PROJECTIONS FROM THE TOP IN YORUBA ART

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Yoruba art is well known to the readers of African Arts, and the corpus of scholarship on this subject is expanding rapidly. Recent studies tend to be particularistic, focusing on forms associated with specific cults or ritual contexts. This essay takes an alternate and complementary approach, analyzing the significance of a motif often mentioned in the literature but almost totally unexplored. I will refer to this motif very broadly as a "projection from the top": the projection must be attached to the head or the top of a construction. This motif appears in hairstyles, headgear, wood masks, cloth masquerade costumes, sculpture, and architecture. Despite great variation in form and medium and despite multiple shades of meaning, these projections share a basic principle of Yoruba religious thought.

The Yoruba view all organic matter as possessing a vital force (ase) that can be manipulated to regulate the quality of man's life. Herbalists, native doctors, priests, and diviners prepare according to formula such natural elements as leaves, stones, water, earth, and parts of animals. As medicinal preparations, they may be carried in a container, rubbed on the skin, ingested, or entered into the bloodstream through incisions. Particularly relevant to this discussion is the fact that preparations containing ase are placed inside incisions made on the crania of priests and priestesses who then become mediums for the gods.

The priest is possessed on ritual occasions by the spirit of the god. The Yoruba say the god "mounts" (gun) the inside head (ori inun) of his priest, and the head swells (wu), taking on the personality of the god. A possession priest is known as adosu—literally, "one who receives osu." Osu as defined by Pierre Verger is "a ball of the size of a knot made of the elements constituting the ase [vital force] of the gods, reduced to powder and amalgams" (1954b:324). In a Yoruba-derived cult house in Bahia, Brazil, I saw an adosu with an osu recently embedded in incisions made on the top of the head (Fig. 1). The term also refers to hair that is allowed to grow over the spot of the incision. In Figure 2 the osu is a square patch of hair. The hairstyles of Oshun priests from Oshogbo are more prominent; the patch has developed into a pronounced tuft or conical shape projecting from the cranium (Fig. 4).

Related to the hairstyles of these priests are those of royal messengers, ilari (Fig. 3). In the past ilari served as intermediaries between the king and his officials and the various cult groups (Morton-Williams 1964:253). They and their distinctive hairdos were known as far west as Porto-Novo in République Populaire du Benin (Dahomey). According to A. Akindele and C. Aguessy, in the kingdom of Porto-Novo the head of a new "ilari" is shaved "taking care to leave a cone of hair at the summit of his cranium" (1953:60). This hairdo marks ilari as consecrated to the service of the king and invests them with some of the king's powers. The roles of adosu and ilari are similar in that both are intermediaries endowed with certain powers of their associates. Ilari literally means "incision on the head," ila ori. Samuel Johnson reports medicines placed in the head were "supposed to be a charm capable of giving effect to whatever the name given to the individual at the same time signifies" (1921:61). So striking is the role and image of ilari that they have been depicted in Gelede masks (see Drewal, 1974, fig. 8), identifiable by their distinctive stem-shaped hairdos. Like the intersecting lines painted on the head of the Brazilian initiate (Fig. 1), the hairline of the ilari,
separating the right from the left side, is intersected by the vertical line of the tuft which marks the place of the incision.

Another example of the projection from the top of the head is found in the most sacred mask of the Gelede society, called Iyanla or Ososomu, the Great Mother (Fig. 8). The projection is again called osu, representing a tuft of hair, and it reflects one of the Great Mother’s praise names: Apokudosu (a pa oko di osu), “The One Who Killed Her Husband in order to Receive Osu.” The osu here, like those on the heads of priests and royal messengers, signifies that the mask has been prepared with powerful substances. So potent is the preparation that gazing upon the mask will cause bad dreams and temporary insanity, and women of child-bearing age risk amenorrhea and infertility. In another mask from the same general area, the osu was replaced by a single bird perched on top, reflecting the power of the Great Mother to transform herself into a bird in the night. The Yoruba refer to the Mother as Oloju Meji—“One with Two Faces”—and Abara Meji—“The One Who Possesses Two Bodies.” As one informant explains, “You see her one way in the day, and at midnight she turns to another thing.”

The projection on the top of her head, then, also hints at the vital force, represented by the bird, inside the head.

The idea that projections from the head may characterize vital force is apparent in the form and context of Yoruba oshe Shango (Figs. 5, 6). These dance staffs are carried generally by one possessed by Shango, god of thunder. The double celts projecting from the head represent vital force (Verger 1964:17) and reflect the god’s power to hurl thunderbolts to earth in the form of lightning, a power believed to be shared by priests of Shango (Wescott and Morton-Williams 1962:27). In Figure 6, a priestess possessed by Shango dances with an oshe, which in essence mirrors the state of the priestess carrying it: her head is swelled with the presence of Shango, and the thunderbolts emerging from the head of the kneeling priestess depicted on the sculpture convey the nature of the vital force in her head.

Other images of the head radiating inner power are depicted in chalk drawings on an adosu’s compound wall (Fig. 11). The priestess says that these images are spirits and they have many things projecting from their heads that cannot be seen with “the naked eyes.” The lidded pot on the head of one image has substances inside that “we cannot know.” Like the hairstyles of priestesses, royal messengers and the Great Mother, and like the double thunderbolts depicted on oshe Shango, these projections from the head are visualizations of the vital force that resides inside.

Nowhere is the concept of inner power more apparent than in Egungun iconography. Egungun masqueraders represent spirits from the realm of the ancestors. Performances of Egungun affirm the Yoruba belief in the intercession of ancestors in the affairs of their descendants while precautions to prevent the audience from touching the performers reinforce the separation of the two realms. Three types of Egungun from the Egba area of Yorubaland illustrate projections from the top of the head (Figs. 9, 10, 12). The first is Alabala (Fig. 10), probably the most common type of Egungun in this area since it is the first costume a cult member acquires. Each Alabala has an osu in the form of a tuft made of yarn. An Egungun tailor commenting on the tuft said, “When that osu is there, it means that the cloth of that Egungun is complete. So it can be taken out. But if that osu is not there, you will never see them carry it out and say that Egungun is coming.” The osu tells us that the Egungun has been prepared with the proper ingredients for efficacy.


4. OSHUN PRIEST AT OSHOGBO, NIGERIA, AFTER VERGER (1964a: pl. 110).

5. OSHE SHANGO WITH THE DOUBLE CELT MOTIF SPRINGING FROM THE DEVOTEES’ HEAD; PROBABLY EGBADO, CLEVELAND STATE UNIVERSITY.
Medicines are placed inside a calabash concealed in the garments, sometimes making the cloth bulge. This practice has been documented in myth by Joel Adedeji (1970:75). The first Alabala was reported to be a hunchback, and before he died he willed that whoever of his children had the hump should be given the mantle of Egungun and made the leader of the society. However, an impersonator took the garments and carried a calabash under his costume to simulate the hump. The myth states, ""Oturu (the impersonator) has carried a gourd! Ifa was consulted for Oturu who carried a gourd and called it a hump!'" The ruse was exposed by the drummers, but since the impersonator danced with great flourish, the Alaafin (king of Oyo) officially presented him with the mantle and made him the rightful heir to Egungun. The contents of the concealed calabash constitute the essence of Egungun. The osu is merely the outward sign of the presence of inner power and the authenticity of cloth.

A second type of Egungun is the powerful Onidan (Owner of Miracles) (Fig. 12). Like Alabala, Onidan is prepared with efficacious ingredients concealed within the garment. His osu, also made of yarn, runs horizontally along the upper border of the face netting. A third type of Egungun is Egun Elegra, who functions primarily as a crowd controller (Fig. 9). Carrying a whip he keeps the audience from approaching the spirit world of the Egungun. He also serves Onidan, being the only type of the three Egungun discussed whose arms are free to handle equipment. Egun Elegra is also called Gun Eleere because he may carry a carved image (ere) on top of his head. Like Onidan, the projection of Egun Elegra is arranged horizontally along the upper border of the face netting. In addition, the Yoruba god Elegba has a pointed hairstyle curving to the left side (Fig. 9). Among the Ohori Yoruba, Egun Elegra is depicted with an animal horn projecting upward from the masquerader's head and slightly toward the left (Fig. 7). The horn itself is a container and is one of many ingredients with which the Egungun is prepared. The subtle bulge in the cloth indicates where medicine that endows the masquerader with power is concealed.

The projection depicted on the head of sculptures of Egun-Elegba has received much attention in the literature (Wescott 1962; Thompson 1971:Ch. 4; Pemberton 1975) (Fig. 13). Referring to Elegba's tuft of hair, one praise poem states, "Elegba Esu of the road; Esu Adara does not have a head to carry loads; this pointed-headed Laroye does not have a head to carry loads." Verger (1957:136) notes that "this violates traditional decorum, for everyone in Yorubaland is expected to carry his share, depending upon age, on his head," and, based on a myth collected from a priest of Elegba, suggests the tuft on the top of his head is a symbol of his friendship with Ifa, the Yoruba deity of divination (1971: Ch 4/3). Ohori Yoruba priests say that Elegba must not be given loads to carry because he will steal them and refuse to share with the gods; the hairstyle prevents this possibility. His share of sacrifices is offered separately from the other gods and placed at the crossroads where he is believed to reside. Eshu is always given his offerings first, a reflection of his role as guardian of the crossroads, as one stationed between the realms of man and the gods. This perhaps explains the tuft motif culminating in another face (Fig. 13). Eshu sees into both realms and acts as the link between man and the spirit world. This is indeed his role in Egungun. Like the osu of priests and royal messengers, Eshu-Elegba's osu identifies him as a character invested with certain authority and responsibility. The tuft of hair denies the mundane function of carrying loads and implies a head prepared with medicine. There is evidence to suggest a direct relationship between Eshu and certain of the king's ilari. Verger reports that it was the function of the leader of the ilari to make sacrifices to Elegba (1957:115).

The power in Eshu-Elegba's head can best be understood in the context of another class of art object that also frequently displays a head projection: paired figures joined by a leather thong at their bases, which must hang upside down either on shrines or around the necks of priests, who wear them on market days (Fig. 14). The priests say if the head is upright there will be confusion and possibly bloodshed. Before the objects may be carried outside, offerings of corn and gin must be placed beneath them. Upon encountering a priest wearing these inverted figures, a person must pay alms. Giving small amounts of money to a dormant Eshu (one whose head is down) insures those trading in the market of a successful day. Eshu with an upright head is a trickster who brings chaos and trouble.

In the foregoing examples of head projections, the role of mediator has appeared. If a divination, the central mediating system of the Yoruba, is performed by trained priests and serves to order the universe by revealing
the thoughts and actions of gods and ancestors, who are believed to influence man's existence. Before a priest begins the divining process, he places his equipment so that he faces the doorway, or if divining in a grove he orients himself toward the path leading into the clearing. Precautions are taken to clear the path or doorway, for they are the road on which the spirits travel to the ceremony, and priests of Ifa say it is dangerous for people to come down the path during invocations. They divine on a wood tray known as opọn Ifa. The border of the tray is dominated by the face of Eshu-Elegba, which always faces toward the diviner so that it is directly between the road of the spirits and the priest. Here again Eshu is intermediary. He is Elegba Eshu ona, "Elegba Eshu of the road" (Verger 1957:136).

By tapping the tip of an instrument called iro Ifa (Fig. 15) against the center of the divination tray, the diviner gains the attention of the gods. This tapper usually depicts a human figure with a pointed projection at either the head or the base. At the handle of the instrument is usually a cavity for the insertion of efficacious ingredients, but it is the point of the tapper that makes contact with the divination tray and, thus, the spirit world.11

Another projection from the top appears on headgear. In certain Anago and Ohori towns, priests, before entering possession trance, must place tall conical hats on their heads (Fig. 16). These hats, surmounted by a stem (Fig. 18), share certain elements with Yoruba beaded crowns (Fig. 17). Thompson calls the projection on beaded crowns a "stem-on-cone" and notes that it is also found in brass ceremonial crowns (1970:14-15, figs. 8, 9). The hats worn by the possession priests are called konkoso, referring to the sieve- or sifter-like form made of dried grasses; Thompson illustrates the structure of a partially completed beaded crown that is also conical (1970, fig. 2). White chicken feathers are attached to the large beaded bird shown in Figure 17 during annual sacrifices to the crown. Similarly, birds are represented on the possession hats by feathers, which in one town were said to be symbols of extraordinary power. In another, the feathers were actually plucked from the first bird sacrifices made for the priests upon acquiring their positions as mediums. To avoid exposing efficacious medicines, the very sight of which can be dangerous, there is a prohibition against looking inside the hat, not unlike that preventing the king from gazing inside his beaded crown (Thompson 1970:10). More importantly, just as the priest is the closest link with the god, so is the "divine king" the link to the royal forefathers. He represents the royal dynasty, the ancestral force, which is incarnated in his beaded crown (Thompson 1970:8; Asiwaju 1976:114). A. I. Asiwaju confirms the significance of the crown: "The ade [crown], as an emblem of the royal ancestral spirit, constitutes an object in the palace shrine, and even when the Oba [king] was not present in person, the ade (more often the original one) was publicly displayed, usually by being placed on the throne. Before it, the Yoruba were obliged to observe the same protocol of reverence and deference in the real presence of the monarch." Modified projections occur even among a king's everyday headgear (Fig. 20).14

Another object featuring the projection at the top is the ile ori, "house of the head" (Fig. 21), which contains a "head" made of 41 cowries strung together in the shape of a crown (Johnson 1921:27). Little is available in the literature about this object's use. More research on the spiritual concepts of ori (head), ori ode (outside head), and ori inun (inside head) and their relation to a person's destiny, individuality, intellect, personal power, and possession trance will undoubtedly add further significance to projections from the top.15

The final example of this motif is architectural. In a large grove in Pobe, République Populaire du Benin, three shrines are devoted to three Anago Yoruba gods (M. T. Drewal 1975). Only the shrine for Elegba has a projection from the top of the roof that is approximately one meter in height (Fig. 19). The construction here is non-functional and visually recalls the praise phrase, "This pointed-head Laroye does not have a head to
The context, called descend a poles worlds into Legba.” and relates the drama which spirits loa. protective maize (spirits) ceremonial these carry AWORI, HAVE ROYAL FEATHERS, 1944:44; famous THE A Vertical said H. Around the gods. These gods. The context projection, in essence, is like a crossroads, where man establishes contact with the gods.

The most direct expression of the vertical projection as crossroads and its conceptualization in architecture occurs in the New World, primarily in Haiti in the concept of poteau mitan. The poteau mitan is the center post of the Voodoo ceremonial enclosure, and like the projection from Elegba’s shrine, it is architecturally non-functional. More striking is that the poteau mitan is also known as poteau Legba (Maximilian 1945:34; Marcelin 1949:16; Deren 1972:97; Brown 1976). Numerous researchers report that the gods use the post to descend at a ceremony (Bastide 1958: 67-68; Courlander 1944:44; Deren 1972:36, 97; Metraux 1959:77). Harold Courlander gives a good description (1944:44): “This center pole, called a po’t’au (or po’t’au mitan) is a significant ‘prop’ in the drama and meaning of Haitian dancing. Down this pole the loa (spirits) come when they enter the gathering. Down this pole comes the drum-spirit, too, to enter into the head and sticks of the drums. At the foot of the po’t’au sacrifices are laid out, and maize flour paintings made. In the topmost parts of the pole, protective household gardes, or fetishes, may be suspended, and in its branches may be hidden stone celt sacred to certain loa. Around this pole the dance characteristically takes place.”

Alfred Metraux (1959:77) calls the poteau “the passage for spirits . . . the ladder by which spirits come down into the peristyle when they are invoked.” Maya Deren (1972:97) relates the poteau mitan more specifically to the crossroads: “Legba—life—is the link between the visible, mortal world and the invisible, immortal realms . . . Since he is god of the poles of the axis, of the axis itself, he is God of the Cross-roads, of the vital interpenetration between the two worlds. The poteau mitan, the center post of the peristyle, through which the loa arrive at the ceremony, is also called the poteau Legba.”

Vertical projections in these various contexts and forms may be said to act as a poteau mitan, an avenue of the divine, with vital ingredients embedded at their bases to facilitate spiritual presence. This idea can be most clearly illustrated by the Brazilian medium’s head (Fig. 1) recently endowed with ase. Painted lines cross where the medicine was inserted; a raised node forms the vertical projection. In the West African context, certain royal messengers’ hairdos demonstrate this concept (see H. J. Drewal 1974, fig. 8). The head is divided into right and left sides, intersected by a vertical stem. There is a famous tale about Eshu wearing a cap that is white on one side and black on the other. Eshu caused a fight between two friends who saw his hat from two different perspectives. While the two men were settling their dispute about whether the cap was white or black, Eshu went about burning the town. The story defines Eshu as a trickster, but it also warns that the two worlds that he mediates must remain separate or existence will be chaotic. The lines that divide the head (the intersecting lines on the Brazilian initiate’s head, the sagittal line of the shaved hair of royal messengers, and the black-and-white cap of Eshu) suggest the separation of realms. The vertical axis conveys their interpenetration. Only those persons or objects “prepared” for mediating roles can operate in both.

As we have seen, the projection from the top is usually associated with divine presence. Those who don it either in the form of a hairstyle (osu) or headgear function as intermediaries. They include priests, royal messengers, Egungun masqueraders, and the sacred king. And the projection appears in mediating objects such as the Great Mother mask, the Ifa tapper, oshe Shango, and sculpture for Eshu-Elegba. In certain contexts the projection may also be observed in architecture. The heads or tops of these mediating figures literally operate in two realms—realms accessible only through those persons and objects that have been specially endowed for transcendence. Projections from the top, then, are a dominant symbol of the vital force of a divine associate; and in their various forms and contexts they may characterize the particular nature of that force.

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31. According to Kyemante, eight Asantebronies are represented by twelve swords, with only four chiefs having the customary two swords (1961:114). The swords of destroyed chiefs are not retained by the Asante.


Freeman, Thomas Birch. 1844. Journal of Various Visits to the Kingdoms of Ashanti, Kumasi, and Ashanti, London.


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