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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:

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 ojo leyin Ofa, 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
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 (oríṣa) Osun. Each carries on her head a brass bowl filled with the medicinal waters and herbs of this oríṣa, who cures the sick and blesses her followers with children. The brass bowl on the right is for oríṣa Esu, in the center for oríṣa Obalufon, and on the left for oríṣa Osun. Ila Orangun, 1982.

5. Odun Ere (Festival of Images). Annually during this festival, these images, depicting attributes of several oríṣa, are redecorated and displayed publicly by their devotees for having proved to be efficacious and responsive when consulted. Oshogbo, 1991.
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).¹

This discussion, which aims to generate greater scholarly interest in the dimension of “soul”—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 religious and aesthetic discourse in Brazil, the Caribbean islands, and the United States. It will not be possible in this short essay to delve into all its multifarious and important manifestations; suffice it to say that the phenomenon and use of ase have extended far beyond Yorubaland and that it is fast becoming a Pan-Africanist term.

The Fon of ancient Dahomey, for example, developed two different but related concepts from ase: se, referring to divine and metaphysical aspects of ase; and ace (pronounced ache), representing the social and political dimensions. Similarly ase is used in Brazil to define the candomblés (houses of worship) otherwise called ile-ase (ile-ase).³ Research confirms that in Cuba “the sacred world of the santería is motivated by ase” (Murphy 1988:130).⁴

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,”⁵ 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-


Assay 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. 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 oshe 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 elegushango, 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 (ogun) may be taken orally or absorbed into the bloodstream through small cuts in designated places such as the lips. An efficacious use of ase also depends on verbalized, visualized, and performed characteristics of those things or beings whose powers are being harnessed.
It may be difficult to understand the above process if one is not familiar with the related concepts je ("to answer"), da ("to create"), and pe ("to call"). Consider the following Ifa divination verse:

The day Epe was created
Was the day Ase became law
Likewise, Ohun was born
The day Epe was invoked
Ase is proclaimed
Epe is called
But they both still need Ohun
(to communicate).8

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-illa ("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.9 Iluti (literally "good hearing") idiomatically refers to qualities such as obedience, teachability, 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 "Ebara to luti la ibo" ("We worship only deities who can respond when consulted") (Fig. 5).10

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 aju-ina ("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 aju-ina, an
that it is unsafe for anyone to obstruct them. The verbal complex of \textit{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, \textit{ojo, ogede, ayajo, epe, esa, and odu-ifa,} all of which \textit{ase} featured in \textit{ase}, use archaic words and terms in direct and authoritative sentences.

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

The procedures for the recitation of \textit{ase} vary depending on its type and purpose. In some, the utterance of \textit{ase} must be accompanied by the chewing of certain herbs, roots, or peppers. 

\textit{Ataare} (alligator pepper) is most commonly used. Another kind of \textit{ase} calls for the licking of salt, honey, or specially prepared medicines stuffed in an animal horn while an incantation is in progress. 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
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 osoro as he leads the priests to the house of the Chief Priest, the Oloriawo Ifa. The bells that hang below the surrounding bird are covered with palm fronds. Ifa-Orangun, 1982.

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

A-ase, the empowered word comes to pass
For as infallible divination belongs to Ifa
So does prophetic utterance (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 okeke (a kind of cotton) is unsurpassed in its whiteness among all the cotton species
As it desires, elegbade (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 ilaje (a small tropical land snail)

The ogbe 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 oruoro (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 cerum (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 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

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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)

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
aye is comprehensive control, one way of
understanding this incantation is to
regard it as an invocation of the totality
of the aye of other phenomena in order
to reinforce the aye of
ohun (“voice” or
“the performed word”). Such invoca­
tions 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 sub­
ject’s qualities, go to the heart of it and
elicit its inner potency.... They are
‘heavy’ words, fused together into for­
mulations that have an exceptional den­
sity and sensuous weight” (Barber

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 men­
tioned 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 peers
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.

Functioning essentially as a kind of
oriki, visual art forms also carry con­
densed, highly charged and direct visual
messages—aye—which are as powerful
and efficacious as their verbal equiva­
lents. The visual artist uses his or her
ari (“inner eye”) and
ari (“design
consciousness”), important aesthetic
attributes, to select, combine, and repre­
sent specific colors, patterns, motifs, and
aspects of the subject matter in order to
communicate its aye with the maximum
visual impact (Fig. 8).

Orature recognizes the all-important
place of aye in religious and political life.
One ancient myth14 contains an account
of how, at the request of Olorun (Creator­
in-chief), Ogbon (Wisdom) presented
aje (“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
aje 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 preem­
inent aye among all the orisa.

With his aye, Ori was able to deal with
all opposition from his fellow orisa. In the
Ife text, the use of two verbs, pa and da,
provides useful clues to the meaning and
operation of aye, especially in its creative
aspect. In the phrase pa
aje, “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
aje, “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 aye: the superior force or authori­
ty 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.15

Ori is thus the major and most pervasive symbol of ase in both human and spiritual realms. Furthermore, since ori literally means “head,” the utmost respect and honor given to this orisa are given to human and animal heads, because they control the rest of the body.

These have also extended to virtually all political and spiritual heads and leaders, who are all believed to possess an ase similar to that of Ori, the leader of the 401 orisa in heaven.

On all occasions, sacred or secular, the indispensability of Ori is stressed. He is referred to as 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.16

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-oba, where the ase of orisa may be palpably felt and communicated.37

The importance of ase 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 Igbotomekun 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.18

Because the ori-ode (“outer, or physical, head”) is the locus of ase and also of personal destiny (ori-ino, “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-ino.

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

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

A beaded conical crown (aale), 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-ino (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). 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.20

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

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paramountcy in his domain, as “the
eget is considered the leader among
(brown babalaye). It is also not un-
common to find red tailfeathers of the
african parrot on the crown of an
obo and on the coffins of high-rank-
ing and influential orisa priestesses in
Owo. This hints at their unmistakable
presence and power: “Olu-odide kii wa
rugo ki gboho eyi na mo” (“No bird ever
fails to recognize the presence of the
adult parrot in the forest”). The Yoruba
believe that the feathers possess ase
which can alter the nature of persons
and objects. For this reason the red tail-
feathers are strictly forbidden in black-
smiths’ workshops lest they alter the
chemical properties of metals.

Another common symbol of ase often
carried by an obo or his representative is
opa-ase (Fig. 13). Commanding almost an equal degree of
respect as the physical presence of an
obo, 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
sculptors of past rulers are kept, and during
the installation ceremony of a new
ruler it is visited in order to effect a ritu-
lar transfer of ase.

Also in this category of staffs possessing
enormous ase is the Ifa diviner’s iron
staff called opa orere, opa oosooro, 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 eyekan22 (“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-Ogbé in Ifa texts relates
how, as eye-oko (“bird of the grassland,”
“wildlife bird,” or “bird of the wild”) and
called live 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 cyile), meaning “bird of the
home, domesticated pigeon.”23 The
bird(s) on top of the osun babalawo,
1. Ritchie used computer program BMDP P2M.

7. Could it be that the blood is rubbed on the forehead in order he had some evidence for this assertion or whether it was excess of the criterion of mere truth or falsity” (1975:259).

9. This statement was quite typical of Oritse fí a ìwọrọ, Oritse fí a ìtọrọ, Oritse fí a ìtọrọ oogun, used in different contexts for the protection of the head as king does for it; so, for the king must not look upon the container of powerful medicines, medicine are, so that the herbalist must not place it in the top of the crown for the protection of the king’s head and personal destiny,” are (1980:50).

10. This was recited by the Abori Ooni, one of the priestesses who was himself a remarkable man, of diverse power, whether verbally or visually, not only to demonstrate a singular appreciation for the subtleties, peculiarities, and potential of visual expression of the spiritual head,” is known and often recited by Ifa priests and believer who officiate in rites connected with orí (David Ademiji, pers. com., 1979).

11. This feature prominently in Ifa rituals. One might suggest that the role of the head in the Yoruba society is connected with its transformation and elevation of status, both of which may allude to Ifsa priests’ own attainment of high social and religious position in the Yoruba society.

12. “O rò bi ni won fẹẹ? Won ni mo ọmọ ọmọ la? Si o le oke ti o do ko o lowo o. Omo ti ko do o lowo a? Omo ti ko do o lowo a? Omo ti ko do o lowo a?


24. The term “soul” has been used here to mean the philosophico-theological concept that the soul is the essence of a person. However, the soul is not only the container of powerful medicines, medicine are, so that the herbalist must not place it in the top of the crown for the protection of the king’s head and personal destiny,” are (1980:50).