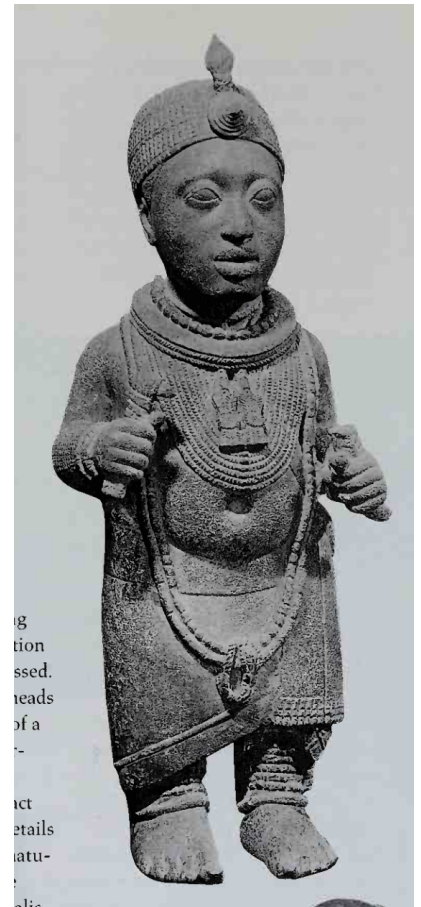


Yoruba Asey
Lauren Blumenthal

In Yoruba culture, *ase* is one of the most important aspects of life and the spiritual realm. *Ase* is essentially a person's energy or life force. Throughout history, art collectors have been negligent in acknowledging the importance certain cultural and religious beliefs play into African artwork. In this essay, the importance of *ase* is explained and described as it relates to art history and the history of Yoruba culture.

Yoruba art has not always been understood by Western researchers. Western culture is unfamiliar with certain elements that play important roles within the art of Yoruba culture. One aspect that researchers have been able to pick up on is the concept of *ase*. *Ase* is often associated with power and control or authority. With regards to religion, *ase* is present in the altars dedicated to *orisa* (deities). In addition to that, the items that are placed on the altars as well as the very air around an altar is charged with that *orisa's ase*. The *ase* of an *orisa* can also be summoned. *Ase* exists within nature as well. Plants, rivers, and hills all contain *ase*. To harness the powers of someone, or something's *ase*, particular rituals or procedures must take place. In some instances, one must speak certain words, perform certain gestures, or even ingest special preparations.

The face and head are key elements to the concept of *ase*. In the Yoruba language, "head" translates to *ori*. In Yoruba art, the head is often enlarged to showcase the importance of the head and the *ase* within it. The head is important in people because it is what controls the rest of the body. Having enlarged heads in artwork gave artists more room to create elaborate depictions of crowns or other



headpieces. On the previous page is figure 8-11. *Figure of an Oni*. It is apparent how much more importance the head was given in regards to proportions. The head on this sculpture is rather



large when compared to the rest of the body. In real life, the average person's head is much smaller than the one on this figure appears to be. Much detail can be seen in the headpiece on this sculpture as well. Despite the sculpture being only about 18.5 inches tall, the detail and the texture within the headpiece, as well as the sculpture as a whole, is very apparent. As previously mentioned, the face plays a key role in *ase*. *Ase* is believed to come from the face or eyes, known as *oju*. Because of the power in one's *oju*, it is believed to be dangerous to look directly at someone's *oju*. Because of the power of one's *oju*, *oba* (leaders) wear veils to keep others from looking at their *oju*. To the immediate left is figure 8-18, *Ariwajoye I, ruler of Orangun-Ila. 1977*.

This Image shows one of the beaded headpieces worn by a Yoruba leader. The tall pointed crown, known as *ade*, is part of the "uniform" for an *oba*. The long beaded veil keeps others from seeing his *oju*. This veil also protects others from the *oba's* ever-so-powerful *ase* in case it is accidentally released. The red tail feathers of the tropical African parrot are a common embellishment on the crowns of *oba*. Because these feathers are important and contain *ase*, the red tail feathers were not allowed in blacksmith shops as a feather's *ase* could alter the properties of metal.

Ase plays a critical role in Yoruba history. *Ase* is a very important connection between one's head, face, and their energy within. While it has not always been understood by Western researchers, new advancements are being made that give a glimpse into the deeper meanings behind artworks from the Yoruba people, as well as African art as a whole.