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Artwork Information Sheet **33**

THE YORUBA BEADED CROWN



The Yoruba beaded crown, Unknown, Beads, 150cm (H), © Yemisi Shyllon Museum of Art, Pan Atlantic University.

INTRODUCTION

Ade, the Yoruba term for crown, is a symbol of power, authority and sovereignty. Just like many other monarchical civilizations, this revered head ornament gives legitimacy to the office of the Oba (King). The most significant of them all, Ade-Are, or Ade Oduduwa is a beaded conical crown structure, popular for its intricacy and regency, and only worn by the highest monarchical authority of all Yoruba land, the Ooni of Ife. Today, there are several crowns similar to the Ade-Are one of which is the Ade-nla within the Yemisi Shyllon Museum of Art. This beaded crown is believed to be an inheritance from the historic ancestor of the Yorubas, Oduduwa.

HISTORY OF THE CROWN IN YORUBA LAND

Versions of the history of the Obas' crown attribute the crown's origin to the primacy of Ile-Ife, known to be the cradle of Yoruba civilization (Busari, 2016). This owes to the belief that there was no record of the centralization of political authority before the emergence of Oduduwa whose radical transformation of the Yoruba society brought about the adoption of Adé-nla (beaded crown) as a symbol of royal authority (Adesoji, 2021). The Ade can be an everyday crown that reflects the taste of each Oba (king) or a special crown worn for special coronations (Folabalogun, 2017). The most significant special occasion crown is the Ade-Are or Are crown, worn on the Olojo Festival in Ile-Ife by the Ooni of Ife, and must be worn once a year after his coronation (Folabalogun, 2017). There is the belief that Oduduwa left the beaded crown as an heirloom for the Yorubas and the crown is said to have curative powers as prayers said with the Ooni wearing the crown are believed to be answered (Urama & Holbrook, 2011, pp. 50).

The "Olojo" festival, which means "owner's day" is celebrated in memory of the day "Olodumare"

created the earth. Yoruba mythology holds that on this day, the beaded crown with a fringe was worn by Oduduwa as a part of his regalia when he descended to earth, which makes it the oldest crown in history (Babarinsa, 2020).

The Are crown which automatically gives the descendants of Oduduwa the right to rule is believed to have been made from several items, such as cutlass, hoe and 149 other undisclosed objects. Oduduwa wore crowns on his sixteen sons who later left Ile-Ife to form the other Yoruba kingdoms. The crowns, just like that of Oduduwa, honour them as second in command to the gods, ekeji orisha (Thompson, 1970).

THE BEADED CROWN



Fig. 1 The Yoruba beaded crown, Beads, 150cm (H), © Yemisi Shyllon Museum of Art, Pan Atlantic University.

The Ade-nla, standing one hundred and fifty centimeters tall on a beaded pedestal in the Yemisi Shyllon Museum of art, is a colourful array of blue, yellow, orange, red, green, white and black beads. It is an imitation of the ceremonial crown common amongst Yoruba royalty. Typical of such crowns, beaded relief figures of humans and animals in three tiers, decorate the orange conical form of the crown.

Topping the crown's conical structure, a multi-coloured bird mounts a blue-beaded pinnacle. The bird features in all three tiers in either blue, black, and a combination of blue and white colours of beaded wings. It is not uncommon to see birds in Yoruba Iconography, considering Oduduwa's bird companion in Ile-Ife's mythical story of creation. According to the Minneapolis Institute of Art, the birds signify a divine force called ashe, the power to make things happen. The birds connote the ashe of the king and of a group of elderly women called "the mothers" who support him. On the crown, the birds symbolize the king's power and the mothers' power to protect him and the people. The birds are arranged rhythmically in the three tiers; four at the top, eight in the middle and four at the last level

At the top of the tiers, a black-beaded rider is mounted on a green horse. The rider wears a light blue headdress and has two white marks on his face, representing traditional scarification. He holds a white saddle in one hand and a white staff in another. This equestrian figure which often features in different media of Yoruba art is called Elesin which means "Horse owner" (Dallas Museum of art, 2017). The horse rider is often associated with gods like Shango, the god of thunder and lightning; Ogun, the god of iron; Erinle, the hunter; Orisha-oko, god of the farm; Eshu, the divine messenger/trickster, or Jagunjagun, a warrior. It is a symbol of power and prestige mostly found in shrines and the household of royalties.

At the bottom tier, on all four sides of the crown, are broad square-like faces with white facial scarification similar to that of the equestrian figure although this time, with three marks. The blue and black coloured Janus faces have bold white eyebrows positioned above orange eyes with white pupils. The smiling faces are outlined with yellow colours and light blue lips showing white teeth. The beaded faces symbolize the wearer's connection to Oduduwa and to the watchful line of royal ancestors who stand behind him.

The long-beaded strings flowing from the helm of the crown's conical structure are called the Iboju. This

fringe feature is a standard canon of the crown for when the monarch incarnates divine powers and it is dangerous to behold his bare face. The Iboju and the Janus faces, similar to egungun headdresses act as a mask that diminishes the wearer's individuality to project his ancestors.

BEADS AND CROWN MAKING TECHNIQUE

Evidence of bead manufacturing among the Yorubas dates back to the 11th Century AD. Blue-green glass beads made in Ile-Ife were being traded outside the Yoruba communities long before contact with the Europeans (Busari, 2017). Besides being wealth indicators, beaded objects in Yoruba land have in the past, been majorly restricted to those who represent the gods; the Kings, diviners, and chief priests, and were recognised as emblems of the gods. This is why the beaded crown connotes power sustained by divine authority (Thompson, 1970).

The colours of the beads are classified according to Yoruba chromatic groupings, funfun, pupa and dudu. Funfun evokes coolness, (etutu) and is represented in the colours white, silver, and pale gray. Pupa evokes heat, (gbigbona) and has the colours red, pink, orange, and pale yellow. Dudu includes dark and generally cool colours like black, blue, indigo, purple, dark brown, red brown, dark grey and green (Drewal, 1998). The crown in fig.1 is a combination of all colour groups but is dominated by pupa and dudu colours.

Craftsmen have the skill of crown making, a craft learned within families and passed on to younger generations within the family lineage. The extremely skilled bead makers have the task of patiently stringing the beads in strands of colours until they have completely covered the structure of the crown.

The bead embroider begins with the making of a wicker-work or cardboard frame. At Efon-Alaye one of the leading centres of crown making industry, the shape of the crown is an almost perfect cone. The cone towers over all other forms of Yoruba headgear. The embroider stretches wet

starched unbleached muslin or stiffened cotton over the frame, providing the base for the embroidery and allowing the object to dry in the sun. (Thompson, 1970, pp.8)

The colours, details and structure of the crown can be modified by the individual creativity of the embroider but the standard forms linked to ancient canons must be honoured.

CONCLUSION

The ceremonial crowns always have sacred implications, usually expressed in the iconographic standards of the crown. The colours of the beads could be used to describe the character of the king, a divinity or a town. Other times, they are simply decoration preferences of the embroider. Either way, the crown symbolizes the continuity of the monarchy and the dissolution of each monarch into the identity of the divine.

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