



# àgéré Ifá (divination cup)

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**Not on display**

**Title/Description:** àgéré Ifá (divination cup)

**Born:** 1850 - 1950

**Object Type:** Cup

**Materials:** Wood

**Measurements:** h. 235 x w. 130 x d. 145 mm

**Accession Number:** 228

**Historic Period:** 19th Century - Late, 20th Century - Early

**Production Place:** Africa, Nigeria

**Cultural Group:** Yoruba (northern)

**Credit Line:** Donated by Robert and Lisa Sainsbury, 1973

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Known as *àgéré Ifá*, vessels such as this - with deep bowls balancing carefully upon the heads of typically female caryatid figures - serve a vital function within Yorùbá divination practices. Via such practices, insights into the causes of current misfortunes or into the promises of the future may be revealed. In a form of ritual forecasting that continues today in some parts of southwest Nigeria, the Republic of Benin and Togo and is centred on an intricate system of mathematical patterns and poetry cycles, Ifa priests (or *Babalawo*) appeal to the powerful god Orunmila to expose the machinery of the present or reveal aspects of the future relevant to their clients by making use of sacred palm nuts (*ikin*) stored in an *àgéré Ifá* such as this one.

To attain such prophetic insights for their clients, an Ifa priest (who within Yorùbá society serves as the principal guardian of sacred poetic verses and oversees their interpretation) can employ one of several methods, each more complex than the next. One of the more complex methods involves the use of an *àgéré Ifá* vessel similar to this one, together with other ritual paraphernalia such as a decorated tray covered in sand and a wooden or ivory tapper [1]. On this more complex method, an Ifa priest transfers sixteen palm nuts (*ikin*) freely between their hands, taking note of whether they are left with an odd or even number of nuts in each fist upon each transfer. While moving these sacred nuts between their hands, the priest draws a set of marks in sand spread out on a specially designed wooden board called an *opon Ifa*. At a certain point, the *Babalawo* translates the distinctive markings on the board into corresponding verses from the vast cannon of Ifa verses to offer a diagnosis for spiritual problems or to provide a tailored prophecy.

The specific composition of *àgéré Ifá* such as this one are significant to their ritual function. In this sensitively carved work, a mother and child - shaped from the same trunk - provide a base on which the elevated container sits. Considered together, this closely-entwined pair signify the importance placed on fertility and child-rearing within Yoruba society - both matters frequently brought before Ifa priests by clients. The exaggerated breasts of the female figure also point to her bodily and spiritual health, which are similarly sought via such divinatory methods [2]. Although no specific carver has yet been identified for this work, it is likely from the northern part of Yorubaland, where similar works were created in large numbers.

Theo Weiss, December 2021

[1] Alisa LaGamma, *Art and Oracle: African Art and Rituals of Divination* (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2000), Cat. Nos. 12-16.

[2] Rowland Abiodun, 'Woman in Yoruba Religious Images', *African Languages and Cultures*, 2.1 (1989), 1-18

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## Further Reading

Henry Drewal, 'Art and divination among the Yoruba: Design and myth.' *Africana Journal* 14.2-3 (1983), 139-56

Henry Drewal, John Pemberton & Rowland Abiodun, *Yoruba: Nine Centuries of African Art and Thought* (New York: Centre for African Art, 1989)

Babatunde Lawal, *Embodying the Sacred in Yoruba Art: Featuring the Bernard and Patricia Wagner Collection* (Georgia: High Museum of Art, 2007)

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## Provenance

Formerly belonging to Captain K. A. Webster.

Purchased by Robert and Lisa Sainsbury from K. J. Hewett in 1956.

Donated to the Sainsbury Centre, University of East Anglia in 1973 as part of the original gift.

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