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## The Symbolic Potentials of Motifs on Yoruba Beaded Crowns

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### ABSTRACT

The Yoruba monarchical system operates supremacy of power with the use of beaded objects to indicate ranks and wealth. Suffice to say that beads are of inestimable value in Yoruba culture because its use is historic and perhaps, transcends extinction based on its cultural value and record. This paper therefore, explores the basis for the use of particular motifs (rendered in beads) on these great works of historical, cultural and socio-political values and their symbolic potentials in Yoruba culture. It examines the relationship between ori (head) and crown in relation to Yoruba culture. It groups Yoruba crowns into two: Agba Ade (the tall and conical type) and Orikogbofo (the caplike type). It identifies four main motifs on the crown and describes one as material (veils) and the other three as iconic (groups of birds). Extolling the power of the motifs in Yoruba monarchical system, the paper submits that the statuses of Yoruba kings are determined by the number of icons (motifs) on their crowns. The paper concludes by asserting that irrespective of any changes in the Yoruba society, the institution of kingship will remain with continuous making of beaded crowns adorned with symbolically and potentially driven motifs in response to socio-cultural demands of the Yoruba society at that time.

**Keywords:** Symbolic, Potential, Motif, Yoruba, Beaded Crown.

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### 1. INTRODUCTION

The culture of the Yoruba speaking people of south-western Nigeria, Benin Republic and Togo attaches much importance to appearance and personality. Personality incorporates either ascribed or achieved status or both, a factor which clearly manifests itself in a hierarchically structured society with monarchical system of divine kings who possess insignia and emblems of office that place them above the ordinary people. This explains the symbolisms of beads in Yoruba culture. The use of beads appears to be a prime indicator of rank and symbol of wealth in Yoruba society and this perhaps accounts for its inestimable value in their culture. Beaded crown, a royal insignia is strongly believed to be Yoruba kings' symbol of power and status (Lam,2022). It is as old as the Yoruba because its genesis is traditionally traced to Oduduwa, the founder and ancestor of the Yoruba race. However, it is believed that the Yoruba gods long ago chose beaded strands as their emblems which perhaps explains why the Oba's use of beaded objects is observably more profuse.

After all, he is the number one citizen among his subjects, the central figure in all traditional activities and most importantly, the next to the gods. No wonder his person is sacred. This was corroborated by Cosgrove (2023 while giving explanations and pictorial descriptions on 'Ade Oba' (king's crown), submitted that it has a very strong connection with the gods. Beaded crown is not the only insignia of royalty, other associated objects such as beaded gowns or robes (*ewu ileke*), staff o(*opa ase*), flywhisks (*irukele*), fan (*abebe*), beaded boots (*bata ileke*) etc. altogether complement a full blown royal regalia.

## 2. ORIGIN AND TYPES OF BEADS

Beads, which are of varied forms, are believed to be produced within and outside Nigeria in places like Ife, Igbo-ukwu, Bida and Upper Volta. But the origin has been reportedly traced to Ife by eminent scholars. For instance, Ojo (1990) declares that:

there is abundance evidence of bead making in the form of bead-making crucibles, some found in archaeological context to prove that the beads used for making the head gear were made in ancient Ife.

The major constituents of beads are variety of quartz sands which are resistant to splintering and fracturing (plus lead as modifier in the case of Ife) and richly coloured glasses melted and sharpened into desired forms.

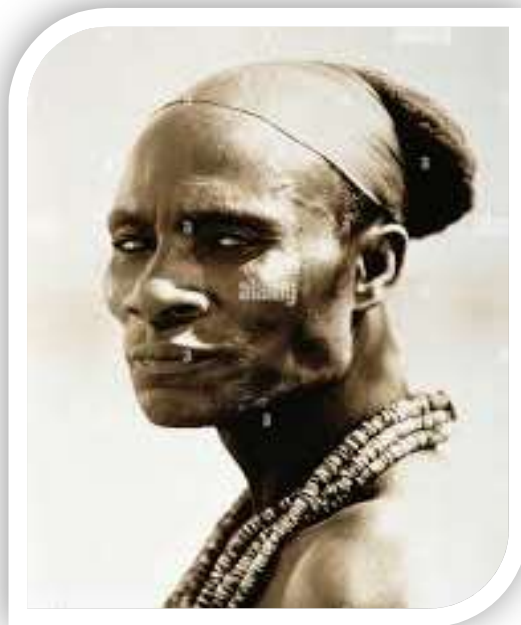


Fig 1:; Beads on the Neck  
Source: Googlesearch

Eluyemi (1976) lists the types of beads found in Ife as *Segi, Iyun*, glass stone and shell beads. Also Negri (1976) mentions the blue glass beads known as *segi* or *popo* which he says were manufactured in vast quantities at Ife and described them as the oldest in Nigeria. He also mentions the red stone which according to him, were made from Lantang stone which can be obtained from the sites at Sokoto and Ilorin. Also there are clay beads in which clay is sharpened into different forms (i.e. oval, round and oblong) fired and polished or painted but are rarely used.

### Beaded Crown as Royal Insignia

The genesis of traditional beaded crowns (*known as ade*) and other insignia of royalty among the Yoruba is ancient as it is associated with philosophies, religious rites and ceremonies connected with the gods and goddesses of Yorubaland as a mark of reverence. Supporting this, Alonso (2014) noted that since the olden days, Yoruba people have been found to be reflecting their philosophies and religious beliefs in their creative products and are hence, described as artists-philosophers. The genesis story continues with the deity Obalufon's decision to invent beads and strung them in different colours on bracelets and necklaces so that the gods and the men who follow them might stand in proud distinction in an attempt to look different from other men (Thompson 1981). He goes further to say that the right to own beaded objects in Yorubaland is restricted to those who “communicate with or possessed by the gods; the Obas, the priests, the herbalists or the divine”.



Fig 2: A king Arrayed With Beads and a Crown  
Source: Googlesearch

of the Yoruba race and this was in line with the submission of Jock (2020), that Oduduwa was the original ancestor of the Yoruba people based on Yoruba's teaching from its oral tradition. Further on this, Oduduwa was said to have given beaded crowns to his sixteen sons who eventually became the

paramount rulers of the then sixteen Yoruba states. It is pertinent to state at this juncture that there are different types of crowns and the most recognized ones worn by paramount rulers are the conical ones with beaded veils or fringes. Since these are the types given out by Oduduwa, the Ooni of Ife therefore occupies a very high if not the highest position in the monarchical system of the Yoruba people. The Yoruba's reverence and supreme authority in their crowns with beaded fringes have compelled the rulers of some important cities who are not qualified historically to wear such crowns to seek for permission and have been allowed to wear them. The beaded veils or fringes that conceal the identity or the face of the Oba from the public, interestingly contribute to the awe-inspiring quality of the sacred Oba as believed by his subjects.

After all, the crown is the most priceless artistic treasure kept and the most important of the regalia (Omotoso, 1977). Perhaps one could be justified to say that crowns are so revered and well guarded that they become objects of transfer from one Oba at his death to his successor. Differently put, the crown; a symbol of power and authority is passed down to an Oba by his ancestral fathers who in essence were the past Obas and the founder(s) of the community. Traditionally speaking, it is culturally unethical for an Oba to attend public occasions such as festivals or meetings without his crown as the crown signifies the divine status and the vested authority of the Oba popularly known as *alase-ekeji orisa* meaning "the custodian of divine authority" and "second to the gods" among his subjects and should therefore be treated with utmost respect.

The Yoruba monarchical system operates supremacy of power, a factor that clearly explains why some historically qualified and accredited Obas wear crowns with beaded fringes and some, not. In the course of struggling for higher status based on modernity in all ramifications, some lower class (community) leaders traditionally called *Baales* or headchiefs whose classes of headgears are caps without beaded fringes called *orikogbofo* have disapprovingly gone against this tradition. To buttress this, Ojo (1966) reports that headchiefs (*Baale*) have gone a step further in wearing the beaded crown even when there is no venerable traditional or historical support for the action. Today, an Oba may possess more than one crown and other beaded items as a reflection of his importance and wealth.

However, crown is of two types; the tall conical crown with the representation of coloured faces and/or birds on the surface with beaded fringes used as a veil to hide the Oba's face and surmounted by a bird with white slender tail feathers. This is referred to as *Agba Ade or Ade nla* (Ogundiran, 2020 and Oladumiye, 2014). They are given names according to the number of faces on them e.g. *olaju meji*, (two faces) *olaju merindinlogun* (sixteen faces) etc and are worn by first class and paramount rulers like Ooni of Ife, Alaafin of Oyo, Deji of Akure, Ajero of Ijero-Ekiti, Ewi of Ado-Ekiti, Ogoga of Ikere-Ekiti among others.

The second type has variety of shapes which include the round and the square and also allows for innovation in shape and incorporation of new motifs in response to modernity. They are generally called *orikogbolo* with specific names coined out of their shapes such as *okanolohun* (round cap-like crown), *onigunmerin* (four sided cap-like crown), *onigunmefa* (six sided cap-like crown) and *Ade-Akete* (rounded cap-like crown with flat base).

### 3. IMPORTANCE OF CROWN AND ITS MOTIFS TO YORUBA PEOPLE

#### Crown

The crown (*ade*) is believed to be a very precious object that communicates sacred power among the Yoruba. It is the highest ranking item among the objects of royalty whose forms and motifs indicate the status and wealth of a king (Olanrewaju, 2009). Also relatively instructive here, Adewuyi (2023) notes that all crowns in Yorubaland are fundamentally produced to convey messages through iconic means some of whose secrets are known only to the initiates and can only be recorded by them. However, the importance of crown in Yorubaland cannot be divorced from the importance of head (*ori*). The head (*ori*) is believed to be the seat of power and wisdom and the overall controller of the individual's life. In essence, a good head (*ori*) symbolizes good luck in life and vice versa.

Perhaps this is why Abiodun (1975) writes that:

*it is the supreme position of the ori in the life of the individual that led the Yoruba to keep its symbol in a cowrie-embroidered container made in the form of a crown.*

In essence, the cover of such an important part of the body especially that of the number one citizen in the traditional set-up should be accorded due respect.

It is worthy of note that wearing of *ade* is quite revealing as it is traditionally believed that the moment an *Oba* sees the inside of his fringed crown, his end has come. This, perhaps is not unconnected with a magical force and a supernatural way to caution the excesses of any erring *Oba*. However, a completely well dressed *Oba* in his beaded regalia especially his beaded fringed crown assumes a living symbol of his (transformed) departed ancestors and becomes an embodiment of spiritual power vested with both life and spiritual authorities.

#### Motifs

Apart from the geometric shapes which are used as mere decorations on the works, other motifs such as the faces, the surmounting bird (*Okin*), or other birds and the veil convey meanings that are potentially rooted and grounded in Yoruba traditional beliefs. Information on the symbolisms of these motifs collected from Mr. Owoyemi Goolu, an Akure based measter-crown-maker correlates with most of the scholarly publications on crown making in Yorubaland. For instance Ojo (1990) declares that there are four main motifs on these crowns ; one material and three iconic. According to him, the bead veil is the material while "the iconic motifs are faces in relief, which with birds in the round adorn the surface of the crown and surmounting the crown, a bird with white tail plumes".

The veil is an *Iboju* meant for covering the face of the accredited *Oba* meaning that anybody installed as an *Oba* has automatically been transformed into another (supernatural) being entirely. Therefore, his eyes are not ordinary eyes and should as a matter of fact, not be made naked to the public which implies that since the veil is part of the crown, then it has become an object of divine power like the crown itself. It is thereby believed that an *Oba* is not supposed to see the inside of his crowns, the moment he sees it, his end has come.

In line with this, Beler (1983) says that the function of the crown is to eliminate or hide the identity of the wearer and supplant him with divine power of the dynasty. This is achieved a prosaic level by the bead fringe veil (*iboju*) which enables the king to incarnate divine powers. In the same vein, Thompson (1970) says the veil which lifts the king to the highest level of possible significance can be compared with concealment in masquerading in that the crown becomes a mask behind which there is a superhuman entity.

#### 4. SYMBOLIC POTENTIALS OF MOTIFS

Information revealed that the symbolic representation of faces are those of Olokun, the god of the sea and beads, that though they represent the face of Oduduwa. This is why it is believed that the Oba, engulfed in the realm and dictates of his traditional belief, sees everywhere even when stationed or glued to his palace. This is in line with the popular Yoruba proverb "*Oju Oba n'ile, Oju Oba l'oko*" (literally meaning that; the presence of Oba's eyes are both in the town and in the farm; he sees everywhere). This partly accounts for the presence of these faces on the crown and the variation on the number of faces are according to the power and historical status of individual Oba. This is in line with Beler's (1982) interpretation where he says the Janus face or multiple faces on the crown suggest the king's omnipresence, his awareness of all that goes on around him on all sides. His all seeing inner eyes is all over the entire town that nothing can remain secret from him.

Thompson (1970) in his own interpretation sees the multiple faces on the crown as an allusion to the gods to whom the king is number two and who are seeings. Ojo (1990), on the other hand suggests a possible link between the faces and faces on beaded panels used by diviners and herbalists, and bead panels used by Osun and Orisa Oko devotees. This is because during Orisa Oko and Osanyin rituals, besides the men who use this type of bag, a particular woman associated with the use of this bag and being a medium of Orisa Oko is addressed as *Kabiyesi*. Again, since in their songs, the devotes referred the image (faces) or the beaded panel as that of *Esu*, he therefore compare these faces (on crown) to that of *Esu* whose shrine is in front at all temples whom homage must be paid before embarking on any activity and whose notion in any offering must first be considered and delivered before real sacrifice is made. Ojo (1990) goes further that since *Esu* has a peculiar relationship with *Ifa* who stands at the threshold between heaven and as divine messenger, he helps in communication between the divine and human realms.

Therefore, he is in touch with the deities who are naturally benevolent but unfortunately direct the malevolent spirit *ajogun* who struggle with them to control the earth. In an attempt to put an end to conflict, sacrifices have to be made and when made, such sacrifices are conveyed to the deities by *esu*. Therefore, if the king is next to gods or a god as claimed by some people, there would be justification in claiming that *Esu* has the same relationship with the king as he has with the deities and implying that they are performing the same function. Going by all the interpretations above, one is faced with the question which one to believe and which should be discarded. None of course, since all of them are supported with collected data within given circumstances. Then, one may be justified to establish their validity more so that the interpretations are inherent in Yoruba traditional beliefs.

Talking on the symbolisms of the birds to the crown, it needs be reiterated that the birds used are classified into two. The first one, *Okin* (paradise flycatcher) is one surmounting the crown while the other ones are *adaba* (dove) *Okin* accordingly, occupies a kingship cadre in hierarchy of birds as the most powerful. He watches and oversees the activities of the king and protects as well. The *Oga idi* (tail feather) which represents the entire body of *okin* makes no difference. Similarly, *adaba* is equally a powerful bird but not as *okin*. They also gather on the surface of the crown to keep watch for them under the command of *Okin*. The number of birds on a particular crown is determined by the status of the *Oba*. Thus, we have four for lower, twelve middle and sixteen for high ranked *Oba*. Birds are very powerful in Yoruba culture and are popularly referred to as the “mothers’ and “owners” of the world. They can do and undo, they control the world and that is why they are associated with witchcraft. Since an *Oba* is not an ordinary person, they (king and bird) belong to the same realm and can work together (Ojo,1990).

Going by scholarly findings, some of the views agree with that of Mr. Goolu ; *Okin* is one of the birds which the Yoruba regard as having extra ordinary features (Ojo 1990). He goes further that “as the king of birds, it is appropriate that the representation of *Okin* decorates the top of the King’s crown”. However, Thompson (1970) has several interpretations of these birds. In one, he says paradise flycatcher is the only bird that had the power to settle dispute existing among the creatures of the world meaning the bird is potentially, a judge because it possesses the attributes of a judge. Talking further on the gathering of birds, he is of the view that the paradise fly catcher is the commanding bird which stays at the top while the other ones are pigeons showing the image of political power in which a senior figure overlooks a circle of followers. According to him, the large birds at the base represent chiefs at the various wards of the town while the small birds are subjects being led upwards to the chiefs of the compound. Here the birds directly reflect the distribution of power in Yoruba civilization which clearly suggests a potentially political set-up.

The connection between the representation of the birds on the crown and witchcraft against which the king has to protect his people is well-articulated in *ifa* songs Ojo (1990). This statement is trying to highlight the importance of *ifa* divination as well as medicine in kingship ritual viz-a-viz birds. The king cannot be installed without the approval of *ifa* oracle. In worshiping his *Ori* (his inner head or essence), *ifa* must be consulted. This is buttressed in the documentation of the Yoruba people by Olorode (2007) where he describes them as being 'embodied in *ifa* divination'. In protecting the king and the community, medicines have to be prepared, this cannot be done without reference to *Osanyin* (Ojo 1990) who is also associated with birds.

Thompson (1970) in one of his views along this line suggests that the gathering of the birds is an indication of deep and complicated magic communication with the gods through aerial flight connecting the aspirations of heaven and earth. On the different numbers, Thompson shares same view that the number is determined by the rank of the *Oba*. However, all interpretations be it magical, spiritual, social or political, fall within the cultural context of Yoruba people thereby making them valid, moreso that they vividly reflect the symbolic potentials inherent in all these motifs.

## 5. CONCLUSION

So far, this paper has described Yoruba crowns of different categories and forms. Interpretations and cultural relativity of the crown's different motifs have been identified and discussed. It is worthy of note that investigations have revealed that modernity recording more positive effects on beaded crowns and other beaded items royalty and resultantly some of them are gaining prominence due to advancement and development in all ramifications. For instance, Yoruba kingship qualifications are now highly competitive thereby making the process survival of the fittest. In other words, the crown is still held in utmost respect and even gaining more prominence because the society is fast expanding and more people are being installed. One will not be surprised if tomorrow *Baale* (community head) of a farm settlement like Igbatoro of Akure North Local Government Area of Ondo State of Nigeria is transformed into a king because that is the order of the day. Besides most of the enlightened kings nowadays have more than one crown.

The Olobo of Obo near Ijare, Iralepo of Isinkan, Akure and Ogoga Ikere Ekiti for instance all have minimum of four each and fortunately crown making has not yielded to technology take-over. Thus the industry cannot be affected by large scale method of production meaning the job security bead workers are still gallantly guaranteed. The end product of all these is emergence of new forms and new motifs in line with what is in vogue because of the potentials inherent in them. For instance the *Ade Akele* is not common and such new forms are requested for these days because of their uniqueness. The world changes and we change with it but whatever change may be now or in the future, the institution of kingship will remain and so is making and use of beaded crowns with symbolically and potentially driven motifs.

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