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Artwork Information Sheet **30**

IYA-OBA ROOSTER



Iya-Oba Rooster, Unknown, Bronze, 40cm (H), © Yemisi Shyllon Museum of Art, Pan Atlantic University.

INTRODUCTION

The Oba of Benin is predominantly featured in Benin Court Art. His courtiers, chiefs, and guards also feature in other pieces but they are not depicted in the regal manner in which the Oba is presented. The only royalty depicted majestically as the Oba is the Iya-Oba who is the King's mother. One of the stately depictions of the Iya-Oba is the Iya-Oba rooster, a tall standing elaborately designed male fowl. To unravel this ironic depiction of the Queen Mother, it is important to understand her personality and position in the royal court.

IYA-ObA

Iya-Oba is the traditional title of the Queen Mother. Iya-Oba means "Mother of the King". This title is not chosen since no one knows from the onset who would bear the first male child of the royal household. However, the Benin people believe that the Iya-Oba is predestined for her role even before she is born and as a result, she can birth the next Oba (Kaplan, 1993).

Usually, the Oba has several wives, but the wife who births the firstborn son of the palace, who is the heir to the throne holds the title Iya-Oba. The mother to the heir apparent, claims this title in the event of the death of the Oba and the coronation of the firstborn. The Iya-Oba is the highest-ranked female in the Benin Empire, and according to Kaplan (1993), "She marks the potential of women for achieved status and power in a system where royalty is ascribed." The Iya-Oba embodies the possibilities for women to acquire wealth, prestige, influence and even immortality in a patriarchal society.

Her status as the king's mother undermines certain political hierarchies and makes her the most influential person in the Kingdom. Being able to influence the king's decisions, she is believed to wield the same powers as senior town chiefs.

Queen Idia, mother of Oba Esigie was the first Queen to assume the title, Iya ObA. This title may have been given to her by her son, Oba Esigie in the early 16th century (1504 to 1550) to honour her for her contribution to the wars and her outstanding spiritual and personal abilities which she embodied in running the kingdom. In honour of the queen, the Oba built a palace for her at Eguae Iya-Oba, (The palace of the Queen Mother) at Uselu which then, was located outside the city but is now part of the

capital. This palace remains the home of Queen Mothers to date.

THE ROOSTER ALTAR-PIECE



Fig. 1 Iya-Oba Rooster, Bronze, 40cm (H), © Yemisi Shyllon Museum of Art, Pan Atlantic University.

Art associated with royal women comprises about 10 percent of the known body of Benin art and the majority of these images were depictions of the Iya-Oba. The most striking and unusual depiction of her is a rooster altar piece, and the Yemisi Shyllon Museum of Art houses two of its kind.

In honour of the life of the Queen mother of Benin, a bronze rooster is cast tall on a square platform designed with what Ezra (1992) refers to as a guilloche pattern. The rooster usually made of either bronze or brass is depicted with an upright comb, small wattles, poised breast in front, leaf-like singly engraved feathers adorning its wings and body, while majestically curved sickle feathers make up its tail.

Abstract decorative patterns are used by the artist to imply the actual texture of a rooster. Some symbols are depicted at the feet of the roosters. Right in front of its textured clawed feet, one of the roosters at the Yemisi Shyllon Museum of Art has an arm holding up what

appears to be three leaves (fig. 2), a motif in Benin art representing victory and power. The other rooster, which is a more contemporary piece, has at its base, a cross-like symbol (fig. 3), a sign possibly introduced by the Portuguese. Both symbols are directed towards the authority and power of the royal court.



Fig. 2 Hand holding leaves at the base of the rooster.



Fig. 3 Cross symbol at the base of the rooster.

This ironic depiction of the Iya-Oba with a male rooster denotes that her voice was judged the loudest because other wives obeyed and listened to her. Usually, she is the oldest wife and is past menopause, so her sexuality is made ambiguous in art. Her position as the leader of the rest of the King's wives also earned her the praise title, "Eson, O goro Madagba" which means "The cock that crows at the head of the harem". Additionally, the Queen mother is said to possess male privileges due to her influence, hence her connection to a male animal.

This is equally evident in sculptures and tableaux of cast bronze and carved ivory where she is represented as a

senior chief and equated with a male (Kaplan, 1993). Like many other domesticated animals, the rooster serves ritual and sacrificial purposes in honour of ancestors in the Benin kingdom. Beyond this function, the rooster is a symbol of the Oba's first and senior wife, Eson.

Researchers are not sure when the production of these fowl altarpieces began, however, Ezra (1992) notes that there is a possibility that its creation started around the 16th century when Oba Esigie began the commemoration of brass heads in Iyoba's honour. Its presence on an ancestral altar was first documented in the diary of Lt. Commander J. Jeans, who served with troops occupying Benin following the British "Punitive Expedition" in 1897. There, he described it as "an altar on which stood a pair of bronze cocks" (Ezra, 1992). Several of these roosters amongst about 2400 Benin court artefacts found their way to Europe due to the expedition in 1897. Some of them have been housed in various prestigious institutions around Europe and America, such as Cambridge University dining hall at Jesus College, which has housed the rooster for more than half a century, The Smithsonian Museum of African Art, USA and The Metropolitan Museum (The MET), New York City, USA National Museum of African Art in Washington DC, the Museum of the Five Continents, the former Museum Fur Volkerkunde in Munich, the Museum Pitt Rivers in Oxford, Etnografiska Museet in Stockholm and the Museum of African Art, Belgrade among others.

The rooster at Cambridge University dining hall at Jesus College was recently returned to the Nigerian high commission, and has along with another Benin artefact, finally been returned to a Benin traditional palace. The restitution of the Benin artefacts is a global concern that is steadily being addressed as several institutions have agreed to return the bronzes in their possession.

CONCLUSION

Living in a patriarchal society, Iya-Oba proved herself by assisting her son, the Oba in his administrative duties, largely performing advisory roles which earned her the title, Iya-Oba (Queen Mother). Her contributions not only earned her the Iya-Oba title but also made her the center of many memorial sculptures including the metaphorical Iya-Oba rooster.

REFERENCES

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