

## ***IFA DIVINATION TRAYS FROM ISALE-OYO***

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## Abstract

*This paper is a study of the images and patterns on ifa divination trays from Isale-Oyo. The paper also explains some ifa paraphernalia. The paper establishes that ifa trays from Isale-Oyo bear distinctive features when compared with other ifa trays in Yorubaland such as those of Ijebu and Osogbo. Central to this study is the iconographic description and interpretations of Isale-Oyo divination trays. Data were collected through direct interviews with divination tray owners. Photographs of the trays were also taken. The investigation revealed that:*

- *Divination trays from Isale-Oyo combine features found on both Ijebu and Osogbo trays.*
- *The Esu figure continues to occupy the top central position on Oyo divination trays, even though with representational variations elsewhere in Yorubaland.*
- *Some divination trays in Oyo carry no decorations on their borders, and in some recent cases, ceramic plates are now used for divination.*

Keywords: opon ifa (divination tray), ifa, esu, South Western Nigeria, Oyo

## Resumo

*Este artigo trata dos padrões e imagens dos tabuleiros de adivinhação ifa usados em Isale-Oyo (Nigéria), bem como de outros objectos religiosos associados. Argumenta-se que os tabuleiros ifa de Isale-Oyo têm características que os distinguem de outros tabuleiros ifa da região yoruba, como os de Ijebu e Osogbo. A descrição e a interpretação da iconografia dos tabuleiros de adivinhação constituem o foco deste estudo. Os dados discutidos foram recolhidos através de entrevistas a proprietários de tabuleiros de adivinhação e fotografias de tabuleiros. Conclui-se que:*

- *Os tabuleiros de adivinhação de Isale-Oyo combinam traços dos tabuleiros de Ijebu e dos tabuleiros de Osogbo.*
- *A figura de Esu continua a ocupar a posição central superior nos tabuleiros de adivinhação de Oyo, embora se registem variações na sua representação noutras zonas do território yoruba.*
- *Alguns tabuleiros de adivinhação de Oyo não possuem qualquer decoração nos frisos, e nalguns casos recentes vêm sendo utilizados na adivinhação pratos de cerâmica.*

Palavras-chave: opon ifa (tabuleiro de adivinhação), ifa, esu, Sudoeste da Nigéria, Oyo

## Introduction

A sizeable number of studies have been carried out on Yoruba *ifa* divination and its arts, especially the divination trays. Wande Abimbola has shed significant light on *ifa* in Yoruba religion (1967 and 1969). He has written extensively on the position occupied by *ifa* divination in Yoruba pantheon. Abimbola has continually pursued the use of *ifa* divination poetry and literature as sources of historical evidence (Abimbola, 1969). His focus is on *ifa* prose, poetry, mythology and divination. Bascom (1969), another enthusiastic writer on *ifa* divination and its religious implications, submits that indeed, *ifa* divination is a means of communication between man and god among the Yoruba.

Rowland Abiodun (2000, p. 182) sought to find contextual meaning to the recurring image of the equestrian figures in Yoruba woodcarvings. He therefore interrogated *ifa* divination poems to find a deeper meaning of the representation of horses in traditional Yoruba arts. He observed that several representations of horses/riders in Yoruba art and the use of horses by the military, a crucial factor in the determination of the strength of armies, is also a symbol of royalty, leadership, power and success.

Studies directly concerned with *ifa* divination trays include those of Drewal (1983, pp. 136-56), Drewal and Drewal (1983, p. 66) and Drewal, Pemberton and Abiodun (1989). Henry and Margaret Drewal (1987, p. 233) explained two compositional decorative patterns on divination trays. These are the “serial” and “seriate” arrangements of images on the borders of divination trays. The “serial” compositional technique according to them, refer to compositions where its units of design have individual interpretations different from others, yet all the units tell one story. The “seriate” arrangement on the other hand refers to representation of the myriad autonomous forces operating in the Yoruba cosmos and those affecting the diviner and his clients. This means the representation of any objects or animals that have one thing or the other to do with divination and the diviner.

According to Drewal *et al.* (1989, p. 23) the decorative patterns on the borders of Yoruba *ifa* divination trays can be divided into nine sections – eight sections on the border and a centre section. The most important of these sections is the *oju opon* (face of the tray) located directly opposite the diviner. In all cases, the head of *esu* is usually depicted on the *oju opon*. The section directly opposite the *oju opon* and nearest to the diviner is called *ese opon* (foot of the tray). Half way up the right hand side is *ona oganran* (the straight path) and opposite this on the left hand side is *ona munu* (the direct path). The other four sections are between

the mentioned sections, from the upper right to the lower left (see Figure 1). They also pointed out that representations of *esu* head on the Ijebu trays, protrude slightly into the centre of the tray.

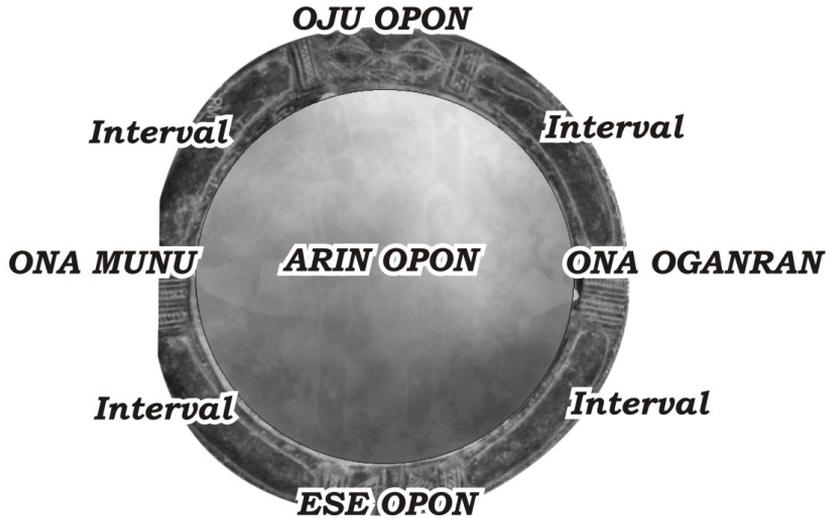


Figure 1: Sections on divination tray

Recent studies on divination by Ezio Bassani (1994, p. 79), Manuel Jordan (2000), Louis Brenner (2000) and Pemberton (2000 and 2007) have enriched the scholarship of Yoruba *ifa* divination. This is in spite of the fact that their focus is not on the divination trays per se, and they were more interested in divination processes of cultures other than the Yoruba.

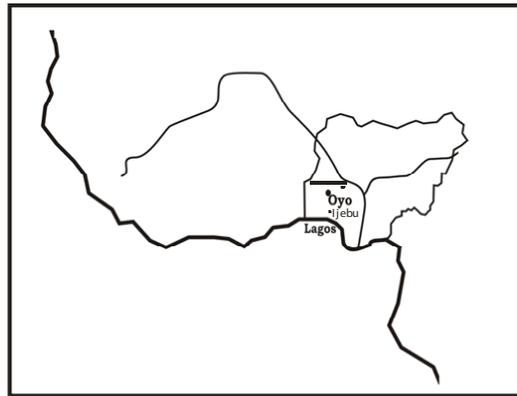


Figure 2: A map showing Oyo, Ijebu and Osogbo located in the South Western Nigeria

This is a study of divination trays in Isale-Oyo, a quarter in Oyo town (Figure 2) in South Western Nigeria. Isale-Oyo is a core area of Oyo town and it is popu-

lated by a large number of diviners. *Ifa* divination is still widely practiced by the people of Oyo. For this reason Oyo perhaps more than elsewhere in Yorubaland, still boasts of a large number of both young and old diviners. This study also identifies peculiarities of divination trays from Isale-Oyo. It compares the trays from Isale-Oyo with those of some other Yoruba towns that have been studied by other scholars.

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## Theoretical framework

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The archetypal theoretical model is employed in this study. The theory claims that image, idea, or pattern can become and be considered a universal model. Archetypes are found in mythology, literature, and the arts, and are important aspects of both philosophical and psychological thought. Since carving of *ifa* trays and decorations has formats to which they tend to conform, it is imperative that they be studied in line with the prescribed formats. This standard format is however not totally rigid and this accounts for variety and individuality found in some Yoruba *ifa* trays.

The basic shape of a divination tray is circular, rectangular or square, except for the *Ulm opon ifa* discussed by Bassani (1994, p. 79), which combines a circle in the centre and a rectangle. As mentioned earlier, common to divination trays is the representation of the head of *esu* at its top central position. There could be patterns all around the borders of the tray. Usually the centre of the tray is left bare, because this is where the divination proper is done. Because divination trays have certain common features, this paper will attempt an in-depth study of selected divination trays from Isale-Oyo based on these common features.

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## Isale-Oyo

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Isale-Oyo (Figure 3), the quarter in Oyo from which the trays in this study are got, is encompassed by the borders of Akesan market, the palace walls of the Alaafin (King of Oyo), Lagbondoko, Aatan and Oroki. A total of ten diviners (*babalawo*) of the first grade and ten diviners of the second grade were interviewed. Diviners are considered first, second, third or amateur grade based on their knowledge of the *odu* (divination poetry) of *ifa*. Structured questions were administered during the interview. The questions were open ended, allowing for flexibilities in the answers of the different diviners. Photographs of divination trays were taken. Other *ifa* divination materials were also photographed.

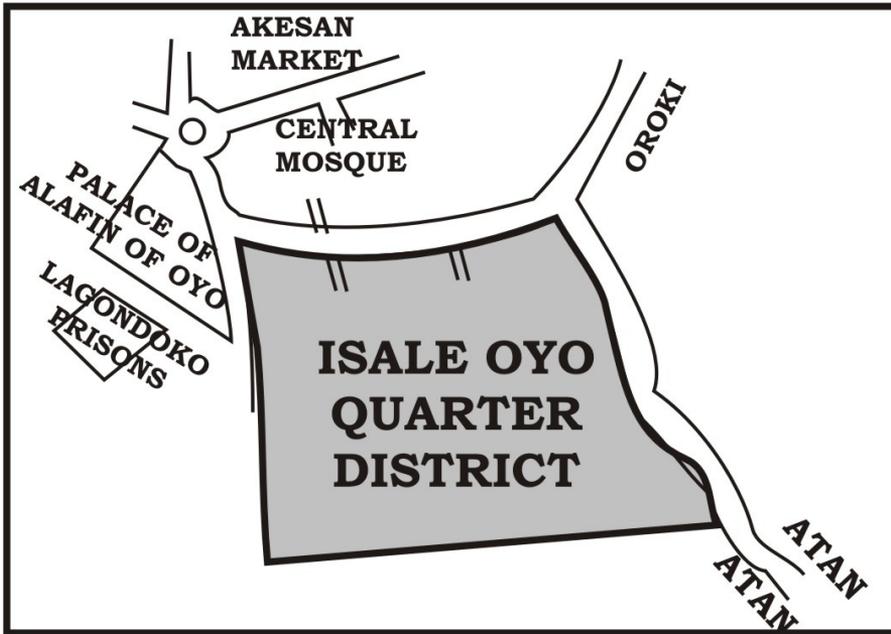


Figure 3: Isale-Oyo Quarter District

### *Ifa* divination and the Yoruba world view

The history of *ifa* divination among the Yoruba can be said to be as old as the people themselves. According to Abimbola, authority on *ifa* (1977, p. 1), the Yoruba believed that *Ifa* (otherwise known as *Orunmila*) was one of the four hundred divinities who came from *orun* (heaven) to *aye* (earth). *Olodumare* (the Supreme Being) had charged each one of the divinities with particular function to be performed on earth. Idowu (1962, p. 19) records that *Esu*, one of the Yoruba divinities, was the universal 'police' and keeper of the *ase* (divine power) with which *Oludumare* created the universe and maintained its physical laws. *Ifa* was put in charge of divination because of his great wisdom which he acquired as a result of his presence when *Olodumare* created the universe. *Ifa* therefore knew all the hidden secrets of the universe. This is why his praise name is *Akerefinusogbon*, the small one whose mind is full of wisdom (Abimbola, 1977, p. 1). From account of view, *ifa* divination is as old as the Yoruba race itself and its origin perhaps too far back in history to be exact.

Johnson (1921, p. 33) recorded that Oduduwa, a Prince of Mecca and the progenitor of the Yoruba, met Shetilu, the founder of *ifa* divination, in Ile-Ife. In another variant of the tradition, also by Johnson, Shetilu a Nupe (also known as Agboniregun) is credited with introducing *ifa* divination to Yorubaland. Shetilu,

born blind, grew up with extra ordinary powers of divination. At the age of five, he was reputed to have started to accurately foretell events. According to Johnson, the Muslims who inhabited the Nupe area disliked Shetilu's powers and so they forced him to flee across the Niger River and relocated to Ile-Ife. The plausibility of this story is in doubt, because the Nupe country mentioned in the story might have been mistaken for Old Oyo, but even then, Old Oyo was never beyond the River Niger. Old Oyo is the original name of Oyo people. The same author also recorded another tradition that claims that *ifa* worship was introduced by a king of Oyo, Alaafin Onigbogi, who became unpopular for his actions. Onigbogi was said to have been dethroned because of his introduction of *ifa* divination.

Interestingly however, *ifa* divination is not unique to the Yoruba people; it has in fact diffused all over the Yoruba diasporas. It is found among the Fon of the Benin Republic. There, it is referred to as *fa* (Bascom, 1969, p. 10). The practice of *ifa* was also taken to the Americas during the mid to late eighteenth century by slaves from West Africa. Brenner records that the casting of sixteen palm nuts or cowry shells (*ifa* divination) is widely practiced today by Africans of West African descent in the diaspora. He observed that it is the most popular of all of Africa's divination systems. Pemberton (2007) corroborated this by noting that *ifa* divination is the best known in Africa. Pemberton pointed out that while the different versions of the "sixteen signs" can be found in so many cultures, they have certain basic elements in common, but their interpretations vary and are often determined by cultural values, oral traditions, and social experiences of the people who practice the divination.

Brenner (2000, p. 119) studied divination in Mali, Madagascar and among the Shona in South Africa and observed that sixteen, as a number, also has significance to their divination systems. Brenner (*ibid.*, p. 125) traced the origin of the "sixteen signs" type of divination of Islamic Sand Writing (*Khatt ar-raml*).

The interpretation of Yoruba *ifa* divination is based on a set of established signs and accounts known as *odu ifa*. *Odu ifa* is a vast body of literary prose and poetry that encapsulates the experiences and wisdom of the Yoruba. There are sixteen major *odu*, each with its identification sign and name and each of the sixteen have their own sixteen subordinate *odu*. Altogether therefore, there are (sixteen times sixteen) two hundred and fifty six *odu*. Each of the two hundred and fifty six *odu* has extensive narratives (prose or poem) about the lives of gods, human and/or animals in Yoruba cosmology (Abimbola, 1976).

## Overview of a divination session

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In a divination session, the client is asked to whisper their problem to a coin, cowry shell or any legal tender. He then drops it on the divination tray. The diviner, called *babalawo*, literarily interpreted to mean *father of secrets*, salutes *Ifa* and urges *Ifa* to provide the appropriate answer to the client's problems without delay. He calls on *Orunmila*, a deity believed to have been present with *Ifa* at the time of creation, and who is believed to know the prenatal destiny (*ayanmo*) of every human being. He offers *iba* (salute in acknowledgment of supremacy) to *Ile* (the earth) *Olodumare* (the Almighty God). The diviner also calls on ancestor diviners to witness the proceeding before he then casts the palm nuts eight times; he marks the result of each cast on the *iyerosun* (dust on the diviner's tray). The result must match one of the two hundred and fifty six possible *odu* signs.

A shorter version of casting *ifa* is done by using divination chain (*opele ifa*, Plate 4). This tool consists of eight seed pods or small copper-alloy plates with concave or convex surfaces linked together by a metal or bead chain. The diviner holds the chain at its centre point and casts it so that it falls on an already laid cloth before him to reveal a pattern of the *odu* sign.

On sighting the revelation of the cast, the diviner recalls the associated storyline or poem revealed in the *odu* sign. The client of the diviner must be attentive at this point, because the solution to the problem will be revealed in the *odu* chant.

In the chants of the diviner, the party concerned hears of others who have suffered various problems, some perhaps greater than those that brought the suppliant to *ifa* and the joy they knew after performing the sacrifices that *ifa* had asked them to make. At intervals, the diviner taps the divination tray with *iroke ifa* (divination tapper). The person consulting *ifa* is afterwards expected to perform the prescribed sacrifices.

The chants, many at times, end with lines revealing that after the person in the *odu* of *ifa* had performed the required sacrifice, things became better for him. The lines often run thus:

*Igba ti o dafa*  
*Won ni ebo ni o waa ru.*  
*O si ru u.*  
*Igba o rubo tan....*  
*Lo ba dipe ohun gbogbo nlo deede.*  
*Orin awo wa bo si lenu...*

He took his problems to *ifa*  
 He was told to perform sacrifice,  
 And he performed it.  
 After he performed the sacrifice  
 He became a happy man.  
 He started to sing the song of *ifa* priests...

Apart from the main concern of this paper, *opon ifa*, which will be discussed in details later on, a number of tools and objects are involved in divination. This paper will look into a few of them. Notable other divination items include:

### ***Agere ifa (ifa bowl) - Plate 1***

This is the container where the palm nuts used for divination are kept. There are many forms that can be carved on *agere ifa*, ranging from animal to abstracted form. It is usually about 15 to 30 cm high. Plate 1 is a common example of an *agere ifa*; it depicts a kneeling woman carrying a bowl. The kneeling woman has a highly decorated wrapper around its waist. The body of the kneeling woman is bare with its breast protruding sharply to the front. The figure has beads around its wrists. The bowl she is carrying is also sumptuously decorated with horizontal and vertical relief lines.



Plate 1: *Agere ifa*  
 (from Odekunle family, Elekara, Oyo)

### ***Iroke ifa* (diviner's tapper) - Plate 2**

Carved wooden or ivory object used to invoke *Ifa* while performing divination. The *ifa* priest strikes the divination tray repeatedly with *iroke* to call *Ifa*'s presence to the session.



Plate 2: *Iroke ifa*  
(from Odekunle family, Elekara, Oyo)

### ***Ikin ifa* (sacred palm nuts) - Plate 3**

*Ikin ifa* consist of sixteen palm nuts from *ope ifa* (*ifa* palm-tree). Each fruit of this palm-tree has four eyelets on its thick bottom side. These palm nuts are kept in *agere ifa*.



Plate 3: *Ikin ifa*  
(placed in a tray)

#### ***Opele* (divination chain) - Plate 4**

Four half-nuts of the *opele* fruit are attached to each half of the chain (on both right and left sides). Each of these half-nuts has a smooth surface and a rough side. During a divination session, the *ifa* priest holds the *opele* in the middle and casts it in front of him.

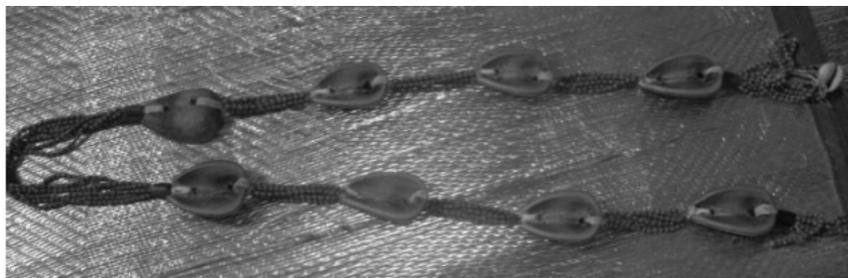


Plate 4: *Opele*  
(from Famoriyo family, Isale-Oyo)

#### ***Apo ifa* (ifa bag)**

This is where the divination chain is stored. It is a part of the diviners outfit. It can be made from a variety of materials, such as leather or cloth.

#### ***Iyerosun* (divination powder) - Plate 5**

This is the powder that is spread on the divination tray. It enables clarity of the priests' markings on the tray during divination. It is whitish in appearance and got from the *irosun* tree or from dry bamboo eaten up into powder by termites. It is simply spread on the *opon ifa*.



Plate 5: *Iyerosun*  
(the powder on which the markings are done)

They are the whites that obscure the face of this tray in this illustration.

### ***Ibo* (instrument for casting lots)**

When a suitable *odu* has been found and a solution to the problem has been identified, the *ifa* priest then makes use of the *ibo* to unravel further details regarding the interpretation of the solution which has been identified.

The *ibo* is a pair of cowry shells tied together and a piece of bone. The cowry shells stand for an affirmative reply while the bone stands for a negative reply from the divinity in respect of every question posed. Several other instruments are also used as part of the *ibo* to symbolise different things. For example, a piece of rock stands for good health while the black nut represents *Orunmila* himself.

After the casting of divination, the client is asked to hold the *ibo* materials in both hands, two in one hand and the remaining one (as they are often times three), on the other. As the diviner makes investigation, he asks the client to drop the *ibo* in a particular hand at intervals. He could ask him or her to drop the one in any of the hands. The diviner was not supposed to know in which hand the client held the materials. Therefore, as the materials are dropped, on his request, the diviner is led to know how to approach the solution to the problem. For example the diviner can address *Ifa* by making a statement demanding to know whether there is solution to the problem or not, he then ask the client to drop the *ibo* in his left or right hand. If the one dropped is the cowry shell, the implication is that there is an answer to the problem. However if the client drop the bone, this is a negative implication. Further divinations will therefore have to be made for other probable solutions.

### ***The opon ifa* (divination tray)**

Divination trays are carved in wood and are basically in two shapes; often they are either circular or rectangular. Sometimes they are carved with both shapes. It is on the divination tray that *iyerosun* (divination powder) is spread to get the result of each cast. The edges of the tray are designed with intricate zoomorphic and geometric carved shapes and patterns (Plates 6 and 7 are examples of trays from Isale-Oyo). The middle of the top section usually bears the face of *Esu*, the divinity that keeps the *ase* (authority).



Plate 6  
(from Fadahunsi family, Oroki, Isale-Oyo)



Plate 7  
(from Fadairo family, L.A. Road, Isale-Oyo)

According to Fatokun Morakinyo<sup>1</sup> (b. 1946), the *esu* figure that is always represented on Yoruba divination trays is symbolic of the strong friendship that exist between *Orunmila* and *Esu* (Personal communication, May 2011). This association is evident in *odu ogbefun*. The narration of the *odu* runs thus:

*Ogbefohun folohun*

*Nko fohun folohun*

*Adia fun Esu on gbogbo irunmole ti won jo nsore*

*Adia fun Orunmila oun Esu odara ti won jo nsore*

Ogbe return what was kept in your custody to the owner

No, I will not return it

The same performed divination for *Esu* and all other divinities who were friends

It also performed divination for *Orunmila* and *Esu* who were friends

According to the story, one day, *Esu* thought to himself that he was the wisest of all the divinities. He had put all of them to test, and they all failed. It was only *Orunmila* that he had not tested. He therefore decided to give *Orunmila* his own test.

He went to the market and bought a monkey (*aaya*). He tied the monkey with a fragile rope. Thereafter, he went to *Orunmila* with the monkey and asked *Orunmila* to please help him to keep the monkey for a while, because he (*Esu*) wanted to embark on a long journey which would take him seven days. *Orunmila* accepted to keep the monkey but asked *Esu* to tie it to a tree in the front of his house. *Esu* did and left immediately.

*Orunmila* quickly consulted *ifa* to know the intention of *Esu*. *Ifa* asked him to perform sacrifice with lots of bananas. He was to carry the sacrifice into a thick forest. *Orunmila* did. After he completed the sacrifice, he discovered the monkey had broken the rope and escaped.

Not long after this discovery, *Esu* came back to inform *Orunmila* that he was no longer going on the journey, he therefore demanded for his monkey. *Orunmila* told him that the monkey had escaped. *Esu* became furious and started to cry. *Orunmila* knew that there will be trouble if he did not find the monkey. It takes seven days before the tears of *Esu* fall to the ground and once the tears fall in front of *Orunmila's* house, there will be no peace within and outside *Orunmila's* home again.

<sup>1</sup> Fatokun Morakinyo is the Oba Edu (*Ifa* Chief in Isale-Oyo).

*Orunmila* quickly consulted the oracle again. The oracle asked *Orunmila* to go back to where he dropped the sacrifice and that he would find the monkey there. When *Orunmila* got to where (in the forest) he left the sacrifice, he found the monkey eating the bananas. He took the monkey back home and gave it to *Esu*.

*Esu* was surprised that *Orunmila* could find a way out of his dubious plot for him. He was also overwhelmed that there exists another divinity that could thwart his intrigue. From that time, he vowed to support *Orunmila* in all his endeavours. It then became a tradition that the *Esu* figure is fixed in a principal position on all divination trays.

The divination tray is perhaps the most important paraphernalia of the *ifa* diviner. It forms the base upon which the divination is done. On the divination trays lies the interest of this paper. The paper now takes a closer look at the divination trays from Isale-Oyo in particular and against other known ones from Yorubaland.

Plate 8 is a divination tray from Isale-Oyo. There are animals depicted on the edges of the divination tray. The animals are lined up as if in a procession. This is placed counter-clockwise from the top left hand side to the right. There are five zoomorphic representations altogether on the tray. There is a snake, a gecko or lizard and probably a mudfish. Similar animals have been noted in trays from Ijebu and Osogbo (Hans Witte, 1994, p. 59).

The fourth animal, because of its large ears, is probably a rabbit, but it may well be a bush rat (*okete*). Bush rats in Yoruba belief are said to possess supernatural powers. The belief is that they can transform to human (and sometimes human beings to bush rats) to carry out nefarious activities in the night. Bush rat is sometimes called *eran agha* (mystical animal). The last animal on the tray is a bird. This species is unknown, but it is depicted with its feather and tail elaborately patterned and with a long beak. Birds in Yoruba belief are associated with the powers of witchcraft.

Fagbemisola<sup>2</sup> (age about 35), who is also a diviner, pointed out that the relationship between *ifa* divination and birds is to be found in *irosun ega* (an *odu*). He said that many times when birds are depicted on divination trays, they are likely to be *eye ega* (*ega* bird), the one mentioned in *irosun ega* (Fagbemisola Fatokun, personal communication, May 2011). In that *odu*, *Orunmila* is said to have had four *ifa* apprentices, namely *Ikun* (a type of rodent), *Asa* (hawk), *Okere* (squirrel) and *Ega* (a type of bird). On an occasion, *Orunmila* told his wife, children and apprentices that he was travelling and would spend fifteen days away. However, after the period he mentioned, *Orunmila* did not return. His immediate family

<sup>2</sup> Fagbemisola Fatokun is the son of Fatokun Morakinyo (The Oba Edu of Oyo).

members were bothered. His wife was particularly restless. She therefore went to *Ikun* to consult *ifa* oracle, to know when *Orunmila* would return. *Ikun* told *Orunmila's* wife that her husband was no longer coming back and that she should forget about him and marry him (*Ikun*). *Orunmila's* wife refused, she left *Ikun's* house and went to *Asa* for consultation. *Asa* also told her that *Orunmila* was not coming back and he also proposed to the woman. She left and went to *Okere's* house; the story was not different from what happened in *Ikun* and *Asa's* houses. She therefore tried *Ega*. *Ega* consulted *ifa* oracle and told the woman that her husband will soon come. *Ega* prescribed a sacrifice. Before the woman completed the sacrifice, *Orunmila* arrived.

The woman narrated her experiences in the homes of the four apprentices. *Orunmila* was furious and therefore killed *Ikun*, *Asa* and *Okere*. He spared *Ega*, gave him a lot of wealth and made him his bosom friend. This story is said to account for the representation of *ega* bird on *ifa* divination trays.



Plate 8  
(from Fasakin family, L.A. Road, Isale-Oyo)

Plate 8 exhibits animals similar to those found on Plate 9. The procession in Plate 8 is of five animals, while Plate 9 has three animals arranged counter-clockwise. The animals depicted have elaborate surface texture, which leads one to think the two trays might have been carved by the same person. The trays are textured with zigzags and criss-crossing lines laid on the animals. This may have been to enhance the aesthetics of the divination tray. The bird on this tray has lineal texture patterns, used to show the direction and pattern of the feathers. Also the zigzag texture on the snake gives an appearance of movement. There are no demarcation bars between the animals in the trays. It seems that the carvings were done at the discretion of the artist rather than after a laid down design pattern.

The representation of snakes on divination trays, according to Fasakin<sup>3</sup> (about 90 years old), can be traced to *Okaran Osa*, an *odu* of *ifa* (Personal communication, January 2009).

*Okaran Osa, awo Ejo*  
*Adia fun ejo*  
*Ejo nbe laarin ota*  
*Nigba iwase*  
*Ejo ko loro*  
*Itakun ni ejo, won fi ndigi lati oko wale*  
*Ejo to awon babalawo lo*  
*Won ni ko bo ori*  
*Ejo bo ori*  
*Won ni ko rubo okini*  
*O rubo*  
*Ejo di ororo*  
*Ejo di ohun iberu*  
*Ori kan ti ejo ni*  
*Nii fi tugba ori ka*

Okaran Osa is the divination for the Snake  
 The Snake consulted *ifa* for solution  
 He was amidst enemies  
 At the time of creation  
 Snake was harmless  
 Snake was used for tying firewood  
 Snake could no longer contain this insult, he went to the diviner

<sup>3</sup> Fasakin is a diviner in Isale-Oyo.

He was asked to sacrifice in honour of his head  
 He performed the sacrifice  
 He was asked to sacrifice needle  
 He did  
 Snake became poisonous with venom  
 It became frightful  
 A snake has only one head  
 Yet, its appearance sends several heads restless

The Yoruba belief that the source of poisonous powers of the snake is gotten from *ifa* is a strong testimony of the potency of *ifa* divination to solve any problem. According to Ojebode<sup>4</sup> (age 55), it may also be a representation of *Esu* (Personal communication, May 2011). This makes it one of the animals used as decorative patterns on the edges of divination trays.



Plate 9  
 (from Fasakin family, L.A. Road, Isale-Oyo)

The faces of *esu* depicted on plates 8 and 9 indicate a stylistic affinity. Both faces are depicted with simple forms. The eyes have brows, the nose is a simple triangular form, and the mouth is represented with two short parallel raised

<sup>4</sup> Ojebode Fabiyi is a diviner and masquerade in Isale-Oyo.

lines. Generally, their forms are bold and sharp, in characteristic Yoruba woodcarvings style. The images depicted on the entire border, including the face of *esu* are embedded within the border line. The only difference between the *esu* figures in Plates 8 and 9 is that the face on Plate 8 wears a vertical face mark on both cheeks. In terms of their countenance, the *esu* faces represented are neither sad nor calm nor with any discernible countenance.

The representations on Plate 10 do not follow any particular pattern; however the heavy zigzag snake on the left-hand side balances the weight of the divination chain depicted on the left-hand side. On the lower part of the tray (*ese opon*) directly opposite the *esu* face, are same reptilian animals. On the lower right-hand side of the tray is depicted a small gourd (*ado*). Such gourds are used in storing curative medicines in Yorubaland. Then the figure of an animal sits in the upper left-hand side of the tray. This animal may perhaps be a bush rat because of its long tail.

The face of *esu* in this tray extends beyond the demarcated borders of the tray into a part of the centre of the tray (*arin opon*). The mouth, cheeks and chin of *esu* jot out of the border. The face is realistically rendered with robust cheeks. The eyebrows and lips are simply depicted. The face is not characterised by the deep and sharp cuts common to Yoruba woodcarvings.



Plate 10  
(from Fagbenro family, Oroki, Isale-Oyo)

The carvings on the edges of the tray depicted in Plate 11 are simple. The decorations occupy only the four major areas on the border of the tray. The head

of *esu* is on the *oju opon*, while two arrow-like triangles are on the *ese opon*. On the *ona oganran* and *ona munu* are simple embossed horizontal lines.



Plate 11  
(from Famoriyo family, Lagbondoko area, Isale-Oyo)

Unlike the other trays discussed earlier, the tray in Plate 12 is rectangular in shape. It is bordered by intricately embellished patterns rather than with animal forms. The geometrically decorative pattern is incised rather than in relief. The patterns used include ziz-zags, criss-crosses, and chequered patterns. The *esu* face on this plate also extends slightly into the centre of the tray. There are facial marks on its cheeks and forehead. There are four horizontal marks on its cheeks, while on the forehead are three short vertical lines. The eyeballs are large and bulging. The marks on the cheeks are typical *abaja* of Yorubaland. The one on the forehead is called *pele* even though *pele* may also be worn on the cheeks by the Yoruba. These two facial marks are common all over Oyo Yoruba towns, especially in Oyo and Iseyin, according to Babalola (2009).



Plate 12  
(from Ojebode family, Oroki, Isale-Oyo)

Ojebode Fabiyi (age 55) traced the representation of animals like horses and tigers to *ogundawonrin* and *oyeku meji* respectively.

He traced the representation of horses to the *odu* of *ifá* called *ogundawonrin*, also called *ogundanlare*. It runs thus:

*Emi ko ri eni ti nrele Alara*  
*Ko ba mi ki gbogbo omo won nile Alara*  
*Emi o ri eni tin lo si ode Ejigbo*  
*Ko ba mi ki Orisatalabi ara ode Ejigbo*  
*To ba ki Orisatalabi ara ode Ejigbo*  
*Ki o ki Egunbiyi Oloponda, omo Abuda*  
 .....  
*Omo kerekere ntile rode*  
*Awon agbalagba tode wole*  
*Ifa e rowo mi dogbodoruku, owo mi niyi*  
*E pe ki olukaluku ma yowo tire labe aso*  
*Ifa ise re ni mo je kiri, n go je ngo mu*  
*Ti mo fi dele Olu,*  
*Ifa ise re ni mo je kiri, n go je ngo mu*

*Ti mo fi de Oke Ora*  
*Ifa ise re ni mo je kiri, n go je ngo mu*  
*Ti mo fi de Oke Ijeti ile Agboniregun*  
*Mo gbo, o ta si mi leti*  
*Won ni iwo lo se fun Olu ti Olu fi lowo*  
*Ifa ire ni ko se fun mi ki nlowo*  
*Ifa mo gbo, o ta si mi leti*  
*Won ni omi tutu ni obu fun Igbora*  
*Ti ohun gbogbo fi tutu fun Igbora*  
*Ifa mo gbo o ta si mi leti*  
*Won ni o se fun Owarangun Aga ti Amota Ido*  
*Omo oloburo omoba Agufo Olabaye tetete*  
*Ojo ti Owarangun Aga ku*  
*Esin ni won fi ru oku Owarangun Aga wale*  
*Ti mo ba gbogbogbo, ti mo ba tototo*  
*Esin ni ki omo o fi ru oku mi dan dan dan*

Whoever is going to Alara  
 Should salute inhabitants of Alara  
 Whoever is going to Ejigbo  
 Should salute Orisatalabi the son of Ejigbo  
 After greeting Orisatalabi an indigene of Ejigbo  
 He should also extend salutations to Egunbiyi Oluponda a son of Abuda  
 .....

The young ones are moving from courtyards into the house  
 The elders are moving from inside into the courtyard  
*Ifa* look at my hand, its crumpled  
 Let all show their hands  
*Ifa* it is your instructions that I am carrying out, that made me not eat nor drink  
 Till I got to Olu  
*Ifa* it is your assignments that undertaking, that made me not eat nor drink  
 Till I got to Oke Ora  
*Ifa* it is your assignments that I am carrying out, that made me not eat nor drink  
 Till I got to Oke Ijeti the abode of Agboniregun (the founder of *ifa* divination)  
 I overheard that you (*Ifa*)  
 Helped Olu to make plenty money  
*Ifa* favour me also to make money

I overheard that you (*Ifa*)  
 Gave Igbora cold water  
 Life became comfortable for Igbora  
 I overheard that you (*Ifa*)  
 Helped Owarangun Aga of Amota Ido  
 The son of Oloburo, prince of Agufo Olabaye  
 The day Owarangun died  
 His corpse was transported home on a horse  
*Ifa*, when I am old and aged  
 Let my children carry my corpse with horses

This *ifa* verse brings out the importance of horses. Horses as found in this verse are dignifying animals and are a mark of royalty. According to Pogoson and Akande (2011, p. 1), the horse rider is not an unusual imagery in Yoruba woodcarving. Indeed, it is an abundantly used one in Yoruba art. Among the Yoruba, carved wooden figures of horsemen honouring warriors are kept in the house of veterans of military exploits.

Ojebode pointed out that in *oyeku meji*, tiger was made mention of.

*Oni ni won roko leti opon*  
*Ola ni won sakaa lagbe*  
 .....  
*Oni la o kun Ifa Olukorokorobojo*  
*Ola la o kun Ifa Olukorokorobojo*  
*Ani won o kun, Won kun*  
*Won pa Ekun kan minijo-minijo*  
*Ti nbe ni abe iti*  
*Won gbe ori re fun Oba Ido*  
*Omo Ejworogbe Ile Ido*  
*Won gbe yegese ara re fun Oba Eleyo Geji*  
*Omo ajoju ebo gbara*  
*Ina abara wusa*  
*Ojo palami omo atuyeriyesi*  
*Eni to ba peri Oba Ido nibi*  
*Ori gbogbo a maa fo won iwere iwere*  
*Eni ba peri Oba Eleyo Geji*  
*Aya a ma lawon Igarara igarara*  
*Togun Oba Ido ni ina....*

Today we shall clear the forest on the edges of the tray  
 Tomorrow we shall fry bean cake in a gourd (impossibilities)  
 .....  
 Today we will divide it, a divination of Olukorokorobojo  
 Tomorrow we will cut it to pieces, a divination of Olukorokorobojo  
 We asked them to butcher it, they did  
 They killed a big tiger  
 They cover it and kept it under the plantain trees  
 They gave its head to the king of Ido  
 The son of Ejiworogbe of Ido  
 Another part was given to King Eleyo Geji  
 The one that thrives on sacrifice  
 The fire that hurts  
 The rain that sprinkles  
 Whoever attempts to attack the king of Ido  
 They will have their heads aching  
 Whoever attempts to attack King Eleyo Geji  
 Their hearts will pound with fear

On the whole, divination trays from Isale-Oyo combine two features found on trays from Osogbo and Ijebu. These features pointed out by Witte (1994, p. 59) indicate that divination trays from Ijebu have a part of the face of *esu* extending slightly into the centre of the tray, and that the trays from Osogbo have the face of *esu* contained within the borders of the tray. This may indicate a stylistic and cultural affinity between both places and Oyo.

Bassani (1994, p. 79) discussed a particular divination tray (Plate 13) belonging to a German merchant, Christoph Weickmann, in the middle of the 17<sup>th</sup> century. This divination tray, in our own opinion, exemplifies the variety of styles and forms in Yoruba divination trays. The overall shape of the tray is rectangular but embedded in the rectangle is a circle. The depictions on this tray encompass a lot of activities and patterns found on many Yoruba divination trays. Interestingly also, the shape can be said to be two in one. This is one of the most representative trays we had ever seen.



Plate 13: Divination tray collected by Christoph Weickmann in the middle of the 17<sup>th</sup> century

The stylistic affinity between trays from Isale-Oyo and trays from elsewhere in Yorubaland supports the belief that some Yoruba settlements were established from Old Oyo. The sack of the Old Oyo by the Fulani's and consequent spread of the Yoruba towards the Bight of Benin might also have resulted in the spread of the Yoruba carvers and carving patterns just as with their cosmology.

According to Aremu (2001, p. 16), almost all Yoruba carvers trace their ancestry to Are Lagbayi (sometimes called Abogunde, or Ajibogunde) of Old Oyo. Lagbayi was a legendary palace wood carver of an Alafin of Oyo. He was said to have come from Ojowo, a satellite town of Old Oyo. It is therefore possible to assume that many Yoruba wood carvers may have descended ancestrally from Old Oyo. The similarities in the carvings may therefore be because of descent from the same source, Old Oyo. Old Oyo is also the centre of *ifa* culture from where it spread to other parts of Yorubaland. Woodcarvings are not as popular in Ife as they are in Oyo and elsewhere in Yorubaland.

Looking at the fixed use of the *esu* figure in all divination trays in Yorubaland, it is safe to assume that this is the most significant figure in the tray. The decorations, undoubtedly left to the discretion of the artist, allows the use of representations of all types of animals, humans and other *ifa* paraphernalia and all forms relating to *ifa* to decorate the tray. Indeed the decorative patterns found on the borders of many divination trays in Yorubaland are similar to those found on Yoruba calabash carving, wood carving, *adire eleko* and other Yoruba artistic

genre. This is an indication that the carvers might have had the freehand to ex-temporize but not with the central *esu* figure in the upper part of the tray.

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