



Altar (Asen)

Medium

Iron

Description

Circular iron platform with figures on stake. This iron structure was made to honor a deceased Fon man from Ouidah, a city located near the coast of Benin in West Africa. Although altars similar in structure to this asen are made throughout southern Benin, the construction of this asen is unique to 20th-century Ouidah. Elsewhere, asen contain cast forms and figures, but only those made in Ouidah exclusively feature elements fashioned from cut iron. Ouidah asen are also known for their numerous figures and large, circular platforms. Asen tableaux do not have a single corresponding meaning that is readily understood by a viewer. It is widely believed that only the maker and the family member who commissioned the asen fully comprehend its full significance. One constant, however, lies with the importance of the central, often

seated, figure. He represents the deceased. The objects and figures that surround him may reference his occupation, his contributions to society or his family, or may simply be a playful pun of his name. As a motif, the figure who offers a calabash regularly appears on asen. The calabash is the vehicle by which the living make offerings of food and water to the dead. In fact, an asen is best understood as symbolically representing a calabash in form and function. The asen provides a smooth round "stage" upon which the figures act, and an object that serves to mediate communication between the living and the dead. Fon family compounds reserve a space for the planting of many asen which memorialize the deceased. In addition to its otherworld significance, the calabash is often associated with creation. Two halves are joined to make a whole, just as the creator couple Mawu and Lisa, joined to form the universe. The thick vertical column with the forked top represents a guardian spirit. It serves to both thank the dead for his interaction with the living and pray for continued support. Although the Fon of Ouidah have long had communication with Europeans, the cross is not believed to have derived from Christianity. It references Mawu, the female creator figure, to whom the Fon turn for protection. Appearing at first glance to be a rounded archway is the horned rainbow serpent, Dan Aido-huEdo. "Ni", the Fon word for both rainbow and name suggests that the serpent represents a pun. Arched over the deceased, the pun may be interpreted as symbolizing his personal resolve to honor the lineage name. The rainbow serpent may have further layers of significance: Dan connects thunder and the earth, thus transmitting souls to earth; and grants

happiness and well-being to individuals. A pig often recalls the proverb, "As long as the pig is free, no grass will grow in front of my father's house." In other words, the progeny of the deceased promise to tend to his altar and perform appropriate ceremonies to honor him. In the past, the pendants that dangle from the rim of the asen often served as the artisan's personal signature. This form of identification is rarely practiced today; the pendants' forms merely replicate a popular motif. The frog in a snake's mouth refers to a Fon proverb in which a frog is saved by an invisible hand. Interpreted broadly, the saying suggests ancestral protection. The paired disk and crescent may suggest the strength of the family: "All things grow large like the moon." The pairing may also refer to dualism and the creator couple, Mawu and Lisa. Suggested reading: Edna G. Bay, *Asen: Iron Altars of the Fon People of Benin*. Atlanta, GA: Emory University Museum of Art and Archaeology, 1985

Dimensions

40 x 11 inches (101.6 x 27.9 cm)