

La couronne de grain Yoruba avec son visage frontal, sa décoration d'oiseaux et son voile est le premier attribut des rois traditionnels au sud-ouest du Nigéria. La couronne symbolise les aspirations d'une civilisation arrivée au niveau d'autorité le plus élevé. Depuis des siècles, l'iconographie de la couronne dans cette partie du monde se caractérise par un rassemblement des oiseaux (ou un seul oiseau) surmonté d'un visage frontal. La figure Gara de Tada indique que cette iconographie date probablement de l'antiquité nigérienne la plus reculée.

Le visage frontal, qui réunit la terreur et le prestige, suggère une synthèse des mondes des vivants et des morts: le roi comme ancêtre. A l'extérieur le rassemblement des oiseaux peut dénoter le rang et la constitution politique, alors qu'à l'intérieur il constitue une allusion puissante à la neutralisation du mal par le roi. Quand le voile tombe pour couvrir le visage du chef, son individualité se dissout et, dans un sens, le roi devient la dynastie même. Porter ces emblèmes extraordinaires, c'est d'établir un lien entre le présent et le passé Yoruba.

THE SIGN OF THE DIVINE KING

An Essay on Yoruba Bead-Embroidered Crowns with Veil and Bird Decorations

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The bead-embroidered crown with beaded veil, foremost attribute of the traditional leaders (Oba) of the Yoruba people of West Africa, symbolizes the aspirations of a civilization at the highest level of authority.¹ The crown incarnates the intuition of royal ancestral force, the revelation of great moral insight in the person of the king, and the glitter of aesthetic experience.

The Yoruba provide an appropriate setting for the study of art and authority on the African continent. Chieftancies remain important here and as half of the population of Yorubaland (southwest Nigeria and parts of Dahomey and Togo) lives in towns over which such leaders preside, traditional loyalties are strong. (Legum 1966: 213).

According to tradition, it was none other than Oduduwa himself, awesome maker of land upon water and the father of the Yoruba, who initiated the wearing of the beaded crown with veil as the essential sign of kingship. (Mellor 1938: 154). He placed a crown on the head of each of his sixteen sons.² These journeyed from the site where traditional Yorubas believe Oduduwa lived, Ile-Ife, in the forests of what is now southwest Nigeria, and established separate kingdoms. In time these kingdoms became the modern Yoruba States.³ The rulers of these ancient provinces all claim descent from Oduduwa.⁴ They are honored as seconds of the gods (ekeji orisa).

The gods of the Yoruba long ago chose beaded strands as emblems. The fact that the crowns are embellished with

bead embroidery immediately suggests godhead. Indeed the prerogative of beaded objects⁵ is restricted to those who represent the gods, kings and priests; and those with whom the gods communicate, kings, priests, diviners, and native doctors. The beaded crown therefore connotes power sustained by divine sanction. Formerly, it is reported (Ojo 1966: 260), red jasper beads were imported from Litingo in Upper Volta and fashioned and polished at Oyo-Ile, the ancient capital of the Oyo Yoruba. These formed the main material of royal bead embroidery, although in antiquity beads of different colors were made at Ile-Ife. Today crowns are embellished with imported colored beads.

Bead embroidery is practiced at a number of centers, especially Efon-Alaiye, Ile-Ife, Oyo, Ilesha, Abeokuta, and Iperu-Remo. The men who work in this tradition must be extremely skilled. Their task entails the stringing together of beads to form a strand of a single color, and the tacking of these strands (length and color determined by design) to the surface of the crown until the visible portion of the object has been completely covered.

The bead embroiderer begins with the making of a wicker-work or cardboard frame. At Efon-Alaiye, one of the leading centers of the crown-making industry, the shape of the frame is an almost perfect cone (Fig. 2). The cone towers over all other forms of Yoruba headgear. The embroiderer or his helper stretches wet starched unbleached muslin or stif-

fened cotton over the frame, providing the base for the embroidery, and allows the object to dry in the sun. A frontal face, a Janus design, or a circular band of frontal faces are often molded in relief over the lower portion of the frame, with shaped pieces of cloth dipped in wet starch. The actual embroidering then follows, after a choice of surface pattern. Some crown-makers hold up small cardboard silhouettes—afro-islamic interlace patterns, flowers, crosses, and so on—then mark their outlines on the canvas with chalk or pencil. Efon-Alaiye masters are said to waive this procedure at times and work from memory or inspiration. A gifted artist sometimes experiences agony at this point. "I do not tell people," an Ijebu Yoruba crown-maker confessed to Justine Cordwell (1952: 227), "but sometimes I have great difficulty in arranging designs and colors on crowns. When this happens I go to my room and take out the [image of the god of native medicine] that has been in our family many years . . . I make sacrifice . . . that night when I dream I see the crown as it is when complete, with all the colors and designs as they should be."

The basic unit of the work is the single strand of beads. These may be extended vertically, diagonally, or horizontally to form geometric outlines, and they may be cut in diminishing or increasing lengths to fill in patterns. A sin-

1. HEADRESS, WELLCOME COLLECTION, MUSEUM OF ETHNIC ARTS, UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, LOS ANGELES. HEIGHT 11".





2. EFON ALAIYE. EFON YORUBA. PARTIALLY COMPLETED CROWNS COVERED WITH CANVAS. WORK DIRECTED BY ADETOYE, MASTER BEAD EMBROIDERER, DECEMBER 1963. HT. 15" AND 14½".

gle strand may form a circle, or coil around the trunk of a miniature elephant, or hook back upon itself to complete an interlace motif. Outwardly simple, the string of beads is actually an aesthetic instrument of subtle expressive power.

The craftsman normally sews small representations of birds fashioned in the round onto the sides of the crown (Fig. 1). These birds are also covered with beading. There are cases where other beaded figures (chameleons, elephants, human figures) are attached to the crown. A beaded bird often surmounts the summit of the crown. In one instance (Fig. 1), the bird seems to peck the frontal side of the crown.

Choice of bead color serves the intensification of relief elements. Horizontal and vertical pink strands define the frontal face forming the main design element of the crown of the present traditional ruler of the Ijebu settlement of Ijebu-Ife. (Fig. 4). Black beads strung on these strands at precise points represent vertical and horizontal facial marks associated with a particular descent group. The projection of the eyes is rendered more impressive by the framing of black beads with white. And beaded red strands emphasize the formation of the lips in relief.

The details of the structure of the crown may be modified by individual creativity, but the basic form, linked to ancient canons, must be honored. Thus, traditional crowns are either cone-shaped (frequently with an aperture at the point of the cone where the base of a beaded bird may be inserted) or a vertical stem-on-cone structure character-

ized by the elongation of the cone so that a kind of long, narrow cylinder is created at the top of which presides a bird and the sides of which often serve as ground for subsidiary birds arranged as an inward-facing circle. There is also a kind of "elliptical helmet" type of crown, frontally resembling a cone but shaped not unlike the mitre of a bishop (cf. Talbot 1926, III: Figs. 191, 140). Traditional crowns—as opposed to casual royal headgear (*ori-ko-gbe-oyo*) without sacred implications—must include (1) a beaded fringed veil (*iboju*) for state occasions when the king incarnates divine powers and it is dangerous to stare at his naked face (2) frontal faces rendered in relief or partial relief (3) beaded birds rendered in the round.

Remove the beaded veil and the crown is devoid of full significance. The first king of the city of Ilesha, according to tradition (Johnson 1921: 24) severed some of the fringes from the crown of a nobleman of Ile-Ife, a terrible act, not unlike attempting enforced abdication.

Frontal faces may be applied to ordinary royal headgear, such as a beaded cap worn by a certain titled chief of the city of Ikere-Ekiti, but almost without exception they appear on ceremonial crowns with fringes. The same point applies to beaded birds. It is the veil which lifts the object to the highest level of possible significance.

An important sanction distinguishes the fringed crown from lesser forms of head covering. The gaze of the king must not fall upon the inside of his fringed crown, for there are believed to be magical forces within the object (what they are may never be revealed to

commoners) which have the power to blind a careless wearer. In the presence of the writer, the King of Otta saw the inside of his crown by accident, whereupon he immediately whispered in Yoruba, "my eyes have seen and may my eyes remain." The Araba of Lagos, a high-ranking priest of the Yoruba cult of divination, maintains that long ago a despotic king might be forced by the elders to look inside the fringed crown as a hint that he should "go and rest." In other words, the despot had been served notice that he had but a brief interval during which he might commit suicide or face certain execution. The crown thus serves, in part, as a kind of supernatural check against the conduct of the king.

The visual effect of the beaded veil in ritual context is extremely impressive. (Fig. 4). The vaguely perceived outlines of the face of the ruler match, in a sense, the generalized qualities of the frontal faces on the crown. Veiling diminishes the wearer's individuality so that he, too, becomes a generalized entity. Balance between the present and the past emerges. No longer an individual, the king becomes the dynasty. He is concealed behind his beaded netting in a way not unlike the manner of concealment traditional to the Egungun cult whose followers professionally impersonate the dead. The crown becomes a mask. The use of the veil extends a tradition in force in the sixteenth century when De Barros reported that ambassadors were only allowed to view curtains of silk, behind which sat the King of Ile-Ife, "for the king is regarded as sacred." (Crone 1934: 126).

Historical Evidence

The origin of the crown in its present form is obscure. The sculpture of Yoruba antiquity (A.D. 960 to 1160), found at the site of the city of Ile-Ife, does not yield an exact concordance. The evidence here does show the use of beaded crowns, some depicted with frontal emblems. Some smaller than life-size heads are depicted wearing especially elegant beaded headgear but these modes do not match the modern crown; they are without birds and frontal faces. Some life-size metal heads have rows of holes running along a line which might be the outline of the bottom rim of a crown. Willett (1966: 42) suggests these heads carried the real crown worn in life by the person commemorated by the sculpture. We can only speculate as to their form.

Four hundred years later clues to the rise of the crown in its modern form begin to emerge. First of all, there is the so-called Gara⁸ Image, one of a group of seven metal sculptures found at the small village of Tada on the Niger, not far from the site of the old imperial capital of the Yoruba. The image (Fig. 3)

represents a traditional ruler in regalia. He wears a garment extending to his knees. Upon the surface of this garment appear various motifs: crosses, interlace, zig-zag, and frontal birds with startling coiled wings. The figure wears a textured outer vestment covered with the depiction of cowrie shell embroidery. The wealth of the man is communicated by the use of cowries, an ancient form of traditional currency, as over-all embroidery of the vestment. Over the embroidery hang two narrow sashes. And over the sashes, at the chest of the figure, hangs an arch-shaped medallion of a ram's head flanked by long-beaked birds and with a third long-beaked bird above the beast.

The helmet of the ruler is of great importance (Fig. 3). Two large medallions, one frontal, one facing back, are fixed to the helmet and these bear a horned face with nostrils from which issue serpents or fish. The mouth of the face is open, teeth are bared, and the tongue protrudes. These faces are like a sign of wrath. Between them two powerfully wrought tresses emerge, perhaps suggesting radiating might through magic hair. Each medallion is crowned with vertical ornamental flanges. At the top of the ruler's headgear four metal birds once stood on long legs (in the passage of time the birds have been bent down until they are now almost obscured). The birds once crowned the image in harmony with the Janus disposition of the frontal faces: two faced forward and two faced the rear (Fig. 6). Each bird has a pointed beak, round projecting eyes with concentric rims, two bands of ladder-like ornamentation about the neck, two bands of the same ornamentation curved at the sides of the body to indicate the wings, forked and downward-curving

tail plumage, and long egret-like legs. The last observation does not necessarily denote exact depiction of species. The length of the legs of the birds may have reflected care that their position was commanding.

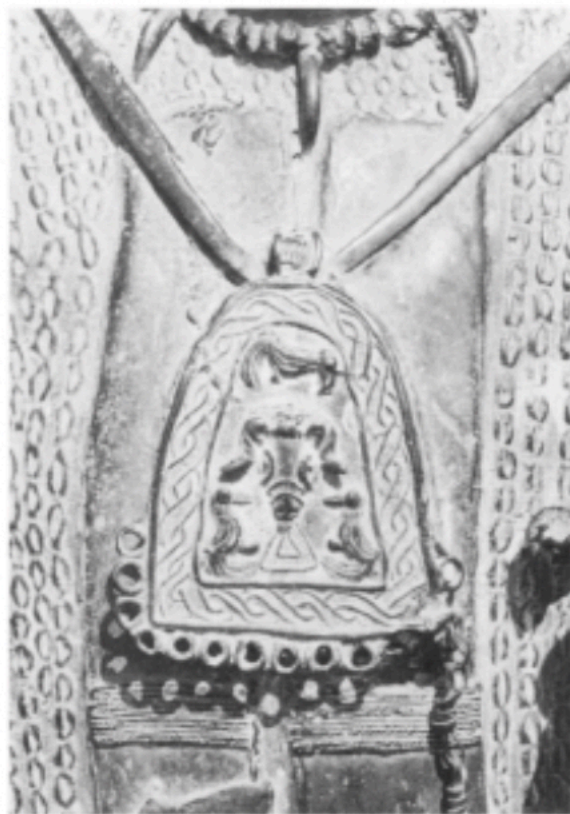
The point is: classic elements of the modern crown, frontal faces under birds, have emerged here. The date of the sculpture is consequently crucial to regalia history but accessible information permits only guesswork. Nadel (1942: 406) has published a legend which tells of the arrival of these sculptures from Idah with the flight of the founder of the Nupe kingship about A.D. 1523. But the Nupe main settlements are found across from the Yoruba on the left bank of the Niger and contiguous hinterland. The legend does not explain why these metal sculptures, one of them of incomparable quality, were left in a small and isolated village incommensurate with their evident urban aristocracy.

One might consider the possibility of their removal, either for safekeeping or as abandoned booty, from the former imperial capital of the Yoruba, Oyo-Ile, during the wars of the early nineteenth century. The ruins of Oyo-Ile are less than sixty miles from Tada, versus two hundred miles upstream from Idah in Igala country. Perhaps the arrival of these objects was blended with the legend of Tsoede by the people of Tada for reasons of their own. Note that the beautiful seated figure at Tada is unquestionably ancient Yoruba in origin, and another figure, bringing hands together before his chest, has facial traits which seem Yoruba.

Some stylistic details, the bird with coiled wing and the frontal face with serpents issuing from the nostrils, suggest a measure of relation to the art of Benin, the famous kingdom to the south-east of the Yoruba. But the latter sign



3. STANDING BRONZE FIGURE OF A TRADITIONAL RULER, CALLED BY ONE INFORMANT "THE GARA IMAGE"; ALLEGEDLY BROUGHT TO TADA FROM IGALA COUNTRY IN THE FIRST QUARTER OF THE 16TH CENTURY, POSSIBLY OF YORUBA ORIGIN. LEFT: DETAILS OF CHEST AND HEAD. CROWN MEDALLION DIAMETER 5 1/2".



5. YORUBA WROUGHT-IRON STAFF. OPA OSANYIN TABI EYINLE (IRON STAFF FOR THE MEDICINE GOD OR HUNTER GOD OF THE RIVER). SHOWS CIRCLE OF MINIATURE IRON IMPLEMENTS SURROUNDING A BIRD. NIGERIAN MUSEUM, LAGOS. HT. 20".



4. IJEBU-IFE, IJEBU YORUBA. BEADED CROWN WITH VEIL OF THE RULER OF IJEBU-IFE.



6. TADA, SOUTHERN NUPE. DETAIL OF FIG. 3.

also occurs in Yoruba antiquity. In addition, there is a metal figure of a bowman at Jebba, near Tada, very much in the style of the Gara Image, with a bird with coiled wings and bent-upward legs suggesting connection with the image of the Benin king in a divine state—i.e., the image of the king with legs which have become upward-bending mudfish. Perhaps the coiled wing bird with upward-bending legs is an alter ego of the divine king?

The metal sculpture of Benin sheds some light on the history of Yoruba crowns. A chronology for the metal sculpture of the kingdom has been established (Fagg 1963: 24-38) which helps suggest dates for Yoruba crowns comparable to the styles shown in the metal art of Benin. Benin bronze art is a royal privilege with emphasis upon the depiction of attributes of honor and entourage. There is, as an opening illustration of beaded crown types in the Benin mode, an example (von Luschan 1919: IX, 12) from the "Middle Period" of Benin art history, which has been approximately dated by Fagg from the mid-sixteenth to the late seventeenth century. Here a ruler wears a crown of arch-like contour reminiscent of the shape of the chest medallion worn by the Gara Image. The headdress bears a horned frontal face, also recalling Tada. In addition, there is another Benin metal plaque (von Luschan: Tafel 8, No. III c 8392) which shows frontal eyes and mouth on a high conical hat. A most extraordinary example is a bronze head, tentatively dated to the mid-sixteenth to late seventeenth century, which is surmounted by four metal birds (Fig. 11) (Fagg 1963: Pl. 18). Serpents issue from the nostrils and tear-ducts of this image. And there are many beaded crowns with beaded vertical shafts shown on Benin plaques, suggesting relation with the Yoruba stem-on-cone mode of chiefly headgear. Although the date of the Tada/Jebba finds remains to be established, related Benin images (with double tresses descending from helmets and so forth) suggest that the bird-over-the-frontal-face as an important motif was present in the art of Yoruba regalia by the sixteenth century.

The medallion on the chest of the Gara Image depicts a probable metal prototype. The stylistic closeness between this medallion and those forming part of the headgear of the Gara Image and the Jebba bowman raises the question as to whether there were metal crowns in existence in Yoruba antiquity. The answer is affirmative. João de Barros, who commanded the Portuguese fortress of São Jorge da Mina from 1522 to 1525 and monitored information collected from farther east, mentions the

use of metal crowns in sixteenth century Yoruba or Yoruba-related territory:

"... to the east of Beny at twenty moons' journey there lived the most powerful monarch of these parts, who was called Ogane. Among the pagan chiefs of the territories of Beny he was held in as great veneration as is the Supreme Pontiff with us. In accordance with a very ancient custom, the King of Beny, on ascending the throne, sends ambassadors to him with rich presents to request confirmation. To signify his assent, the prince sends the king a staff and a head-piece of shining brass, fashioned like a Spanish helmet." (Crone: 126).

Oghene is the term used by the people of Benin to signify the King of Ile-Ife. (Bradbury 1957: 20). The text suggests that brass crowns were in use before the sixteenth century. It is significant that brass crowns are still found in Yorubaland and that their use is linked to ancient cults and kingships. At the Ekiti settlement of Ogotun there is a brass crown, associated with the worship of Obanifon (Obalufon), one of the original followers of Oduduwa (Fig. 10). The whorl and plaited embellishments of the object suggest the famous brass-casting industry of the Yoruba northeast, Obo Aiyegunle, as provenance. Willett (personal communication) photographed a brass crown for Obanifon at Obo Aiyegunle itself. And Allison (1960) documented the existence of a tiered brass crown, somewhat resembling a pagoda, at Agbanda in Igbomina Yoruba territory. These may be modern brass crowns or relatively recent work from the last century.

But certain Ijebu settlements conceal the existence of important brass crowns, some of which may be several centuries old. The king of the city of Ijebu-Igbo has an ancient brass crown.¹⁶ There are three large brass birds near the base of the crown, and presumably a frontal face, but the chain fringe is said to have disappeared.

The ruler of the Ijebu-Remo settlement of Ogere has inherited a brass crown of stem-on-cone shape. The crown is made of curved brass sheets which have been clamped together. Six ornamental chains hang from a projecting circular edge near the top of the crown. Three small brass face masks, attached by studs, ornament the crown. Opposed crescent markings are visible on their foreheads. This sign is associated with brass figural sculpture for the Yoruba cult of the earth. A chain veil is



7. BENIN. MEDICINE STAFF, MOUNTED BIRD WITH LONG BEAK SURROUNDED BY A CIRCLE OF MINIATURE IRON IMPLEMENTS. COMPARE FIG. 5. CANDALABRUM-LIKE "ARMS" ARE ATTACHED TO THE STAFF BENEATH THE PRINCIPAL FIGURE. DRAWING AFTER VON LUSCHAN, TAFEL 109.



8. ODO-NOPA, IJEBU YORUBA. BRASS CEREMONIAL CROWN OF THE LOCAL PRIEST OF AGEMO. PERHAPS MADE IN THE LATE 19TH CENTURY. HT. APPROX. 16".

said to have once hung from the bottom of the crown. Comparison with a brass crown in the neighboring town of Iperu (Fig. 9) suggests the Ogere object is relatively recent in manufacture, perhaps of the second half of the last century.

The Iperu crown is closer in form to the stem-on-cone headgear of the Benin Middle Period. The name of the crown, "Crown-from-the-beginning" (*ade ishe-she*), suggests its relative antiquity. The writer would guess that the object is four to three hundred years old by analogy with related headgear of the art of the Benin Middle Period. According to Iperu tradition the object is more than five hundred years old. There are four frontal faces on this crown, which measures approximately nine and three-quarters inches high, and some of the surface of the object is pierced with lattice-like openwork. The frontal faces

bear the opposed crescent markings. The "Crown-from-the-beginning" is used in the worship of the departed kings of Iperu.

The chameleon, called *agemo* in Yoruba, has been used as metaphor of extraordinary leadership since time immemorial in Yoruba culture. One of the ancient followers of Oduduwa (Forde: 37) took the name of this remarkable creature. And there is an ancient cult, associated with the use of brass crowns, which takes the same name. *Agemo* is virtually the national cult of the Ijebu. Priests of the cult are attributed awesome faculties; they are, for example, believed to have the power to fell trees and destroy buildings by the force of their curse. Each priest of *Agemo* is alleged to own a brass crown. These sixteen priests, living in settlements which more or less surround the ancient capital of the Ijebu, are: Tami of

Odogbolu, Lumoro of Imoro, Petu of Ishiwo, Lashen of Orun, Posa, Ija, and Lijagbori of Imosan, Onugbo of Okenugbo, Bajelu of Omuku, Sherefuse of Igbile, Nopa of Odo-Nopa, Idebi and Lubamisan of Ago-Iwoye, Ogbegbo of Obonwon, Mogodo of Aiyepe, and Moko of Okun-Owa (MacKenzie; Odukoya; Ogunba). The chief priest of *Agemo* at Imosan alleged on 2 January 1968 that at least one of the sixteen ministers of *Agemo*, Lijagbori of Imosan, did not have a brass crown because his role of throwing kola in honor of *Agemo* was secondary and the writer suspects, but cannot prove, that the Moko of Okun-Owa does not have a brass crown. Some priests will only wear their crowns in ritual context or in time of dire emergency and as a result only one crown is known to have been visually documented (Abraham 1958: 292). This is the brass crown of the *Agemo* priest of Odo-Nopa, a village to the east of the city of Ijebu-Ode (Fig. 8). An extraordinary brass bird with plumage rendered in sheet brass surmounts the stem at the top of the cone of the crown. The bird has an exponentially curved double crest. A short forked tail continues the curve of the crest and the body of the bird is ingeniously fashioned in openwork. The bird stands on a small disk from which hang small brass pendants. At the bottom of the stem the crown flares into a cone. The cone is embellished with relief designs and fine passages of openwork. Two small birds, cast in the round, seem to peck the bottom portion of the stem. Brass chains hang from the bottom of the crown and form a metallic veil which effectively blurs the perception of the countenance of the wearer when in use. There are a number of birds fashioned in low relief on the surface of the conical portion of the crown. But here the most visually arresting elements are the Janus faces with schematized limbs and body. The eyes of the faces are bi-faceted and projecting. Their diagonal placement is striking. The nose is heavy and descends from a swelling above the eyes. From this swollen area flare a pair of horns. The small body is separated from the face by openwork and from the body extend zig-zag arms in "ladder" pattern and hands grasping an object (leaf? fan? ceremonial sword? Compare Fig. 4). The legs of the image are fish with tails ending in a knobbed-cross motif outlined by openwork. Here the royal frontal face is associated with the fish-legged figure, ancient motif of sacred leadership in the art history of Yorubaland and Benin". The faces are to be compared with figural brass staffs (*edan*) for the cult of the earth. Let us take for example a body of six earth cult staffs (Williams 1964). The *Agemo*

crown shares with this group a number of traits, such as swollen forehead, obliquely positioned bi-faceted eyes, and ladder-like fine ornament. The suggested dating of these six brasses is broad, mid-seventeenth to mid-nineteenth century. The Agemo crown at Odo-Nopa was perhaps made near the end of this period if not even later, for there are flaws in the casting suggestive of debasement of earlier craft excellence. This priestly object may have been closely copied from a vanished original which itself reflected stylistic affinity with the ancient brass crowns of the Ijebu.

There is a collection of old beaded crowns at Idowa, an ancient and important Ijebu kingship, which also has a bearing on the problem of crown history. One group of the old crowns at Idowa, "about three or four," is given as pre-sixteenth century work, while a second group includes specimens said to have been made after the settlement of Idowa in the sixteenth century. The earlier crowns are said to have been brought from the capital of the Ijebu at the founding of Idowa. "One of the oldest crowns" is a beaded cap surmounted by vertical beaded shaft with double-knobbed finial. The object bears fragments of beaded fringe dangling from a ruined rim (Ogunba 1964: 253). There is a certain concordance between this crown and the stem-on-cap beaded crowns depicted on Middle Period Benin plaques. The handsome use of polychromy in the building of design qualifies a common assumption that all old

Yoruba crowns were entirely covered with carnelian. Ogunba (p. 250) explains the lack of frontal face and birds thusly: "in pre-sixteenth century times . . . the (ruler) was more . . . priest-king than a secular king . . . content with a symbolic crown than a gorgeous one."

It is possible that sixteenth century and perhaps earlier Ijebu crowns reflected Benin influence. Certainly sufficient evidence exists to prove the impact of Benin culture upon the urban Ijebu peoples. But the mode of Benin might have derived from Yoruba antecedents. Cordwell (1952: 210) feels that the original Yoruba crown was a close-fitting cap with a small conical elevation²² to the rear and cites the indigo wax head covering of priestesses of a prominent riverain spirit, the deity herself associated with kingship, as a modern continuity of the mode. The likelihood is that there was considerable interweaving of the crown-making traditions of the ancient Yoruba and the people of Benin. Willett (1966: personal communication) says this is confirmed by the Ile-Ife corpus.

Two allegedly eighteenth century Idowa crowns are reminiscent of modern styles. Perhaps the finest of the two has been attributed by local priests to the reign of King Anowoneyo. The crown of Anowoneyo is covered almost entirely with gleaming cowrie shell embroidery. This stem-on-cone type has a continuous fringe and is embellished with four ingeniously cowrie embroidered birds, fashioned in the round and sewn to the cone surface. A bird attached to the top of the stem is clearly senior in terms of position, dimension, and imaginative elaboration of tail plumage. The birds seem to peck the crown with long beaks, recalling the birds on the beaded crown shown in Figure 1. Ogunba's remark (p. 251), "As the (king) carried this cowrie crown about at a public cere-

mony, he must have appeared to the average citizen as the very fountain of their prosperity," recalls the impact of the sumptuous vestment of cowries at Tada.

Frontal faces and more complicated gatherings of birds emerge on those crowns at Idowa believed to have been made in the present and the nineteenth century. The gist of the iconography of the Yoruba crown, for several centuries, is the frontal face under bird or gathering of birds. It is now appropriate to examine these themes in some detail in order to probe their iconological depth.

The Frontal Face

The face is generic but sometimes linked to actual descent groups by virtue of facial markings. Some faces show, like the Tada medallions, bared teeth. The showing of teeth is rare in the sculpture of the Yoruba, where the concern is normally to represent the lips closed as an aspect of essential dignity. The open mouth, on the other hand, implies a different kind of condition and, as we have seen at Tada (not to mention Ile-Ife), the baring of teeth is associated in certain cases with the snakes-issuing-from-nostrils motif, as if to emphasize doubly the unleashing of extraordinary powers. These powers illumine the present with



9. *IPERU*, REMO YORUBA. BRASS CEREMONIAL CROWN (ADE ISHESHE) FOR THE WORSHIP OF THE ANCESTORS OF THE PRESENT RULER. ACCORDING TO LOCAL TRADITION, MORE THAN 500 YEARS OLD. HT. APPROX. 9 $\frac{3}{4}$ ".



11. *BENIN*. BRONZE HEAD SURMOUNTED BY FOUR METAL BIRDS. TENTATIVELY DATED MID-SIXTEENTH TO LATE SEVENTEENTH CENTURY. HT. 10 $\frac{1}{2}$ ". MUSEUM FÜR VOLKERKUNDE, BERLIN.

10. *OBO-AIYEGUNLE*, EKITI YORUBA. BRASS CROWN FOR OBANIFON, NOW AT OGOTUN-EKITI.

the past: such powers come from the dead. Compare Carroll (1950: 353), who was told that the frontal faces on the crown represented skulls. This fits the suggestion of an aura of ancestral force. In keeping with the argument that the frontal faces represent the dead, one might note that Yoruba artists sometimes carve single faces to represent the decapitated heads of felons (as upon a drum for the spirit of the earth at Odo-Nopa) or the decapitated heads of witches (as upon circular boards worn by ancestor-impersonators in Ibarapa Yoruba country) or slain enemies (as along the highest register of the brass door for the King of Ilesha). These heads as a unit suggest victory over evil.

The frontal face is not absolutely correlated with morally instructive horror, however. The serene visage which embellishes the Yoruba divining board represents the mercurial spirit who accompanies the god of divination as trickster and messenger. In addition, the frontal face may simply stand for a human being. Thus the bottom line of faces on one of the doors of the palace of the King of Ile-Ife represents, according to the artist who carved them, a group of royal messengers (*emese*) and the assertion is confirmed by the clear rendering of the partially shaved scalp that identifies the messenger of the ruler in Yoruba culture. But the majority of occurrences of the frontal face in Yoruba art have to do with the extraordinary.

As to the frontal faces on the crown, the combination of exaggerated human traits and specific descent group markings suggests a synthesis of the world of the dead and the world of the living—the king as living ancestor. This seems the primary meaning of the frontal face¹². The plausibility of this view is suggested by a fabric of native testimony. The ruler of the capital of the Aworri Yoruba alleges that the frontal faces represent, as a Janus, Oduduwa himself. The Araba of Lagos extends this allegation by asserting that the Janus is an allusion to one of the magical characteristics of Oduduwa: the possession of two heads, one earthly, the other spiritual. An apparent echo of this belief, in the field of wood sculpture, may be seen among the Ibarapa Yoruba where a two-headed standing male figure for Oduduwa has been documented (Idowu 1962: Pl. 3a). But surely the most exciting validation of the depth of the belief comes from the Yoruba of Cuba: "Oduduwa has two faces—one facing forward, towards life, the other backwards, towards death." (Fabelo 1960: 60).

The ruler of Iperu-Remo maintains that crowns with multiple faces allude to the gods, "who are all-seeing," attesting the power of the king to view by supernatural means all that occurs in his domain. The king of Ijebu-Ife was told that the face upon his inherited crown stood for the first king of his settlement. Basing his ingenious interpretation on fieldwork among Ijebu Yoruba, Ogunba (1965: 258) feels that an image with bared teeth on one of the crowns of the ruler of Idowa implies the transformation of the king at his coronation from a human being into a spirit. This is a dramatic extension of the notion of divine kingship and can be related to the testimony of an Ijebu king: the king wearing the ceremonial crown with fringe may not stand upon the naked earth. He must stand on a mat or cloth of suitable quality. This recalls the fact that certain Yoruba possession priests must stand on wooden mortars when the deity is manifest in their flesh. The Dagburewe of Idowa explains: the king is deified at this moment.

The frontal faces communicate this tenet of belief. The king behind the veil incarnates the most awesome powers a mortal can possess. He is both impregnated with godhead and subject to the morally watchful gaze of the gods. His own face has vanished and the countenances of his ancestors have become his own at a higher level of vision. To repeat, the meaning of the frontal face

on the beaded crown seems to be: the union of the living king with the deified royal dead.

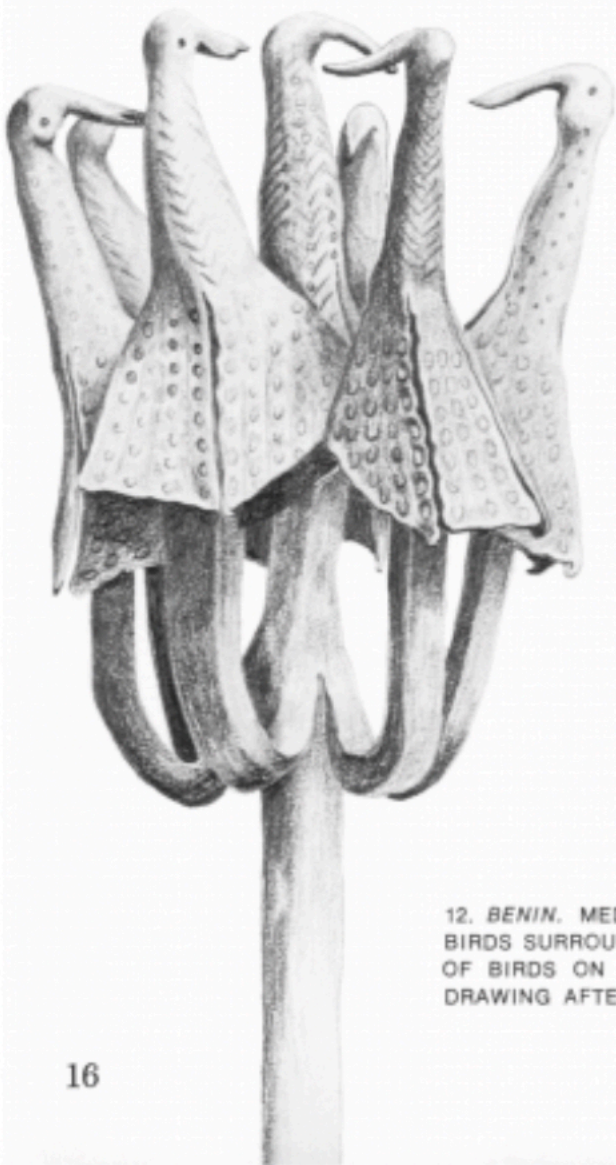
The Gathering of the Birds

Their representation is normally generalized. It is pointless to seek exact depictions of species unless feathers from an actual bird have been added to the representation as identifying ornamentation. In the Yoruba-related metal art of Benin the emblem of the bird in aristocratic settings is said to represent the ibis; in such instances a frequent downward-curved beak makes the attribution seem plausible. Precise species have in fact been suggested (Schüz, 1969). On the other hand, long-billed birds may also appear in the art of Benin in extraordinarily aggressive settings, such as astride horned beasts, and this is of course far removed from the non-predatory, relatively placid quality of the actual species. And what if the length of the beak has to do with expressionist distortion, at the threshold of the supernatural, based upon but transcending strict mimesis? This anticipates an argument that beak shape and other details are aspects of a magic biology which converges upon the real.

In Yorubaland itself, variant interpretations of species attest the generalized nature of the original. The ruler of the Egbado Yoruba settlement of Oke-Odan asserted in December, 1962 that the birds represented pigeons, emblems of victory, while a neighboring ruler insisted the intention was to convey the impression of a gathering of cranes. Still another chief mentioned the vulturine fish-eagle. Extremely interesting was an identical opinion voiced independently by two sources, the one Oyo Yoruba, the other from Ekiti territory: priestess of Obalufon at Ogotun-Ekiti and a high-ranking member of the cult of the earth at Oluponon, near the Oyo metropolis of Iwo, both alleged that the birds on the crown are egrets (*okin*). The high rank and traditional learning of these informants made their testimony merit close attention. Hence the latter allegation in full:

The earth spirits whom the men of the cult of the earth (Ogboni) worship were the first to wear crowns. This was before the Yoruba kings. These spirits put egret feathers on their crowns, just as some Yoruba kings do today, because the egret is the bird of decorum. The egret is the sign of orderliness which is the mark of our cult. And, long ago, when animals talked, it was the egret who had the power to settle disputes arising among the creatures of the world.

The Araba of Lagos in effect ties the Egbado and Oluponon versions together by his own assertion that the command-



12. BENIN. MEDICINE STAFF. AN INWARD-FACING CIRCLE OF BIRDS SURROUND THEIR MASTER. COMPARE WITH THE CIRCLE OF BIRDS ON THE WELLCOME COLLECTION CROWN (FIG. 1). DRAWING AFTER VON LUSCHAN, TAFEL 107.

ing bird at the top of the crown is an egret and the minor birds a group of pigeons, the image of political power. The tail feathers of the white cattle egret are attached to the summit of some Yoruba crowns today¹³. This custom extends into the realm of sculpture, at Igogo-Ekiti, where the local priest dresses an image of a mounted dignitary by adding white feathers to the carved bird which surmounts the representation of a ruler's bonnet.

The lordly aura which surrounds the gathering of the birds is further communicated by their arrangement, as master and entourage, whereby a senior figure overlooks a circle of followers. The vision is hieratic, ordered, and at the same time mysterious. A striking detail is the frequent siting of the minor birds parallel to the stem or cone of the crown, so that they recall the West African Grey Woodpecker (cf. Abraham 1958: 759) which alights parallel to the trunk of a tree, preparatory to hammering the bark with his beak. Even more interesting is the fact some minor birds, and occasionally the bird at the summit, are positioned so that they actually seem to peck the sides of the crown. This does not mean that a straightforward allusion to the woodpecker is intended—no informant ever mentioned this—but that, perhaps, something to do with the *action* of the woodpecker, the piercing of an object, is recalled. The imaginative use of color in the beading of these birds makes clear that a systematic denotation of the woodpecker is not intended. But the fact remains: the birds are ordered and imply hierarchy, yet something in their positioning hints of the unleashing of unnamed, penetrating powers, just as the frontal faces fuse qualities of terror and decorum.

Native interpretations of the meaning of the number of birds upon the crown show conflict over hidden unity. Mellor, more than thirty years ago, (1938: 154) documented a prevailing Ijebu belief that the sixteen birds on the crown of the paramount chief stand for the sixteen founders of the Yoruba States. These birds are believed to be the sixteen original sons of Oduduwa. Southeast of the territory where Mellor did his research, the ruler of the town of Agbowo-Ikosi remarked in the summer of 1963 that the birds were a practical measure of the rank of the wearer: the crown of a minor ruler bears four, that of a great chief twelve, that of the great paramount chief sixteen or twenty-four.

Interpretations change when one moves from the kingdoms of the Ijebu to Oyo and Ijesha territory. Thus McCrow at Oshogbo: "ceremonial bead hat represents the traditional Yoruba system of government. Large birds at base represent Chiefs of the various

wards of the town. Vertical lines of small birds are subjects being led upwards to the chiefs of the compound, the larger birds surrounding the King himself." Here the birds directly reflect the distribution of power in Yoruba civilization. Diagrammatic political structure becomes cryptic civic geography at Ilesha where William Fagg (1962: personal communication) was told each bird signifies a ward of the town.¹⁴

The persistent theme is the measure of the might of the king, whether by quality of descent (scion of one of the sixteen original sons), quality of influence (the king, the ward chiefs, and their followers), or quality of domain (the particular wards and hence the size and importance of his city). And running through the version is the consistent association of the bird with the elders and the king, men who have lived life long and who, therefore, because of their accumulated riches of mind, are charged with the maintaining of order. The careful disposition of the birds, subject to a major figure, mirrors the point.

There is a kind of suggestive momentum to these symbols which carries us deeper into the problem of multi-variant meaning. Haselberger (1964: 139) has stressed the different levels of significance which attach to the relief sculpture of Kumasi in what is now Ghana, in which she finds a secular and condensed meaning for the common man and a rich, spiritual meaning for the initiate. Similarly, Fernandez (1965: 905) has observed that the iconographic themes of Bwiti cult ceremonies in Gabon exist not serially, but simultaneously, demanding the consideration of several levels of meaning at any given point of the ritual. There is an analogous depth of allusiveness to the gathering of the birds.

To begin, the theme reappears in the medium of iron sculpture as the primary emblem of cults having to do with divination and healing or both. Nor is this the only artistic form shared by kings, diviners, and native doctors. All three (including some special highly titled priests of other cults) are the only men in traditional Yorubaland who share the jealously guarded right to beaded objects. The distinction is clear—the king may enjoy the widest latitude in beaded objects, from beaded slippers to beaded canes, but the diviner may possess a beaded bag and the officiate for the spirit of medicine owns a beaded bottle. The last object may be observed among some Efon Yoruba settlements.

The links between kingship, healing, and divination are perhaps more power-

Continued on page 74



13. BENIN. MEDICINE STAFF. MOUNTED BIRD SURMOUNTS REPRESENTATIONS OF HORN AND CHAMELEON. DRAWING AFTER VON LUSCHAN, TAFEL 109.

It is in studying and researching the probable significance of these clay statuettes that I believe I have been put on the right track concerning those of the Chiaka district. They represented the victims who, like the *ekongo* of which Bastin writes (p. 74), were killed by the newly elected sovereign in order to assure the well-being of the entire kingdom. These victims entered, beyond the grave, into the service of the king. With regard to the clay figurines which were placed on an altar in the sacred hut called *eyemba*, representations of at least one woman and one man were used each time. After being put to death, they were beheaded. The sovereign could bewitch other victims as well, who were not beheaded. The woman, whose head was buried under a rain-making vessel, always had to be a mother; in the same way that a woman nursed her infant, she was able to assure the regularity of the rains. The head of the man was buried in the livestock enclosure in order to assure the prosperity of the livestock, the principal wealth of these people.

At Caluquembe, the royal family, who are the direct descendants of the Chiaka royalty referred to by Bastin, formerly bewitched at least seven persons in order to assure both the health of the country and the new reign.

Among others these included:—an old woman; old women know best the secrets of ancestors—a pregnant woman; on the one hand they are never hurried and always accomplish their work carefully and on the other hand they are the best pledge of fertility—a child; children do not fear danger and know how to be joyous about all things; children are also magically pure—a potter; while they do their work potters are always in a good humor—a hunter of big game; they are the best warriors—and finally a magician who had been possessed by a superior spirit; they are initiated in the secrets of these spirits. (*Anthropos* 58, p. 78.) Although in relation to Caluquembe I have never heard of representations of these victims, this does not necessarily change my interpretation, because at times of great calamity, the king of Caluquembe sent ambassadors to the holy places of the royal village of Ekumba, Chiaka. The only statuette at Caluquembe of which I have heard is that of Kaisese which Bastin presents (p. 74, par. 1) but which seems to be classified in another category, that of the protectors of souls and not of the spirits of sacrificed or bewitched victims. In the large old royal residence of Bailundu that Bastin also mentions (p. 76) and that I have had occasion to visit, it has been said that victims sacrificed for the same causes were mummified and conserved seated on chairs in the sacred hut of the royal village called *ociyemba* (the *eyemba* of the Ngambue). These were in some ways like the macabre originals of the type about which Bastin writes. To my knowledge, among the Ovimbundu all the statuettes have a religious or magical significance, the traces of anointing oil referred to by Bastin being a proof. Art for the sake of art seems absolutely unknown among these ethnic groups. Even the sacred staffs decorated with representations of human heads and inherited from generation to generation (not only among royal families) and the bows (the *olohonji*) were and are still worshipped. Apart from that, I do not have any knowledge about women who have entered the pantheon of the royal families of Chiaka.

Thus I believe that it is in this direction that it is necessary to research the interpretation of the statuettes discussed by Bastin. The woman nursing her infant is an eloquent confirmation of she who was favored by the rains. This said, nothing prevents one from admitting that the artists might be inspired by the *Inakulu* and the *Nana yakama* and consciously or unconsciously, might take as models people who were counted upon for the life, the fertility and the well-being of the entire kingdom.

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THE SIGN OF THE DIVINE KING

Continued from page 17

fully extended by the sharing of the emblem of the bird. The native doctor is often identified by the possession of a wrought-iron staff surmounted either by a single iron bird or a circlet of minor birds under a commanding bird at the summit. Similar iron staffs are also made for the cult of a riverain spirit named *Eyinle* who has marvelous powers of healing. It is possible to explore the forms of these staffs. Some often have roughly horizontal radial bars near the top of the staff a short distance underneath the senior bird at the top. These flaring bars sometimes end (Fig. 5) with miniature iron implements (sword, arrow, machete, hoe and so forth) associated with the "hot" iron god together with cryptic emblems of other deities associated with heat and witchcraft (NML 48.25.27). Their siting suggests control by a superior force manifest in the spirit of the bird or, alternatively, the bird as their messenger. The elegance of these radial dispositions has caused at least one observer to compare them to candelabra. In Aworri and Anago settlements the writer has observed staffs of this type surmounted by two birds in iron, heraldically opposed.

The Nigerian Museum, Lagos, also has iron medicine staffs attributed to the northern provinces of Yorubaland. The basic form of these northern modes is the placement of the major bird over an inward-facing circle of minor birds, the latter spirits standing on an iron circle secured to the staff which passes through the center of the described circle by means of horizontal cross-bars. (NML 46.9.44; 48.9.129; 54.8.1.)

The Yoruba cult of divination has its own kind of iron staff with bird motif, the diviner's staff (*osun*) (Fig. 14). The staff of the diviner is a vertical iron stake with a number of small hollow cones in iron which have been inverted and attached to the staff near the top of their sharp points so that they appear to radiate from the staff in a manner vaguely recalling the spreading of the branches of the Roman umbrella pine. The open inverted bottom portion of these cones is covered with a flat iron disk over which an iron bird is normally centered. Conical iron bells are often hammered right side up in one or more rows the length of the staff. The form of diviner staff morphology therefore is: bird over disk over inverted cones over bells.

The medicine staffs of Benin are related to Yoruba medicine and diviner staffs. They are heavier, virtually Baroque elaborations of the tradition.

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Benin medicine staffs are embellished, not only with iron bells, but also with iron representations of animal horns, chameleons, human royal figures, chains, and so forth. Three documented staffs (Figs. 7, 12, 13) show a virtuoso expression of the mode with ferociously beaked senior birds mounted on horseback or astride a horned beast or enveloped by a circlet of birds. These staffs do not have the circular disk of the diviner staff and some show candelabrum-like "arms" attached to the staff below the principal figure. The presence of the alternation of serpents and miniature iron implements around the senior bird bespeaks close connections between the iconography of Yoruba and Benin medicine.

The diviner staff in Yorubaland and in the Yoruba sectors of Bahia, Brazil is associated with the representation of the ancestors. (dos Santos 1967: 79). The cognate *asen* of Dahomey are iron stakes surmounted by flat disks in iron. These are kept for the ancestors. The bird at top sometimes vanishes, leaving the disk unadorned or serving as a platform for emblematic allusions to the special qualities of a ruler.

Iron sculpture for divination and medicine intersects with brass sculpture for the Yoruba cult of the earth with respect to the appearance of the theme of the bird. Birds are sometimes shown "pecking" the human figure represented on earth cult brass staffs, hence the iconography seems closer to the crown in the sense that the bird sometimes is shown seemingly engaged in an active role. The men of the cult of the earth are in many cases the same elders we have met before as heads of city wards and advisors to the king—the cult of the earth is composed of men senior in rank and age—so that the fact that they share the emblem of the "bird of the elder" with the king is not surprising and leads us deeper and deeper into an evermore interconnected world of symbolism. Indeed we have seen that one earth cult member claims that the society owned the bird motif," before the Yoruba system of kingship existed.

Oral literature provides some further clues. A myth collected by Cabrera (1948: 23) among descendants of Yoruba slaves in Cuba, tells of an evil figure who closed the roads of the world. He thereby threatened humanity with absolute destruction until he was tricked into dancing by a pair of twins (Yoruba believe all twins possess special powers), in which vulnerable position he could be killed in order that the world be saved. The description of the dance is interesting:

Birds of darkness came down to dance with the Devil. They flew in shadowy flocks, spinning around his knotted hair,

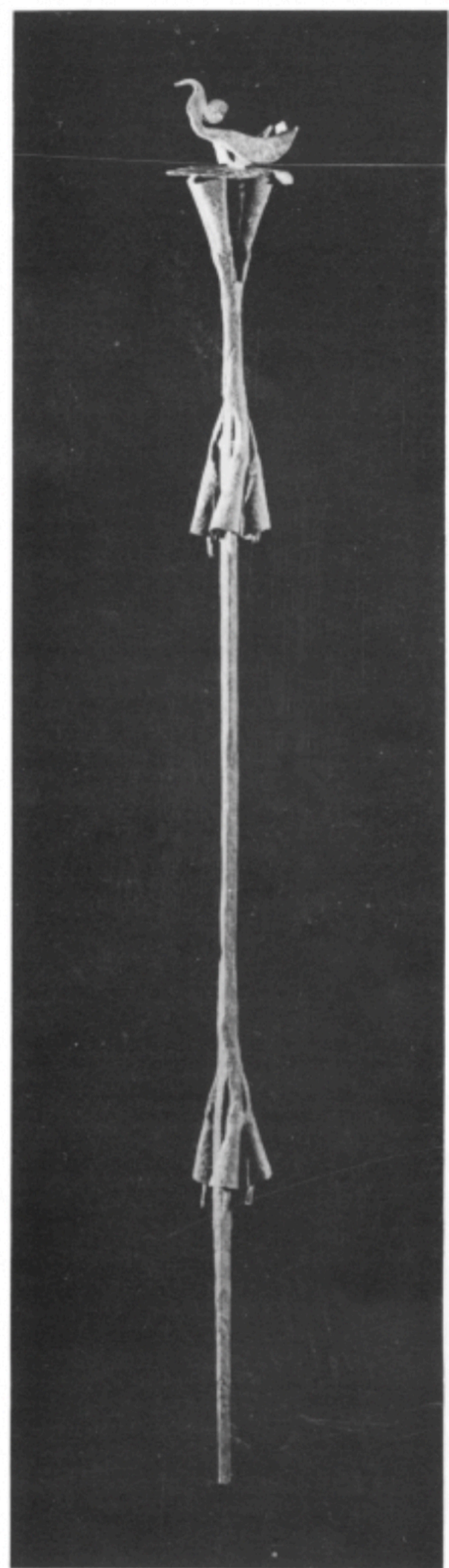
a circle of owls and bats that revolved about him in lugubrious flight.

The characterization of the spirit in terms of the absolutely evil "Devil" would seem to reflect a certain westernization of Yoruba thought in Cuba, for some Yoruba priests in Nigeria say that there is no such thing as categorical evil. As one informant emphasized, during a dance in honor of the witches in 1964, "where there are bad things, there you get good things, too." Nevertheless, the honoring of a central figure (here seen as evil) with a circle of birds recalls Yoruba iconography. Indeed one may further cite a tale from the Yoruba side of the Atlantic wherein the noisome retinue is recreated in a similar context of sinister honor:

As (the old woman) paused, all of her birds perched on her shoulders and head . . . Then she said: "My name is Jungle Witch. I am the owner of this jungle from the beginning of the earth" . . . But immediately she mentioned her name to us, Jungle Witch, all of her birds flew around her and then perched again on her body. That showed us that they honored her, (Tutuola, 1962:16).

Here we are very far from the exemplary dignity of the Yoruba court, but there is a kind of visual resonance to these scenes which alerts us to dark associations that attach to the theme of the gathering of the birds in the traditional mind.

In another Afro-Cuban myth a single bird is cast in a role consistent with the notion of the positive magic of the kingship. Again the world is threatened with total destruction (resulting from a dispute between heaven and earth). This time the pied crow (*kanakanna*) flies beyond the stars with a message of reconciliation that saves mankind from death. The bird becomes sacred and takes perpetual shelter in the spreading arms of the iroko tree. Here the bird symbolizes communication with the gods, the very substance of divination and kingship,



14. YORUBA DIVINER STAFF (OSUN). MADE AT EFON-ALAIYE. HEIGHT 40 $\frac{1}{4}$ ".

15. FOM, ZAGNANADO, DAHOMEY. WROUGHT-IRON FIGURE OF GU, THE GOD OF IRON. HT. OF ENTIRE FIGURE, 76". PAUL TISHMAN COLLECTION.

and one clue to the understanding of the sharing of the emblem of the bird between kings and diviners emerges. Although the role of the bird has been reversed in the latter myth, from destroyer to redeemer, the theme of mortal conflict with forces of destruction remains.

It is time that we identify these "forces of destruction." The Yoruba believe that there exist on earth certain people who reveal themselves by their reaction out of all human proportion to jealousy-provoking situations such as blatant wealth. These people, largely old women with magic powers, are architects of doom and death. They transform themselves into birds, bats, or owls, the point being that these are not diurnal creatures but forms which come into their own at night, "for witchcraft is a nocturnal thing, the witches being most active between twelve and three A.M. in the realm of dream and nightmare." (Prince 1962: 797). The ancient Yoruba image of the witch, to use the dramatic term which does not carry in Yorubaland the notion of absolute evil, is the bird.

This bird, known by the euphemism "bird of the elder," takes certain forms: "a white bird with a long red beak and red claws," and "a brown bird like a

bush fowl with a long red beak." The mention of the long beak immediately recalls many depictions of royal birds and the whiteness of the first type is like a pun on the association of the egret with kingship. Even more to the point is the belief that the witch bird damages its victim by pecking the head or neck and sucking out the blood. This fits the strange siting of birds on crowns in such a manner to suggest the pecking of the sides of the crown as well as representations of birds in the iconography of the cult of the earth which seem to peck the sides of the head of a human figure. Direct comparison between the bird of the witches and the penetrating beak of the woodpecker is made in singing for the witches documented in the Yoruba sector of eastern Dahomey (Beier 1958: 10-11):

Our mother kills quickly without a cry
To prick our memory suddenly
Quickly as the woodpecker pecks the
tree on the farm

The woodpecker who hammers the tree
while words rush forth from his mouth
Large, very large mother at the top of
the iroko tree.

Many elements seen in enigmatic expression elsewhere seem to coalesce in this remarkable passage. Not only is the


association of the bird with the witch sharpened by partial allusion to the woodpecker's piercing of wood, but the witch presides, like the messenger who saved mankind, at the summit of the iroko, a tree which itself is sacred to traditional Yoruba. Descendants of Yoruba slaves in Bahia, Brazil maintain that the metal staff with bird finial for the god of medicine represents an iron bird in an iron tree. The radiating supports of minor birds of some types of Nigerian medicine staffs strongly recall the Bahian metaphor.

Deepening the implications of the imagery, an important priest of the god of medicine in the capital of the Anago Yoruba, a man of great traditional erudition at the cultural centre of the entire Yoruba sub-group, carefully testified in the winter of 1963 that the birds fashioned in iron on medicine staffs not only represented witches but honored them and made them fear the owner of the staff. Prince (1962) has shown that the diviner honors the witches by sacrificing to them at the base of the iroko tree whenever a patient seems struck by an illness beyond normal medical understanding. It may be that the medicine staff serves as a surrogate for the iroko tree whenever the diviner or native doctor is unable to make a journey into the forest."

In any event, the gathering of the witches in the night at the top of the iroko, the siting of the iron birds at the top of the medicine staff, and the gathering of the birds at the summit of the headgear of the ruler suggest parallel idealist metaphors of the transformation of doom into human survival. The witch, after all, is an elderly person, susceptible to the pleasures of honor and entourage. As the ruler may be praised and at the same time reminded of his obligations to the people, so the witch may, upon being honored and recognized, become responsible. Respect assures continuity.

But there is another factor. One of the verses of Yoruba divination tells of the refusal of the trickster deity to grant the witches the power to kill until they agreed to accept certain signs as a means by which men might protect themselves from them. (Prince). The gathering of the birds is surely one of these ancient signs. One recalls the testimony of the priest in the capital of the Anago: one places the iron birds on the staff to honor the witches and make them fear the owner of the staff."

Crowns and staffs, where so embellished, may form joint altars to the witches. The emblem of the famous familiar of the witch, the bird, may remind those who in feathered form kill by night of the limits placed upon their propensities by the positive magic of good government, medicine, and divina-



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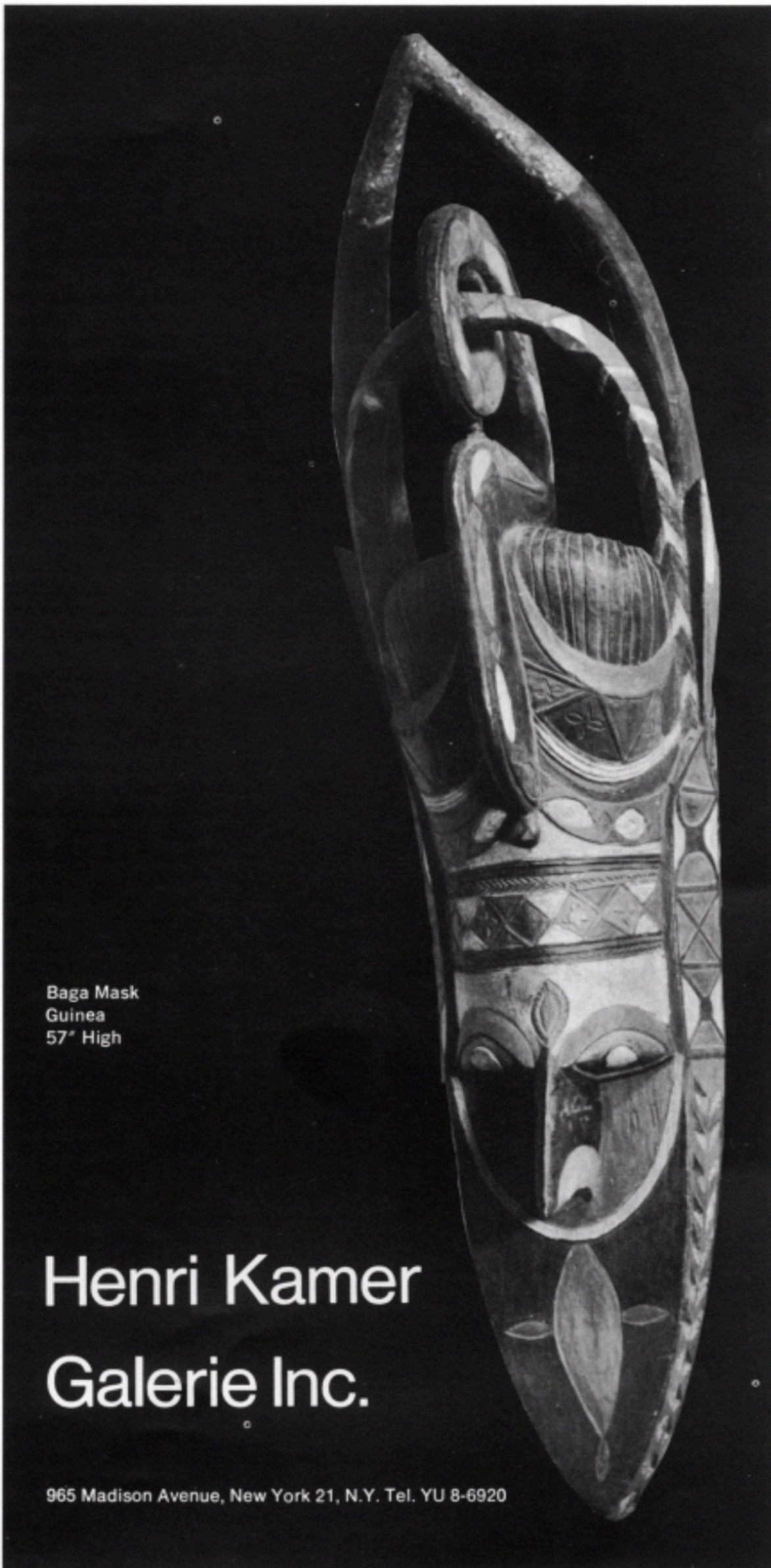
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tory action. No man is more responsible for the protection of the people from witchcraft than the traditional ruler, hence the bird would seem to confer an aura of supernatural fluency and arcane mastery. And the men who wear the "bird of the elder" are, in so many cases, elders themselves. This leads to the conclusion that the king, in order to neutralize witchcraft with authority, must himself assume powers of witchcraft.

This does not impugn the humanity of the king. This means the ruler knows by intimate association the proper medicines by which to wreak supernatural havoc when it is necessary to save his people. He can destroy by positive supernatural force those enemies whose unchecked actions might lead to the ruin or the death of the ruler and, hence, by a logical sequence, the destruction of the state and the people.

Transmission of force and ethics in the person of the king must therefore be protected by magic set about his body. We have seen there are probably active powers concealed in the crown with fringes and it might be added that on ceremonial occasions skulls are mounted on staffs to deflect evil from the King of Benin. There are leather-wrapped charms which may be observed hanging from the ceiling of the audience porches of the palaces of some Yoruba kings. A legend exactly in point with the thesis of the bird as motif of royal witchcraft is found among the Yoruba-influenced Fon of Dahomey. There Dada Sagbadjou Glele, living representative of the royal families of Dahomey, kindly explained in January 1968 the symbolism of a certain bird-mounted staff (*asen*) from the capital of the Fon now in the collection of the Museum of Primitive Art, New York: the bird represents the victory of the King of Dahomey over the witchcraft of the Mahi, a people living to the north of the Fon capital. The story goes that as the Fon king and his army marched north against the Mahi they observed a bird associated with the power of the Fon ruler devour another bird associated with the head of the Mahi. This was a sign that the witchcraft of the Fon king had overcome the witchcraft of the Mahi and shortly thereafter supernatural suggestion was translated into practical military accomplishment. The legend recalls the traditional opinion of the Suku of Congo-Kinshasa that it is imperative to have a leader who can operate fluently within the sphere of the witches on behalf of his kinsmen. (Kopytoff 1965: 469).

Magic aggression is consequently another possible dimension of the meaning of the gathering of the birds on the crown of the king. The greater the number of birds, perhaps, the stronger the royal supernatural power, the greater



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the wards and domain, the mightier the royal ancestors, the more numerous the vicissitudes which the king can master. It is probable that kings invoke their royal ancestors in time of emergency to help wage counter-witchcraft. It is extremely interesting that the Yoruba deities of war and uncertainty, Ogun and Eshu, provide in their known program of sculptures two possible links between the bird, as crown motif, and the bird as emblem of medicine and ancestor worship. At Zagnanado in Dahomey a wrought-iron sculpture of the god of iron was allegedly²⁰ found (Fig. 15). The head of this striking figure supports an unmistakable wrought-iron altar to the ancestors or asen. (Sieber and Rubin 1968: addendum to catalogue.) Von Sydow (1954: Pl. 16b) shows a trickster image from the Ewe portion of modern Ghana. The head of this image supports a small iron altar to the ancestors. These altars derive from the Yoruba divination staff which bears the image of the bird. The metaphor which has been suggested, that the crown of the king is an altar of political power to which medicine and ancestor worship are incidental, here becomes an actuality.

The argument is strengthened not only by the fact of the fusion of ancestor staff and crown traditions in the Dahomean and Ewe field but, more importantly, by the additional fact that the pendants hanging from disks near the top of the old Ijebu brass crowns are more explicable when compared to the pendants hanging from the disk on many



16. IJEBU-ODE, IJEBU YORUBA. FACE BELL (OMO) GIVEN AS A REPRESENTATION OF YADUWA, FIRST EGBO (A HIGH-RANKING TITLE) OF IJEBU ODE. PRESENT OWNER ALLEGES THAT THE BELL IS MORE THAN 400 YEARS OLD. HT. APPROX. 10 1/4".

examples of Dahomean ancestor staffs. Perhaps the Fon synthesis of the rival iconographies derives from an earlier Yoruba solution. We know that Yoruba divination was active at Alladah in Dahomey before 1659 and that the King of "Haarder" (Alladah) practiced divination at that time in the Yoruba manner (von Luschan: VIII, 493). It is possible that a relationship between the symbolism of kingship and divination existed before the seventeenth century, for we have observed the confrontation of the fish-legged motif of the king in a divine state with the bird since Tada and the Middle Period of Benin.

The gathering of the birds on the crown of the Yoruba king converges in several ways with the gathering of the birds in the iconography of Yoruba medicine and divination. The notion of the beaded crown with birds as an altar of royal authority enlivened with allusions to the ancestors and their power to wage counter-witchcraft on behalf of mankind, begins to look plausible. And the bird as ancestral force merges with the idea of the ancestral frontal face. Indeed we have witnessed the association of the two images since antiquity.

Conclusion

The beaded crown with veil blends the terror and the splendor of the kingship. The ruler must face evil dreadful beyond human imagination. The birds suggest evil and the neutralization of evil, flying out to destroy enemies foreign and domestic and even the king himself should he prove malcreant. The senior priest of Agemo at Imosan was firm on the punitive powers of the crown: "the crown brings evil to the head of the man who does evil." The shape of the ancestral frontal faces on the crown extends the vision of moral vigilance and wrath.

The birds symbolize the splendor of communication with the gods, with the spirits of departed kings, and with the king himself in full ancestral panoply. The faces of his ancestors bear witness to his earthly grandeur, the fall of the veil lifts his glory to their level of ontological purity. The review of the documents, visual and written, suggests a series of oppositions: summit of tree as site of force/head of king as seat of judgment; flight of bird or piercing with beak/royal communication or magic incisiveness; transformation of the ancestors into the king/transformation of the king into the ancestors; the coming of night when unseen forces are unleashed/the fall of the veil when unseen forces are absorbed. The meaning of these oppositions might be simply interpreted: the king can only uphold the aspirations of civilization if he embodies within an essential goodness the understanding of evil. ■

This article is an exploratory essay which proffers possible explanations of the main themes of the crown of the Yoruba kings. However, the interpretive passages, although based on extensive field data, are essentially subjective. Comparison of the iconographies of Yoruba medicine, divination, and kingship yields the recurrent image of the bird and the prerogative of beaded objects. These apparent structural links, within the religious and political life of a single African people, have suggested to the writer a generalized interpretation of motifs in the final paragraph which is meant to stimulate further exploration. Apropos of the work which remains to be done, one might repeat the words of the priest of Agemo at Imosan who, when shown a drawing of a crown with veil, birds, and frontal faces, immediately exclaimed: "The very history of the Yoruba."

R. F. T.

11 January 1970, New Haven

1. A Ford Foundation Foreign Area Training Fellowship enabled the writer to study Yoruba sculpture in the field from October 1962 - January 1964. I am also extremely grateful to the Concilium on International Studies at Yale for a grant to continue field studies during the summer of 1965 and during December 1967/January 1968. The essay has profited from conversation with William Bascom, George Kubler, Leonard Doob, Frank Willett, the Araba of Lagos, and his Highness the Alaperu of Iperu. I am grateful to Herbert Cole for allowing me to publish this work before appearance in a forthcoming volume of which he and Douglas Fraser are co-editors. Douglas Fraser organized a symposium, in May 1965, on "Art and Leadership in Africa" at Columbia University. This paper grew out of the conference proceedings. It is a pleasure to thank Douglas Fraser for many kindnesses, most especially a thoughtful editing of an earlier version of the present essay. Warmest thanks are extended to Kenneth Murray for allowing me to consult his invaluable unpublished manuscripts on Yoruba art and to John Picton for facilitating study of the holdings of the Nigerian Museum, Lagos in 1963 and to Ekpo Eyo for subsequent similar courtesies. Afolabi Ojo and Richard Neal Henderson were kind enough to read the manuscript and offer useful suggestions. The essay is dedicated to the traditional chiefs of Yorubaland and their ancestors.

2. According to an Oyo Yoruba myth, the original crowns of Oduduwa were owned by the rulers of Benin, Ila, Ketu, Owu, Oyo, Popo (Alladah?), and Shabe. (Johnson: 7-8). An Ijesha Yoruba myth, on the other hand, associates ten original crowns with the following ancient towns: Aramoko, Benin, Efon-Alaiye, Igbajo, Ijero, Ila, Ilesha, Ondo, Otun, and Oyo (Johnson: 23). Ojo (1966: fig. 19) has published an interesting map showing some thirty-four Nigerian Yoruba "crowned towns" (*ilu alade*) linked to the foundation of Yoruba kingship. To his list ought to be added Ila-Orangun, Ketu, Shabe, and other important settlements.

3. The largest of these states are the Oyo, Igbomina, Egba, Ijebu, Ife, Ijesha, and the Ekiti. West of the Egba and the Ijebu are the Egbado, Aworri, Anago, Ohori-Ije, and Ketu Yoruba.

4. Peter Lloyd has written that "one could, I think, write a textbook on comparative political systems, drawing almost all one's examples from the Yoruba." The remarks of the present writer therefore apply to most northern Yoruba kingdoms where chieftancy titles tend to be hereditary within the lineage. Lloyd shows that elsewhere chiefly titles are obtained through title association, such as the cult of the earth among Egba Yoruba. In Ondo the king selects the chiefs. Kabba Yoruba groups, in the far northeast of Yorubaland, are without kingship. For details, see Lloyd's "Sacred Kingship and Government among the Yoruba" (1960).

5. Privileged royal beaded objects include beaded slippers (*bata ileke*), beaded staffs (*opa ileke*), flywhisks (*irukere*) with beaded handles, and beaded gowns (*esou ileke*). A fine example of royal beaded treasure is the collection of the paramount chief of the Aworri Yoruba who has some twenty beaded crowns, many with flywhisks, staffs, canes and slippers beaded to match.

6. There are different kinds of fringing: (1) *continuous fringe*, the simplest and perhaps oldest variety, decorates the rim with a curtain of parallel beaded strands. Parallel brass chains hang from old Ijebu brass crowns and probably indicate relative antiquity as to the use of continuous fringing. (cf. Fig. 8); (2) *netting-over-fringe*, as in an important crown worn by the paramount chief of the Ijebu and documented by Talbot (1926 Vol. III: 141). Beaded mesh here decorates the rim and from this mesh hang parallel strands; (3) *netting-between-fringes*, of which the royal headgear of the ruler of Ogere is a good example, has netting at the front to veil the face of the wearer while parallel fringes cover the sides and back of the face and neck.

7. Bertho (1950: 73) mentions that the King of Bornu is veiled in modern times on certain occasions. The further distribution of the custom would make an interesting study.

8. Informants of Tada used this term, linked with the legend of the coming of the seven metal sculptures from Igala (Igara) country in the sixteenth century; they called the famous seated figure "Danboroko Image." Willett (1966), however, was told that the name of the latter image was "Tsoede."

9. G. J. Afolabi Ojo (1969: personal communication) recently brought to the attention of the writer the full name of the deity, "Obalufon who became very old and tough as iron" (*Obalufon ogbo d'irin*).

10. The writer has not seen this crown and bases the description on remarks made by Abraham (p. 292).

11. The famous Efon sculptor, Owoeye Oluwuro, stated in the late summer of 1964 that the fish-legged motif which he carved on one of the royal portals of the palace of the Oni of Ile-Ife represented Oduduwa.

12. Possibly the high conical shape of brass and beaded crowns stems from Islamic sources, a suggestion which fits the known impact of Islamic embroidery patterns on the costumes of the Yoruba. In the Saray Museum of Istanbul there is a Persian helmet dated 1528 which is of interest because

its chain mail neckpiece recalls the continuous chain fringe of the Ijebu brass crowns. However, the former chains are, of course, much more tightly spaced for defensive purposes (Kuhnel 1963: Figs. 160, 162). Reference might also be made to an inlaid steel helmet, dated 1625-6, from Persia (Barrett 1949: Pl. 39) and a conical helmet in the Louvre of the Circassian Mamluk period, dated to the reign of the Sultan al-Ashraf Barsbay (A.D. 1422-38). We know from the Kano Chronicle that iron helmets and chain mail were in use to the north of Yorubaland in the cities of the Hausa by A.D. 1410 (Palmer 1910: 73). If the fringed beaded crown does prove to represent a reworking of Islamic armor in the medium of bead embroidery, the form was probably elaborated in the two ancient Yoruba cities of Ile-Ife and Oyo-Ile where native bead-working industries existed in pre-colonial times. Oyo-Ile, especially, was in contact with the cities of the Hausa, and perhaps Gao and Djenne, suggesting possible avenues of diffusion of the form from the north.

13. There is a stylistic relationship linking Yoruba conical beaded crowns and the *omo* face-bells of Ijebu-Ode and at least one Ekiti settlement. Both are conical and bear the representation of a human face. *Omo*, like crown faces, represent ancestors. At Ijebu-Ode, they are the privilege of the chiefs of the royal lineage: The Awujale, Olisa, Egbo, and Apebi. (Murray: 1949-54). The lord of the Ijebu, the Awujale, by tradition has inherited some thirty-nine brass *omo*. However, although it is reported by Murray that a certain Mr. W. Smith, Resident at Ijebu-Ode, has seen this extremely important collection they were not divulged either to Murray in 1954 nor to the present writer in 1962-63. Talbot (1926) illustrates the *omo* of the Olisa of Ijebu-Ode. The present Olisa has emphasized that although most *omo* represent remote ancestors each incumbent has a face-bell made to be later worn by his son over the right shoulder with the bell coming to rest at the left hip of the wearer.

The present Egbo of Ijebu-Ode has inherited a face-bell (Fig. 16) which is shaped in the form of an expressionistic visage, the face of Yaduwa, the first Egbo, who came to Ijebu-Ode during the reign of the tenth Awujale from a site "near Benin" called Ijamo. The Egbo suggests that the date of the object is pre-sixteenth century. This does not take into consideration the possibility of intervening replacement of the actual original. The ferocity of the glance of this remarkable sculpture recalls the protruding eye of the crown frontal face. *Omo*, both in form and function, seem related to the role of the frontal faces on brass and beaded crowns as communication of ancestral power. The power, as appropriate to rank, seems restricted to a single person in the case of *omo*, whereas crown faces may be multiple and of infinite suggestion.

14. Cf. Ojo, 1966, p. 219: "The rarity of the egret gave it a value out of proportion to its size: the long white feathers were formerly presented to the (rulers) of Yorubaland who used them to adorn their crowns. Nowadays the feathers are sold rather than presented."

15. The conventional numbers of the beaded birds—four, twelve, sixteen, and twenty-four—in important instances do not match actual urban geography. Thus the imperial capital

of the Oyo by tradition had eleven quarters: Oke Eso, Modade, Molaba, Nsise-Ogan, Ntetu, Ondasa, Onse-awe, Aremu, Ile-Ologbo, Ajofa, and Isale-Ogede (Johnson: 281). Moreover, the supreme leader of the Ijebu rules over a city divided into twenty-five quarters.

16. Decorative detail varies with the particular area of Yorubaland. For example, Ekiti versions are often embellished with wrought iron chameleons, perhaps an allusion to the fact that the chameleon is an important ingredient in the compounding of certain types of medicine. (Ojo: 1969).

17. Cf. Lloyd (1968: 47): "much as they may, as individuals, stand in awe of the kingship, the council of chiefs see in the reigning ruler a man selected by themselves." Thus it seems logical that the power of the elders to check the powers of the king might be reflected by the sharing of certain artistic motifs.

18. The suggestion that the medicine staff serves as surrogate for the iroko tree is, however, but one of various possible interpretations.

19. Verger (1965) has written an important study of Yoruba witchcraft. He corrects the degenerate image of the witch as absolute evil with evidence showing that the "witch" is actually a fallen deity to whom the creator of the world had granted power over all deities, the power symbolized by the bird and the gourd, the latter image standing for the world. The Anago testimony, that the bird on the iron staff honors the witches and makes them fear the owner of the staff, might be rephrased in the light of Verger's materials to the effect that the herbalist strikes through to the positive factor in witchcraft for the good of his client. It is believed that the central bird of the staff with sixteen iron birds is a bird capable of neutralizing witchcraft. (Ojo: 1969). The concept seems consistent with the argument that the king is supreme among men in the arts of discovering and harnessing for the good of his people positive witchcraft.

20. But even without the alleged Zagnanado figure one might make reference to the more firmly documented image of the Dahomean war god in the Musée de l'Homme. The latter is crowned with various iron implements in miniature form, some precisely of the type and shape seen on some iron staffs for the Yoruba god of medicine in the Yoruba kingdoms to the east of the Fon. (cf. Fig. 5). It is as if the deity were wearing a modified medicine staff as headgear.

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SOKODAE, Notes, from page 39

1. The Krachis, Yejis and Ntwumurus all tell this story and they are all quite positive about it. We think the story is true because the event it recounts marked the beginning of the independence of the Krachi State as it exists today (that is, independence from the Juabens). This story also agrees with accounts from the Ashanti-Juaben history according to Dr. Adu-Boahene, Department of History, University of Ghana, Legon. In May, 1969, Mr. Richard York, Department of Archaeology, University of Ghana, Legon, completed some more excavations at Ketekpandu which will probably establish more precise facts regarding the dates of the Juaben domination during this period.
2. It would seem that there is some controversy over the original ownership of these horns. Some people claim that they were originally Akan, actually Ashanti, horns which the Ntwumuru copied. A set of Ntamera are even now used as "state horns" by the Ashantehene. They are carved elephant tusks; however, these horns themselves were originally owned by an Ntwumuru chief, Atere Firam. Evidence to support this claim, hence original Ntwumuru ownership, is to be found in The Ashanti Court Records: in the Ashantehene's "A" Court, Kumasi, in the matter of Kumawuhene vs. Dwanhene, 1951, pp. 53, 55, 59, 61, and 75. The Ntwumuru chief, Atere Firam, lost a war to the Ashantis and the horns were a part of the "Dwira" or booty that the Ashantis took from him.

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