Basic Detail Report

House of the Head (Ìlé Orí)

Date

19th to 20th Century

Primary Maker

Yoruba

Medium

Shell, leather, canvas and bead

Description

In the traditional Yoruba religion of southwest Nigeria, Benin and Togo, before one is born they stand before a wall of potential destinies and choose their own. Once they have entered the world of the living this destiny's embodiment can be commissioned to be made by an artisan. The finished product is called an ìbòrí, inner head, after the belief that the head is the most important part of the person, controlling every aspect of being. This object takes the form of a small, conical or pyramidal structure made of leather, canvas, money cowrie shells, and a fine sand consecrated by divination priests. The immense job of protecting the ìbòrí is given to a larger but otherwise similarly constructed container of leather and cowrie shell, the ìlé orí, home for the head. Orí, the Yoruba word for head is itself an extremely complicated deity in the Yoruban pantheon. The dual meaning of a crucial Yoruban creation story indicates that Orí both the conqueror of all of the lesser gods, Òrìṣà, and created them. This confusion is perhaps partially explained by contested belief that Orí is an aspect of Olódùmarè's being, he who sits atop the pantheon of Yoruba gods. Though Orí and an individual's ìbòrí are abstract concepts as noted above the ìbòrí can take physical form in the world of the living. The same Ifá priests who conduct divination with the otherworld are involved in their creation, using the divine essence of Olódùmarè to create a bridge between the world of the living and the otherworld. At a later point when one can afford the costly amount of cowrie required to make an ìlé orí, a home for the head is built. From then on, the ìbòrí is only taken out of its containers on rare occasions: for consultation and to appease Orí who holds sway over one's destiny. Gifts with corresponding positive outcomes are offered to ward off evil, avert disasters, and to attract fortune and happiness. For the Yoruba bad luck can be attributed to neglecting one's ìbòrí or to having chosen a bad ìbòrí from Àjàlá, the maker of heads in the otherworld. While the latter is considered a permanent pox, properly attending to one's ìbòrí can alleviate this. Furthermore, even someone with a good ìbòrí can squander their well selected destiny by not paying it its due. Cowrie shells, the primary component of both ìbòrí and ìlé orí, were first introduced to Yorubaland in the 15th Century, becoming widespread by the 16th Century. These small white shells are vitally important as currency and either a symbol of good fortune or fertility throughout much of the world. Despite this, it was rare that they would take on a form so intricately tied to the spiritual one of ìbòrí. It was the good fortune associated with cowrie shells that led to their use in ìbòrí and ile ori. Completely, coated in row after row of these shells the symbolism is obvious: literally, one's fate would is surrounded by good fortune. As a currency though, the

use of cowrie shells in this way had serious financial ramifications. The Yoruba saying: “Tightly packed and plentiful is money used in making Ori’s house, But loose and free are the beads of the wealthy.” Indicates a wrongdoing by those who would remain wealthy and neglect their ìbòrí, as a hole in either the ìbòrí or the ìlé orí would cause their concentrated power to diminish. The ìlé orí especially was an investment with no early exit. Some of these objects held as many as 12000 cowrie shells. As for the eventual fate of the cowrie shells, after death the ìbòrí and ìlé orí are shattered over the grave of the deceased. Some sources indicate that the cowrie shells were later collected by the family to be reused, but other sources note that these remains were buried with the dead. Archeological evidence at a number of Yorubaland sites indicates that cowrie shells have been found in mounds, but the numbers seem to indicate that the former is the case. Various factors including the large scale, bird finial, and open design of the top indicate that this ìlé orí was made for and used by rulers. Why exactly this ìlé orí was not shattered when its royal owner passed away is unclear, the likeliest answer being that they converted to either Islam or Christianity during their lifetime.

Dimensions

15 × 10 in. (38.1 × 25.4 cm)