



Shango staff in the form of a woman

On display

Title/Description: Shango staff in the form of a woman

Born: 1800 - 1950

Object Type: Figure

Materials: Wood

Measurements: h. 388 x w. 111 x d. 58 mm

Accession Number: 227

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

Production Place: Africa, Nigeria, Oyo

Cultural Group: Yorùbá

Credit Line: Donated by Robert and Lisa Sainsbury, 1973

Expertly carved from a single piece of wood, this ceremonial dance wand (or *oshe*) depicts a kneeling female devotee of Sàngó, the Yorùbá God of divine retribution and worldly order. Because direct portrayals of Sàngó are taboo, this powerful god's essence has instead long been symbolised by a double axe motif at the apex of carvings made for his worship - such as in this piece, where the curving bilobe axe-head balances artfully over the figure depicted in its central section - symbolising Sàngó's dual role as the god of retribution and of fortune. As is typical in Sàngó wands, the devotee depicted is a female with pronounced breasts and large hips, which together evoke the qualities of fertility and health associated with Sàngó's blessings. Less typically, the figure in this carving holds an *oshe* of her own in one hand and a gourd rattle (*shere*) in the other - playfully echoing the outline of the larger object of which it is part.

Among the Yorùbá of southwestern Nigeria, Togo and the Republic of Benin - where he is still worshipped in some communities - Sàngó is seen as both a historical figure and a divine being. According to Yorùbá folklore, Sàngó was one of the early kings of the Oyo kingdom. However, finding himself in a battle for supremacy, Sàngó summoned a mighty thunderstorm which accidentally destroyed his capital and killed his family. As a result, he took his own life. Shortly after his death, a mighty thunderstorm descended across Yorubaland - thereby establishing the enduring connection between Sàngó's divine authority and thunder's destructive power [1]. In subsequent centuries, this connection was re-emphasised by the inclusion in his carvings of an axe-head motif in the shape of thunderstones or celts (*edun ara*) which were found scattered on the ground after thunderstorms - although in this carving the axe-head takes a more horn-like, curved form.

The graspable hilt of this object points to its function as tool for worshipping Sàngó. Although usually stored within dedicated community shrines with axe-head section facing downward, *oshe sàngó* such as this are retrieved from shrines and turned upwards for use within placatory ceremonies. During such events, priests of Sàngó hold the *oshe* close to their bodies - as in the depicted figure - and then throw them outwards in an erratic ritual motion symbolising Sàngó's dual, highly unpredictable nature [3]. Priests engaged in such ceremonies are said to achieve a state of serene entrancement which, in this carving, is depicted in the central figure's glazed eyes and solemn posture.

Theo Weiss, July 2021

[1] Susan Vogel [ed.], *For Spirits and Kings: African Art from the Paul and Ruth Tishman Collection* (Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1981), 92

[2] Pemberton Fagg, John & Holcombe, *Yoruba Sculpture of West Africa* (Random House, 1982), 74. See also Steven Hooper, [ed.]. *Robert and Lisa Sainsbury Collection catalogue. Vol. 2: Pacific, African and Native North American Art* (Yale University Press, 1997), UEA 112

Further Reading

Roslyn Walker, *The Arts of Africa at the Dallas Museum of Art*, Yale University Press (2009), 110-111.

Norma Wolff & Michael Warren, 'The Agbeni Shango Shrine in Ibadan: A Century of Continuity,' *African Arts*, Vol. 31 (3), (1998), 36-94.

Provenance

Formerly belonging to Captain K. A. Webster.

Purchased by Robert and Lisa Sainsbury from K. J. Hewett in 1953.

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