



# Artwork Information Sheet **24**

## **BIRD OF PROPHECY (AHIANMWEM ORO)**



*Ahianmwem-Oro (Bird of Prophecy)*, Brass, 27 x 10 inches, Yemisi Shyllon Museum of Art, Pan-Atlantic University.

## INTRODUCTION

The Benin Empire is popular for having a tradition of consistency in its art. Some of these consistent forms include the Oba and Queen Mother Heads, the royal triad, and animals such as the leopard, crocodile, rooster, mudfish and bird. These symbols often have some traditional, political, or cultural significance attached to them. The “Bird of prophecy”, traditionally called *Ahianmwen-oro* is a cultural emblem of the *Ugie Oro* festival of the Benin people, passed down from the early 16<sup>th</sup> century, under the reign of Oba Esigie. This article explores the *Ugie Oro* festival and reveals the significance of the *Ahianmwen-oro* to the Benin people.

## UGIE ORO FESTIVAL

The *Oro* festival was instituted in the 13<sup>th</sup> century by the fourth Oba, Ewedo, to celebrate his achievements and the affluence and prosperity of the land. People in the city ate and drank to celebrate the events, and were forgiven of any wrongdoings for the day. Two hundred and fifty years later, Oba Esigie elaborated the festival by adding the bird cast upon a short staff in brass called *Ahianmwen-Oro* (Iyare, 2004). The *Ahianmwen-Oro* is used only during the *Oro* festival which takes place between May and June, the lunar Months of *Uki Eghe* (Ekhosuehi, 2020).

*Ugie Oro* was initially celebrated every five days for three months, but as a result of modernization, it was shortened to a few weeks (Ezra, 1992). During the festival, the Oba, the senior chiefs, courtiers, and priests dance in procession, in full regalia. The regalia is designed like a priestly cassock (Plankensteiner, 2007). The chiefs initially wore coral bead collars and headgears with a fish eagle feather on top, which symbolized age and wisdom. During the procession, they danced in a circle beating the beak of a cast brass bird of prophecy with a rod, in remembrance of Oba Esigie’s triumph over his enemies. The dance is also performed to honor each king’s dead father. Eweka II’s reign was the last recorded celebration of *Ugie Oro* before 1985.

## AHIANMWEN-ORO

The *Ahianmwen-oro* means bird of *Oro* festival. Among the Benin people, the bird has several names because of its role in a legendary tale. It is called the “Bird of Prophecy”, and also known as *Ahianmwen-utioye*, which means “bird of catastrophe,” or *Odibosa*, which means “God’s Messenger.” The bird is said to be famous in Benin culture for its predictions. If it shouts “*Oya-O*,” it foretells peril or tragedy, but if it cries “*Oliguegue*,” be grateful, it foretells favor, fortune, or good luck. If it cries *Oya-o*, *Oya-o* repeatedly in front of a human, it is a sign that the person has to be cautious (Ekhosuehi, 2020).

In a general account of the popular tale, the bird cried “*Oya-O*” to Esigie as he journeyed to Idah to conquer his enemies. The people of Idah on the eastern side of the Niger River, whose intention was to surmount Benin, marched on to the city and almost conquered it. Benin’s defence forced them to retreat and Oba Esigie resolved to pursue them. The Oba’s chiefs were not in support of his decision, however, he trusted his judgment.

While in pursuit, Esigie, recognising the negative cry of the bird of prophecy, commanded that the bird be killed by Portuguese mercenaries, saying, “whoever wishes to succeed in life must not heed the bird that cries disaster” (Nevadomsky, 2020). As soon as he won the war, he established the *Ahianmwen-Oro* to point out that the prediction of the bird and the disapproval of his chiefs had been synonymous with the empty noise produced by clanking the bronze staffs, pointing out that the wisdom of the king is ultimate (Gunsch, n.d). Hence, the clanging of the beak of the bird mounted on a short staff.

*Ahianmwen-oro* within the Yemisi Shyllon Museum of Art, just like others of its kind, is a bird with its wings spread out, mounted on the top of a short tapered pole. The bird’s long curved beak carries a small object that resembles a stone but is more commonly referred to as a magical substance or a ball of medicine.



Fig 1.1 **Ahianmwen-Oro (Bird of Prophecy)**, Brass, 27 x 10cm, © Yemisi Shyllon Museum of Art.

The brass cast bird done in the traditional cire perdue method has its overlapping feathers finely shaped and outlined, and beady protruding eyes by each side of its face. Its outstretched wings inspire the perception that perhaps the bird is about to fly or has just perched in its position. The top section of the rod on which it rests has more designs than the lower and broader part, which gives convenience for the latter part to be handheld. The patterns on it are interwoven lines, which are common in Benin sculptures.

The rhythmic sounds which the staff makes when the rod bearers strike it in unison, make scholars such as Ezra (1992) refer to it as a “Hand clapper” because it is a “self-sounding” musical instrument. Nevadomsky (2020) also calls it an Idiophone, a musical instrument that creates sounds primarily by the vibration of the instrument itself, without the use of airflow, strings, membranes, or electricity.

Scholars disagree on what kind of bird the *Ahianmwen-oro* is. Researchers have called it the Ibis because it resembled the Egyptian Ibis, which has mythological importance comparable to the *Ahianmwen-oro* and is similarly revered

(Nevadomsky, 2020). Scholars have also called it vulture, the African pied wagtail, hornbill, King Fisher, fish eagle, the pin-tailed whydah, and even the cattle egret. Joseph Nevadomsky, a researcher, revealed that from his field research in Benin, the birds shown to him at Madam Ehioghren’s apothecary were not identical to the long curvy billed bird that the brass casters depicted.

The bird Nevadomsky identified is the white-tailed ant thrush (*Neocossyphus poensis*), a small, short-beaked bird, with a slate-brown body, tawny chest, and dark brown tail whose outer feathers are tipped with white. It is these white-tipped tail feathers that are said to give the “bird of prophecy” its ability to predict danger (Ezra, 1992).

He reckoned that the imagery served as an exaggerated expression of the bird’s oracular powers and that the brass casters of Benin were not obliged to give realistic representations of their subjects. According to (Ezra, 1992), this is questionable because despite the stylized nature of Benin art, and modest modification of natural elements, the subject intended is usually unmistakable.



Fig 1.1 **West African Pied Hornbill**, © Jacques Erard. Retrieved from ebird.org

Ezra goes further to state that the exact bird might not be easily identifiable because the bird which Esigie encountered might be extinct or a fictitious creature created by the Edo diviners and exploited by Esigie to commemorate his victory in the Benin Idah

war. Eventually, Nevadomsky, through indirect reference in a National Geographic Society film on Burmese birds, concluded that the “Bird of Prophecy” is almost certainly the West African Pied Hornbill. This is obvious in the bird’s physic, especially while it is in flight. Its flight stance shows that it is well represented by the Benin brass casters. “Having watched films of this bird (courtesy of the National Geographic Society) holding a red seed in its beak, it is easy to see how that activity had the symbolic association with messaging” Nevadomsky adds.

## CONCLUSION

The bird of prophecy (*Ahianmwun-Oro*) encapsulates the symbolic nature of the Benin Art through the significance of animals depicted in it. The idiophone indicates that their work was not created for the sake of art and that their portrayal of forms was exact and deliberate.

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