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Ìróké: Icon, Instrument and Insignia of Ifá

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Introduction

The *Ìróké Ifá* (also called diviners' board tapper) is one of the tools of *Ifá*. Diviners carry it around as a symbol of identity. *Ìróké* is a long and narrow carved piece of wood or tusk. Some studies have divided the *iróké* into top middle and bottom sections in order to study them adequately. They are usually only about 30 to 40 centimetres in length. It is used to tap the edges of divination boards during divination sessions. This action is repeated continually to hold the presence and attention of supernatural forces and to signify *àse*, an appeal to Olódùmarè to sanction said prayers. Babaláwo Famóriyò (2013) says that when prayers are said during a divination session, the *babaláwo* may say *àse* (may it come to pass) or tap the edge of his divination board three times, suggesting *ase*.

The description of the divination session by Pogoson and Àkàndé (2011:15) illustrates the use of *irókè ifá* in a divination process. The session starts with the Babaláwo saluting *ifá* and asking *ifá* to provide appropriate answers to his client's problems. He goes on to call on the attention of *Òrúnmilà*, the deity that originated *ifá* and was present with God (*Olódùmarè*)

at the time of creation and is believed to know the secrets of the world. *Òrúnmìlà* is also believed to know the prenatal destiny (*àyànmó*) of every individual and by this, he is said to be capable of foreseeing and foretelling the future. With these powers, *Òrúnmìlà* has the knowledge of how men can realise their destiny. The *babaláwo* also salutes and invites the following to partake in the session: *Olódùmarè* (the Supreme Being), the *alálè* (owners of the land), *àwon àgbà* (the elders), *àwon baba òlá* (the progenitors) and various ancient *babaláwos*. From the foregoing, it is evident that the *babaláwo* has indeed, called a conference of forces and the only known instrument with which the *babaláwo* continues to enjoy the participation of these forces on the issue at hand is by tapping the *iróké* on the edges of the divination board.

The history of *ifá* and some of its paraphernalia have benefitted from enriching, informative and analytical studies in the past (Clarke 1939, Abimbola 1968 and Bascom 1969). It is however, regrettable that not enough attention has been given to the iconology, use, importance and imagery of *iróké ifá* in particular. It has only been scantily described and mentioned in passing when discussing *ifá* or its art objects. Yet, this particular instrument and insignia is an icon of Yoruba religion and art in its own right. Abíódún (1975) and Laggamma (2000:52) recognise the *iroke* as an essential component of the divination kit of a *babaláwo*. Abíódún's study of *ifá* art objects is one of the few works that pay attention to *iróké ifá*. It employs *ifá* divination verses and other oral traditions in the interpretation of the significance of *iróké* and other *ifá* art objects. This study is undoubtedly informative. However, the vastness of the *odù ifá* makes it impossible for one author to exhaust the knowledge pertaining to *iróké* in the two hundred and fifty--six (256) verses. Besides, Abíódún's study is not focused on *iróké* alone, but on all *ifá* art objects. This research will concentrate only on *iróké ifá* and interrogate more *odù (ifá verses)* with the aim of unearthing new information on the iconology and relevance of *iróké*. Close attention will also be given to examples of *iróké ifá* from Yorúbá communities in Òyó (Nigeria), and Sábè (Benin

Republic). Lastly, this study intends to draw attention to *ìróké ifá* as an important icon in Yoruba wood carving art corpus as it is in religion. It is, in fact, at par with *àgèrè ifá* and *ose sàngó*.

Ìróké ifá is one of the many paraphernalia of *ifá* divination. Other items used for divination include *opón ifá*, *àgèrè ifá*, *ikin ifá*, *òpèlè*, and *ibò*. A brief examination of these other items of divination will help in the placing of the *ìróké* in proper context.

Opón Ifá (divination board)

Opón Ifá, usually carved with wood, is either circular or rectangular. It is often adorned with relief decorations on its edges. The themes of the decorations are diverse and range from zoomorphic to anthropomorphic representations. Witte (1994:67) has noted that many of the images on the borders of Yorùbá *ifá* divination boards are of activities of humans and animals that have been mythologically proven to have one relationship or another with *ifá*. Such animals are even mentioned in some of the poems of *odù ifá*. We have concluded elsewhere that sometimes the images are extemporised by the carvers and that it is only the *èsù* head, usually at the top central position, opposite the diviner, that is constant (Pogoso and Akande 2011:15-17).

Àgèrè ifá (ifá palm-nut bowl)

This is usually carved with wood; it is the container where the palm-nut for *ifá* divination is kept. According to Roache (1974:20-25), *àgèrè ifá* comes in many forms and styles. They range in style from very simple ones with a single simple column supporting a large dish at the top to the ones bearing complex mythical images. He cites the example of an *àgèrè ifá* that portrays what could probably be the representation of a Yorùbá myth. In it, two hunters or warriors attack a wild animal, which grasps a huge coiling snake in its mouth.

Drewal and Drewal (1983:60-67) gather a tradition that narrates that *agèrè* was at a time the wife of Òrúnmilà, who is said to have hid her husband inside her stomach to protect him. It was

reported that she was so industrious that her husband engaged in business activities with her. The keeping of *ikin ifá* (divination palm-nuts) that represents Òrúnmilà the husband of Àgèrè, inside the *àgèrè ifá* is, therefore, symbolic of the relationship between Òrúnmilà and Àgèrè *ifá*. Àgèrè *ifá* is also used as a container for preparing medicine, which is a symbol of her hard work. Abíódún (1989:1-18) observes that *agere ifá* is ideally depicted as a woman because of the importance of women in Yorùbá pantheon. He adds that the figure of a kneeling woman carrying a bowl is common to all *Ifá* and Òsun art repertoire. In *Ifá*, it is known as *àgèrè ifá* or *ibòrí ifá* and in Òsun and other cults, it is generally known as *arugbá* (one who carries the calabash).

A number of iconographic identities are associated with *àgèrè ifá*. They must have three main sections: the top where the *ikin ifá* is kept, the middle section where any form of picture may be depicted and a flat base on which the entire structure will rest that also serves as the handle. Important to the *àgèrè ifá* form is that the top part must be deep enough to hold the palm nuts without falling off, the middle section can carry any cultural depiction, although the representation of a woman is most common and the base must serve to hold the whole carving and its content without tilting.

Ikin ifá (divination palm-nuts)

These are the sixteen palm-nuts from *òpe ifá* (*ifá* palm tree). Each fruit of this palm tree should have four eyelets on its thick bottom side. These palm nuts are kept in *àgèrè ifá*.

Òpèlè (divination chain)

The *òpèlè* is a chain with eight half pods of a rare tree called *òpèlè* (*Schrebera qolungensi*). The palm nuts are inserted into a strong string at regular intervals. Stringed alongside with the pods, sometimes it could be glass beads, metals, cowrie shells, and or rarely coins. Leather throngs or ordinary tough cotton strings are used. Clarke (1939) records that the best *òpèlès* are made of brass chains. During a divination session, the *ifá* priest

holds the *òpèlè* in the middle and throws it in front of him to cast. According to Babaláwo Awóreni (2009), *òpèlè* was once a human being and a servant of Òrúnmìlà. Òrúnmìlà bought *òpèlè* as a slave from the market with the intention of using him to clear his farm. Unfortunately, after buying *òpèlè*, Òrúnmìlà discovered that one of his legs was shorter than the other, so he could not be of much help on his farm. Òrúnmìlà then took *òpèlè* home to live with him. When *òpèlè* got to Òrúnmìlà's home, he exhibited strange and rare wisdom and, therefore, joined Òrúnmìlà in his business of divination. On one occasion, Òrúnmìlà is reported to have traveled when *òpèlè* was called upon to perform a divination for the king. On that occasion, *òpèlè* committed a great offence, which he himself reported to Òrúnmìlà on his return. Òrúnmìlà got so much annoyed that he hit *òpèlè* on the head with his *ìróké*. According to the tradition, the *òpèlè* is reported to have broken into eight pieces. Òrúnmìlà did not want to throw *òpèlè* away; he therefore, had to use strings to join him together and from thence, he used him as an instrument of consultation.

Ìbò (instrument for casting lot)

Ìbò is a pair of cowry shells and a piece of bone tied together. After casting the lot, the cowry shell stands for an affirmative reply while the bone stands for a negative reply. This is in respect of every question posed during a divination session. Several other materials may also be used as *ibo* and they have different symbolic meaning. For example, a piece of rock stands for good health while the black nut represents Òrúnmìlà himself.

The *ìbò* is used to pinpoint the details of the solution to the problem. *Ìbò* is brought to the divination scene after a particular *odù ifá* has been identified and recited as appropriate solution to the problem of the client. After the divination, the client is asked to hold an *ìbò* in each hand, two of them in one hand and the remaining one (as they are often three in number), in the other. As the diviner carries out his investigation, he asks the client to drop the *ìbò* in a particular hand at intervals. He may also ask the client to drop the one in any hand of his choice. The diviner

is not privy to which hand the client has held particular *ibò*. Therefore, as the materials are dropped, on the diviner's request, he is led to know how to approach a solution to the problem. This leads and keeps him on the right track. For example, the diviner can address *ifá* by making a statement demanding to know whether there is a solution to the problem or not, he then asks the client to drop the *ibò* in his left or right hand. If what he drops is the cowry shell, the implication is that there is a solution to the problem. However, if the client drops the bone, this implies that the solution to the problem is yet beyond reached reach. Further divinations will, therefore, have to be made for other probable solutions.

Ìyèròsùn (divination powder)

This is the white powdery remains of *iròsùn* or bamboo trees eaten by termites. It is spread on the divination board, on which the results of the permutation from the scooping of the *ikin ifá* by the *babaláwo* are printed.

On *ifá* and its paraphernalia

As earlier stated, the history of *ifá*, sometimes called *Òrúnmilàà*, has been discussed by many Yorùbá scholars. Many of the stories of *ifá* have been based on oral traditions which have variants from different Yorùbá communities. As these stories are subjected to various interpretations, it is difficult to know the original version. Johnson (1921), one of the early writers of Yorùbá history, traces the origin of the Yorùbá from the Eastern part to Ilé-Ifè and suggests that Shetilu (also called Agbonirègún), the originator of *ifá* divination, had been in Ilé-Ifè before Yorùbá people came to meet him there. Johnson points out that Shetilu was originally from Nupe land. But in another oral tradition, also by Johnson, he claims that an *Aláàfin* of Òyó, Onígbojí, who was dethroned for this action, introduced *ifá* worship.

Clarke (1939) posits that the beginning of *ifá* divination among the Yoruba may be unknown but that the source of *ifá* divination power was obtained from the phallic god, *elégbáa* (also called

èsù), on the promise to give him the first portion of every offering to God by those who consult *ifá*. Clarke, tracing the history and identity of *ifá* among the Yorùbá pantheon, observes that some of the names given to *ifá*, such as *òrúnmilà* or *olórúnmilà* (both names indicate that the bearer has domain and power from heaven) can be compared with those of the Supreme Being, *Olódùmarè* or *Olórun* (the owner of heaven). Clark, therefore, suggests that *ifá* or *Òrúnmilà* must be the mouthpiece of *Olódùmarè* (Clarke 1939). He further postulates that *Olódùmarè* communicates with men and they with him through *ifá*. Clarke also engages the controversy of the relationship between *èsù* and *ifá*, as he argues that *esu* and *ifá* are the main messengers of *Òrúnmilà*. He posits that *Òrúnmilà* may just be another name for *Olódùmarè* since *Òrúnmilà*, in some myths, is the leader of the four hundred and one (401) deities sent by *Olódùmarè*. Clarke's position about the relationship between *èsù* and *Òrúnmilà* can also be used to explain the reason why *èsù* head is usually carved at the topmost part of *ifá* divination boards.

Furthermore, Idowu (1962:19) records that *esu*, one of the Yorùbá divinities, was the universal police and keeper of the *ase* (divine power) with which *Olódùmarè* created the universe and maintained its physical laws. *Ifá* was put in charge of divination because of his great wisdom, which it is said he acquired as a result of his being present when *Olódùmarè* was creating the universe. *Ifá*, therefore, knows all the hidden secrets of the universe. This is why he is called *akéréfinúsogbón* (the small one whose mind is full of wisdom).

According to Abimbola (1977:1), the Yoruba believe that *ifá* was one of the four hundred and one divinities (*òrisà*) sent by God (*Olódùmarè*) to the earth (*ayé*), as the divinities descended from heaven (*òrun*) into the city of Ilé-Ifè at the beginning of creation. *Ifá* was said to be the youngest and the wisest of all. He was, therefore, nicknamed *Akéféfinúsogbón* (the small one whose mind is full of wisdom), and because of his wisdom, he was put in charge of divination.

McClelland (1982:12) in his study of *ifá* traditions in Ede, Òkò, Ìkirun and Òsoḡbo states that *Òrìsànlá* (sometimes called *Obàtálá*) and *Òrúnmilà* were critically involved in the creation of the world. If *Òrúnmilà* was involved in the creation of the world, as found in this myth, this is an indication that *ifá* worship had existed before human beings and by implication, the Yoruba people. This may suggest that the time of origin of the *ifá* worship is beyond the knowledge of the Yoruba people themselves.

Today, *ifá* worship can be found all over the world. The expansion of *ifá* worship is credited to the dispersal of the Yorùbá, the original owner of the culture, all over the world. Evidence abounds to attest to the diffusion of the Yorùbá from Nigeria to establish communities in other parts of West Africa and indeed, other parts of the world. They are well known to have migrated to Ifè, a region of Atakpame in Togo and to Sàbe and Quidah in Benin Republic. The Yoruba people in Ife or Fe in Togo were said to have migrated to their present location from Ile-Ife around the 13th century (Gayibor 1992:12, Odji 1997:14). The expansionist wars of Old Oyo Empire in the 17th to the 19th century, when Oyo sought to expand her territory for the reasons of slave trade led to Oyo conquering the regions of Abomey down to ports of Novo and Quidah. This led to the spread of Yoruba people to the west of the West African regions. The concomitant transatlantic slave trade of the 16th to the 19th century saw many Yorùbá forcibly moved from Nigeria and Benin Republic to the Americas where they served as slaves. In all the new communities where they have diffused, *ifá* is still worshipped. Despite their unwholesome predicament, they tenaciously continued to worship *ifá* and other religions in their new lands. *Ifá* worship is now even gaining popularity among Americans. In a study carried out by Meyer and Bede-Fagbamila (1997:33), they record a large number of Americans living in Chicago who regularly consult *babaláwos* (*ifa* diviners) to inquire about their businesses and other personal problems.

Specific studies on art objects used in *ifá* divination and worship include that of Abiódún (2000) who addresses the recurrence of equestrian figures in Yoruba woodcarvings. He interrogates *ifá* oral literature (*odùifá*) with the aim of finding the original meaning of the equestrian in Yorùbá art. His conclusion is that the horse is an animal of prestige and a crucial factor in the determination of the strength of armies. It is therefore symbolic of prestige, royalty and superiority.

Drewal (1983:136), Drewal and Drewal (1983:60) and Witte (1989:59) carry out studies on Yorùbá *ifá* divination boards. Drewal and Drewal (1987: 225) identify the compositional arrangement of decorative patterns on Yorùbá divination board. They point out 'serial' and 'seriate' arrangements on the borders of divination boards. Drewal (1987) identifies nine sections of the *ifá* divination board. Other studies that address *ifá* divination but do not delve into the wooden objects of its worship include those of Ezio Bassani (1994), Manuel Jordan (2000), Louis Brenner (2000), and Pemberton (2007).

Furthermore, Lagamma (2000) surveys the works of art associated with oracles in Africa and concludes that art and oracle illustrate some of the ways by which African cultures seek to transcend the limitations of human knowledge by reaching out for the intervention of the divine. Lagamma (2000) identifies *iróké ifá* as an instrument that initiates communication between the natural and supernatural. He notes that when the diviner strikes with a tapper (*irókéifá*), on the flat surface of a wooden board, *opón Ifá*, the communication is initiated.

Pogson and Àkàndé (2011) attempt a comparative analysis of the decorative patterns on divination boards from Ìsàlè Òyó, Ìjèbú and Òsogbo. They submit that divination boards from Ìsàlè Òyó combine features found on boards from Òsogbo and Ìjèbú. The features on the Òsogbo and Ìjèbú boards combined in the boards found in Ìsàlè-Òyó, have already been identified by Witte (1994). The boards from Ìjèbú have a part of the *èsù* head, located on the *oju opón*, extending into the centre (*ààrin opón*)

of the board, while the boards from Òsogbo have the head of *èsù* contained within the limits of the borders of the board.

Ìróké Ifá

To establish *ìróké ifá* as an icon within the Yorùbá woodcarving corpus, its iconography must fulfill the laws of archetypal models. The archetypal theory on model states that for any image, idea, or pattern to become and be considered a widespread model, it must have specific features that are universal to all. Vasina (1984) submits that the mental image of an archetype exists before the object itself. The idea, therefore, is that the image must guide the maker. Archetypes have independent lives of their own; their appearance creates awareness and poses no questions. The appearance of *ìróké ifá* can be best exemplified by a Yorùbá saying that “*Òdú kii se àimò fún olóko*” “*Òdú* (a particular green leaf vegetable) is easily identified by farmers.”

According to Chief Dìípo Gbénró (2014), a Yoruba language expert and a traditional chief of Ibadan, there is a particular myth of *ifá* that narrates an ordeal of *Òrúnmilà* and how he had to sell his instruments of divination, including his *ìróké*, to get out of an impending disaster. In the narrative, *Òrúnmilà* who was to receive some important visitors from heaven (*òrun*) was so broke that he could not afford to entertain these visitors. He then instructed his wife to take his instruments of divination to the market to sell in order to get money to entertain his visitors. *Òrúnmilà*'s wife sold the *ìróké* for *egbèfà owó eyo* (1200 cowries), the *opón ifá* for *egbèje owó eyo* (1400 cowries) and the *ìrùkèrè* (fly whisk) for *èrindinlògbòn owó eyo* (26 cowries). The proceed from the sales was then used to prepare a great feast for these important visitors. When the visitors had finished wining and dining, they felt impressed with the lavish hospitality of *Òrúnmilà* and thanked him. They then declared their identity as *ajogún* (evil forces with destructive powers) and that because *Òrúnmilà*'s generosity was impressive, they promised not to harm him or lay their hands on things that belong to him. *Òrúnmilà* was happy and thankful to *ifá* and

ancestor *babaláwos*. This story simply portrays how physical materials were sold, but the result was the spiritual rescue of *Òrúnmilà* from destructive forces.

According to Fámoriyò, a *babaláwo* from Ìsàlè Òyó, verses of *èjì ogbè* and *ògúndá iwòrì*, narrate stories in which the *iroke ifá* is mentioned. He first spoke on *èjì ogbè*, the founder of *Òtúnmobá* (Otun) town. The verse goes thus:

*Ìjì tí mo jì, mo mú iróké baba mi itorofini
itorofini
Ìjì tí mo jì, mo mú irùkèrè baba mi itorogbàjà
itorogbàjà
Mo ké ibòsí, mo pe Akintulà baba mi
Akintulà o, Akintulà ò jé mi mó
Omo erin tí fon kikan kikan
Omo erin tí fon bí iḡboro tí gòkè àlò
A bí itó ginniginni bí eji ro palé
A kini nilé Ìdó
Òun ló difá fún ògèdè Òyàgàn
Ògèdè Òyàgàn n sùnkùn aláiribi ó n gbààwè àìrì
pòn
Ó lóun kò bimo, Ó wá n fì owó osun nu ògìrì
gbìgbe
Ó rì omo léyìn adie, ó bú púrú sékùn
Ó ní eye oko se é bimo ju eni lo
Ògèdè Òyàgàn to àwon babaláwo lo
Àwon babaláwo won bu ikin ifá dá
Erin nlá yo ganbù lójú opón
Ogbè lótùn ún Ogbè lósi
Ebo ni won ní kó rú
Wón ní kó rúbo sí iróké àti irùkèrè
Ó rúbo, ebo rè fín, ebo rè dà
Ògèdè Òyàgàn wá bimo yanturu
Ògèdè Òyàgàn wá n yin Ifá
Ifá wá n yin Elédumarè
Elédumarè wá n yin ara rè lálède òrun
Édumarè nikan ni kó ní eni a n fiyìn fún
Ó wá lanu kótó, orin ifá ló bó sii lénu*

Ó wá ránsé sí agogo lóde Ìgboro
 Òpá kogókogó lóde Ìserimogbe
 Ó wá nasè tòn séyìn, ijó fà á
 Ó ní, e wo omo Abítulà berere
 E wo omo Abitula berere
 Ògèdè Òyàgàn, A kii rágàn Eésún
 E wo omo Abitula berere

Meaning:

As I woke up I took my father's *iroke*
 As I woke up I took my father's flywhisk
 I called my father Akintula
 Akintula, please answer me
 The child of the elephant that trumpets hard
 The child of the elephant that trumpets while
 climbing the *alo*
 The one with plenty urine like the dew-falls
 The one that greets in Ido
 The same performed divination for the barren
 banana tree
 Barren banana tree was crying for not having
 children
 She said she was barren, and was rubbing her
 hand of calm wood oil on walls
 She saw the hen with chickens, she burst into
 tears
 She exclaimed that how can birds of the forest
 have children and she would not have
 The barren banana then consulted *babalawo*
 The *babalawo* made divination with *ifa* palm-
 nuts
 It was the big elephant that was revealed on the
 divination board
ogbe on the right, *ogbe* on the left (*aji ogbe*)
 She was asked to make sacrifice
 She was to sacrifice to *iroke* and fly whisk
 Barren banana performed the sacrifice and the
 sacrifice was acceptable

Barren banana then gave birth to numerous children
 Barren banana then praised *ifa*
Ifa in turn praised the *Olodumare*
Olódùmarè praised himself in the skies
Olódùmarè does not return praises to any other person
 He then opened his mouth and started to sing
 He sent for the gong from Igboro
Opa kogokogo (stick for beating drum or gong) from Iserimogbe
 He then stretched out his leg backwards, dance consumed it
 He said look at the children of Abitula, numerous, numerous
 The children of Abitula are numerous
 The barren banana, We do not come across a barren *esun*
 Look at the children of Abitula, numerous, numerous.

In this *o.dù* of *ifá*, Ògèdè Òyàgàn (referred to as Abítulà in the verses) was barren and had been asked to make sacrifices to *iróké* and *irùkèrè* for her to be able to have children. She did this and consequently, she gave birth to many children. Famóriyò explains that even today, similar prescriptions are made for those who are faced with difficult times, and come to consult *ifá*. They may be asked to sacrifice a hen each to *iróké* and *irùkèrè*. This *odù ifá* eulogises the powers and position of *iróké ifá* and brings it to the level of an *òrìsà* (god or goddess). This is undoubtedly a eulogy of the enormous powers encapsulated in *iróké* and *irùkèrè* in the paraphernalia of *ifá* and Yoruba cosmology.

Fámoríyò recited another *odù Ifá* dealing with *iróké*, Ògúndáwòrì, which further eulogises the importance and power of *iróké*:

Ògúndá ni eléku
Ìwòrì, ni ijé konko

Ló difá fún won lóde Òró
 Wón ni kí wón rúbo sí àìkú ara won
 Wón gbé ebo nibè, wón rúbo
 Ñjé iróké mi iróké ide ni
 Ìrùkèrè mi irùkèrè bàbà ni
 Ajere tí mo fi ñ difá sebi Olódùmarè ló fi lé mi
 lówó

Ló difá fún Olóòró
 Ìgbà tí wón ní kó rúbo sí àìkú ara rẹ̀
 Ó wá gbébo nibè, ó rúbo
 Wón ni kó sètùtù fún Ìróké, Ìrùkèrè òun Ajere
 Olóròó gbó sáwon aláwo lénu, ó rúbò
 Ó rúbo sí iróké, Ìrùkèrè òun Ajere
 Ó rúbo tán ebo rẹ̀ fin, ebo rẹ̀ gbà
 Ta ló wá so Olóròó di oba?
 Òrúnmilà ló so Olóròó doba,
 Èrò Ipo èrò Òfà,
 E wá bá ni jèbútú ire gbogbo
 Jèbútú ire là wá wà
 Olóròó wá ñ yin àwon aláwo rẹ̀
 Àwon aláwo ñ yin Ifá
 Ifá wá ñ yin Olódùmarè oba
 Òdùmarè wá ñ yin rarè
 Èdùmarè nikan ni kò léni tí fògo fún

Meaning:

Ogunda is the Eleku (ancient *babaláwo*)

Iwori is the Konko (ancient *babaláwo*)

The two performed divination for the people of Oro

They were asked to sacrifice for longevity

They sacrificed

My *iroke* is made of silver

My flywhisk is made of bronze

The *agere* with which I make divination, it is *olodumare* that gave me

The same performed divination for the king of Oro

When he was asked to perform sacrifice for
 longevity
 He performed the sacrifice
 They propitiated *iroke*, *irukere* and *agere*
 Oloro heeded to his *babalawo*'s instructions, he
 sacrificed
 He sacrificed to *iroke*, *irukere* and *agere*
 His sacrifice was accepted
 Who then made Oloro the king?
 Orunmila made Oloro the king; it is *orunmila*
 that made Oloro, king
 Oh people of Ipo and Offa, rejoice with us for our
 fortune
 All and sundry we are favoured
 Oloroo praised his *babalawo*
 The *babalawo* praised *ifa*
Ifa in turn praised *Olodumare*
Olodumare praised himself
Olodumare is the only one who does not praise
 any other personality.

As in *èjì ogbè* that was recited earlier, *ògúndá iwòrì*
 corroborates the importance of *iróké* within the Yoruba
 divination system. In *ògúndá iwòrì*, the king of Oro's fortune
 was realised after he sacrificed to three the paraphernalia of *ifá*,
 namely; *iróké*, *irúkèrè* and *àgèrè*. In addition to the known
 connotations and powers of *iróké*, these two *odù* reveal *iróké*'s
 supernatural ability to provide for every human need when
 propitiated. It is an instrument that can be propitiated for the
 realisation of good destiny by men. The figure of the kneeling
 woman, usually found in many Yorùbá carved wooden objects,
 which Abíódún (1989) points at as symbolising a woman in
 labour and a time for the bringing forth of the destiny of men, is
 therefore, highly suitable as an illustration in the middle section
 of the *iróké*.

Iconography of *iróké ifá*

Abiódún (1989) views *iróké* as a good example of the striking appearance of women in Yorùbá sculpture. He observes that the *iróké* consists mainly of three sections: the topmost or pointed end section; the middle section, and third or bottom section in order of importance. Elsewhere, Abiódún (1979) attempts an interpretation of *ifá* art objects based on oral tradition. He suggests that the topmost part of the *iróké* symbolises the inner spiritual *orí* (head), while the middle section, which is usually a depiction of human head or a kneeling nude female figure holding her breast symbolises humanity choosing destiny. He explains that to the Yorùbá, the choice of destiny is of utmost importance and that a woman is significant in the choice of destiny. The woman usually represented in a kneeling position is a symbol of *ikúnlè abiamo* 'the pain associated with child birth,' often regarded as the greatest act of reverence that can be shown to any being, especially to appease the gods and solicit their support. This is not unconnected with the fact that it brings forth a new life.

The features that essentially qualify a carved object as an *iróké* are its possession of the three parts already mentioned and described. The inside of the handle may be hollow for the attachment of bells. An *iróké* must be portable and ergonomically designed for ease of holding it, and it must be strong enough for tapping on the *opón ifá* without damage.

Plate 1 is an *iróké ifá* that belongs to Taiwo Abimbola of Ilé Titun, Òyó; it has three sections. The first, the top, is the conical cap of the *iróké* and terminates with a curve at the tip. It is this section that usually hits the *opón ifá* when tapping during divination. The next section is the middle section, which is usually the section where the artist carves an illustration. This particular *iróké* bears the carving of two human heads (most likely female) backing each other. The coiffures on the heads of the figures are elaborate and elongated to terminate in the cone, which is also the cap on the heads. The coiffure on the heads is the traditional Yorùbá *sùkú* hairstyle. The third section of the *iróké*, the lowest part, is the handle in which a rattle bell is

embedded. On the surface of this *ìróké* are criss-cross carving decorative lines that form interlocking patterns. The criss-cross pattern probably also serves as grip for the holder. It is hollowed out on the inside and metal bells are attached (see plate 1c). When the *babaláwo* taps it on the board, the metals rattle. The *ìróké* may also be shaken to rattle the bells. The *babaláwo* sometimes jingles the *ìróké* to attract *àse* (Abiodun 1994). The hollow and the resonance qualities of the wood help to echo the sound of the bell.



Plate 1a

*Ìróké*Ifa: Táiwò Abimbólá, Ilé Titun, Òyó
24.4 cm



Plate 1b
ìròkélǵá side view



Plate 1c
ìròkélǵá

The inner part of the handle that doubles as a rattle

Plate 2 is another of Táiwò Abímbólá's *ìròké*. It conforms to the three-section archetype of Yoruba *ìròké*. In the

middle section, an equestrian is depicted. The horse rider has a decorated coiffure, which terminates at the conical part of the *iróké*. Horse riders are not unusual imagery in Yorùbá woodcarving. Indeed, Thompson (1974) notes that the image of the mounted figure is widely found in West Africa as an expression of domination. Among the Yorùbá carved wooden figures of horsemen honouring warriors are kept in the homes of veterans of military exploits. Morton-Williams (2005) equally points out that the 'motif' of the mounted warrior, usually in wood and rarely in ivory, is common in several settings in Yorubaland. It can sometimes be found in temples or shrines of gods (*òrìsà*) and in the palaces of kings. He maintains that they are also found in the superstructure of some *èpá* masks. The lower section of the *iróké* in plate 2 is the handle.



Plate 2a

Ìròkéifá: Táiwò Abímólá, Ilé Titun, Òyó
21.1 cm



Plate 2b

Ìròkéifá: Táíwò Abimbólá, Ilé Titun, Òyó
(side view)

The *iróké* in plate 3 belongs to Babaawo Fámoríyò of Ilé Odò Òjé, Ìsàlè-Òyó. The unique feature of this *iróké* is not only in its length; it does not also have the middle section. The artist has creatively carved a human face from the top section, thus making up for the lost middle section. The features of the face on the *Ìròké* are simple and are sunk, rather than relief on the wood. The bottom section is hollow and has a bell attached to the inside.



Plate 3

Ìróké Ifá: Fámoriyò, Ilé Odò-Òjé, Ìsàlè-Òyó.
10.2cm

The *ìróké* in plate 4 also belongs to Fámoriyò. This *ìróké* has the three parts. In the middle section is the representation of a man's bust. The carving is simple.



Plate 4

Ìróké Ifá: Fámoríyò, Ilé Odò-Òjé, Ìsàlè-Òyó.

14.4cm

Plate 5 is an *iróké ifá*, that also belongs to Fámoríyò. This particular one is made with beads. This type of bead is traditionally called *otutu opòn*. Òjébòdé of Òròkí area of Ìsàlè Òyó also has one of this type (Plate 6). According to Fásakin (2013) this type of *iroke* is usually held by *babaláwos* when going out on important occasions. They are not often used for consultations. Scholars very rarely mention this type. The *iróké* with *òtútù opòn* are made with sticks, strings, adhesive, and strings.



Plate 5

Ìróké ifá, (made with *òtútù opòn* beads): Fámoríyò, Ilé Odò-Òjé,

Ìsàlè-Òyó.

25.7cm

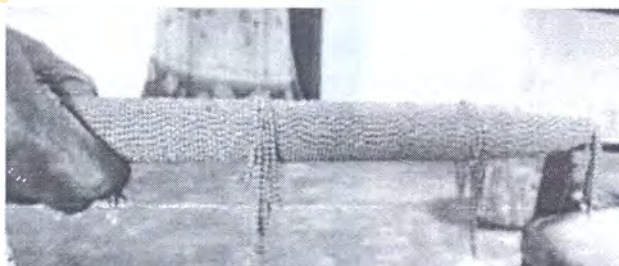


Plate 6

Ìróké ifá, (made with *òtútù opòn* beads): Ojebode, Oroki Area,
Isale-Oyo

Plate 7 is an *iróké* belonging to Chief Morákinyò, the *Ààre Ìsèse* Yorubaland of Ilé Arówópalé, Ìsàlè-Òyó. The representation in the middle section is that of a standing male and female backing each other. Her breast, though not protruding, and her coiffure identifies the female. On the head of the two figures is an abstracted bird form on which the top conical section is mounted. The base is the handle of the *iróké*.



Plate 7

Ìróké ifá: Chief Morákinyò, *Ààre Ìsèse* and *Oba Edu*, Ilé Arówópalé, Ìsàlè-Òyó.

30.6cm

Plates 8 and 9 are *iróké ifá* from Alápiinni and Ìjàlùmò areas of Sabe in Benin Republic. The representations in the central position of both *iróké* are of a kneeling woman holding their breasts. However, the facial features of the figures in these *iróké* are not clear enough. The gender of the kneeling figure in plate 8 is obscure. The facial features are totally absent, thus the

face is blank. There are no surface decorations with lines and patterns. Plate 9 is a little more detailed than plate 8. In plate 9, the coiffure is distinct while some facial features are clearly carved.



Plate 8

Ìróké ifá: Falaise Òjérindé, Aláplínni Area, Sabe
20.1cm



Plate 9

Ìróké ifá: Fadupe, Ìjálùmò areas of Sabe
16.8cm

Conclusion

Generally, most *iróké* have three sections, but there are instances where there might be more or less than three sections. For example, the *iróké* in plate 3 has two sections; the carver collapses the middle section and fills the upper section with a human face. The *iróké* is, therefore, shorter than the ones with three sections. Another novel one is the beaded *iróké* in plates 5 and 6. These *iróké* are obviously for prestige purposes more than tapping boards.

Also observable is the fact that there are similarities in the iconographic patterns of *iróké ifá*, *àgèrè ifá* and *ose Sàngó*. They all equally tend to have three sections. A typical *àgèrè ifá* has the top section, which is the cup in which *ikin ifá* is placed

during divination, the middle section, the place where the carver carves a particular image and the third section is the base. *Ose* Sàngó also has three segments. The upper section is the axe head, which, according to Thompson (1976), indicates the tongue of fire usually carried by Sàngó devotees. The middle sections of the *ose*, like in *àgèrè* and *ìròké*, usually have some form of representation carved in. The base section of the *ose* is the pedestal on which it stands. Armstrong (1983) posits that sometimes, *ose* is simply carved with a handle surmounted with twin blades. He also notes that there are instances where the blades are further adorned with human faces at the centre or at the end of each blade. Describing the next section, Armstrong (1983) notes that this portion may portray a variety of forms, but mostly it bears the carving of a full human figure, which is sometimes male but most times kneeling females.

The middle section of *ìròké*, *àgèrè* and *ose* Sàngó serves as the decorative platform for the artists. In this section, the artist has the freedom to choose and decorate the object within a limited repertoire of images. Commonly employed images in the middle sections are equestrian, kneeling female figure holding her breast and a standing male or female figure. It must however be emphasized that the carvers are at liberty to extemporize as they carve.

Also important to note is that all the *babaláwos* interviewed agreed that it is not compulsory, although desirable, for a *babaláwo* to hold an *ìròké ifádú* during divination. The *ìròké* inspires concentration and indicates *àse* and sustains the attention of the diviner, client, mortal and supernatural forces, during the divination session. The *ìròké* is the physical insignia of authority of the *babaláwo*, both at spiritual or social gatherings.

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