



Artwork Information Sheet **12**

IFA DIVINATION TRAY



Opon Ifa (Ifa divination tray), Wood, 48x44cm © Yemisi Shyllon Museum of Art, Pan-Atlantic University

INTRODUCTION

Divination is the practice of seeking wisdom to foresee future events or discover hidden knowledge by the interpretation of omens with the aid of supernatural powers. It has been a means of communication between the traditional African people and their gods. This convention is also common among the Yoruba people of Nigeria with divination being an integral aspect of their indigenous religion.

Ifa divination is said to be as old as the Yoruba people. It deals with the communication between humans and the spirit world using Ifa divination tray (Opon Ifa) and other ritual materials. These spiritual objects serve as a vehicle through which the priest of Ifa (babalawo) reaches the gods while chanting verses of a vast corpus of oral literature known as *ese ifa* (Pemberton III, n.d). The *Ilaji Opon* (Semi-circular Ifa divination tray) is one of the Ifa divination trays within the collection of the Yemisi Shyllon Museum of Art. It is not traced to a particular artist but it is speculated to originate from Oshogbo in Yoruba land, and was acquired from traditional art dealers in Cotonou. Although the *Ilaji Opon* is different in shape from the regular circular and rectangular Ifa trays, it is similar in context and elements. To fully appreciate and understand the *Ilaji Opon*, it is important to explore what the Ifa is, the Ifa divination culture in Yoruba land and its significance in Yoruba history.

IFA DIVINATION IN YORUBALAND

Ifa divination is practiced by the Yoruba people of Southwestern Nigeria and West Africa, and it continues to be prominent in Nigeria and among Africans in America. The date of inception of the Ifa divination is unknown, but it appears to pre-date Christianity and Islam in West Africa.

Studying Ifa divination elucidates several Yoruba mythologies. According to a Yoruba myth, Ifa oracle was founded by Orunmila in Ile-Ife (the city believed to be the source of the Yoruba's – Orirun Ile Yoruba)

(Olawale, 2020). Ifa is known as the Orisha (deity or god) of wisdom, knowledge and divination. He is acknowledged as the very first Babalawo. It is believed that Orunmila was sent to the earth by Olodumare (the creator of the universe) to bring the laws of Olodumare into this world which is encoded in the 256 Odu of Ifa (the sacred text of the spiritual and ethical tradition of Ifa that has its origins in ancient Yorubaland). The Odu which is sectioned in chapters/verses called “*ese*”, contains elaborative narratives of mythic stories related to history, events, ritual practices. According to Anonymous (n.d), when an Ifa divination is received and the Ifa priest chants or speaks the wisdom from the Odu Ifa, it is Olodumare speaking.

The Ifa priest commonly called Babalawo (father of secrets/ father of ancient wisdom) helps individuals or a community to see what is in store for them in their day-to-day lives through divination. The training to become a Babalawo is an intense process. An intending Babalawo must choose a priest who would initiate him. In doing so, he is also choosing the family (Ile) he will train and study with. The Babalawo-in-training memorises all or most of the 256 Odu of Ifa including performing other rituals to be qualified as a Babalawo.

THE OPON IFA

The Yoruba's believe that their cosmology, which consists of the realm of the living (Aiye) and the realm of the spirits (Orun) is visualized in the Ifa divination tray. The tray usually has an elevated decorated border enclosing a flat centre. According to Drewal et al. (1989), the images around the parameter of the tray often refer to mythic events and characters, as well as daily issues and activities. Drewal et al. (1989) further explain that the images, “depict a universe populated by countless competing forces.” The Opon Ifa commonly has two shapes, circular or rectangular. Despite this, they could come in other shapes just like the *Ilaji Opon*. Pogeson and Akande (2016) observe that the edges of the tray are designed with intricate zoomorphic and geometric carved shapes and patterns, and the middle of the top section called “Oju

Opon” (face of the tray) usually bears the face of “Esu”, the divinity that keeps the “ase” (authority).

This head of “Esu” is usually positioned opposite the diviner during the divination process. “Esu” is an “Orisa” (deity), who serves Ifa (Orunmila) as a messenger of the oracle (Britannica, T. Editors of Encyclopaedia, 2015). In Pogeson and Akande (2016) (p.28), according to Fatokun Morakinyo (b. 1946), the “Esu” figure that is always represented on Yoruba divination trays is symbolic of the strong friendship that exists between “Orunmila” and “Esu”. Directly opposite the “Oju opon” and closest to the diviner is called “Ese Opon” (foot of the tray). In some cases, the head of “Esu” is also positioned here. Halfway up the right-hand side is “Ona Oganran” (the straight path) and opposite this on the left-hand side is “Ona Munu” (the direct path). The other sections are usually between the mentioned sections. Surrounded by the decorative border is the tray’s centre “Aarin Opon” on which the divination is done (Pogeson & Akande, 2016).



Figure 1. Sections on the divination tray. (Pogeson & Akande, 2016).

In addition to being a divination tool, the Opon ifa serves a deeper symbolism. In the words of Drewal et al (1989) pg.17, The etymology of the term Opon means “to flatter”, and the tray, through the artistry

of its embellishments, is meant to praise the momentous work of diviners as they seek to disclose the forces active in a situation. The tray’s iconography is often documented in a myth that preserves the lessons of the past.

Accompanying the Opon ifa during divination are other divination tools and objects such as the “Agere Ifa” (Ifa bowl: where the palm nuts for divination are kept.), “Iroke Ifa” (diviner’s tapper: carved wooden or ivory object used to invoke Ifa while performing divination.), “Ikin Ifa” (sacred palm nuts: Ikin Ifa consist of sixteen palm nuts from “Ope Ifa” (ifa palm-tree). “Opele” (divination chain: four half-nuts of the Opele fruit are on each half of the chain and is used during a divination session by the priest), “Apo Ifa” (ifa bag), and “Iyerosun” (divination powder: this is the powder that is spread on the divination tray. It enables clarity of the priests’ markings on the tray during divination.) (Pogeson and Akande, 2016 pp.23-25).

THE ILAJI OPON



Fig 2. **Opon Ifa (Ifa divination tray)**, Wood, 48x44cm © Yemisi Shyllon Museum of Art, Pan-Atlantic University

Apart from the unique semi-circular structure of the Ilaji Opon, this tray possesses an uncommon colouration. The tray’s ornate border is divided into twelve sections and is colored intermittently in

white, blue and yellow. The sections are separated by a rope-like bond that may symbolize the palm wine tapper's rope for climbing trees (Walker, 2005). As is typical of most Ifa trays, a male face is positioned at the top center of the tray (Oju Opon) which is a depiction of "Esu", the messenger of heaven and earth. The male face which has markings on each side is also positioned at the bottom center (Ese Opon), and the lower left and right of the tray. All the "Esu" faces bear an indifferent facial expression. On each side of the "Esu" at the "Ese Opon" are oval shapes resembling half-opened eyes. Vertically divided, each side of the tray seems identical with the other. The first figure next to "Esu" on both sides depicts a human figure with an object in its mouth. This figure matches the physique of most "Esu" statues in Yoruba land, which is a depiction of "Esu" playing a flute or pipe. It refers to Esu's duty as mediator and messenger (Drewal et al, 1989). One of the figures, (on the left side) is bald while the figure opposite it has hair or is wearing a headgear, describing an attribute of "Esu" as partly shaven and partly hairy according to Yoruba mythology (Walker, 2005). The next figure, whose gender is not clear, sits on a stool and holds forward an offering bowl "Olumeye". These figures resemble the preceding figure on the right. They could either be judged to be an Ifa devotee paying homage to "Ifa" or "Esu" receiving sacrifices since according to Pemberton (n.d), he is the bearer of sacrifices and guardian of the ritual way. Farin (2009-2016) opines that "Esu" is usually portrayed holding a calabash containing the Ase (Life force) of Olodumare in his left hand, a description which fits the image on the tray. The third segments depict a figure holding a staff. The figures are also most likely "Esu", whom Farin (2009-2016) describes as "having a curious habit of walking with a limp."

CONCLUSION

The consistent appearance of "Esu" on Ifa divination trays show its great significance in the tradition. All other features of the tray are done according to the discretion of the carver, including its shape, but they are all majorly inspired by Yoruba mythology and all things relating to Ifa.

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