Episode 6

Wed, 8/25 5:07PM • 26:26

**JC Niala** 00:15

Hello, and welcome to the sixth episode of Afro Historyscapes Podcast, where we give you a different perspective on African history. We tell the stories of African histories through objects at the Horniman Museum and gardens in South London. These objects bring to life fascinating stories from the past. Together with objects and histories, we open a different window into African worlds.

**Tom Fearon** 00:42

We show how these objects continue to be used on the continent and in the diaspora in various ways. The narratives we share are based on research carried out by the Horniman’s, curators, and community researchers. Each month, we focus on a different theme. But we think another way to explore the history of Africa is through the idiom of movement. Africa is a dynamic continent that has always been on the move. If you're interested in African history, material culture, and museum collections, then this is the podcast for you.

**JC Niala** 01:18

We're your hosts, JC Niala,

**Tom Fearon** 01:21

and Tom Fearon, and today is our final episode on the theme of religion.

**JC Niala** 01:27

So so far, we've explored the African contribution to Islamic history and art, as well as the role of spirits known as jinn across the Islamic world, particularly the Kal Tameshek peoples who wear protective amulets to keep the spirits at bay.

**Tom Fearon** 01:45

We had some great conversations with Sabrina, I can't stop thinking about the Djinn stories Sabrina shared with us. And we also explored the material culture of Christianity on the African continent, focusing on Ethiopia, and the rich tradition of Christian faith, which has flourished there independently of European missionaries.

**JC Niala** 02:04

That's right, and Nick shared with us some fascinating insights into ways that despite conversion to Christianity, traditional African spiritualities allow for distinctly African interpretations of Christianity to emerge, transforming the global Christian landscape.

**Tom Fearon** 02:22

But today, we will be exploring the history and material culture of traditional Yoruba religions, known as Ifá. This is a rich and complex religion, which we could never do justice to in a short podcast. The main limit is that European systems of knowledge and language do not fit neatly with Yoruba religion, culture and history. Ifá divination is a fascinating tradition, with strong connections between humans, ancestors and spirits, that should be understood on its own terms. So consider today to be an all too brief introduction.

**JC Niala** 02:59

And we're extremely lucky to be joined by Community Action researcher Abiola Balogun, who has carried out extensive research into the history and material culture of Ifá divination. She'll help to answer some of our questions. Her research as a community action researcher has informed much of the content of this episode. And we'll include videos alongside this podcast, and the links on the podcast page.

**Abiola Balogun**

Hello, it's great to be here.

**JC Niala**

This is Afro history escapes. always something new, always has been always on the move.

This episode will focus on two objects that are key and if I divination object number 23.34 is a wooden divination tray, known as Opọ́n Ifá dating from around the mid-19th century. It's round in shape, and carved around the circumference of the tray a mesmerizing carvings of different figures and objects, which include various animals, and what is thought to be palm nuts, which a key and the divination process. One of these figures with a braid and smoking a pipe is thought to be Eshu, a trickster God who acts as a messenger between this world and the spirit world, causing trouble in the order of Ifá, and bringing people into contact with spirits called Orisha. The tray is one of many objects used in Ifá divination to communicate with Orisha. At the top of the board is a representation of a faith known as oju ọpọ́n or face of the tray. These solemn eyes stare out seemingly from the spirit world and are Another representation of the Orisha Eshu.

**Tom Fearon** 05:04

The second object is another of many objects used in Ifá divination object number 6.12.65/546 slash 546 is a divination chain, known as Opele Ifá, made from eights half kola nuts, held together by string. The divination chain is used in conjunction with the divination board. The divination chain is usually thrown onto the board during the divination process, and depending on how they land determines the situation and remedy for individual or collective problems. This is all in relation to the Odù Ifá, a highly sophisticated corpus of Scripture handed down by the grand priest and supreme creator god Orunmila. And while the divination chain looks fragile, it has the potential to be extremely powerful.

**JC Niala** 05:58

Can you tell me what you mean by that?

**Tom Fearon** 06:02

Well, there are many objects used in effect divination, ranging from the objects described here to cowrie shells, and sacred Ireyosum some powder, each having a specific purpose. But perhaps these objects are not just materials to mediate this world and the spirit world. It's thought that the objects themselves are spiritually active and powerful. An anthropologist, Martin Holbraad, did research in Cuba with adherence of a derivative of Ifá known as Santería. For worshipers, that Ireyosum powder is what allows the spirits to manifest. In this sense, the powder is power. The powder is the literal power of the spirit world.

**JC Niala** 06:44

Gosh, that's quite radical. It really changes the way we can understand objects. They have the power over us. Saying that I think that many examples in our day to day lives. If we think about mobile phones, they can definitely rule our lives. But back to the objects in the museum. Do they still hold that power?

**Tom Fearon** 07:07

Well, it depends who you ask. But some would argue that considering Ifá is a system of knowledge, that the processes of divination are key to keeping these objects spiritually activated. If these objects are not attended to by someone with that knowledge, such as an Ifá priest, otherwise known as a Babalawo, their spiritual essence eventually leaves them

**JC Niala** 07:29

I understand what you mean. So let me get this straight. Ifá divination is a way of connecting with spirits called Orisha?

**Tom Fearon** 07:39

Yes and no. Like I said, he is an oracle of knowledge that Orisha spirits sent by Olodumare, the Supreme Creator God, for guidance. Although contested, in Yoruba cosmology, there are 400 plus one Orisha. However, as a system of knowledge, the spirit world and human world are very much entangled, initiates into Ifá. Learn this knowledge from Babalawo, they will guide and instruct them on how to engage with Orisha.

**JC Niala** 08:10

I see. So when we think about it as a system of knowledge, it can be understood as a cultural system, not just a religion.

**Tom Fearon** 08:19

Yes, exactly. And we can learn this by looking at the rich history of the Yoruba peoples and nation.

**JC Niala** 08:27

Yeah, the Yoruba peoples are an ethnic group, mostly from modern day Southwest Nigeria. But the history of Yoruba people stretches back to about the seventh century. The center of the Yorubaland was the city of **Ile**-**Ife**, and according to Yoruba religious tradition, was founded by the Orisha **Oduduwa,** who ruled the city. The leader, otherwise known as Ooni, ruled under the orders of the Supreme Creator God, Oludumare. As the place where the gods descended to earth. Ile-Ife translates as ‘place of dispersion’ and remains the center of Ifá religious tradition. Today ruled by Ooni ***Ọjájá II*** who is the traditional ruler of the Yoruba kingdom, known as the King of Kings. To this day, Ile-Ife, or just Ife is the center of Ifá religion for the Yoruba peoples. Standing in the site, since around the fifth century BC, the city of Ile-Ife grew into a powerful civilization, known for its stunning and intricate bronze sculptures. Many of them depict important spiritual leaders throughout history, and some bare face markings synonymous with Yoruba ethnic identity.

**Tom Fearon** 09:53

Yes, I've seen the statues, they are made using an innovative lost-wax method of casting. But now I would like to introduce today's guest, Abiola Balogun. Hello, Abiola, thank you so much for joining us. Perhaps you could help us learn a bit more about if divination.

**JC Niala** 10:09

Abiola? Are you able to tell us a little bit more about these objects, what their significance is and how they're used?

**Abiola Balogun**

10:18

I think yourself and Tom really describe these objects in its full entirety. And I must commend you both on an excellent pronunciation of the Yoruba words. One thing I would like to echo on or perhaps add to JC's point is that firstly, the divination tray known as the Opọ́n Ifá, which literally means the forehead of Ifá. And secondly, the oju ọpọ́n which literally means the eye of the forehead represents the Orisha called Eshu, who is deemed as the God of divination, and the messenger of Ifá during a divination process. These objects are used to reveal the past, understand the present and reveal the future of personal and community circumstances. Followers go to the traditional priests, known as the Babalawo to consult with Ifá, who is regarded as the oracle of knowledge and wisdom. The divination chain, as Tom described earlier is a string of eight kola nuts, and each nut represents one of the eight letters in the divination scripture. One thing that is important to share or to note on is that these objects can only be used by a tradition of priest, which is the Babalawo. Now during the process of this ritual divination, the forehand, and the eye of the tray must be positioned to face the Babalawo directly. He or her should then chant various verses to evoke the presence of the gods, whilst bringing the chain and then gently toss the chain on a divination tray, a mat, or a white cloth to reveal oral scriptures, for the priests to help followers make decisions, sacrifices and seek solutions from ancestors and the orishas.

**Tom Fearon** 12:29

Abiola, that's fascinating. And thank you for giving us an insight into the process of divination as well as the meanings behind the object. So as me and JC were discussing and if I'm correct, if is an oracle of knowledge held by the Orisha and divination is a way of communicating with Orisha, why would practitioners want to communicate with Orisha?

**Abiola Balogun**

12:50

Well now probably change the order in terms of your question, because if that is the medium through which followers can interpret the circumstances of their problems, and find the best solutions to their personal and collective challenges. Yes, Ifá is the oracle of knowledge and wisdom, however, the orishas are spirits or supernatural beings, placed onto earth to act as a medium from Olodumare. Now, Olodumare is the supreme being, which in the Yoruba tradition is known as God, and each Orisha has a purpose in all human lives. And this comes last in the process of divination. Ifá is the oracle that transmits the connections with Olodumare, while the Orishas role is to bring harmony and resolve any challenges individuals may have or even communities.

**JC Niala** 13:51

So let me get this right is divination a way of connecting spirits with the physical world?

**Abiola Balogun**

14:00

So let me ask you a question JC. Is the Bible a way to connect with saints? I'll probably say the answer is no. For instance, the Catholics refer to Holy Mary as a saint and the Mother of God, for which they communicate to reach the ultimate purpose to connect with Almighty God. In the Roman Catholic Church, people go for confessions to say sorry for the wrongs or sins and their lives to experience God's healing through forgiveness, reciting a number of Hail Mary’s in order to cleanse their faith. This is a similar analogy with Ifá divination system. The only difference here is there are many more Orishas or saints whose guidance are needed depending on the circumstances to reflect upon.

**JC Niala** 14:57

I see what you mean yes, there's a lot of similarities with catholic canon of saints as well, but can practitioners communicate with Orisha on their own?

**Abiola Balogun**

15:07

Well, JC that is a tricky question, because the answer is yes and no. Firstly, it is believed that from birth you inherit an Orisha who guides you through your life. And follow us often pay homage through offerings such as food, drinks, fruits, to sacrifices of farm animals, like goats and chickens, etc, to their Orishas. However, during present personal challenges, other Orishas may be required to resolve or restore harmony in one's life, but can only be revealed with the help of and Ifá priest. I'll just give you a simple example. If a community is suffering from famine, or woman is having problems conceiving a child, the Ifá priest was mostly lean on the Orisha called Yemoja is the Orisha of water and feminine mysteries.

**Tom Fearon** 16:07

So Abiola, what other materials and objects are used when communicating with Orisha?

**Abiola Balogun**

16:14

Going back to how we started this conversation, the divination tray and chain are two of the many objects used. They also have the sacred powder called Ireyosum, which is used on the divination tray. Other objects are the eighteen loose cowries, similar to the divination chain, but never used together, as well as the scriptures of 256 chapters, which helps the Ifá priest to interpret the readings during the divination process.

**JC Niala** 16:52

And what role does it play in contemporary Yoruba social life?

**Abiola Balogun**

16:58

So they say the effect of nation process is strongly focused on community predominantly centered in the Yourba social life. When we look at the masquerade, display such as Gelede, which plays a strong string to the Ifá divination system to honor women in the communities. The bearer of this Gelede mask, who represents a family lineage is selected through a divination of an Ifá priest and certain rituals needs to be carried out to appraise the ancestors and the orishas.

**Tom Fearon** 17:36

So it seems to play a strong role in Yoruba social life and culture. But these religious practices are also popular among the African diaspora and take on many forms, Santería in Cuba and North America **Candomblé** in Brazil and Argentina and there are shared spiritual roots with Haitian **Vodou** too. And some of these religious traditions incorporate forms of Catholicism as well. But there's a reason for this transatlantic connection, isn't there Abiola?

**Abiola Balogun**

18:07

Absolutely, what I find quite intriguing is the absence of recognizing that the cultural movement because of the trans-Atlantic era has led to a large number of people being forcefully removed from Southwest Nigeria, which is the homeland of Yorubas, and migrated to many parts of South America. Yorubas are known to be very strong, passionate individuals. So during this time, they had to hold on to the only thing they had left, their native language, their culture and their religion, and as a result led to several syncretized religion which is a blend of the Yoruba ritual of divination and Christianity.

**Tom Fearon** 18:57

It seems like Ifá and other Yoruba traditional religions have traveled the world for various reason, and are not only a religion, but a powerful cultural movement. They continue to be important both in Nigeria and in the diaspora.

**Abiola Balogun**

19:11

Well, firstly, just to clarify, there is only one Yoruba religion, which is worshipped up through Ifá divination system. What I find quite interesting is how the religion has been kept alive by generations of the descendants from the trans-Atlantic movement. I was absolutely surprised during my research work, to see that, for instance, 70% of the population in Cuba are Africans. However, looking at the other side of the coin from Southwest Nigeria, whether due to the influence of education, modern society or religion Ifá divination is deemed as unorthodox and fetish, and for many who still practice are doing so in secret. However, I think Africans in diaspora felt the need to hold on to this as the only way to preserve their connection with their ancestors and gods. As of my time growing up in Nigeria, the Ifá divination system was seen as the last means to an end. I grew up in a Muslim Yoruba family, I remember when we had family or personal challenges, my parents always turn to the Imam for support for scriptures in the Quran. And he will provide guidance on scripts to recite and days to fast and pray. When matters are not resolved through this we lean on consulting with our oracles and orishas for cleansing and restoring harmony with these problems.

**JC Niala** 21:05

So there's something quite profound about that. And if these practices continue to be popular and adapt to modern life, do you think that it's important that the religious practices are understood as traditional?

**Abiola Balogun**

21:20

I think the notion here is to understand what the term traditional means in the context of religion. For instance, Christianity is a traditional religion from the Romans. So why should the Yoruba religion be deemed otherwise or even be surrounded by the question, Is it a traditional religion? Secondly, we also need to be a little bit less pragmatic about our views on religion. And the reason I say this is because even I struggled with defining the Yoruba religion as perhaps more a way of life. One, there is no specific dates, to worship collectively. Secondly, there is no written account I can refer to without consulting Ifá priest. And finally, as an example, there is no designated day to remember or honor, anything associated to the religion, like you have Christianity where you have Easter Christmas, and with the Muslim Ramadan, and so on and so forth.

**Tom Fearon** 22:31

Obviously, that's fascinating. And I think it really challenges our understandings of religion. Like you said, it's more a way of life than simply as a set of doctrines. Thank you Abiola, your research has been invaluable when researching this episode. Is there a key point about traditional Yoruba religion that you'd like our listeners to take away with them today?

**Abiola Balogun**

22:52

I think for me, one thing that I definitely think it's important to take away from this podcast today is that the fair definition system is an essential aspect within the Yoruba culture. The system itself is not rigid and is open to people of all faiths. And I think for me, the last thing I'd love to kind of share with everyone listening in on this is that Ifá practice is not a jealous religion, and is open to anyone who wants to practice.

**Tom Fearon** 23:25

That's great Abiola. And as your research says, Ifá divination is a traveling religion, and as people, their religion and culture move their spirits move with them. And speaking of the transnational movement of Yoruba inspired religion, reminds me of a Cuban musician, **Daymé Arocena**, who incorporates the drumbeats and chants of Santeria, a syncretic form of Yoruba religion into her amazing music, and will add links alongside the podcast.

**JC Niala** 23:53

I think Abiola’s research is incredibly inspiring, because it's such an important reminder about how religion is so tied up with music, like the example you've given from Cuba, art and also culture. And if you're interested, as you've been listening to this podcast, in other African traditional religions, there's so many more to learn about.

**Tom Fearon** 24:13

Yes, and I think that's what I would like listeners to take away from this podcast, that the traditional Yoruba religion is not just a religion, as we might typically understand it in Europe. It blends this world with the spirit world, and it's as much of a cultural tradition as a religious tradition. In fact, from the last three episodes, we have seen how religion becomes a way to navigate everyday life. Whether it's protection from Jinn in the Sahara, building civilizations based on a distinctly African biblical heritage, or being guided through life by Orisha, religion and its material culture is deeply embedded in the history lives and worlds of African peoples.

Thank you for listening to Afro historyscapes. That wraps up our three episodes on religion. I have to say as someone who researches religion myself, I've really enjoyed these episodes.

**JC Niala** 25:11

I really have as well. It's been such a privilege to hear from Sabrina, Nick and Abiola, whose research as part of the community action research project at the Horniman adds incredible knowledge and expertise to our existing understandings of these objects and the stories they tell. A big thank you to them.

**Tom Fearon** 25:33

Next week we move on to the theme of technology where we will explore the ways that African peoples have enterprise and innovated throughout history. Johanna Zetterstrom-Sharp, deputy keeper of anthropology at the Horniman museum & gardens will be joining us to explore the technologies of milk. Yes, milk. I can't wait! We've been your hosts, Tom Fearon

**JC Niala** 25:57

JC Niala

**Abiola Balogun**

and Abiola Balogun

**JC Niala**

This is Afro historyscapes. Always something you always has been always on the move.