



Ogboni society staff

Not on display

Title/Description: Ogboni society staff

Born: 1850 - 1950

Object Type: Staff

Materials: Brass

Measurements: h. 276 x w. 36 x d. 38 mm

Accession Number: 230

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

Production Place: Africa, Nigeria

Cultural Group: Yorùbá

Credit Line: Donated by Robert and Lisa Sainsbury, 1973

In Yoruba society, several traditional groups exist to promote the worship of the ancestors and bestow authority on deserving stewards. The Ogboni society, otherwise called “the Oshugbo society” in Ijebu, is a council from the Yoruba tribe in the Southwestern region of Nigeria. Ogboni consists of elderly men and women whose level of integrity and sound judgement have been proven over several years. Members have their special way of greeting during their meetings. They acknowledge one another by clenching their fists and placing their left hand above the right to reverence the spiritual and sacred issues.

Before this modern time, the Ogboni society served as the judicial, political, and majorly, spiritual interventionists. They engaged in administrative functions such as the dethronement of kings, as well as meting out penalties on criminals. The staff is a bronze image carved with a head and a long body. The head is accessorised with a loop meant to suspend it above the body. The two eyes in the head are shaped like cowries, accentuated by an elongated narrow nose and a naturalistic mouth. Above each eye is a carefully arched eyebrow. The headdress that adorned the head is styled like the famous African hairstyle called *suku*. It represents the authenticity of someone’s membership in the Ogboni council.

The head of the Ogboni staff illustrates the power of authority, symbolising the wealth of wisdom as an Ogboni member, experience in the matters of life, and to a large extent, old age. The figure is a fusion of both the male and the female genders to demonstrate the importance of sustaining prosperity within the community and keeping the earth (*ile*) safe. Three birds perch on the staff’s shaft, symbolizing the synergy between nature and human power.

Bolaji Owoseni, March 2023

TO-BE-REPLACED-WITH-A-GAP

This bronze staff is surmounted by the image of a head, on top of which is a loop, possibly for suspension. The facial features show cowrie-shaped eyes, a long nose with flared nostrils and full mouth. The patterning to the head probably indicates some form of hat. Along the shaft of the staff three birds are positioned, in a pecking arrangement. The second bird down is missing due to damage. There appears to be some green mottled discolouration along the shaft.

Helen Coleman

Entry written for VADS website (<https://vads.ac.uk>)

Further Reading

<https://exchange.umma.umich.edu/resources/30131/view>

www.imodara.com/discover/nigeria-yoruba-edan-ogboni-osugbo-staff/

Provenance

Purchased by Robert and Lisa Sainsbury from H. Reisser in 1962.

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