



## Yoruba Art & Culture

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### The Yoruba

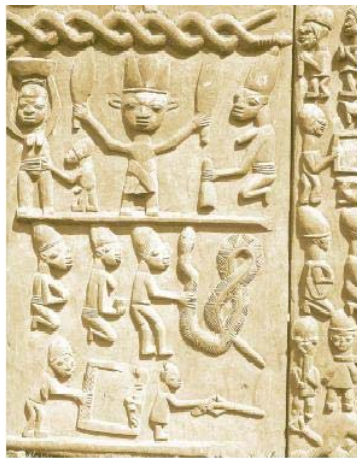
The Yoruba people live on the west coast of Africa in Nigeria and can also be found in the eastern Republic of Benin and Togo. Because the majority of the slaves brought to the Americas were from West Africa Yoruban descendants can also be found in Brazil, Cuba, the Caribbean, and the United States. There are also many Yoruba currently living in Europe, particularly Britain, since Nigeria was once a British colony. The Yoruba are one of the largest cultural groups in Africa. Currently, there are about 40 million Yoruba world-wide. The Yoruba have been living in advanced urban kingdoms for more than 1,500 years. They created a strong economy through farming, trading, and art production. Their outstanding and unique artistic traditions include woodcarving, sculpture, metal work, textiles, and beadwork.

West Africans, such as the Yoruba, have lived in urban societies and have produced extraordinary art work since the 5th century BC. During this time, the Yoruba began to use iron to create metal tools and weapons such as machetes, axes, and hoes. These tools made it easier for the Yoruba to farm the land. They planted crops including yams, their staple food. They also harvested the seeds from the palm oil tree. The seeds from this tree produce a vegetable oil that is used for cooking. Kola nuts were also grown and harvested. Soon the Yoruba began trading with neighboring areas for rice and sorghum. Due to increased agriculture, the Yoruba community began to grow in size and large towns were created. They arranged their communities by clan lines, or extended families. Families who had the same ancestors lived next door to each other in large compounds. An elder was put in charge as the head of the compound. Towns became organized by the type of work that people did.

### Royal palace compound, Oyo, Nigeria, 1960



### Royal palace door, (Detail) 1951



### Royal Place horse, Oyo, Nigeria 1960



### Yoruba Kingdoms

There were about 20 Yoruba kingdoms at one time with a different king ruling over each one. Ife was known as the center of cultural and religious life.

Oyo was the strongest kingdom with the largest military and political system. The kingdom of Oyo was close to the Niger River. The rich soil in Oyo allowed the people to grow more crops than they needed. This helped the kingdom of Oyo to easily trade with neighboring groups. They also created a strong military. Oyo was in control of 6,600 towns and villages by the end of the 18th century. Internal wars and fighting with neighboring groups, along with the beginning of the slave trade, eventually led to the decline of these great kingdoms.

In the 18th century, European countries were beginning to create colonies all over the world. Europeans were taking villagers from West Africa and bringing them to the New World to be slaves in the new colonies. The British came to Yorubaland in 1852. By 1884 European nations were meeting to discuss how they would break-up Africa into different colonies. The British were granted the right by the other European nations to colonize Yorubaland, and in 1893 Yorubaland became part of a larger colony known officially as Nigeria.



Lagos, Nigeria, 1960

In 1960 Nigeria became an independent country. Ten million Yoruba were known to live in Nigeria at that time amongst many other ethnic groups. Today, the Yoruba still continue many of their traditional ways of life. Many Yoruba live in large towns and cities, and many towns are still based on the extended family dwellings in compounds. Lagos is the largest city in Nigeria and over ten million people live there, including a large Yoruba population. Many Yoruba today are still employed as carvers, blacksmiths, farmers, weavers, and leather workers. Today, the Yoruba still make some of the world's greatest works of art.

#### Food, Agriculture and Trade

Yams are the most important food for the Yoruba in their homeland of Nigeria. Grains, plantains, corn, beans, meat, and fish are also eaten. Poultry, goats, sheep, pigs, and cattle are raised as livestock. Large rivers, lagoons and the ocean provide fish and shrimp for the Yoruba. Fisherman sell fresh and dried fish through traders at the local markets. The Yoruba make stews out of yams, plantains, corn, cassava, and taro. Palm oil from the nuts of the palm oil tree is often used to cook with.

Every country has an economy. People create economies through employment, trade, and the buying and selling of goods. Around 1900 cacao became the most important crop that Nigeria sold to other countries in order to earn money. Cotton and indigo were also grown and sold. Today natural resources like crude oil, coal, palm oil, peanuts, cotton, rubber, wood, corn, rice, millet, cassava, and yams are exported. Many men are employed as farmers. Women are responsible for selling goods at the markets.

Potters, blacksmiths, carvers, and leather and bead workers are important to Yoruba society because they all contribute to the economy. The goods that they produce are made to be used and also have great artistic value.

#### Sculpture

The Yoruba began creating magnificent sculpture out of terra cotta clay in the 12th through 14th centuries. Bronze figures were made during the 14th and 15th centuries. To create bronze sculptures, artists first made models out of clay. When the clay dried they would put a thin layer of beeswax over the clay and engrave details in the wax. Next, they covered the wax with more layers of clay until they created a thick mold. The mold would then be heated over a fire until the middle layer of wax melted. The artist poured the bronze into the top of the mold through tubes. The bronze now took on the form of the wax that was once there. When the bronze cooled and hardened the outer layer of clay was broken off and the sculpture was completed. These life like sculptures may represent kings and gods.

The Yoruba began to create more abstract wooden sculpture as their major art form later on. Many African cultures choose to create sculptures of humans in an abstract form rather than a realistic one.

#### Pottery

Women are the potters in Yoruba society. They make many different types of pottery including pots for cooking, eating, and storage. Palm oil lamps are also crafted. Unique pots are made in honor of Yoruba deities. Pottery is only made in towns where clay is available. It is sold to neighboring towns that do not have access to clay.

#### Leather and Beadwork

Men are responsible for leather and beadwork. Goat, sheep, and antelope skins are used to make things like bags, cushions, and sandals. Leather scraps in different colors are often pieced together to form designs. Beads are used to decorate crowns, hats, bags, and other items worn by kings and babalawo. Popular bead designs include, human faces, birds, and flowers.

#### Leather and beaded knife case

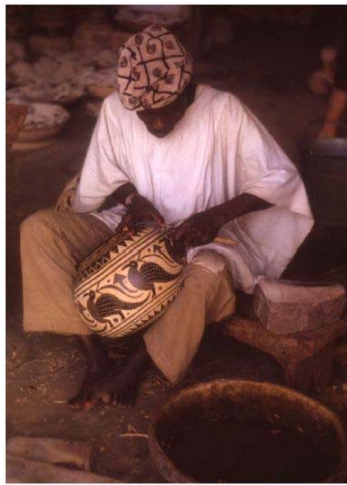


#### Royal leather cushion



#### Blacksmiths and Calabash Carvers

Blacksmiths are very important to local towns and are responsible for making tools that many other professions use, such as hoes, axes, knives, chains and hammers. Calabashes (dried gourds) are carved by men and are used to serve food or drink. Goods carried to markets are often carved from calabashes. They are also used as containers for storing medicines and food. Calabashes are also carved into musical rattles.



#### Calabash carver's tools



#### Woodcarving

Men are responsible for woodcarving. Woodcarving is the most important art form in Yoruba culture. Men use knives and adzes to carve wood. Divination trays and many other sacred objects are carved out of wood.

#### Textiles

Men and women both act as weavers and dyers. Weaving is done on different types of looms. Weavers create hundreds of different patterns on their looms. Wild silk and cotton are used to make cloth. Indigo, a native plant, is often used as a dye to color threads.

#### Religious Beliefs

Traditional Yoruba beliefs see the world made up of two connected realms. The visible world of the living is called Aye, and the spiritual world of the Orisas, the ancestors and spirits, is called Orun. Ase is the life force that is given to everything by the Creator of the universe. Ase is in everything: plants, animals, people, prayers, songs, rocks, and rivers. Existence is dependent upon Ase because Ase is the power to make things happen and change.

The Yoruba believe in the Creator who rules over the entire universe along with many other gods that serve underneath him. The Creator of the universe is called Olorun. Olorun lives in the sky and is considered to be the father of all the other gods. Olorun is the only god that never lived on earth. Olorun is the supreme god and has no special group of worshippers or shrines, like the other gods do.

The Yoruba people worship over four hundred different deities. These gods are called Orisas. Some of the Orisas are worshiped by all of the Yoruba. Other gods are only worshiped by certain towns or families. Every person is given or receives a special deity to worship. A person usually worships

the god or his father, but some worship the god of their mother. Some people are contacted by a particular god in their dreams and are instructed to worship them.

**Stool. Made by Duga, Meko, Nigeria, 1950**

**This Stool is made to represent Iroko, a deity who makes peace when Esu, the trickster and divine messenger, causes a fight.**



#### Creation Myth

Every culture has stories that explain how the universe was created. This is one version of a creation story that is told by the Yoruba to explain the beginning of the universe.

Olorun lived in the sky with all the other gods. He told Orisanla, the god of whiteness, to create the earth for him. Olorun gave Orisanla some soil, a chain, a five toed chicken, and a snail shell and sent him on his way. When Orisanla got to the gates of heaven he noticed some other god having a party. He stopped to chat with the other gods for a bit and drank some of their palm wine. Orisanla became from the palm wine and fell asleep. Orisanla's younger brother Odua noticed his brother fast asleep. He took all the things that Olorun had given him and went to the edge of the heaven with Chameleon.

Odua dropped the chain and climbed down, throwing some of the soil onto the water.

He then released the chicken and the chicken scratched out the earth, expanding it in many directions until the ends of the earth were made. Chameleon then stepped upon the earth to make sure that it was stable. Odua followed and settled at a place called Idio.

Orisanla soon woke and realized what happened. From that time on Orisanla put a taboo on palm wine. Even today those who worship Orisanla are forbidden from drinking palm wine. Orisanla came down to claim the earth but his brother, Odua demanded that he was to be the owner of the earth since he had created it. The two brothers quite drunk continued fighting until Olorun heard them and called them to report to him. Olorun granted Odua the right to own the earth and rule over it. Olorun then told Orisanla that he would become the creator of mankind. In order to keep peace amongst the two brothers Olorun sent them back to earth with Sango, the God of Thunder; Ifa the God of Divination; and Eleshije, the God of Medicine.

**Sango dance wand, made in Meko, Nigeria, 1950**



*Although every worshipper of Sango, the thunder god, owns a wand for his personal shrine, it is carried only by the group member who becomes possessed with Sango's spirit. The central figure represents such a devotee, carrying a Sango staff in his right hand. At his left is a female worshipper of Oya, the Goddess of the River Niger and Sango's most loyal wife; and on his right is a man beating Sango's drum. At the top left is a ram, Sango's favorite sacrificial animal, and at the right, the dog that is sacred to him.*

There are many important Yoruba deities. Esu acts as a messenger for the other deities and he is also a great trickster. He assists Olorun and the other gods by causing trouble for people who offend them or fail to worship them. Everyone prays to Esu so that he will not harm them.

Ifa is the god of Divination, and no matter what other deities a person worships everyone asks Ifa for knowledge and guidance in times of trouble. Ifa is a great wiseman, and he acts as the interpreter between all gods and humans. Ogun is the God of Iron and War. He is a great blacksmith and a fearless hero. Woodworkers, leatherworkers, and blacksmiths worship him. Without Ogun particular god. There may also be taboos—foods or things that people cannot partake in because of the god that they worship. For example, Esu's favorite foods are corn, beans, and palm wine. These things are often placed at his shrine. His followers often wear black beads around their neck. They never eat or use palm oil because this is said to make Esu angry.

#### Ifa Divination

Divination is a method of solving problems and foretelling the future. It has existed for thousands of years throughout the world in different forms. Ifa divination is a traditional way to solve problems among the Yoruba. Divination helps to explain why certain misfortunes are happening to someone. For

example, if a farmer's crops are not growing or if someone in the family is ill they would seek the help of a diviner. Ifa diviners are called babalawo (fathers of ancient wisdom). The function of the Ifa diviner is to determine the reasons that are causing a person's misfortune. He does this by performing a ritual with the person which reveals the source of the problem.

#### The Divination Ceremony

Divination depends on interpreting marks made on the divination tray. Divining powder is used to make these marks. Sixteen palm nuts from the African palm tree are the most important of all the objects used in divination. Palm nuts are a symbol of Ifa, the God of Divination. The diviner tries to pick up all sixteen palm nuts in his right hand. If one nut remains in his left hand he makes a double mark in wood dust on his tray; if two remain, he makes a single mark. The diviner recites a verse based on the marks made. These verses act as the advice to help solve the person's problem.

#### Divination tray

The carved face represents Esu, the messenger of Ifa and the other deities.



#### Yoruba beaded diviner's bag



As diviners travel often in the pursuit of their profession, they frequently carry a portable set of Ifa paraphernalia in bags. The divining chain is kept and carried in a shoulder bag. It is made of locally woven cloth, or sometimes of leather, and it may be decorated with cowry shells or beads. Beaded bags are often smaller. A diviner is one of the very few nonroyal persons permitted to use solidly beaded materials; these are usually reserved for the Yoruba kings, who had beaded cushions, slippers, and gowns, and who alone may wear beaded caps and crowns.

Beaded bags, knife handles, hangings for the shrine, and other objects may be made by the diviners themselves, or by the beadworkers who work for the kings. Palm nuts, divining tray, and bell may be carried in this bag if it is large enough, but for palm nuts other types of containers are usually provided, which remain at the shrine for Ifa most of the time.

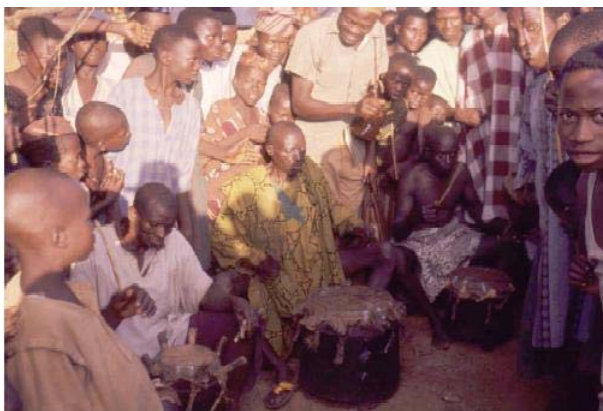
#### Music and Dance

Music and dance have always been an important part of Yoruba culture for those living in Nigeria as well as in the diaspora. Yoruba music and dance are used for many different occasions in life such as religious festivals, royal occasions, and entertainment.

Yoruba traditional music focuses on Yoruba deities. Drums and singing are the main elements of Yoruba music. Instruments such as metal bells and wind instruments are sometimes used. Yoruba is a tonal language. Words must be pronounced in the appropriate tone (pitch) in order to understand speech in its correct meaning. There are three major tones: high, mid, and low. Most of Yoruba music is based on these tonal patterns of speech.

Juju emerged in the 1920's and is the most well known form of Yoruba popular music in Nigeria. Juju has its roots in traditional Yoruba drumbased music. Juju is dance music played by large ensembles centered around guitars and drumming. Singing is a major part of Juju music and is inspired by Yoruba poetry, proverbs, praise songs, and the musical character of the language.

#### Drumming, Oro, Nigeria, 1960



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*Yoruba Divination: Selections from the Collections of William and Berta Bascom*, curated by Ira Jacknis, Research Anthropologist, PAHMA. November 2000-may 2001 (parts of this text were reproduced in the list of objects section).

*A Century Of Collecting* curated by Ira Jacknis, Research Anthropologist, PAHMA.

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#### Epa Headdress, Yoruba, Nigeria



The annual Epa festival celebrates the important social roles of a town: its chiefs, farmers, warriors, hunters, priests, and women. The climax of the festival occurs when male dancers appear, surrounded by their followers and wearing tall, heavy masks like this one, receiving salutations, praise names, and songs. The lower, abstract helmet portion conceals the dancer's face and allows him to see through the mouth. The upper, more naturalistically carved, superstructure celebrates the central figure at the top, the herbalist priest (Osanyin) who wears a fringed hat. In his right hand the priest holds his official staff, identified by a cock surmounting several tiers of clustered bells. Below the staff is a pot drummer. In his left hand he holds a staff showing two musicians, a kneeling flutist on top and a dundun drummer below. Along with the pot drummer, the kneeling flutist and the dundun drummer herald the presence of the priest, the dundun drummer beating out tone patterns that sing the praises of the priest. A female "bowl carrier" stands before the priest. The bowl contains the herbal medicines, the power (ase), of the priest. In Yoruba iconography bowls contain hidden power and are thought of as possessing powers similar to those of women, associated with their powers of reproduction and ability to compromise the fertility of others. This is the hidden power of "our mothers," celebrated in the Gelede ceremonies and by the Gelede headdress shown in this exhibit. Since the welfare of the town depends upon the herbalist's skills of healing and controlling evil, he is accompanied by a retinue of spear bearers, flutists, horn players, men carrying gourds of his medicines, women pounding yams (a festive food), and a woman carrying a child, suggesting that the powers of the Osanyin priest assist in giving birth. This elaborate array of figures (all formerly painted with bright colors) shows the carver's powers of composition and mastery over the massive bulk of wood.

#### Reference:

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