind of Reading." In his book *The Afrocentric Idea* Molefi Kete Asante notes: "Unable to read or write English and forbidden by law (in most states) to learn, the African in America early cultivated the natural fascination with *nommo*, the word, and demonstrated a singular appreciation for the subtleties, pleasures and potentials of the spoken word, which has continued to enrich and embolden his history" (1987:83).
6. For a review of definitions of *ase* by various scholars and writers, see Pierre Verger (1966:38), Henry John Drewal and Margaret Thompson Drewal (1983a:5-7), Rowland Abiodun, Henry John Drewal and John Pemberton III (1991: 12-13), Robert Farris Thompson (1983:5-7), Margaret Thompson Drewal (1992:27), Andrew Apter (1992:84), Moses A. Makinde (1988: chap. 5), and Henry Louis Gates, Jr. (1988:7).
7. As Drewal and Drewal have noted: "Like the preparation of medicine (*oogun*), during which each ingredient is invoked and activated separately, thus contributing its own unique *ase*, seriate composition is a means of organizing diverse power, whether verbally or visually, not only to acknowledge their autonomy but, more importantly, to bring them into actual existence, to marshal them, and set them into action" (1987:249).
8. The English translation for this verse and others quoted in this article is mine. From the Yoruba: "Ojo ti a b' Epe/ La pa se/ Ojo ti a b' Ohun/ La pe pe/ Won pa se/ Won pe pe/ Ohun lo wa ki" (Professor Olabiyi Yai, pers. com., January 1994).
9. For a fuller discussion of *iluti*, see Rowland Abiodun (1990:78-79).
10. This statement was quite typical of *orisa* devotees and celebrants at Odun-Ere (Festival of Images) in Oshogbo, 1976.
11. For an excellent discussion of the language and style in *ese-Ifa*, see Wande Abimbola (1976:63-110).
12. For a more extensive discussion and illustration of the animal horns and medicinal preparations, *oogun*, used in different types of *ase*, see M.A. Makinde (1988: chap. 5).
13. "A-a-se, ko ni s'aise/ Nitiri awise ni t'Ifa/ Afose ni f'Orunmila/ Ase egunmo nii se l'awujo efo/ Ase Ijimeri nii se l'awujo eran/ok/ T'erekese naa nii se l'awujo owo/ Gbogbo igi ti 'legbede ba fowo ba nii dun/ K'o se, ko se ni t'ilakose/ Yee a ba wi han ogbo ni ogbo i gbo/ Yee a ba wi han igba ni igba i gbo/ Oro

okete ba'le so ni ile i gbo/ Aha alagemo ba da l'orisa i gbo/ Aro oon abuke ki i p'ohun Orisaa da/ Sango kii ko ohun orogbo/ Orisa kii ko ohun obi/ Obatala kii ko ohun seseefun/ Kokoro keekeke kii ko ohun ayetale/ Oba itu kii ko ohun iyo/ Ojuro kii ko ohun omi/ Osibata kii ko ohun ade l'eerun i gba/ Abede ni l'okra/ Okira kii be tite ti/ To, ito kii pada sen/ Omi kii san p'aju wehin/ Kankan l'ewe ina i jo ni/ Irawe kii da'jo ile k'o sun ke/ Adigbonranku kii fojo iku ree d'olaf/ Dandan ni t'aidan/ Ojo omode ba wa oyin ni i royin/ Ojo a ba multi ni i pa ni/ Ojo a ba gbele ebu ni aa bo/ Ojo a ba ribi nii wole/ Ojo akudodie kan ba ko ni'le aye naa ni'yoku re i gbeeran/ Ojo a ba p'eejun l'eejun i jel/ Ojo a ba p'oro l'oro i gbona/ Ojo oluwongaga ba wa'ye naa nii rorun/ Ojo l'oro ina mu'gi/ Ojo naa l'oro ito maa mu'le/ Warawara ni l'ijimere i so l'ori igi aladi/ Warawara naa l'omode iso lori igi Werepe/ Warawara l'aa ri'ku idin, warawara/ Warawara naa ni K'ohun yi se o warawara."

14. See Rowland Abiodun (1987) for a fuller account of this myth. For more myths and studies on Ori, see also Rowland Abiodun (1975:444-46; 1983; 1989:111-12), Wande Abimbola (1976:113-49), Margaret Thompson Drewal (1977), Olufemi Morakinyo (1983), and Babatunde Lawal (1985).
15. "Orisa lo ko ba Ori dimu/ Ori da a, o da si ita Ajalamo/ N'ita Ajalamo ni odofe di finafin/ Ori da l'ifa/ l'ifa di Rokinrokin/ Ori da Amakisi/ O lo si l'la-Oorun/ Nibe ni Amakisi ti ntan ina aaro s'ile aye/ O da kaluku won si ibi ti a gbe mbo won gbo/bo" (David Adeniji, pers. com., 1974).
16. "Ori Aja ni Aja fi n la igbo/ Ori no apaara fi n la Iroko/ Ori ni ootoo Agbonrin fi n la iwof/ Ori eja lo ba Eja a la ibu/ Ori Akasa lo n ba Akasa la idofe Ori l'owawara fi n la ipere/ Ori eni ni isaju eni/ Oun naa ni osomona eni/ Ori eni ni ibo ni'ghero ohun rere." This was recited by the Abori Ooni, one of the priestesses who carries out the rites and sacrifices of Ori on behalf of the Ooni of Ife (pers. com., 1976).
17. Writing on the crown at Ife-Orangun, John Pemberton III notes: "The crown is called an *orisa*, a deity, and is the object of ritual attention by a female attendant of the king or, as in the case of the palace in Ife-Orangun, by the senior wife. It is she who places the crown upon the king's head, standing behind the king as she does so; for the king must not look upon the container of powerful medicines, *oogun ase*, that the herbalist priests have placed in the top of the crown for the protection of the king's head and personal destiny, *ori*." (1980:50).
18. "Ori, Onise, Adanaye/ Ori, Apere/ As'akaramo-aa loja/ Ejiqbomekun/ Ateleni mo pada lehin eni/ Ori baba (oko) ohun gbo/ Ori l'abakji/ Gbogbo ara ko je ikankani/ Bi ori a kuro li ara/ Okutu lo kuj Kukuraku ara ko reru/ Ori jowo, daku/ Ma pada lehin ni/ Ori oko ohun gbo/bo." This oriki for *ori*, "inner spiritual head," is known and often recited by *ifa* priests and elderly people who officiate in rites connected with *ori* (David Adeniji, pers. com., 1979).
19. "Kabiyesi/Alase, Ekeji-Orisa/ l'ku Baba-Yeye."
20. For more detailed discussion of Yoruba crowns, see Robert Farris Thompson (1970) and Ulli Beier (1982).
21. I am grateful to Reverend Father (Dr.) T.M. Ilesanmi of the Department of African Languages and Literatures, Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife, for drawing my attention to the very important role of Owari priestesses. See also Rowland Abiodun (1989b) for more discussion on woman in Yoruba religious images.
22. Wande Abimbola, pers. com., 1974.
23. *Eyale* features prominently in *Ifa* rituals. One might suggest that the choice of this bird for the top of the *osun* is connected with its transformation and elevation of status, both of which may allude to *ifa* priests' own attainment of high socio-economic position in the Yoruba society.
24. "O rubo tan/ Won se l'fa fun un/ Won ni ko mu osun lo/wo/ Lo si ode Oko ti nlo/ Won ni ba ba ti dode Oko/ Yoo rii iya alaro kan lojude Oloko/ Ki o se bi eni pe/ Yoo fi osun owoo re gun un/ Nigba to dode Oloko/ O beere aafin Oloko/ O ba iya alaro kan niwaju aafin naal/ Lo ba pa guuru si il/ O se bi eni pe/ Yoo fi osun gun un/ Bese fi iya alaro ye fun un/ Lo ba fi osun naa gun un/ Bi osun ti gun ile/ l'ee jin tesekese/ l'gba ti yoo wo abe ile/ O ri opolopo ileke se/."
25. "Asepe pa ajuba nii fese le ori eran geregere/ A da fun Orunmila nlo gba oya ootootoo waye/ O mbo, o ba ara lonaf/ O ni ki lo se iwo ti i wongu-wongu bayii/ O fi oya ootootoo kan an/ Lesekannaa ara na."
26. For more discussion on the *orufanran* in Owo, see Rowland Abiodun (1989a:108-9).

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