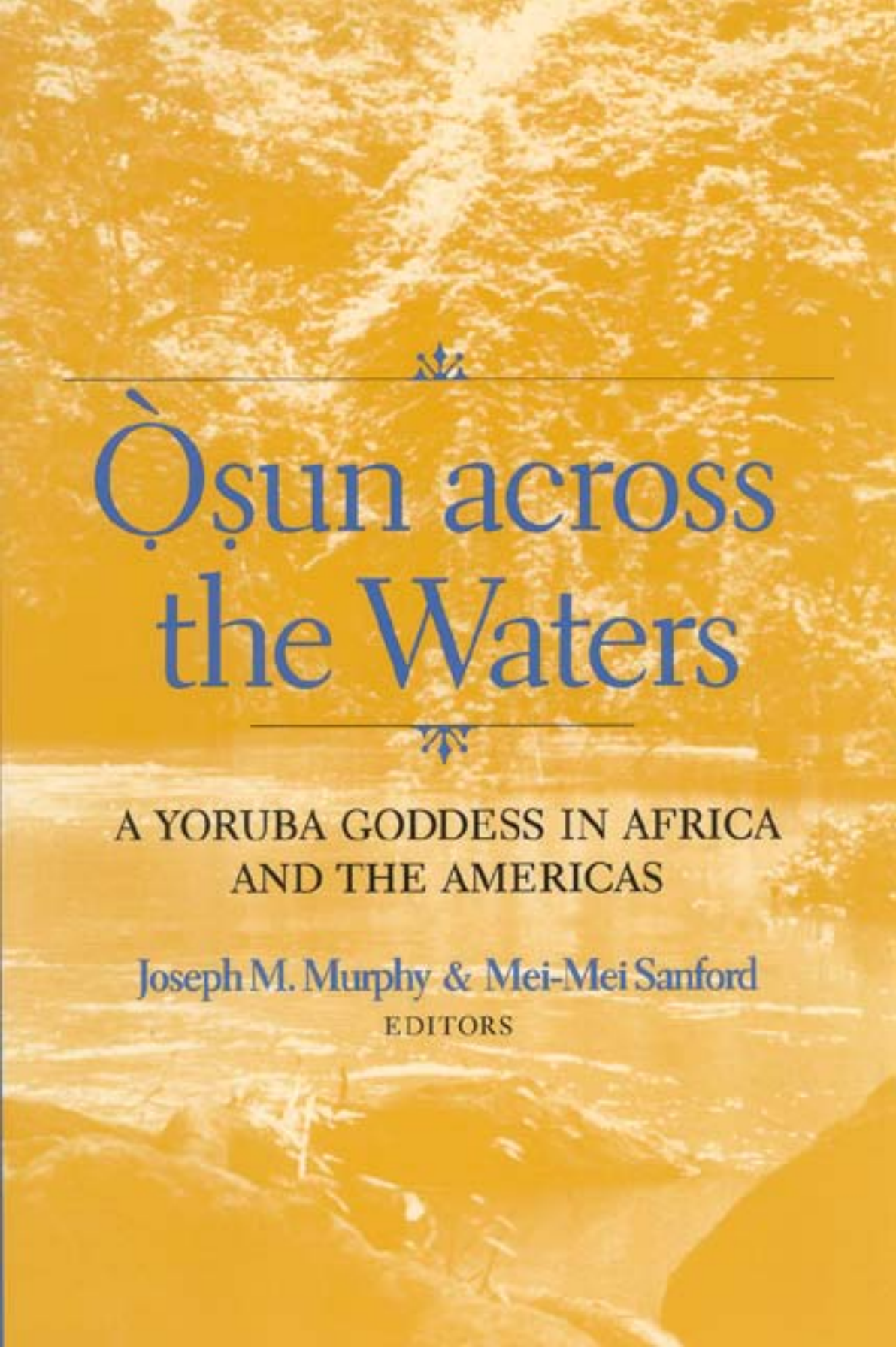
Ọ̀ṣun across the Waters
A YORUBA GODDESS IN AFRICA AND THE AMERICAS
Joseph M. Murphy & Mei-Mei Sanford
EDITORS

# ỌṢUN ACROSS THE WATERS

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# Òṣun across the Waters

## A YORUBA GODDESS IN AFRICA AND THE AMERICAS

*Joseph M. Murphy & Mei-Mei Sanford*
*editors*

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Cover: Ọ̀ṣun River in Òṣogbo, Nigeria, 1998. Photo by Mei-Mei Sanford.

Frontis: Titilayo Sangoyoyin, Ọ̀ṣun River in Iragbiji, Nigeria, 1998. Photo by Mei-Mei Sanford.

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**A JUANA, UNA DIOSA**
**— J. M. M.**

**FOR MY MOTHERS AND FATHERS**
**— M.-M. S.**

# Contents

# Illustrations

## Figures

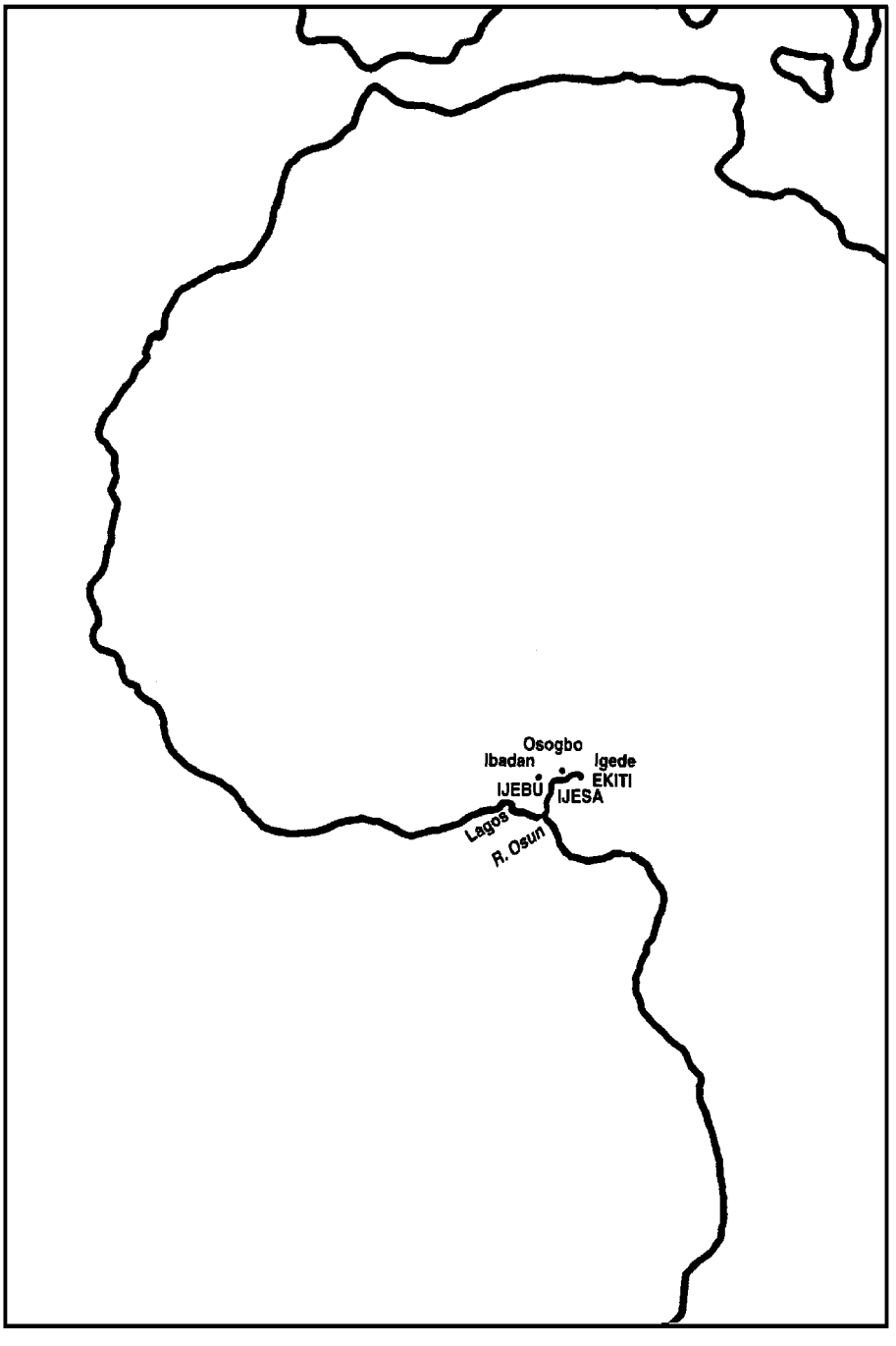
## Maps

# Orthography

The Yoruba language has developed conventions in spelling utilizing subscript marks such as ẹ, ọ, and ṣ, which are sounded "eh," "aw," and "sh," respectively. Yoruba tones are rendered with a rising mark for high (á) and with a falling one for low (à). In general we have followed the preferences of the contributors in using these marks, usually dropping them for proper names and places, with the exception of the names of the òrìṣà themselves.

Throughout the Yoruba diaspora, the language has taken on the local orthographies where it has established itself. Thus our goddess can be rendered Ọ̀ṣun, Ochún, Oxum, and Oshun. We trust that these local spellings will give context and texture to the varieties of Ọ̀ṣun traditions portrayed in this volume and that her name will ring clearly in all its forms.


(Left and right) Ọ̀ṣun sites in the Americas and Africa.
*Courtesy David Hagen.*


Osogbo
Ibadan
Igede
EKITI
IJEBÚ
IJESA
Lagos
R. Osun

CHAPTER ONE

# Introduction

*Joseph M. Murphy and Mei-Mei Sanford*

The child of Ife where the sun rises
The mother who gives a bounteous gift
The tender-hearted one
The source of water
The child of Ijesa
The water to whom the king prostrates to receive a gift
—*oríkì Ọ̀ṣun*, Ode Remo 1992[1]

## *Ọ̀ṣun across the Waters*

Ọ̀ṣun is a brilliant deity whose imagery and worldwide devotion demand broad and deep scholarly reflection. The purpose of collecting the essays for this volume is not only to document the historical and cultural significance of Yoruba traditions, but to emphasize their plural nature, their multivocality both in Africa and the Americas. We hope the effect will be prismatic, freeing the representation of Yoruba religion in general and Ọ̀ṣun traditions in particular from the constricting views which have prevailed. Most previous accounts of Yoruba traditions have been content to characterize Ọ̀ṣun as "river goddess," "fertility goddess," "the African Venus." These ethnocentric and reductive views fail to reflect the centrality and authority of Ọ̀ṣun in Yoruba religious thought and practice. Neither do they convey the multidimensionality of her power: political, economic, divinatory, maternal, natural, therapeutic. This volume reveals the diversity of aspects of Ọ̀ṣun layered in any single tradition as well as the multiple traditions of Ọ̀ṣun thriving in Yorubaland and the Americas.

We are interested in seeing the dynamism and texture special to *òrìṣà Ọ̀ṣun*. The contributors to the ground-breaking *Africa's Ogun*, edited by Sandra Barnes, explored the complex nature of Ògún, the *òrìṣà* who transforms life through iron and technology (Barnes 1997). *Ọ̀ṣun across the Waters* continues this exploration of Yoruba religion by documenting what "Ọ̀ṣun religion" looks like. Indeed the phrase "Ọ̀ṣun religion" is a provocative translation of the Yoruba as revealed in the conversation of two Yoruba men when they visited the home of an Ọ̀ṣun

priestess in New York. When one inquired at the doorway, "What is the religion (*èṣìn*) of this house?" The other replied, "*èṣìn Ọṣun*."

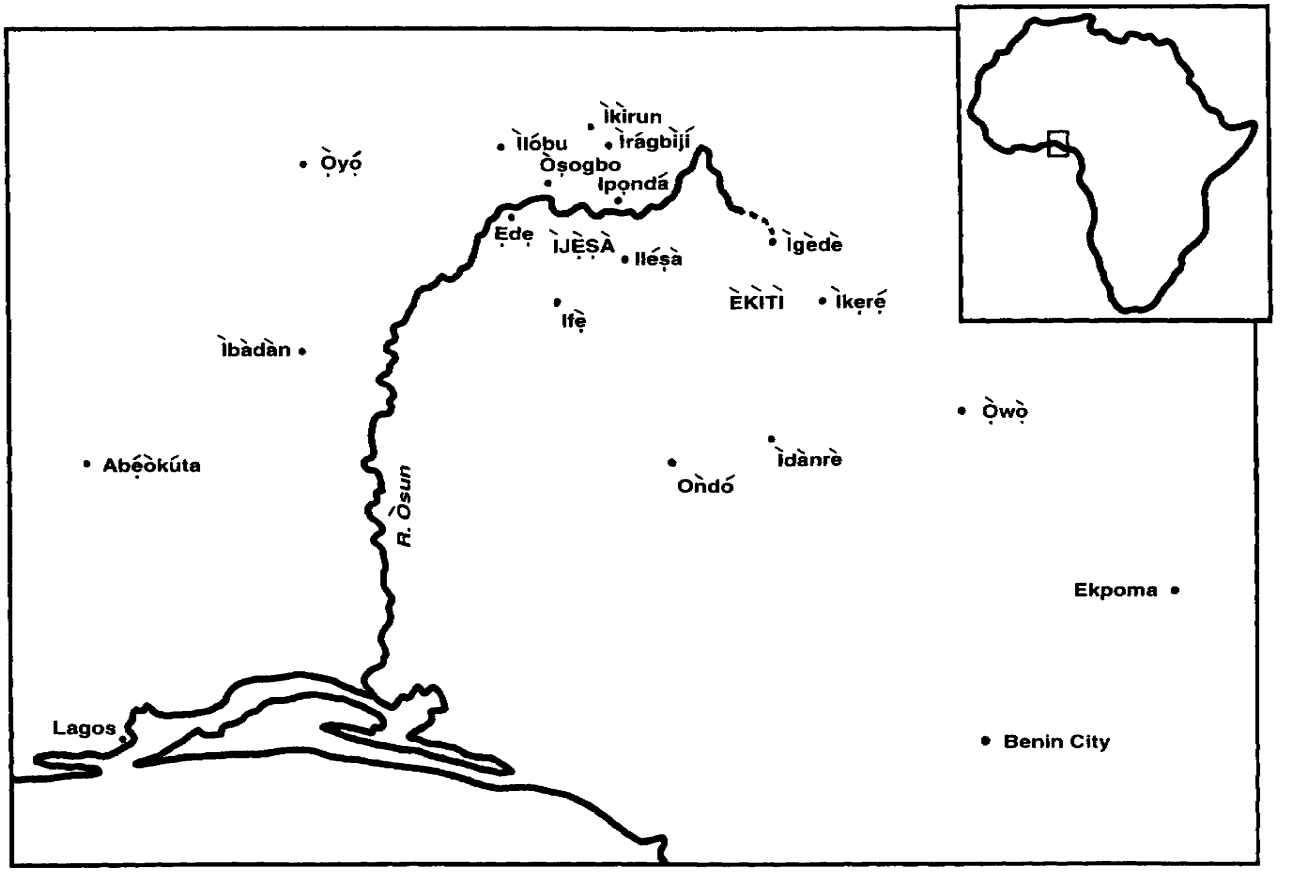
Ọṣun's themes can be seen in counterpoint to those of Ògún. Both are transformers: Ògún transforms through technology; and Ọṣun through the simplest of natural substances, water, and by the mystery of birth. Both are creators of civilization and urban life, Ògún by creating the iron tools of agriculture and conquest, Ọṣun by creating the wealth of cowries, and the court and shrine artistry of brass and bronze. Ọṣun is known as a "cool," peaceful deity and Ògún as a "hot" warrior *òrìṣà*. Yet both rise in defense of their devotees and conquer—Ògún by the knife or the careening truck, Ọṣun by the often silent, inexorable movement of water. Both heal: Ọṣun by water; and Ògún by the herbal expertise of his hunters and the ability of his priests to facilitate difficult births and dissipate life-threatening blockages in the body. Ọṣun and Ògún present dynamic examples of the resilience and renewed importance of traditional Yoruba images in negotiating spiritual experience, social identity, and political power in contemporary Africa and the African diaspora.

The seventeen contributors to *Ọṣun across the Waters* trace the special dimensions of Ọṣun religion as it appears through multiple disciplines in multiple cultural contexts. Tracing the extent of Ọṣun traditions, we go across the waters and back again. Ọṣun traditions continue to grow and change as they flow and return from their sources in Africa and the Americas.

## *Ọṣun the Source*

Ọṣun's name means source. It is related to the word *orísùn*, the source of a river, a people, or of children. The word *Ọṣun* can be glossed as that which runs, seeps, flows, moves as water does. Ọṣun is the perpetually renewing source of life, modeling in *sẹ́lẹ̀rú*, the appearance of sweet water from dry ground, a mode of hope and agency in new and difficult situations, a way out of no way that has made life possible for her devotees in West Africa and the Americas. Rowland Abiodun, David Ogungbile, and Diedre Badejo describe Ọṣun's elemental power as water to make life possible and to preserve life for creation. Mei-Mei Sanford documents the continued acknowledgment of Ọṣun's watery potency by Nigerian Christians, citing an Aladura leader who identifies Ọṣun and Yẹmọja with the uncreated waters of Genesis.

Ọṣun may also be understood as the source in other ways. As the hair plaiter with the beaded comb, she controls the outer head and the inner head, or destiny. She is the seventeenth *òrìṣà* to come from heaven to earth, and without her the other *òrìṣà* are powerless and human life is impossible. Abiodun tells us that she is also the seventeenth *Odù*, indispensable to the process of divination. Ọṣun is the owner of *Ẹ́ẹ́rìndínlógún*, sixteen cowries, a form of divination distinct from Ọ̀rúnmìlá's *Ifá* and widely practiced by women as well as men. The narrative of Ọṣun as "married" to Ọ̀rúnmìlá and the injunction that the *babaláwo*'s "wife" be




Detail of Ọ̀ṣun sites in Africa. *Map by Mei-Mei Sanford, drawing courtesy of David Hagen.*

a priestess of Ọ̀ṣun, understood in the context of the testimony of elder diviners of both systems, reveals a thoroughgoing vision not only of complementarity but of primacy. *Babaláwo* cannot divine without Ọ̀ṣun because, as 'Wande Abimbola argues in his essay, her *Ẹẹ́rìndínlógún* are the source of their *Ifá*.

## *The Ijesa* òrìṣà

The best-known source of Ọ̀ṣun traditions arises in Ijesa country in a region of West Africa that since 1991 has been known as Ọ̀ṣun State, Nigeria.[2] Though Ijesa traditions have been fundamental in shaping the image of Ọ̀ṣun worldwide, the deity is recognized by her devotees in any locality and she takes on images appropriate to them. The most well-known narratives about the first encounter between human beings and Ọ̀ṣun are set in the Ijesa settlement of Osogbo. Migrants from Ilesa settled on the banks of the river that has been named after her and have sacrificed to her there ever since. Virtually all of the people of Osogbo are drawn into the annual celebration of Ọ̀ṣun's role in the life of the city. Two essays in this volume examine the festival at Osogbo where the pact of mutual support between Ọ̀ṣun and the city's *ọba* (sovereign) is ceremonially renewed. Diedre Badejo explores the ways in which devotion to Ọ̀ṣun makes explicit the implicit power of Osogbo women in social, economic, and political spheres. Jacob Olupona relates how the royal house of Osogbo finds in the image of Ọ̀ṣun a way to negotiate power among the many constituencies of the city to work toward a civil society. The Osogbo festival is the largest event in Nigeria dedicated to a traditional deity and has become an international tourist attraction drawing thousands to witness the grandeur of the festival and give praise to Ọ̀ṣun.

Though the Osogbo festival is the most well-known center of Ọ̀ṣun devotion, there are significant Ọ̀ṣun festivals in other cities of Nigeria and other parts of the world. Some Ọ̀ṣun centers are ancient Yoruba towns, named as roads or aspects of Ọ̀ṣun in the divination verses of *Ẹẹ́rìndínlógún* and *Ifá:* Iponda, Ewuji, Ijumu, and Oro.[3] Ọ̀ṣun traditions can be traced as well by examining the distribution of brass arts associated with her worship. In this volume Cornelius O. Adepegba examines the styles and traditions surrounding the ritual use of Ọ̀ṣun's brass objects in Ijesa, as well as Ife, Oyo, and Ekiti. There are important Ọ̀ṣun shrines in Iragbiji, Iponda, Igede, Ibadan, Oyo, Ijebu, Ekiti, and Abeokuta, as well as Rio de Janeiro, Salvador da Bahia, Havana, and New York. Everywhere Ọ̀ṣun is worshiped her flowing water appears. Devotees in every town have their own Ọ̀ṣun river, stream, or spring. In Yẹmọja's own city of Abeokuta, an Ọ̀ṣun priestly lineage and an Ọ̀ṣun river flourish.[4]

With the catastrophic mass enslavement of Yoruba men and women in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, Ọ̀ṣun traditions were carried across the Atlantic and redeveloped in Cuba and Brazil. Under conditions of enslavement and cultural marginalization, Ọ̀ṣun traditions became a key feature

of African-Atlantic strategies of adaptation and resistance to European values and spirituality. Joseph Murphy looks at the ways that Ọ̀ṣun came to be identified with the patron saint of Cuba. Ysamur Flores-Peña shows how the different blendings of Yoruba and Spanish aesthetic traditions among the Cuban Lucumí could act as "confrontation weapons in the hands of the deity [Ọ̀ṣun] and her altar makers."

Yoruba traditions are currently experiencing a renaissance in the United States. Spurred by the influx of Caribbean immigrants since the 1960s, tens of thousands of Americans are embracing Ọ̀ṣun as the key to successful living and spiritual development. Rachel Harding listens to African American priestesses who have found in Ọ̀ṣun ways to connect to their religious roots and build a new spirituality that fulfills their quest to live as strong Black women.

The celebration of Ọ̀ṣun traditions in the Americas has spread well beyond the circles of her immediate devotees. The Odunde festival in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, was begun in 1975 and has become a city institution that draws thousands to worship at the Schuykill River. Ieda dos Santos tells us how "everyone is Oxum's" in Bahia, Brazil, where the *mae d'agua* festivals for her and Iemanja are the most popular Afro-Brazilian celebrations of all. In Miami every September 8th at the shrine of the Cuban saint, Our Lady of Charity, hundreds of devotees of Ochún gather to make offerings at the shore of Biscayne Bay.

The connection between Ijesa and Ọ̀ṣun is well known in the Americas. We find *cabildos* or chartered clubs in nineteenth-century Cuba that identified themselves as Iyesa. Today there are special Iyesa drums for Ochún in Matanzas that sound distinctive rhythms for her worship. In Brazil, Ijexa rhythms are the definitive beat of carnival troupes called "afoxés" who adapted Oxum rhythms to public performance. Afoxés and Blocos Afros were the most visible and popular expressions of a reassertion of Afro-Brazilian identity in Bahia in the nineteen-seventies and it is consonant with Ọ̀ṣun's power to find her the pulse of what might be called the "black pride" movement of Brazil.

## *Aládé: "The Crowned Woman"*

Ọ̀ṣun is praised as a crowned woman, and one who "dances to take the crown without asking" (Verger 1959: 426). The former Àtáója (ruler of Osogbo) Adenle praised her in Ijesa fashion as the great *ọba* of the water, and elaborating, described her palace and courtiers resplendent in the deep pools of the river (Verger 1959: 408). The Ijesa Empire, where Ọ̀ṣun is hailed as Ọba Ijesa, has a history of women sovereigns, counting at least five women rulers among the thirty-nine Owá whose names are known. The number of women rulers in Ijesa may, in fact, be considerably higher.

When the Nigerian historian Bolanle Awe was told of Sandra Barnes's characterization of Ògún as an "empire builder," she declared, "Ọ̀ṣun is an empire

builder as well."[5] In Osogbo and the other towns where she is the tutelary deity, Ọ̀ṣun is a warrior as well as a peacemaker. She carries a cooling brass fan in one hand and a brass cutlass in the other. Ọ̀ṣun is a fierce defender. A praise song collected by Pierre Verger in Ipetu says: "Owner of the knife, I take refuge by your side," and another from Osogbo says: "We can stay in the world without fear" (Verger 1959: 429, 422).

In towns that Ọ̀ṣun protects, the well-being of the city and exercise of sovereignty is dependent on the pacts that she makes with the people and with the sovereign. In Osogbo people sing: "Who does not know that it is Ọ̀ṣun Osogbo who enables the *ọba* to rule Osogbo?"[6] In Iragbiji, another strong Ọ̀ṣun town, it is the senior priestesses and priests of Ọ̀ṣun who install the Aragbiji (*ọba*). Without their active consent, he cannot reign. Adeleke Sangoyoyin, an Iragbiji *òrìṣà* priest, averred: "No *ọba* can rule without Ọ̀ṣun."[7]

Ọ̀ṣun can be understood as the basis of sovereignty because of her immense power and her ownership of the cool air and cool water essential to life. In this aspect, she is the "great water to whom the ruler prostrates to receive a gift" for his people (Sanford 1997: 184). In the Americas, sovereignty is a central metaphor of initiation and priesthood, and coronation is impossible without a trip to the river. A New York Ochún priestess has said, "The river is the entry into *santo*," life in the *orichas*.[8]

Another reason that Ọ̀ṣun is the source and condition of the *ọba* exercising rulership is that she is the leader of the Àjẹ́, the people, particularly elderly women, who use power secretly. "The Mothers," as they are commonly known, are imaged as birds and it is their female bird power that is suggested in the birds that surmount Yoruba crowns. They indicate that the *ọba* rules with the power of the Mothers or under their watchful scrutiny. Medicines that activate the ruler's potency are placed inside the crown by elderly priestesses. These medicines are so powerful that the sight of them would cause the sovereign to die. Ọba William Adetona Ayeni of Ila-Orangun has said, "Without 'the Mothers,' I could not rule."[9]

## *Ọ̀ṣun and Religious Complexity*

Ọ̀ṣun's identity as the source shows her at the heart of Yoruba ideas of divinity. Diviners can't divine without Ọ̀ṣun; sovereigns can't rule without her; the *òrìṣà* can't build the world without her arts. She is the ever-renewing source below the surface of the visible who makes renewal possible. She is thus able to make herself anew whenever she comes to consciousness and she is made anew wherever her devotees re-envision her.

This dynamism is characteristic of the nature of Ọ̀ṣun as an *òrìṣà*. In this volume we step past the crude systemizing that reduces Ọ̀ṣun to "river deity" or "goddess of love" to embrace a complex vision of multidimensional divinity.

There are simply too many aspects of Ọ̀ṣun to categorize her in single or simple ways. She has multiple iconographic and ritual media that connote her to her initiates. These are found in the many stories told about her, in the songs sung at her ceremonies, and in the furniture of her shrines. In each locale across the waters and within individual devotees, Ọ̀ṣun is recognized in these symbols that may have continuous and discontinuous allusions to each other. The different identities of Ọ̀ṣun may flow into one another or arise spontaneously to the surface "from nowhere." She is water, river, fish, fan, mirror, brass (gold, copper, coral, yellow, money), honey, pumpkin, peacock, vulture, beautiful hair, comb, perfume, and many other things known and yet to be found. In this volume, Robert Farris Thompson finds echoes of her ringing laugh in sounding brass, cool breezes, sweet honey, and sharp blades.

Ọ̀ṣun can be old and young, rich and impoverished, loving and spiteful. At every turn she is something that the devotee does not expect. She cries when she is happy and laughs when she is sad. She is a powerful sovereign and a master of domestic arts. She heals with cool water, and destroys life in raging flood. She is a loving mother and a leader of vengeful spirits who can take anyone's child away.

These multiple Ọ̀ṣuns arise out of the experience of many communities and many individuals. In the Americas they are organized as "roads," distinctly different Ọ̀ṣuns who are celebrated in different narratives, songs, and ceremonies. Isabel Castellanos shows us that five roads of Ochún in Cuba take their devotees down different paths in understanding the goddess and themselves, ranging from Ochún Ololodí, the serious diviner, to Ochún Ibú Kolé, the powerful buzzard, to Ochún Yeyé Moró, the gorgeous dancer. There is indeed one Ochún but she is the unknown source of the different roads, and their destination.

This ability of Ọ̀ṣun to be many things allows devotees to hold their religious lives in complexity. As an *òrìṣà*, Ọ̀ṣun offers what all the *òrìṣà* offer: the good things in life, health, wealth, and love. But she brings them in certain ways, along certain roads, that must be learned and followed to receive her blessings. She can be one *òrìṣà* among many, or many *òrìṣà* in one. She can even be the Supreme Being. Many priests and priestesses of Ọ̀ṣun address her as *Olúwa*, "My Lord." Amid the titles and attributes of Ọ̀ṣun that Jacob Olupona offers us in the beautiful invocation that begins his essay is the stunning declaration that, for the singer, Ọ̀ṣun is "my Olódùmarè," my God Almighty. Here Ọ̀ṣun is recognized as God, the author of destiny and divinity's source.

As there are many ways of being Ọ̀ṣun, her devotees may find her in novel forms. Ọ̀ṣun and the *òrìṣà* cross denominational and cultural borders. Joseph Murphy chronicles the representation of Ochún as a Catholic saint in colonial Cuba. Mei-Mei Sanford profiles Nigerian Christian women who have found their commitment to Christianity suffused with their devotions to African goddesses of water. Even in the contested religious space of Osogbo, Jacob Olupona finds Muslims honoring Ọ̀ṣun.

Ọ̀ṣun is the *òrìṣà* who heals with cool water. When she is invoked her presence is felt to bring lightness and effervescence to illness, want, and gloom. Ọ̀ṣun's ability to heal is based on her sovereignty and her compassion. She is a warrior who can fight for her children and vanquish enemies visible and invisible. And she is a loving mother whose embrace is there for those who need her. George Brandon writes, "Ochún's abode is a safe house for the anguished and afflicted." He draws a portrait of the Ochún priestess Bianca who works in the rubble-strewn streets of the South Bronx. Bianca finds in her devotion to Ochún her inspiration to care for others. The Ochún priestess is called to exhibit, in Brandon's phrase, "a charity that always assures you that if you give, you will always have something *to* give."

In the Umbanda communities of Rio de Janeiro, Lindsay Hale tells us of Oxum's irrepressible and abundant sexuality that bubbles up through the constrictions of race, class, and sexual hegemonies to celebrate sexuality and affirm her children, gay and straight, who express it.

In São Paulo, Oxum is a mother for the motherless. Filmmaker Tânia Cypriano introduces us to Pai Laércio Zaniquelli, priest of Oxum, who has made his house a home for thirty-two children living with HIV and AIDS.

In Manuel Vega's portrait of Mãe Menininha of Gantois done expressly for this volume, we find the strength and compassion, brass and honey, of *èṣìn Ọ̀ṣun* fully lived. He tells us that in Mãe Menininha's presence he understood Ọ̀ṣun profoundly when she sang "the *òrìṣà* came down like stars from the sky!" Her life was devoted to serving others. When, years ago, Brazilian songwriter Dorival Caymmi asked in a popular song, "And the most beautiful Oxum?" he and all Brazil knew the answer: "She is at Gantois."

In the seventeen essays that follow, the contributors to *Ọ̀ṣun across the Waters* explore Ọ̀ṣun traditions both in depth and breadth. We examine the special themes that Ọ̀ṣun religion suggests as well as the variety of contexts in Africa and the African diaspora where these themes have developed. We begin now to trace the path of the deity of water, the source of life, power, and authority.

## Notes

1. Sanford, Mei-Mei Elma Cooper, "Powerful water, living wood: The agency of art and nature in Yoruba ritual," Ph.D. dissertation, Drew University, 1997, p. 184.

2. The goddess is recognized in the state motto, "Home of Living Spring," which is stamped on car license plates.

3. Wande Abimbola, personal communication to Mei-Mei Sanford, Oyo, 1992.

4. J. D. Y. Peel, in his analysis of Abeokuta Christian Missionary Society journals (1845–1912) found more references to Ọ̀ṣun than to Ẹ̀mọja. See his "A Comparative Analysis of Ogun in Precolonial Yorubaland," *Africa's Ogun: Old World and New*, 2nd Ed. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997, p. 265.

5. Bolanle Awe, personal communication to Mei-Mei Sanford, Ibadan, 1989.

6. Jacob Olupona, personal communication to Mei-Mei Sanford, 1998.

7. Adeleke Sangoyoyin, personal communication to Mei-Mei Sanford, Iragbiji, 1997.

8. Madrina, personal communication to Joseph Murphy, 1979.

9. Quoted by Rowland Abiodun in this volume citing Drewal, H. J., and J. Pemberton III, with R. Abiodun, *Yoruba: Nine Centuries of African Art and Thought*. New York: The Center for African Art and H. N. Abrams, 1989, p. 210.

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CHAPTER TWO

# Hidden Power

## Ọ̀ṣun, the Seventeenth Odù

*Rowland Abiodun*

From Òṣogbo in Ọ̀ṣun State to Ikóro in Ekiti, from Ibadan in Ọ̀yọ́ to Ìjùmú in Kwara State of Nigeria, and throughout the Yorùbá diaspora in the Caribbean, Latin America, and North America, the Yorùbá continue to venerate their most powerful female *òrìṣà* (deity), Ọ̀ṣun. The images alluding to her presence and power are as diverse as the people and the geographical locations where she is worshiped. Thus, the definition of Ọ̀ṣun's identity extends beyond Òṣogbo and many Yorùbá towns where she is believed to have turned into the Ọ̀ṣun River, and where festivals are held in her honor annually. Equally complex is Ọ̀ṣun's personality, which has largely been constructed according to her worshipers' differing needs and spiritual goals. Be that as it may, there are a few generally held beliefs about Ọ̀ṣun, namely, that she embodies the very substance of the water we drink; with her fan, *abẹ̀bẹ̀*, (a noun formed from the verb *bẹ̀* [to beg]), she "begs" the air we breathe, she "cools and purifies it, neutralizing its negative contents"; and, by virtue of her profession as the foremost hair-plaiting expert in Yorùbá mythology, she affects the destinies of all beings and the *òrìṣà* in profound ways. A well-known *oríkì* (praise citation) introduces her:

| | |
|---|---|
| *Ọ̀ṣun, Ṣẹ̀ẹ̀gẹ̀sí,* | Ọ̀ṣun, (embodiment of grace and beauty) |
| *Olóòyà iyùn* | The preeminent hair-plaiter with the coral-beaded comb |
| *Adagbadébú Onímọ̀lè Odò* | Powerful controller of the estuary |
| *Elétùtù Èdìbò Èkó* | Propitiator-in-chief of Èkó (the City of Lagos) |
| *Obìnrin gbádámú, Obinrin gbàdàmù* | A corpulent woman |
| *Obìnrin tí kò ṣeé gbá l'égbẹ̀ mu.* (Ọpẹ Onabajo, personal communication, 1985) | Who cannot be embraced around the waist. |

Besides adding to the power and beauty of the human face and the head which is the focus of much aesthetic interest in Yorùbá art, hair-plaiting carries an important religious significance in Yorùbá tradition. The hair-plaiter (hair-dresser) is seen as one who honors and beautifies *orí* (*orí-inú*), the "inner head,"

the "divinity" of the head. One's head is also taken to be the visible representation of one's destiny and the essence of one's personality.[1] Hair-plaiting is thus highly regarded, as a good *orí* will, to some extent, depend on how well its physical counterpart has been treated. It is also primarily for this reason that most Yorùbá will be reluctant to haggle over the charges of a hair-plaiter or hairdresser.[2]

It should not be surprising that Ọ̀ṣun, "the preeminent hair-plaiter with the coral-beaded comb" is believed to have the power to influence the destinies of men, women, and the *òrìṣà*, and that Ọ̀ṣun's presence is crucial to the sustenance of life and order on earth. Archaeological excavations in the ancient city of Ifẹ̀, ancestral home of the Yorùbá, have revealed several terra-cotta heads of women with elaborate coiffures which date to the eleventh and twelfth centuries. While we may never be able to determine the identities of the women portrayed, we can, at least, assume that religio-aesthetic notions similar to those narrated in the *Ifá* literary corpus about Ọ̀ṣun might have informed the creation of these terra-cotta sculptures. The persistence of certain hairstyles, particularly the *ọ̀wẹ́wẹ́* which is found on at least one ancient terra-cotta head from the Olókun grove,[3] and its recurrence, with only very slight modification, in the Òtòǹpòrò Ẹ̀pa mask carved by Fásíkù Aláayè of Ìkẹ̀rin in 1976 is noteworthy (fig. 2.1).

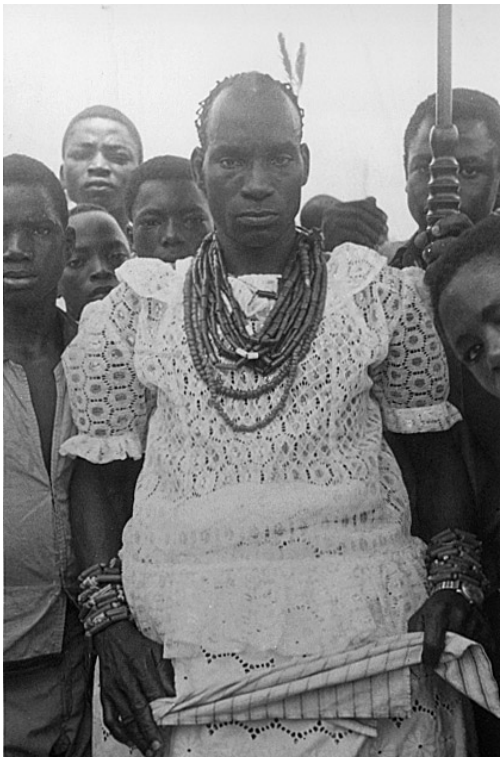
Still treasuring the important heritage of hair-plaiting and hairdressing, women members of the Yeye Olórìṣà society in Ọ̀wọ̀ spend hours and sometimes days styling their hair elegantly for the annual Igógó festival to honor Ọ̀ṛọnṣẹ̀n, another important female deity who was the legendary wife of Ọlọ́wọ̀ Rẹ̀-nrẹ̀ngẹnjẹ̀n, Ọ̀wọ̀'s ruler. For Yeye Olórìṣà, who are a highly respected group of women, their coiffure is not considered complete without the insertion of ornate brass and, in recent times, plastic combs which hold up bright red parrot feathers (fig. 2.2). Wearing their ritual costumes, these women create their own aesthetic atmosphere at the peak of their performance in the Igógó festival, magically charging it with their "bird (*ẹ̀yẹ*) power." It is believed that this bird power has *àṣẹ* (life force, authority, or voiced power to make something happen) that enables women to accomplish whatever they wish. It is probably because of this power also that men are afraid to move too close to Yeye Olórìṣà as they believe that they may lose their sexual potency. It is interesting that the red parrot feather which is on this occasion believed to possess the magical power to alter the nature of persons and objects, is also prohibited on the blacksmith's premises lest his metals change their chemical properties.[4]

The overall welfare and prosperity of the town appear to rest with the Yeye Olórìṣà. All visual evidence points to their influence and power. Male chiefs including the Ọlọ́wọ̀, the ruler of Ọ̀wọ̀, also plait their hair to respect and acknowledge the authority of the goddess Ọ̀ṛọnṣẹ̀n. Depending on their status, chiefs may insert one, two, or three red parrot feathers in their plaited hair with or without the brass comb. The Ọlọ́wọ̀ may add two long white egret feathers to distinguish him as the Oba (ruler) of Ọ̀wọ̀ (fig. 2.3a and 2.3b).

2.1 Òtòǹpòrò, Ẹpa mask by Fásíkù Aláayè of Ìkẹ̀rin, 1976.
*Photo by Rowland Abiodun.*

2.2 Yeye Olórìṣà, a ranking priestess during the Igógó festival in Ọ̀wọ̀, 1976.

2.3a Ọba Ògúnoyè II, Ọlọ́wọ̀ of Ọ̀wọ̀ with plaited hair, wearing a pair of *pàkatò* (criss-crossed beaded bands across his chest), and *àbòlúkùn* (big, white skirt) during the Igógó festival, 1974. *Photo by Rowland Abiodun.*



2.3b Ranking male chiefs with plaited hair at the Igógó festival in Ọ̀wọ̀, 1974. *Photo by Rowland Abiodun.*

Even though Ọ̀ṣun is not worshiped in Ọ̀wọ̀, and I am not suggesting here that Ọ̀ṛọnṣẹ̀n and Ọ̀ṣun are the same *òrìṣà*, there are many aspects of the Igógó festival which remind one of Ọ̀ṣun. The blouse and big skirt worn by the Ọlọ́wọ̀ and his chiefs during this festival are unmistakably feminine. The skirt, called *àbòlúkùn* in Ọ̀wọ̀, is very close to what Yorùbá descendants still wear in the New World, namely Brazil and Cuba, to mark themselves as high priestesses of several *òrìṣà* including Ọ̀ṣun. The exact significance of this very imposing skirt was not revealed to me, but in the context of use, it certainly creates an aura of majesty, power, affluence, and plenitude through its arresting whiteness and volume.

Indeed, the Ọlọ́wọ̀'s role and function during this festival resembles that of Ọ̀ṣun. He is regarded as the source, and the one who sustains the community's peace and prosperity. He asserts this role ritually, dramatically, and choreographically during the Igógó festival. Combining the dignity and color of the elaborate *àbòlúkùn* costume with the penetrating metal-gong *agogo* music to which he dances in graceful wave-like movements, the Ọlọ́wọ̀ effectively moves the hearts and bodies of his subjects. And in response to his body movement in the imposing *àbòlúkùn*, the crowd cheers their ruler with praises such as:

| | |
|---|---|
| *Okun àrágbárìgbì* | The mighty, expansive ocean |
| *Àkàtà-ílá borí Ọ̀ghọ̀ málẹ̀* | The great, wide umbrella-like shelter of Ọ̀wọ̀ |
| *Ọ̀gẹ̀dẹ̀ so tòò-tòò* | The prolific banana tree which bears much fruit |

In the above praises, the use of the water imagery, namely, "the mighty, expansive ocean," is intriguing since Ọ̀wọ̀ has no bodies of water that can be described as such, and Ọ̀ṛọnṣẹ̀n was not a water deity. This leads one to speculate on how attributes usually associated with Ọ̀ṣun have been adopted by other Yorùbá communities located outside of those areas where Ọ̀ṣun is now actively worshiped. It is, of course, also possible that there may have existed a more ancient set of female-related attributes from which even Ọ̀ṣun's identity might have been constructed. This latter suggestion seems quite plausible, when we consider the range of similarities in costume, coiffure, choreography, use of birds' feathers (especially the red parrot tail feathers), and fans in the Igógó and Ọ̀ṣun festivals.

When we try to search for the meaning and significance of the *àbòlúkùn* in Ọ̀wọ̀'s Igógó festival, we find that the *igbá odù*, a special wooden bowl, used to store sacred divination items during the initiation of Ifá priests,[5] provides us with useful clues. This wooden bowl-with-lid echoes the shape of *àbòlúkùn* when worn while also conveying a strong visual sense of protection and stability. Carved to look like a female figure, the body is made up of top and bottom halves. This bowl-like container is retainer and shelter of *Ifá* divination objects as well as *ikin*, the sixteen sacred palm nuts symbolically representing the sixteen principal *Odù*, all male, and a seventeenth small ivory object called *olórí-ikin* ("The principal *ikin*"). This *olórí-ikin* reminds us of Ọ̀ṣun, the seventeenth *Odù*

with whom the destinies of the remaining sixteen *Odù* rested. With both arms spread out and hands resting on a relatively large and pregnant-looking belly, the *igbá odù* radiates a commanding presence and an unmistakable female authority whose influence is felt by all.

For a clearer picture of the role of Ọ̀ṣun among the *Odù* (or *òrìṣà*) in Yorùbá thought, and her indispensability to successful and harmonious political, economic, religious, and social life, we shall consider the following Ifá divination verse (see appendix following this chapter for the Yorùbá original):[6]

It was divined for the sixteen Odù
Who were coming from heaven to earth
A woman was the seventeenth of them.
When they got to earth,
They cleared the grove for Orò,
Orò had his own space.
They cleared the grove for Ọpa,
Ọpa's abode was secure.
They prepared a grove for Eégún,
Eégún had a home.
But they made no provision for Ọ̀ṣun,
Also known as "Ṣẹ̀ẹ̀gẹ̀sí, the preeminent hair-plaiter with the coral-beaded comb."
So, she decided to wait and see
How they would carry out their mission successfully;
Ọ̀ṣun sat quietly and watched them.
Beginning with Èjì-Ogbè and Ọ̀yẹ̀kú méjì,
Ìwòrí méjì, Odi méjì, Ìròsùn méjì
Ọ̀wònrín méjì, Ọ̀bàrà méjì, Ọ̀kànràn méjì,
Ògún-dá, Òsá, Ọ̀ràngun méjì and so on,
They all decided not to countenance Ọ̀ṣun in their mission.
She, too, kept mute,
And carried on her rightful duty,
Which is hair-plaiting.
She had a comb.
They never knew she was an "*àjé*."
When they were coming from heaven,
God chose all good things;
He also chose their keeper,
And this was a woman.

All women are *àjé*.
And because all other Odù left Ọ̀ṣun out,
Nothing they did was successful.
They went to Eégún's grove and pleaded with him,
That their mission be crowned with success.
"Eégún, it is you who straightens the four corners of the world,
Let all be straight."
They went to Àdàgbà Ọ̀jòmù
Who is called Orò

"You are the only one who frightens Death and Sickness.
Please help drive them away."
Healing failed to take place;
Instead epidemic festered.
They went to Ọ̀ṣẹ́ and begged him
To let the rain fall.
Rain didn't fall.
Then they went to Ọ̀ṣun
Ọ̀ṣun received them warmly,
And entertained them,
But shame would not let them confide in Ọ̀ṣun,
Whom they had ignored.
They then headed for heaven
And made straight for Olódùmarè,
Who asked why they came
They said it was about their mission on earth.
When they left heaven,
And arrived on earth
All things went well;
Then later things turned for the worse,
Nothing was successful.
And Olódùmarè asked
"How many of you are here?"
They answered, "Sixteen."
He also asked,
"When you were leaving heaven, how many were you?"
They answered, "Seventeen."
And Olódùmarè said, "You are all intriguers.
That one you left behind
If you do not bring her here,
There will be no solution to your problem.
If you continue this way,
You will always fail."
They then returned to Ọ̀ṣun,
And addressed her, "Mother, the preeminent hair-plaiter with the coral-beaded comb.
We have been to the Creator
And it was there we discovered that all Odù were derived from you [Ọ̀ṣun],
And that our suffering would continue
If we failed to recognize and obey you [Ọ̀ṣun]."
So, on their return to the earth from the Creator,
All the remaining Odù wanted to pacify and please Ọ̀ṣun.
But Ọ̀ṣun would not go out with them.
The baby she was expecting might go out with them,
But even that would depend on the gender of the baby
For she said that if the baby she was expecting
Turned out to be male,
It is that male child who would go out with them

But if the baby turned out to be female,
She [Ọ̀ṣun] would have nothing to do with them.
She said she knew of all they [the Odù] had eaten and enjoyed without her,
Particularly all the delicacies and he-goat they ate.
As Ọ̀ṣun was about to curse them all,
Ọ̀sẹ́ covered her mouth
And the remaining Odù started praying
That Ọ̀ṣun might deliver a male child.
They then started to beg her.
When Ọ̀ṣun delivered
She had a baby boy
Whom they named Ọ̀sẹ-Túrá.

Though known as Ọ̀ṣẹtúrá among *babaláwo* (the priests of *Ifá*), this baby boy is, in fact, Èṣù, the one who approves of, and bears sacrifices to, the *òrìṣà*.[7] Mothered by the most powerful and influential female divinity, Èṣù is not just the *provocateur par excellence*, but the embodiment of the element of the possibility of uncertainty in the Yorùbá world. The hook-like dance staff worn on the right shoulder by Èṣù's devotees is Janus-faced, recalling his *oríkì* as the *òrìṣà* "who belongs to opposing camps without having any feeling of shame" (*a ṣòtún ṣòsì láì ni tiju*). Some scholars have read the hook part of the staff as his long hair, seeing it as evidence of Èṣù's libidinous energy, aggression, and unrestrained sexuality. While this interpretation may be supported to some extent by Èṣù's own *oríkì*, a more convincing explanation might be found in Ọ̀ṣun's profession as hair-plaiter, and her apparent link with *orí* (*orí-inú*). Be that as it may, Èṣù's indispensability in the Yorùbá pantheon is a concrete reminder of Ọ̀ṣun's presence and power in the earthly and spiritual realms.

In the divination verse above, the Creator-God has placed all the good things on earth in Ọ̀ṣun's charge, making her "the vital source" as her name suggests. Without Ọ̀ṣun's sanction, no healing can take place, no rain can fall, no plants can bear fruit, and no children can come into the world. Granted that every *òrìṣà* must have their own *àṣẹ*, one must wonder about Ọ̀ṣun's seemingly superior *àṣẹ* that was able to counteract the activities of her fellow *òrìṣà*. Alternatively, it is conceivable that the *àṣẹ* of female *òrìṣà* is inherently different from the male *òrìṣà*, and perhaps even antagonistic when they compete, with one (presumably, the female *àṣẹ*) neutralizing the other (that is, the male *àṣẹ*), as appears to be the case in this story.

There are a few hints in Yorùbá tradition that Ọ̀ṣun's gender, especially as the only female *òrìṣà* of the seventeen that came to the earth at creation, must have had much to do with her power and influence. It is, for example, considered good luck if one's first child is female. Such parents are believed to start with *ọwọ́ èrò*, "the hand of propitiation,"[8] perhaps better translated as "the cool hand of propitiation" which ensures ease and success in any undertaking. For related reasons, perhaps, parents frown on prolonged bachelorhood. Even though they realize how difficult it is to sustain a marriage, parents, nevertheless, press their

sons to get married because they believe that a man's successful life cannot really start until he has a wife or wives. This *Ifá* verse from Ọ̀ṣẹ́túrá points to this belief:

| | |
|---|---|
| *Àìní obìnrin kò ṣe é dákẹ́ lásán* | Having no wife calls for positive action |
| *Bí a dákẹ́ lásán, enu ni í yọ ni* | To keep quiet is to invite trouble and inconveniences |
| *Níní ẹjó, àìní ọ̀ràn* | Having a wife is as difficult as having none |
| *Ènìà kò l'óbìnrin* | One without a wife |
| *Ó tó kó káwó l'orí sọkún gba ọjà lọ* | Should cry and weep publicly in the marketplace |
| *Kì íṣé ọ̀ràn àṣejú* | It is neither an extreme action |
| *Ọ̀ràn àṣeṣá kọ́.* (Ogunbọwale 1966: 1) | Nor an overreaction. |

From the above verse, it would appear that in Yorùbá tradition, women are thought to be indispensable to men as Ọ̀ṣun was to the sixteen male *òrìṣà* or *odù* at the time of creation. Disguised here, however, is the ambivalent attitude of men toward women. This can be attributed to the belief that, like Ọ̀ṣun, women of any age are potential *àjẹ́* who possess *ẹyẹ*, the "bird power." The fear of this extraordinary power has caused men to appease women as they do "our mothers" (*àwọn ìya wa Ọ̀ṣòròngà*), a term used synonymously with "àjẹ́" but often incorrectly translated as "witches."[9] Consequently, in many social, religious, and political gatherings, men endeavor to placate "our mothers" and to pray to them to use their powers for the good of society. As a divine ruler, Ọba William Adetọna Ayẹni in the northeastern Yorùbá kingdom of Ila-Orangun, while referring to the cluster of birds on his great crown, is reported to have said, "Without 'the mothers,' I could not rule."[10]

Even though much of the traditional political power in Yorubaland today seems to be located in the domain of men, Yorùbá oral traditions and visual art do not provide much authority for assuming that this has always been the case. For example, we are not quite certain of the gender of Odùdúwà, the progenitor of the Yorùbá race, since we have as much evidence for considering Odùdúwà feminine as masculine.[11] The indeterminacy of Odùdúwà's gender will make more sense when we know more about Ọ̀ṣun, the *òrìṣà* who could not be ignored by her peers, and the echoes of whose multifarious dimensions of feminine power and presence continue to reverberate in Yorùbá culture and society.

Looking at the purported "crown of Odùdúwà"[12] from Ìdànrè in Ondó State of Nigeria, we are immediately struck by its similarity to another crown from Ilésà in Ọ̀ṣun State, worn by women as recently as twenty years ago (fig. 2.4). The Ìdànrè crown, though ancient and simple in appearance, is essentially complete. It is roughly conical in shape and has all the important attachments which aid its identification as a truly authentic symbol of divine authority among the Yorùbá. William Fagg describes the crown:

> It . . . consists largely of strings of red beads which are mostly stone but may include some coral. It also includes a rather miscellaneous assortment of beads. . . . It (the crown) is not very much like the Benin coral and carnelian crowns, but does look

2.4 Priestess of Ọwárì wearing *adé àforíṣokùn* (crown) in Ilésà, taken before 1960. *Photo from the collection of Reverend Father T. M. Ilesanmi.*

like the ancestor of the falling curtains of seed beads on the crowns of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. (Fagg 1980: 12)

The crown from Iléṣà is called *adé àforíṣokùn*, and it is worn by the most senior priestess of Ọwárì, the third or fourth Ọwá "ruler" of Ijeshaland, where Ọ̀ṣun still has very active devotees.[13] Like Odùdúwà, Ọwá was a warlike, temperamental, and very powerful ruler according to Ìjèṣà oral tradition. The *àforíṣokùn* crown also resembles the purported "crown of Odùdúwà" in many ways. It is possible that they may have functioned in similar contexts.

Both *adé àforíṣokùn* and the purported crown of Odùdúwà possess the *oṣù*, "a tuft or a kind of medicinal package with magical power, attached or sewn to the top of Yorùbá crowns."[14] Sometimes concealed under heavily beaded decorations or disguised as bird motifs on crowns, the *oṣù* must never be opened nor its contents revealed to the wearer of the crown. The vitality, force, and authority of a divine king would seem to be closely connected with the magical ingredients in this *oṣù*.

The veil (*ìbòjú*), which is an important part of the Yorùbá crown, is present in the Ìdànrè and Iléṣà examples. Intended to hide the identity of the wearer who is supposed to operate from the height of an *òrìṣà*, "a divinity," the *ìbòjú* of the *adé àforíṣokùn* suggests how the Ìdànrè crown may have looked in actual use. The priestess of Ọwárì holds a white horse-tail whisk in her right hand and a two-piece wand of office in her left. She wears several rows of tightly packed beaded necklaces, along with a long and expensive neck chain which hangs down well past her torso. Flanked on both sides by her women supporters, the priestess displays her symbols of authority, power, and influence.

The crown with the veil is the most important symbol and conveyor of divinity in the institution of obaship. It also downplays gender differences through visual means, just as the Yorùbá word *ọba*, (ruler) is not gender specific and cannot be taken to mean only "king" as many researchers have erroneously assumed. In fact, the following traditional greeting for an *ọba* is inclusive of both genders:

| | |
|---|---|
| *Kábíyèsí* | One whose authority cannot be challenged |
| *Aláṣẹ* | Who is endowed with àṣẹ |
| *Èkejì-Òrìṣà* | And ranks only with the *òrìṣà* |
| *Ikú* | Death, the embodiment of finality |
| *Bàbá-Yèyé* | Ultimate Father-Mother |

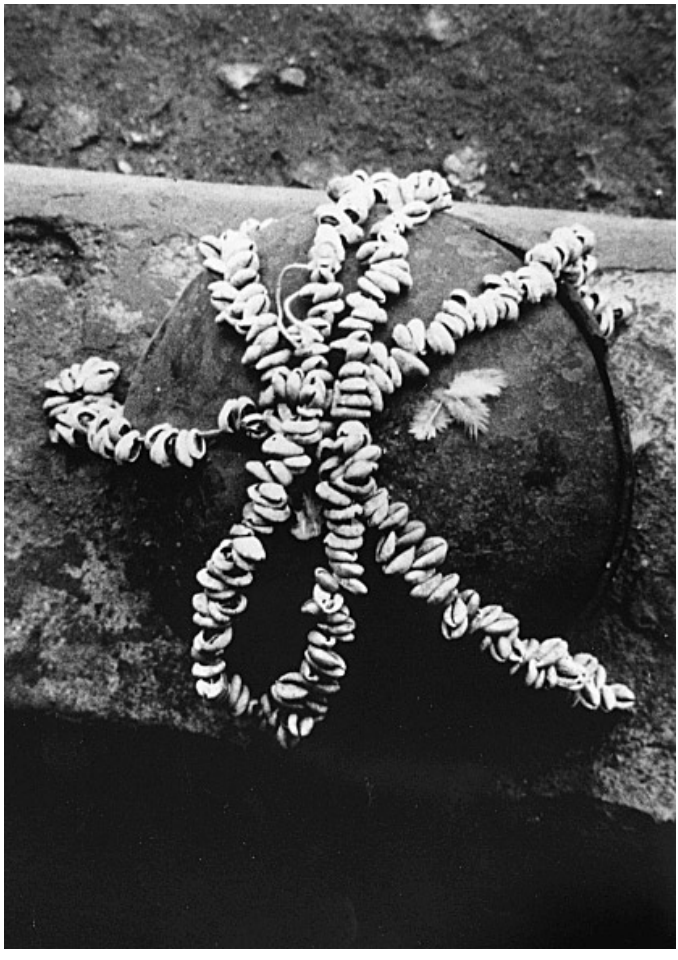
The most important element in the Yorùbá concept of divine leadership is *àṣẹ*,[15] the essence of which is the energy or life force needed to control the physical world as well as to activate, direct, and restructure social and political processes. Thus, it would seem totally unreasonable to exclude Ọ̀ṣun from the institution of obaship. After all, Ọ̀ṣun's *àṣẹ* can always be used to a ruler's advantage in the event of a power tussle. Ọ̀ṣun in this context, however, should be taken as a metaphor for "our mothers" as well as for feminine power and presence in general.[16]

From available archaeological finds mainly at Ilé-Ifẹ̀, the sacred city of the Yorùbá, the recognition of the important role of women would appear to be of great antiquity. The brass figure pair found at Ìta Yemòó, Ilé-Ifẹ̀, in 1957,[17] as well as other terra-cotta heads found in the same city, give some indication of the status of Yorùbá women in the pre-colonial era. In the brass pair, the slightly shorter figure with narrower shoulders appears to be the female. Her cloth wrapper is tied high enough on her torso to partially cover her breasts, which is in agreement with the way Yorùbá women still wear their wrapper when they do not wear a *bùbá* (blouse). Her shoulder sash, made of bead or cloth, hangs diagonally across the main torso with the tied end resting on the left hip. This diagonal shoulder sash is a mark of the woman's status and possibly an indication of her cult affiliation. This interpretation makes sense when we look at the attire of a female cult called Yeye Olóriṣà in Ọ̀wọ̀ which is less than one hundred miles east of Ifẹ̀. Here the cult members wear a bright red diagonal shoulder sash across their chests. The female brass figure is dressed like an important chieftain with all the regalia of office equal to that of her male counterpart.

In Onìdó, another major Yorùbá town situated some forty-five kilometers southeast of Ilé-Ifẹ̀, there is the Ọlọ́bùn, otherwise known as *Ọba Obìnrin* (female ruler) (fig. 2.5), who is in charge of the market and plays an important role in the installation rites and ceremonies of the Ọ̀ṣemàwé (the male ruler) of Onìdó. She wears two white egret feathers in addition to a red parrot feather like her male counterparts in Yorubaland. She carries a white horse-tail fly whisk to mark her high status, and wears an immaculate white outfit every day of her life. She wears red tubular coral beads around her neck, wrists, and ankles according to Onìdó tradition. When seated on her throne, the Ọlọ́bùn always has on the ground before her a calabash container, on top of which stringed white cowrie shells have been placed in a special order. *Igbá ajé* (the calabash of wealth) symbolizes the important office of Ọlọ́bùn as the Lord of the market and the controller of all commercial transactions (fig. 2.6). Until the Ọlọ́bùn passed away in 1980, she actually visited the market several times each month, touching important market stalls and commercial establishments with her *ọ̀pá-ajé* (the staff of wealth), which is her staff of office. Such rounds are believed to boost trade and improve the community's economic situation.

It is still recalled in Onìdó that the first traditional ruler was a woman named Púpùpú. Today the Ọlọ́bùn and her female chiefs hold very high and sometimes the highest political positions and are influential in campaigns for high offices in the town of Onìdó. At the installation of the Ọ̀ṣemàwé in the late 1970s, the Ọlọ́bùn was the one who presented the *ọba*-elect, Robert Adekolurejo, to the people of Onìdó. Similarly, during the installation rites, Ọlọ́bùn's chiefs and other high priestesses in Onìdó performed purification sacrifices to pave the way for a peaceful reign. Thus the role of women appears to be to neutralize malevolent forces and evil machinations, but they are ultimately more politically powerful than the ruler, being the power behind the throne.

2.5 The Ọlọ́bùn, (*Ọba Obìnrin*, "Female Ruler") of Oǹdó, 1976.
*Photo by Rowland Abiodun.*



2.6 *Igbá ajé*, Ọlọ́bùn's ritual calabash container which identifies her as the Controller of all market transactions in Oǹdó, 1976.
*Photo by Rowland Abiodun.*

The hidden power of women is better understood when we examine the way it is related to *Eégún*, the ancestral masking tradition in Yorubaland. The word *Eégún* refers to the concealed power of ancestors. Pierre Verger has suggested that *Eégún* may have belonged originally to women.[18] *Eégún* is also used as a euphemism for female genitalia because they are hidden. The clitoris in particular is traditionally regarded as possessing "concealed power" which women can use to accomplish whatever they desire. Additionally, it is noteworthy that Yorùbá tradition privileges female triplets (*ato*) when it comes to holding high positions in the secretive and male-dominated *Eégún* (for deceased ancestors).

All these attributes are also associated with Ọ̀ṣun and perceived to be integral to her influence, extraordinary insight, and ability to do things which the other

*òrìṣà* could not do. Thus, Ọ̀ṣun's "concealed power" has earned her the title of "the leader of the *àjẹ́*."[19] The following lines of her *oríkì* acknowledge her exceptional ability:

> She is the wisdom of the forest
> She is the wisdom of the river
> Where the doctor failed
> She cures with fresh water.
> Where medicine is impotent
> She cures with cool water. (Beier 1970: 33)

Many Ọ̀ṣun priests, priestesses, and devotees literally believe in the power of water to heal their ailments and problems. Water, Ọ̀ṣun's main curative agent, is an active ingredient in the Yorùbá preparation of *ẹ̀rọ̀* (a softening agent/medicinal preparation). Used ritually, water is believed to effect harmony and peace, to eliminate tension, and reduce heat. Thus, with cool water, a person's *orí* can be improved or "softened" if it is considered "hard" (*le*), that is, attracting a series of inexplicable disasters. The following incantation for *ẹ̀rọ̀* medicine shows how water is perceived in traditional thought:

| | |
|---|---|
| *Bí ooru bá mú* | When the weather is blazing hot |
| *Abẹ̀bẹ̀ ni í bẹ̀ẹ́* | It is the fan that pacifies it. |
| *Bí iná bá á jó koko* | When there is a flare-up, |
| *Omi là á fi í pa á* | We use water to quench it. |
| *Ọ̀gẹ̀rẹ̀, iná mà ńlé omi lọ* | Defiantly, fire chases water, |
| *Ọ̀gẹ̀rẹ̀* | Sweeping past. |
| *Bí iná bá ń lé omi* | If fire chases water |
| *Tí kò padà lẹ́yìn omi* | And does not turn back, |
| *Èrọ̀ pẹ̀tẹ̀* | Propitiation is the answer. |
| *Ọ̀gẹ̀rẹ̀, iná má ń lé omi lo* | Sweeping past, fire is chasing water. |
| *Ṣẹ̀ṣẹ̀* | Even with all its flare, |
| *Iná kò gbọ́dọ̀ lé ṣẹ̀ṣẹ̀* | Fire dares not chase its glow |
| *Kó le'e wọ 'nú odó.* (Adeniji, personal communication, 1976) | Into the river. |

In the above incantation, both water and the fan which Ọ̀ṣun priests and priestesses often use in their rites and ceremonies are the verbal metaphors for the soothing, disarming, and softening power associated with Ọ̀ṣun. What is terrifying about this power, however, is its noiselessness and lack of ceremony, making it extremely difficult if not impossible to identify its source or prevent its action. The following excerpt from the *oríkì* of "our mothers" captures the negative side of such power:

> Mother who kills without striking
> My mother kills quickly without a cry
> Mother who kills her husband and yet pities him. (Beier 1958)

Whatever enables "our mothers" to extinguish life in this manner, that is, without any visible or materially attributable force, presupposes their foreknowl-

edge of the metaphysical principles of life, especially its source, which is what Ọ̀ṣun is all about. This belief makes "our mothers" and all women indispensable to normalcy, orderliness, increase, and progress in the traditional society. Consequently, women are not only feared, but their cooperation is also sought in all endeavors as the verse below shows:

| | |
|---|---|
| *Ó ní gbogbo ohun tí ènìà bá ń ṣe,* | In anything we do, |
| *Tí kò bá fi ti obìnrin kún un,* | If we do not guarantee the place of women, |
| *Ó ní kò lè ṣeé ṣe . . .* | That thing will not succeed. |
| *Ó ní kí wọ́n ó máa fi ìbà fún obìnrin* | [*Ifá* says,] "we should acknowledge the power of women," |
| *Ó ní tí wọ́n bá ti fi ìbà fún obìnrin,* | [And that,] "if we acknowledge their power, |
| *Ilé ayé yíò máa tòrò.* (Verger 1965: 218) | The world will be peaceful." |

And, in another divination verse, we find the grave consequences of ignoring "our mothers," which was the mistake made by the sixteen male *òrìṣà* at creation:

| | |
|---|---|
| *Wón dífá fún ìyamì Òṣoròngà* | It was divined for Ìyàmì Òṣòrongà. |
| *Tí wọ́n ń tìkọ̀lé ọ̀run bọ̀ wá sílé ayé . . .* | Who was coming from heaven to earth; |
| *Wọ́n lẹ́ni tí kò bá fi t'àwọ́n ṣe,* | They said whoever refused to acknowledge them, |
| *Àwọ́n ó máa bàá jẹ,* | They will afflict him. |
| *Àwọ́n ó máa kó ìfun ènìà;* | They will take his intestines; |
| *Àwọ́n ó máa je ojú ènìà;* | They will eat his eyes; |
| *Nwọ́n ò sì ní gbóhùn ẹnìkọ́ọ̀kan.* | They will drink his blood |
| (Verger 1965: 218) | and no one will hear a sound. |

In Yorùbá art it is not the faithful rendering of anatomical details such as muscles that is supposed to convey the effect of power and action but the intelligent, creative, and skillful combination of forms by the artist. Movement is suggested through rhythmic forms and creative use of space. Faces conceal emotions in most Yorùbá sculpture and function "noiselessly" like Ọ̀ṣun and "our mothers" until all opposition toward them is dissolved.[20]

Visual representations of female *òrìṣà* like Ọ̀ṣun have influenced Yorùbá aesthetic considerations and artistic processes far more than scholars have acknowledged. To illustrate, let us examine the image of woman on an *ìrọ́kẹ́* (*Ifá* divination tapper). The *ìrọ́kẹ́* consists usually of three sections: the topmost or pointed-end section; the middle section; and third or bottom section, in order of importance. Elsewhere, I have suggested that the topmost part symbolizes the inner, spiritual *orí*, while the middle section, usually a human head or a kneeling nude woman holding her breasts, symbolizes humanity choosing its destiny (*orí*) in heaven.[21] The woman is depicted in a kneeling position called *ìkúnlè-abiyamọ̀* (the kneeling with pain at childbirth), which is intended to appease and "soften" the gods and solicit their support in choosing a good *orí*. Equally effective in honoring the *òrìṣà* is the nakedness of the kneeling woman, which the Yorùbá believe possesses the *àṣẹ* to make her wishes come to pass. Thus a Yorùbá man

will be disturbed if his wife threatens to undress during a disagreement, fearing that her nakedness would give her utterances causative power.

The figure of the kneeling woman carrying a bowl is common in Ifá, Ṣàngó, and Ọ̀ṣun sculptural repertoires. In Ifá, it is known as *agere Ifá* or *ìbòrì Ifá*,[22] and among Ọ̀ṣun and Ṣàngó devotees, it is called *arugbá*, meaning "the one who carries the calabash holding the ritual items" for these *òrìṣà*. Essentially, the *arugbá* carries, honors, and beautifies sacrifices during the annual festivals. The *agere Ifá* is used to store *ikin*, the sixteen sacred palm nuts of divination. In many examples of this sculpted container, the female figure elevates *ikin* both physically and symbolically, creating for them a fitting aesthetic atmosphere.[23] In other instances, the *agere Ifá* may take the form of *olúmèẹ̀yẹ*, which is a kneeling woman carrying a cock intended for offering to an *òrìṣà*. That women are preferred to men for bearing sacrifices of such magnitude is further indication of their special relationship to the *òrìṣà*.

In the helmet masks generically known as *Ẹlẹ̀fọ̀n* or *Ẹpa* in northeastern Yorubaland, a common theme of the superstructure is that of a kneeling woman with two children called *Òtòǹpòrò niyì Ẹlẹ̀fọ̀n* (*Òtòǹpòrò*, the pride of *Ẹlẹ̀fọ̀n*) (Figure 2.1). She is an embodiment of all that can be considered beautiful in the Yorùbá notion of womanhood, which includes the gift of children. *Òtòǹpòrò* is painted in black, red, yellow, and white to make her beauty visible even at a distance. She has a very elaborate hairdo (*ọ̀wẹ́wẹ́*), and large, well-defined eyes to accentuate her face. The long and beautiful neck is encircled by a choker and a string of beads, while decorative body paintings emphasize the roundness of the arms and breasts. References to similar aesthetic notions about women abound in Ifá divination literature:

*Funfun niyì eyín*
*Ẹ̀gùn gàgàagà niyì ọrùn;*
*Ọ̀mú síkísikìsíkí niyì obìnrin.*
(Abimbola 1968)

Whiteness is the beauty of the teeth;
Just as a long, graceful neck
And full, erect breasts make the beauty of women.

The above lines remind one of the image of Ọ̀ṣun, also called Ṣẹ̀ẹ̀gẹ̀sí, not only as the "embodiment of grace and beauty" as contained in her *oríkì* (citation poetry), but also as the only *òrìṣà* in whose power it is to grant or reject the request for the gift of children. Whereas non-initiates might appreciate Ọ̀ṣun for her attractive physical attributes only, her worshipers are quick to recognize the visual metaphorical allusions to their *òrìṣà*'s fecundity as the following song by supplicants demonstrates:

*Ó ní oùn ó fọ̀tún gbọ́mọ́ jó*
The supplicant prays that she may dance with a baby in her right hand;

*Òun ó fòsì gbọ́mọ́ pọ̀n*
That she may sling a baby on her back with the left one;

*Òun a tàrán bosùn*
That she may immerse her velvet in camwood [so that she may bear children]; 5

*Kúlúmḿbú yẹ̀yẹ̀yẹ̀* *Kúlúmḿbú yẹ̀yẹ̀yẹ̀*
*Òun a sì jó wọ̀jà* That she may dance into the marketplace to proclaim her blessings,
*Kúlúmḿbú yẹ̀yẹ̀yẹ̀* *Kúlúmḿbú yẹ̀yẹ̀yẹ̀*
*Òun o dirí ọ̀wẹ́wẹ́* That she may plait her hair in the *ọ̀wẹ́wẹ́* style,
*Kúlúmḿbú yẹ̀yẹ̀yẹ̀* *Kúlúmḿbú yẹ̀yẹ̀yẹ̀*
*Ọ̀yẹ̀yẹ̀ kúlúmḿbú* *Ọ̀yẹ̀yẹ̀ kúlúmḿbú*
*Òun a sì mẹ́sin gùn* That she may ride on horseback [that is, be seen as fortunate and successful]
*Kúlúmḿbú yẹ̀yẹ̀yẹ̀* *Kúlúmḿbú yẹ̀yẹ̀yẹ̀*
*Ọ̀yẹ̀yẹ̀ kúlúmḿbú.* *Ọ̀yẹ̀yẹ̀ kúlúmḿbú.*
(Adeniji, personal communication, 1976)

To recapitulate, Ọ̀ṣun's power is complex. She has strong metaphysical connections with pivotal *òrìṣà* like Orí, Ọ̀rúnmìlà, and Èsù, making her not only a resilient but an indispensable *òrìṣa*. Also, by sharing the same *ìwa tútù*, "cool character" with Olódùmarè (the Supreme Creator), Ọ̀ṣun increases her sphere of influence among the *òrìṣà*. She emerges arguably as the most powerful *òrìṣà* in the Yorùbá pantheon. Beginning with Ọ̀ṣun's profession as hair-plaiter, we see how that becomes a metaphor for her influence on, and indirect control of, Orí, the *òrìṣà* of the inner spiritual head or destiny of a person, thing, or deity and by extension, the Yorùbá divine rulership which is modeled after the concept of *orí*. The Ọ̀ràngun's declaration, "Without 'the mothers,' I could not rule," is a statement never made in terms of fathers. This reveals the true source of power in traditional politics and government.

Even though Ọ̀ṣun was the last of the seventeen *odù* (or *òrìṣà*) who came to earth at the time of creation, she quickly became the most influential one by demonstrating to the remaining *òrìṣà* that without her *àṣẹ* (power or life force), their mission could not succeed. In a different but related instance, Ọ̀ṣun, identifiable as the seventeenth *ikin* in the *Ifá* divination system, takes charge of, and directs, all *Ifá* divination procedures. Ọ̀ṣun is probably this same *olórí-ikin*, otherwise known as the wife of *Ọ̀rúnmìlà* in the context of the initiation of *Ifá* priests at *Igbó'dù* (the *Ifá* grove).[24]

When Ọ̀ṣun gave birth to Ọ̀ṣẹ́túrá (also known as Èṣù), she consolidated her power base by making her presence and influence totally inescapable in the earthly as well as in the spiritual realms. Èṣù, the "one who belongs to two opposing camps without having any feeling of shame," is the *òrìṣà* most crucial to the maintenance of the precarious balance between the malevolent and the benevolent powers of the universe. He is also the major link between his mother Ọ̀ṣun and the remaining male *òrìṣà*. In this role of power broker, Èṣù not only broadens the power base of Ọ̀ṣun, but also creates a situation whereby it is virtually impossible to accomplish anything without propitiating him or Ọ̀ṣun. Thus, when we

use *omi tútù* (cool water) to propitiate Èṣù, we are not only appeasing him, but also soliciting Ọ̀ṣun's support in our bid to eliminate friction in the world, heal disease, prosper, and bear children.

Knowing, as she did, that she was the source of all good things as stated in the Ifá literary corpus, Ọ̀ṣun never needed to vie for position among her fellow *òrìṣà*. Her demeanor invokes the Yorùbá saying, *Asúrétete kò r'óyè je, arìngbèrẹ ni í móyè é délé* (One who walks slowly, that is, acts intelligently and gracefully, will bring the [chieftaincy] title home, while the one who runs [that is, acts recklessly] misses the chance of enjoying a title). Compared with the other *òrìṣà*, Ọ̀ṣun represents a higher and more inclusive religio-aesthetic concept whose canons can be immediately relevant to the solution of human problems, regardless of their origin, nature, or severity. Her presence and that of "our mothers" must be acknowledged at all major events, festivals, and celebrations of new seasons and the new year. Virtually all greetings on these occasions end with the prayer *Ọdún á yabo* which is a wish for a "feminine, productive, harmonious, and successful year, season, or celebration." This verbal invocation not only acknowledges the spiritual attributes and vital force (*àṣẹ*) of womanhood which is epitomized in Ọ̀ṣun, but is also a practical acceptance of the superior power of "our mothers" in helping the community to cope with all the challenges of a new season, year, or millennium.

In lines 77–78 of the Ifá text on Ọ̀ṣun cited earlier in this essay, the relationship between Ọ̀ṣun and her fellow *òrìṣà* is stated explicitly. The remaining sixteen Odù, all male, had to go to the Creator to discover that ". . . all (the remaining) *odù* were derived from you (Ọ̀ṣun)." She had not told them. To better amplify her power, she chose to keep this fact hidden.

## Appendix

A dífá fún àwọn Odù Mẹ́tàdínlógún
Tíwọ́n ńtìkọ̀lé ọ̀run bò wá síkọ̀lé ayé,
Obìnrin lóṣe ìkẹ́tàdínlógún wọn
Nígbà wọ́n délé ayé,
Wọ́n lagbó Orò
Orò wà nínú wọn
Wọ́n lagbó Ọpa,
Ọpa ńbẹ ńbẹ
Wọ́n lagbó Eégún,
Wọ́n tẹ̀gbàlẹ̀ f'Eégún
Wọn ò wá ṣefún Ọ̀ṣun
Ṣẹ̀ẹ̀gẹ̀sí Olóòyà iyùn
Ó wá ní òun ómáa wòó
Bí wọn ó ṣe ṣe é tí e e e dáa

Ẹ fi sílẹ̀ o jàre
Àti orí Èjìogbè, Ọ̀yèkú méjì
Ìwòrì méjì, Òdí Méjì, Ìròsùn méjì,
Ọ̀wọ́nrín méjì, Ọ̀bàrà méjì, Ọ̀kànràn méjì,
Ògúndá, Ọ̀sá, Ọ̀ràngún méjì àti bẹ́ẹ̀bẹ́ẹ̀ lọ.
Wọn ò bá mú Ọ̀ṣun lọ sóde mọ́
Ní òun náà bá ṣì dákẹ́
Ní ó bá ńṣiṣẹ́ rẹ̀
Orí ni ó má a ńdì
Ó wá ní òòyà kan,
Wọn ò mọ pé àjẹ́ ni,
Nígbà wọ́n ti ńtọ̀run bọ̀,
L'Olódùmarè ti yan gbogbo àwọn ire,
Ó sì wá yan alátẹ̀lé wọn,
Èyí un sì ni obìnrin.
Obìnrin gbogbo ló lájẹẹ̀
Wọn ò wá mú Ọ̀ṣun,
Wọ́n ṣe gbogbo ǹkan kò gún
Wọ́n wá lagbó Eégún
Wọ́n ni Eégún jẹ́ ó gún o
Iwọ lo jẹ́ kí igun ayé mẹ́rẹ̀rin ógún,

Jẹ́ ó gún o
Wọ́n wá lọ sí Àdàgbà Ọ̀jòmù,
Èyí ni Orò
Ìwọ nìkan ni ò ń dẹ́rù ba ikù dẹ́rù bàrùn,
Báni lé wọn lọọ o
Àìsàn kò ní san
Yió wá bú rẹgẹdẹ
Wọ́n wá lọ sọ́dọ̀ọ́ Ọ̀sẹ́
Kọ́ jẹ kójò ọ́ rọ̀,
Ọ̀jo ọ̀ rọ̀
Wọ́n wá lọ sọ́dọ̀ Ọ̀ṣun
Ọ̀ṣun kí wọn dáradára
Ó sì ṣe wọ́n lálejò
Ìtìjú kò jẹ́ ki wọ́n ó leè finú han Ọ̀ṣùn
Tí wọn ti fọwọ́ ti tirẹ̀ sẹ́hin
Wọ́n wá kọjú sí ọ̀rún
Ó di ọ̀dọ̀ Olódùmarè
Wọ́n ní kí lódé?
Wọ́n ní Olódùmarè ló fún wọn
Nígbà tí wọn ń lọ
Nígbà tí wọn délé ayé,
Wọ́n ṣe é, gbogbo ẹ̀ dára lọ
Ni gbogbo nǹkan wá yí,
Kò sì bamu mọ́
Wọn bá bi wọn pẹ́,
Ẹyin mélòó ló wá?

Wọ́n ní àwọn mẹ́rìndínlógún ni
Wọ́n ní ìgbà ẹ̀ ń lọ ní jọ́un
Ẹ̀yin mélòó lẹ lọ?
Wọ́n ní àwọn mẹ́tàdínlógún ni
Ọlọ́run wá ní onírìkísí ni yín
Ìkan tẹ́ẹ̀ yọ sẹ́hìn un,
Tẹ́ẹ̀ ba lọ́ọ́ pèé wá,
Ọ̀rọ̀ yín kò ní ṣeé ṣe.
Bí ẹ se máa ń ṣeé
Tí yíò máa bàjẹ́ náà nù un.
Wọ́n wá lọ sódọ̀ Ọ̀ṣun,
Wọ́n ní Ìyá Olóòyà Iyùn,
Àwọ́ń dọ́dọ̀ Ẹlẹ́dàá báyìí ló wí

À ṣé ara Ọ̀ṣun ni wọ́n ti yọ gbogbo Odù
Ìyà ni yío je yín,
Tí ẹ kò bá mú tị Ọ̀ṣun ṣe.
Ni wọ́n bá dé Ode Ayé,
Awọn Odù tí ó kù fẹ́ máa mú Ọ̀ṣun lọ sode,
Ọ̀ṣun ní òun ò ní máa bá wọn lọ sode
Ó ní oyún tí ḿbẹ níkùn òun
Ni yío máa bá wọn lọ sode
Óní t'óun bá bímọ,
Tí ó bá jẹ́ ọkùnrin,
Ọkùnrin náa ni yío máa
Báayín lọ sóde.
Tí ó bá sì jẹ obìnrin,
Òun yío yọ ti òun sí ẹ̀hìn
Ó ní gbogbo ohun tí wọ́n je ní òuń mọ̀.
Orí ajá, òrúkọ tí wọ́n ti je ni òuń mọ̀.
Nígbà tí Ọ̀ṣun fẹ́ fọhùn, Ọ̀ṣẹ́ ló fọwọ́ bòó lẹ́nu.
Àwọn Odù yókù wá ń bẹ̀bẹ̀ pé
Kí Ọ̀ṣun ó bí ọmọkùnrin
Wọ́n wa ń bẹ̀ ẹ́
Nígbà tí Ọ̀ṣun yó bímọ,
Ó bí ọkùnrin
Wọ́n sì sọ ọ́ ní Ọ̀ṣẹ́-túrá.

## Notes

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1. For a more detailed discussion of *orí* (*orí-inú*), the "inner head," the divinity (or *òrìṣà*) of the head, see R. Abiodun, 1987.

2. In the colonial past, "income tax" was called *owó-orí*, because it was forbidden to haggle or protest tax assessments.

Ọṣun devotees would wonder why it has taken until only recently for Western medical science to recognize the all-pervading influence of their *òrìṣà*, Ọ̀ṣun, outside of Yorubaland. The news report below would only confirm what Ọ̀ṣun worshipers have known for generations. Titled "Science proves women's claim that hairdo makes them feel better," it states that

> Women leaving a hairdressing salon not only look better, but their health has measurably improved, says psychologist Tony Lysons. When a woman has her hair washed, trimmed and dried, her morale goes up, while her heartbeat slows and her blood pressure goes down by five percent, Lysons said, commenting on research he carried out at University College in Swansea, Wales. He researched his conclusions by connecting electrodes to women as they sat at their hairdressers. (*Toronto Star*, October 5, 1987)

3. See F. Willet, 1967: Plate 29.

4. D. Badejo, 1996: 94–97 also discusses the use of parrot feathers in Yorùbá mythology.

5. See R. F. Thompson, 1971: p. 65, fig. 4.

6. Pa Adeniji, personal communication, 1976.

7. B. Idowu, 1970: 81.

8. R. C. Abraham, 1958: 193.

9. See also Drewal and Drewal, 1983, and B. Lawal, 1996, for more discussion on *àwọn ìyá wa* (our mothers) in Gẹlẹdẹ; and D. Badejo, 1996, in the context of Ọ̀ṣun.

10. J. Pemberton in Drewal et al., 1989: 210.

11. See Lucas, 1948.

12. W. Fagg, 1980: Fig. 6.

13. I am grateful to Reverend Father T. M. Ilesanmi for calling my attention to this crown.

14. See M. T. Drewal, 1977.

15. For more on the concept of *àṣẹ*, see R. Abiodun, 1994.

16. Badejo notes that "Ọ̀ṣun as well as other women 'like her' who possess innate kinetic power reap benefits from her action." (1996: 78). See also C. Odugbesan, 1969.

17. Willett, 1967: see pl. 10 and color pl. III.

18. See P. Verger, 1965.

19. Badejo (1996: 77–80) also comments extensively on Ọ̀ṣun as "the leader of the *àjẹ́*."

20. For more on this aesthetic notion, see Abiodun, 1990: 77–78.

21. Abiodun, 1975.

22. W. Fagg et al., 1982: Plate 15.

23. Abiodun, 1975: 447–450.

24. Badejo (1996: 75) remarks that "[Ọ̀ṣun's] marriage to Ọ̀rúnmìlà suggests that wisdom and knowledge are qualities shared by male and female."

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CHAPTER THREE

# A River of Many Turns

## The Polysemy of Ochún in Afro-Cuban Tradition

*Isabel Castellanos*

The Afro-Cuban *orichas*—and Ochún is not an exception—are far from being simple, monolithic entities. On the contrary, they are multi-vocal, polysemous categories that express a multiplicity of often contradictory meanings. I have used the word "category" advisedly, since *orichas*, for the most part, are not mere individuals, but sets of personalities or "paths" (*caminos*) that refer to particular domains of human experience. I will begin by assessing the meanings of Ochún conveyed by her various *caminos*, followed by a close reading of a few of the *patakís* (myths) associated with her. Finally, I will examine the layers of significance revealed by observing Ochún in interaction with *orichas* such as Changó, Yemayá, Ogún, and Babalú-Ayé. As John Pemberton III has stated in reference to the *ọ̀rịṣa* in Yorubaland:

> it is when one considers the pantheon as a whole, as a total system, that one discerns that the total assemblage of the gods . . . expresses in its totality a world view. (Pemberton 1977: 8)

### *The Paths of Ochún*

The term that Afro-Cuban devotees employ to express the multiple guises of the *orichas* is not "faces," "personalities," or "avatars" but *caminos*, which literally means "roads" or "paths." Paths indicate movement and are intimately linked to another metaphor frequently present in Afro-Cuban thought—and elsewhere—namely, "life as a journey."[1] Paths are the surfaces that are followed in or defined by a journey. They also indicate the route or course of a journey. Paths have a source and a goal, a point of origin and a point of destination. In other words, most *orichas*, but not all, as we will see later, are perceived as dynamic, moving,

dialectical actors who frequently change their location in the exercise of their power or *aché*.

The faithful usually employ three distinct sentences to speak of an *oricha*'s "paths" and these sentences engage different and very significant verbs: (1) *Los orichas tienen muchos caminos* (*Orichas* have many paths) meaning that the deities are perceived as either "spaces" or "containers" that "possess" or "hold" various "roads," or as entities capable of owning various "paths"; (2) X *es un camino de* Y (X *is* a path of Y) — as in "Ayágguna *is* a path of Obatalá" — which emphasizes the notion that *orichas* not only *have* or *follow* paths but *are* paths themselves; (3) Y *viene por camino de* X (Y *comes* by way of X) which foregrounds the imagery of motion, of a journey undertaken by the *oricha*, who follows a specific, well-known route that has as its ultimate destination the space inhabited by the speaker, i.e., the believer.[2]

Ochún has five ritually recognized *caminos*.[3] Ochún Ibú-Akuaro — related to the partridge — is hard-working, joyful, young, beautiful, and fond of music and dance. She lives at the point where rivers meet the ocean and under this particular guise she is the wife of Erinle, whom she later abandons to elope with Changó. Erinle causes his wife to lose her wealth, according to a *patakí*. Ochún Ololodí is Orúnmila's wife. In this manifestation, she is quite serious and, like her husband, a good diviner. Under this visage Ochún rules over waterfalls and is a conscientious homemaker who enjoys sewing and embroidering. Ochún Ibú-Kolé — affiliated with the buzzard — is a powerful sorcerer who relies on the buzzard to bring her carrion to eat. Ochún Yumú is an old woman who lives in the depths of the river.[4] She is the richest of all Ochúns and so deaf that the faithful must ring a large bell to make themselves heard. Ochún Ibú-Dokó is the wife of Oricha-Oko and the patroness of the sexual act. Instead of the latter *camino*, some worshipers include among Ochún's "official" roads Ochún Ibú-Añá, the queen of the drums. Besides these ritually recognized paths, believers recognize other manifestations of this *oricha*, such as Ochún Yeyé-Moró or Yeyé-Karí, the most coquettish, alluring, gorgeous, and joyful of them all.[5]

Despite the diversity of the *caminos*, the faithful insist that there is but one Ochún. They recognize unity in diversity. The set of entities acknowledged as Ochún exhibits a prototypical structure, as is also the case of other *orichas*. In an abstract, decontextualized sense, Ochún is understood as a young, beautiful, light-skinned black female *oricha* who has many lovers and is extremely fond of perfumes, fans, mirrors, jewelry, and all kinds of finery. She loves music, dancing, and celebrates the joy of living. She is also skilled in the arts of seduction and lovemaking. Ochún Yeyé-Moró and Ochún Ibú-Akuaro are the "best examples" of this prototypical Ochún. Individuals who are asked to describe Ochún in a few words overwhelmingly do so in prototypical terms. When Ochún "comes down" — possesses one of the faithful — during the course of a ritual, the dance that ensues more often than not emphasizes her joyful, flirty, coquettish, and

lusty prototypical nature. Artistic genres like poems, popular songs, paintings, films, and ballets almost exclusively portray her prototypical qualities. Nevertheless, the other Ochúns — Ibú-Kolé, Ololodí, Yumú — are also Ochún and convey very important meanings.

In Cuba, Ochún rules over the erotic component of human nature and is also associated with money and material prosperity. The prototypical arrangement of Afro-Cuban *orichas* allows believers to explore a specific domain of experience — erotic love, for instance — in all of its complexity and contradictions. Eros animates both the young and the old, the ugly and the beautiful. It may celebrate life or be the immediate cause of death. It may fuse two lovers into a single being, or turn them into irreconcilable enemies, with flares of jealousy. It enkindles monogamic unions, extramarital affairs, and casual sexual encounters. Ochún Ibú-Akuaro is young and passionate. She speaks of infatuation but also of suffering in love. Yumú, unlike the prototypical Ochún, is elderly and hard of hearing, and speaks of beauty and passion lost in old age. Ololodí refers to sexual love in a domestic context. Her children must be legally married since she does not condone promiscuity or common-law unions.[6] Any one of Ochún's paths may be ritually foregrounded — often in the context of divination — to shed light on a specific experience or a particular moment of a believer's erotic history. In other words, besides the conventional meanings conveyed by the various *caminos*, the latter only acquire their ultimate significance when viewed in the context of a very distinctive interaction between the *oricha* and an individual who brings to the encounter unique life experiences clearly defined and situated in a specific time and place. Thus, *orichas* have both general and very focused, particular messages for their children through their various *caminos*.

The flexibility provided by the prototypical organization of Ochún and other *orichas* also promotes the incorporation, accentuation, or attenuation of meanings associated with changing physical and social realities. This explains in part why the *orichas* have remained relevant in the midst of dramatic societal changes. Indeed, they have survived and flourished under conditions as varied as those brought on by slavery, freedom, tyranny, democracy, and exile, as well as scientific and technological development. Ochún, for instance, eventually lost among Cubans her identification with a specific African river — no longer relevant in the new setting — and expanded her role as the "owner" of all rivers. Oricha-Oko's principal association with agriculture, although still present, faded somewhat among landless slaves and urban dwellers, whereas his position as promoter of fertility in women was foregrounded. The hunter *oricha* Ochosi's traditional role as the guardian of hunters was eclipsed in Cuba by his role of protector against imprisonment. The prototypical nature of the Afro-Cuban deities, with its dialectical emphasis on one *oricha* with multiple *caminos*, not only serves to convey — through projection — very specific messages to the faithful, but has been instrumental by way of their diachronic development, in promoting a con-

stant transformation of the *orichas* themselves that parallels the changes experienced by their children throughout history and throughout their personal lives.

A closer examination of Ochún's paths reveals profound contradictions that are also at the root of the human condition. Ibú-Akuaro is a young girl, Yumú is old, and Ololodí is a mature woman. In some "roads" Ochún is rich, in others destitute. Yeyé-Moró is beauty itself, but Ibú-Kolé is ugly and dirty. Since Afro-Cuban *orichas* are anthropomorphic entities with personal histories, believers often indicate that the *caminos* reveal different moments in their lives. They do more than that. The *caminos* also speak of the contradictions that are an inescapable lot of the human condition. Humanity exists in the midst of positive and negative forces. The *orichas* may assist in attaining a favorable balance, but the contradiction always persists. Not only Ochún, but all the *orichas* allude to this predicament. Obatalá, like Ochún, is portrayed in various *caminos* as both old and young. In addition, he has masculine and feminine paths. Oyá is a valiant female warrior who happens to be frightened of even the smallest lizard. Changó embodies virility, but on one occasion he has to wear female clothes in order to escape from his enemies. Oba is perceived as both a wise scholar and a naive young woman. The verse associated with *Ocana*, the first *odu* of the divination system called *Dilogún*, expresses these fundamental contradictions in the following manner: *Si no hay bueno, no hay malo; haya uno bueno, haya uno malo* (If there is no goodness, there is no evil; let there be one good and one evil).

## *The Patakís of Ochún*

A second fruitful source of information about the meanings expressed by Ochún are the myths, narratives, or *patakís* that describe her actions and accomplishments. Since it is not possible to include in this chapter a full version of all these stories, I will summarize here five that are representative of the rest.

### *Patakí* #1

Ochún had fought with her sister Yemayá and decided to set up a separate kingdom. She walked and walked until she reached a place where each one of her steps turned into a river. There she established herself with her husband Inle. The latter, however, eventually grew indifferent to her charms and she became so poor that her dress turned yellow from repeated washings. One day, Changó went by Ochún's home and advised her to seek Orúnmila's counsel. She did so, and the Lord of Divination instructed her to offer an *ebó*, an offering of a small chicken, a calabash, an opossum, and palm oil. He further instructed her to deposit the offerings at a very specific spot and not to be afraid of anything she might witness. Ochún followed Orúnmila's warnings to the letter and upon arriving at a curve on the road, she discovered a large palace owned by three brothers: twins and Idúo, the youngest. The twins soon engaged in a quarrel and killed each

other. Ochún was ready to flee, but Idúo called her back and said: "Do not run away, all that you see belongs to me, but I will soon die. Upon my death I will bequeath everything I own to you." It was thus that Ochún acquired all her wealth.

*Patakí* #2

Babalú-Ayé — Saint Lazarus — was exceedingly fond of women. Orúnmila, the owner of divination, advised him: "Today is Holy Thursday, do not fornicate since you will offend Olofi [God]." Babalú-Ayé paid no attention and lay with one of his many lovers. The next day, his whole body was covered with sores. The women begged God to save him, but He did not listen and Babalú-Ayé died. Ochún felt sorry for Babalú-Ayé and told Orúnmila to smear her best honey on the walls of Olofi's palace. When Olofi tasted Ochún's honey he immediately wanted more. Ochún responded: "I will not give you any more of my honey unless you bring Babalú-Ayé to life." God complied and Lazarus was resurrected thanks to Ochún's intervention.

*Patakí* #3

Ogún lived by himself in the forest. He had forsaken all forms of social contact and without him — the owner of metals and tools, the *oricha* that is at the root of labor — humanity could not prosper. They desperately needed his presence in their midst. Several *orichas* sent him messages to this effect. Men offered him riches. Women offered themselves. But no one could lure the hermit from his hiding place. Ochún decided to try. She went into the forest, intoned a song, and began to move her body to the music. Ogún watched her from behind some bushes. Enchanted, he soon showed his head in order to see her better. Ochún came quickly to his side and daubed his mouth with honey. Little by little, Ogún came closer and closer to Ochún, who continued dancing and giving him honey to eat. Slowly and voluptuously, Ochún guided him to the village where he was taken prisoner and forced to toil as an ironworker for the good of the people.[7]

*Patakí* #4

Oyá wanted Changó to be faithful to her and suffered a great deal when he had affairs with other women. Since Changó — the plenitude of life — cannot abide death, she struck a deal with several deceased people to surround her house and thus to keep Changó locked inside. Every time that he opened the door and tried to leave, one of the dead would approach him whistling: "Fuuiii!!!" and Changó would hasten to retreat. One day, Ochún went to see him in Oyá's absence. "Hey, Changó," she asked, "how come you don't visit me anymore?" "I can't, Ochún," replied the god of thunder, "Oyá is keeping me inside the house and the *ikú* [the dead] are watching my every move." Ochún got a

bottle of rum, a calabash full of honey, and soon began to flirt with the leader of the dead: "Hey, you, handsome, come and drink some rum, come and taste this delicious honey. . . . " The leader of the dead responded immediately and began to court her. In the meantime, Changó took advantage of the distraction and escaped. The *oricha* of love was thus able to inebriate and to sweeten Death.

*Patakí* #5

The Sky and the Earth had an argument because Earth asserted that she was more powerful than Sky. The latter reacted by moving away and abandoning Earth, who soon was parched without the water usually sent by Sky. All the trees died, except the immense *ceiba* tree, with her roots firmly planted in the earth and her branches reaching out to the skies.[8] After some time, Earth sent offerings to appease Sky, and several birds were charged with carrying the offerings. They all died in the attempt. Ara-Kolé — the Buzzard (Ochún herself under this semblance) — volunteered to perform the task. She was humanity's last hope, and despite the revulsion that most felt toward her — a dirty bird that ate carrion — they entrusted her with the mission to carry an *ebó* to Sky. Ara-Kolé (Ochún) flew during several days and nights until she reached Sky and deposited the gifts at his feet. "Oh, Sky," she said, "Earth begs your forgiveness. Almost everything and everyone has died down there. Please take pity on us." Sky turned his eyes toward Earth, took pity on her misery, and replied: "I forgive Earth." He sent so much rain that Ara-Kolé almost drowned on her return flight. The rain flooded Earth, who drank until she was sated. Plants grew once again, and animals and human beings revived, but the happiness that existed before the quarrel between Earth and Sky has never been fully recovered.

The Ochún *patakís* consistently portray her as a wanderer. In order to perform her works she must displace herself, she has to follow a road. Reaching a purpose is tantamount to arriving at a destination. In the first story, she travels twice. The initial trip ends in misery and disgrace, the second one concludes in happiness and prosperity. Material prosperity, according to Ochún, must be actively sought through personal effort and obedience to ritual prescriptions. *Orichas* like Yewá, Oba, and to a certain extent Ogún, are entrenched in firmness and immobility. Not so Ochún. Like the river, she is constantly moving, eternally pursuing a path. Ochún represents the constant flow of human life and it is fitting that she is recognized as the one who controls the circulation of blood in the human body.[9]

Ochún is also portrayed in the *patakís* as a mediator and a saving force. In the first narrative she follows Changó and Orúnmila's advice and saves herself. In this story she leaves an abusive husband and, through obedience to Orúnmila's words, recovers wealth, health, and happiness. In the other four *patakís*, and in many more, she acts on behalf of others like Changó, Earth and its creatures, and Babalú-Ayé. In effect, the devotees believe that through Ochún's intercession the whole world was reborn, since she convinced Sky to release his life-giving waters

and to forgive Earth's transgressions.[10] She is—together with Yemayá—the symbolic mother of all that exists and of all that is possible, since "the waters symbolize the entire universe of the virtual . . . the reservoirs of all the potentialities of existence" (Eliade 1991: 151). Ochún's intercessory role closely approximates her to Our Lady of Charity, patron saint of Cuba, with whom she is identified in Cuban lore.[11] Like Ochún, the beloved Our Lady of Charity—sometimes affectionately and familiarly addressed as "Cachita" (Little Charity) by Cubans—is understood and felt as being passionately protective of her children, as constantly arbitrating with God on their behalf. Since Ochún carried Earth's message to Olodumare (God) and took back to her His forgiveness, Ochún is considered God's messenger. According to Oba Ecún (1985: 335) all the *orichas*, prior to their coronation, had to visit Ochún's house to inform her about their intentions. By doing this, he adds, "everything turned out beautifully and without any problems."

If, according to the *patakís*, Ochún's purposes are identified with destinations to be reached after a journey, the obstacles along the way—the quarreling brothers, Ogún's timidity, Olofi's determination to punish Babalú-Ayé, the dead imprisoning Changó—are sensed as deterrents to be overcome by way of seduction and lure, not through violence and force. Other *orichas* (Changó, Ogún) often accomplish their deeds by resorting to pressure.[12] The faithful believe that both approaches are equally necessary for successful living. Sometimes forceful appropriation is required. Other situations demand diplomacy and charm. In general, *orichas* do not resort to miraculous, otherworldly means to obtain their objectives. For the most part, they employ very natural, human, everyday tactics such as cunning, hard work, and, in the case of Ochún, attraction and sweetness. This *oricha*, like the others, uses what she is and what she normally possesses to perform her deeds. She engages her sensuality (since she *is* sensuality) as a means of capturing Ogún and freeing Changó; her "honey" to force the hand of Olofi;[13] her words to beg forgiveness on behalf of Earth. This symbolism clearly alludes to her role as an *oricha funfun*, a cool, calm deity who counterbalances the heat and vehemence of the *oricha gbigbona*—Changó, Ogún, Babalú-Ayé, among others—according to the Yoruba and Afro-Cuban traditions.[14]

The faithful, then, behold Ochún as generous to a fault. And yet—and in this she departs from the general perception of Our Lady of Charity as always forgiving—she is also considered quick to take offense, capricious, and demanding. The contradictions that permeate all that exists are to be found in Ochún as well. Miguel W. Ramos (unpublished) graphically describes these contrasts in her character:

> She is very kind, but can become very vindictive and rancorous when she encounters opposition. It is precisely because of this irrational and stubborn character that Oshun is considered the most fragile and feared Orisha in Afro-Cuban lore. When she cries, she does so out of joy; when she laughs, she does so out of anger. When offended, she will ignore the offender, acting as if nothing has occurred. At some

> future date, when her offender has probably forgotten the occurrence, she remembers an old debt and claims immediate payment. The lady wants it and she wants it now!

Indeed, this contradictory nature of Ochún (and of the other *orichas* as well) explains why she represents both the fulfillment of love and *el desengaño amoroso* (disappointment and failure in love). As Ramos (1996: 69) adds: "Her honey can be delightfully sweet, but at the slightest offense she can convert it into an extremely bitter purge."[15] She can be both the most powerful protector and the most capricious retaliator of all the *orichas*. Lydia Cabrera (1971: 50–51) describes in detail the anger felt by Ochún toward one of her children, a man who had sold a peacock[16] dedicated to her, and who had pawned her shawl. Soon after offending the *oricha*, he was relentlessly persecuted by the police; he also fell ill, since Ochún filled his gallbladder with *chinitas* (little stones). He almost died, but eventually survived thanks to Yemayá, who placated her enraged sister and allowed the man to recover after a difficult surgery.

## *Ochún's Semantic Networks*

Individual *orichas*, as we have seen, can convey a variety of meanings, but some of their senses come to the fore only when they are appraised in interaction with other *orichas*, both in the context of oral tradition and in ritual performance. If we observe Ochún in close contact with *orichas* such as Changó, Ogún, Yemayá, and Babalú-Ayé, we discern a range of connotations that go beyond the messages to be gleaned from her or from any of the other *orichas* in isolation. Ochún, Changó, Ogún, and Babalú-Ayé are linked in Afro-Cuban thought with the notions of life and death. Changó denotes vital energy at its peak. He personifies—together with Ochún—the joy of being alive. In *Patakí* #4 we find him encircled and incapacitated by the dead. Many sources refer to his thanatophobia, to his intense revulsion toward anything remotely connected with death. As John Mason (1985: 43) has stated,

> Ṣango loves living and hates dying. He believes in living life to the fullest, no matter what circumstances he finds himself in . . . He is the standard when one thinks of living life. As far as people are concerned Ṣango *is* living; everyone else is just existing. (Mason's emphasis)

Ochún joins Changó in exalting life, but she is also capable of trafficking with death (*Patakís* #2 and #4), especially under her guise of Ibú-Kolé.[17] This affinity with the world of the living—while still retaining the ability to communicate with and influence death—renders her capable of being an effective instrument in the resurrection of Babalú-Ayé, one of the principal agents of death, through the dispensation of pestilence and disease. Faithful to the contradiction that is part and parcel of all beings, Babalú-Ayé is, at the same time, frequently and earnestly invoked as a miraculous healer, capable of dispensing the most power-

ful medicine known to humanity. If Changó and Ochún rejoice in living, Ogún's energy and stability are essential for the sustenance and the promotion of life, as expressed in *Patakí* #3. Ogún represents existence at its most basic; he is firm, ruthless, and coarse. His clothes consist of a simple *mariwó* (raffia) skirt. His altars or *tronos* (thrones) are plain and rustic, adorned with leaves and the straw hats worn by Cuban peasants. He receives offerings of cigars and liquor. Ogún is closely linked to nature in its pristine state, yet his metals and instruments are essential for the development of urban civilization. It is symbolically fitting, therefore, that in the constant interchange between nature and culture, Ogún finally surrenders to Ochún, his semantic opposite, the deity that represents being at its most flowing, sophisticated, and refined. Ochún does not like rusticity, but is fond of gold, fans, jewelry, and fine clothes. Her *tronos* are embellished with embroidered shawls, bracelets, and peacock feathers. Offerings to her include sweets such as *capuchinos*, a traditional Cuban dessert. She likes drums (like Changó) but she also enjoys violins and tunes that include Schubert's "Ave Maria."[18] Together, Ochùn, Changó, Ogún, and Babalú-Ayé—among others like Oyá, Oba, and Yewá—constitute a *semantic network*, a body of meanings that speak of life and death. This network is formed not only through the various particular senses expressed by each individual *oricha*, but by the assemblage of messages that emerge from their interaction with one another. Indeed, in this case, the whole is more than the mere sum of its parts.[19]

Fertility, reproduction, and human sexuality are also notions intimately associated with the theme of life. The triad of Changó, Yemayá, and Ochún constitutes a semantic network that speaks of human procreation. Ochún is the owner of female genitalia and the female egg. For this reason, she assists women who wish to become pregnant and helps them to deliver their babies. Changó rules over male sexual organs and the semen that impregnates women. Yemayá nurtures life. She is depicted as a black woman or a black siren whose belly and breasts are swollen in pregnancy. Moreover, Yemayá is the womb from whom existence emerges. One beautiful *patakí* depicts her as a universal mother. According to the narrative, Yemayá is forced to flee in order to escape the attentions of her own son, called Orungán or "Midday Sun." After running for a long time, she eventually loses her strength and, with a scream, falls flat on the ground. From her breasts two springs spurt forth and the water forms a huge lagoon. Then, her womb begins to swell until it bursts open. From it emerges Dadá, Changó, Ogún, Olókun, Oyá, Ochún, Oba, Oricha-Oko, Ochosi, Oke, and Babalú-Ayé.[20] Ochún and Yemayá, then, are equally essential to motherhood, since the former owns the organs that make conception possible while the latter attends to pregnancy itself and to nursing and caring for the children. Motherhood is equally distributed between these two *orichas*. In addition to their collaboration in female reproduction, Ochún and Yemayá also share dominion over the waters. The first *patakí* rendered here begins with a "quarrel" between Yemayá and Ochún. The

separation that ensues symbolizes the distribution of all water—a clear symbol of life—between these two *orichas*. After this initial rift Ochún rules over fresh water (called in Spanish *aqua dulce*, literally "sweet water"), whereas Yemayá reigns over the seas. In the end, however, this separation is futile inasmuch as rivers (Ochún) must ultimately empty themselves into the sea (Yemayá).

In conclusion, since Ochún—like all the *orichas*, all human beings, and even Olodumare Himself—is a complex, contradictory character, in order to fully comprehend her significance we must pay attention to the way in which she deals with God, with her *oricha* brethren, and particularly with the faithful, both inside and outside of ritual situations. For Afro-Cuban believers, life and death are but moments of a single journey. Far from being incompatible categories, life and death, maleness and femaleness, illness and its cure ultimately meet and feed on each other. In the Afro-Cuban worldview there is no life without death, no good without evil, no love without hate, and no infirmity without health. The goal of the followers of the *orichas* is not to obliterate or to simplify these paradoxes, but to accept their indeterminacy and yet learn how to orchestrate them into a favorable, vital balance. For this they depend on the assistance of Ochún and the other *orichas*. As one Afro-Cuban divination verse reads: "In the same place where fire was born, the rainbow was born; in the same place where the crooked was born, the straight was born." Afro-Cuban wisdom is based upon a profound dialectical view of natural and cultural reality. And thus for believers, Ochún, a river of many turns, blesses—sometimes clearly, sometimes in contradictory and incomprehensible ways—the complex and contradictory life of all who seek her.

## Notes

1. For a general discussion of this metaphor, see Lakoff and Turner (1989). For a specific study of this notion in Yorubaland, see Thompson-Drewal (1992).

2. Observe that the verb is *viene* (comes), which indicates movement in the direction of the speaker, and not *va* (goes) which refers to movement away from the speaker. Sometimes, particularly in the context of ritual possession, devotees say that the oricha *baja* (comes down), always referring to movement in the direction of the speaker.

3. *Oricha* worshipers list many paths of Ochún, but recognize five (her emblematic number) as "official," i.e., these possess identifying colors and specific objects, such as distinct necklaces. In addition, initiates in her cult will "belong" to one of the formally recognized *caminos*.

4. Others say Yumú—and not Akuaro—lives where rivers empty into the ocean (Oba Ecún 1985: 335).

5. Verger (1957: 408–409) lists the various names given to Ochún in Nigeria and in Bahia (Brazil). We find Ochún Yumú in both locations (Ọ̀ṣun Ijumu in Nigeria, Ọ̀ṣun Jumu in Brazil). He also lists Ochún Akuaro (Apara in Nigeria and Brazil. *Aparo* is a bird "very much like a partridge," according to Crowther 1870: 34, Yoruba-English section). Ọ̀ṣun Yeye Kare shows up in Nigeria and in Cuba (Yeyé-Karí, in the island). In total, Verger tabulates five names in Nigeria and sixteen in Bahia.

6. In the initiation Itá of a friend of mine, Ochún Ololodí prescribed that she had to legally marry the man she had been living with (A. L., personal communication, 1992). Itá is a divination ritual that takes place on the third day of the initiation process.

7. This is one of the best-known and most popular *patakís* found in Cuba, and has been the subject of a ballet by the Ballet Nacional de Cuba and a film directed by Gloria Rolando.

8. On flood stories and myths pertaining to sacred trees, see Leeming 1990, pp. 44–62 and 341–344. It is interesting to note that the author employs almost identical words to the ones found in the Cuban *patakí* to describe the *ceiba:* "The roots of the sacred tree extend to the depths of the earth and its branches reach to the heavens" (341).

9. See, for instance, Ramos (1996: 69).

10. Oba Ecún (1985: 335) explains it thus: "[Ochún] has the attribute of being the savior of the world. When Sky fought with Earth and the former punished the latter because of her pride, all was being lost on Earth because of the Deluge . . . When the Buzzard said that she would be able to reach Olodumare, everyone started to laugh and wondered how an ugly and dirty bird could pretend to accomplish so much. But they did not know that Ochún, at that stage of her life, was the Buzzard" (translation mine).

11. In addition, Our Lady of Charity's shrine is located in El Cobre, a copper-mining town. Copper, gold, and yellow metals in general belong to Ochún.

12. According to various *patakís,* Ogún coerced his own mother into having sex with him. In revenge, Changó (his brother) stole Oyá — Ogún's wife — from him.

13. "Honey" is a multi-faceted metaphor with respect to Ochún. It can stand for her sexuality, for her suave ways of conducting business, and it also represents a means to attain freedom. In at least one *patakí* (not included here) Ochún frees some birds she had previously trapped by anointing their feet with honey.

14. Drewal and Pemberton 1989: 14–15.

15. Ochún often punishes by "sweetening" a person's blood, i.e., causing diabetes.

16. Ochún is intimately related to various bird species. As we have seen, Akuaro is the partridge and Ibú-Kolé is the buzzard. In addition, peacocks — so proud of their beauty — belong to Ochún. It is interesting to note that she is represented by both the buzzard, who soars the skies, and by the peacock, firmly attached to earth.

17. Ochún is not foreign to the notion of death. Mason (1992: 295) affirms that "Death (*Ikú*) is her friend and pays her respect." At the same time, however, she celebrates living.

18. Devotees sometimes offer a *violín para Ochún* (a violin for Ochún), a celebration in which music is interpreted by a violinist and an electric-keyboard player. The musicians usually wear tuxedos and the tunes include various melodies such as Schubert's "Ave Maria" — which almost always initiates the festivity — as well as popular Cuban songs from the forties and fifties. As is the case with drummings, a *trono* (altar) is erected and the *soperas* (soup tureens) containing the sacred stones are displayed. *Violines* are perceived by the faithful as more refined than *tambores* (drummings).

19. I have already explored these notions in Castellanos (1996: 30–38). The meanings of the *orichas* have also been studied in Castellanos and Castellanos (1992).

20. According to other *patakís,* Yemayá — as we have seen — is Ochún's sister, not her mother.

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CHAPTER FOUR

# Òrìṣà Ọ̀ṣun

## Yoruba Sacred Kingship and Civil Religion in Òṣogbo, Nigeria

*Jacob K. Olupona*

### Invocation

Aládékojú, I am calling on you
Hail My Beloved Mother Aládékojú
The Beloved one from the town of Ẹ̀fọ̀n Èkìtì
Hail the Powerful Mother Aládékojú,
The descendent of the one who uses the crown made of brass
We travel to the town of Èjìgbò
Where we visited the Ògìyan (the Ọba of Èjìgbò)
The one who dances with the jingling brass
My wondrous Mother!
Who owns plenty of brass ornaments in the town of Ẹ̀fọ̀n
She moves majestically in the deep water
Oh spirit! Mother from Ìjẹ̀ṣàland
The land of the tough and brave people
Men who would fight to secure their wives
Even to the point of killing themselves
Along with their wives if everything fails
Hail the great Mother Ọ̀ṣun
Whose whole body is adorned with brass
She joins the Owá (Ìjẹ̀ṣà Ọba) to celebrate his festival
She shares her holy day (Friday) with Ṣàngó
My confidante
She waits at home to assist barren women to bear children
Ọ̀ṣun has plenty of cool water to heal diseases
Death to the Tapa (warriors from the North)
Ọ̀ṣun surrounds her whole body with Edan
With the shining brass as a Lantern at night,
She very quickly moves round the house

To fetch her sword, ready for battle
Hail the Mother, Ọ̀ṣun Òṣogbo
My mother, the marvelous cook
My Mother who makes succulent fried bean pattie (*àkàrà*), bean cake (*ọ̀lẹ̀lẹ̀*), and corn cakes (*èkuru*) as well
Those who refuse to hail my Mother
Will be denied tasteful bean cakes and corn cakes
My mother who provides bean cake for the Ẹ̀fọ̀n people
When my mother wakes up, she prepares food for her household
My mother will then proceed to the kolanut stall
As she trades in kolanut,
She is also carrying her corn to the mill to grind
At the same time she is also dying clothes (adire) by the sideway
There is no task my mother cannot do
She even keeps a stable for rearing horses
My mother lives in the deep water
And yet sends errands to the hinterland
Aládékojú, my Olódùmarè (supreme Goddess)
Who turns a bad destiny (*orí*) into a good one
Ọ̀ṣun has plenty of brass ornaments in her storage
Òrógùn, Orógùngunnùdá,
The favorite wife of Ọ̀rúnmìlà (god of divination)
The owner of the indigo pigeon
In vivid colors of the rainbow,
Her image appears brightly dressed on the river bank
Aládékojú, the owner of the mortar made of brass
Ọ̀ṣun fights for those she cares about
Human beings (*ènìyàn*) do not want us to eat from a china plate (*àwo tánganran*)
Ògbónmèlé, do not allow the evil world (*aye*) to change our good fortune into a bad one
Do not let the wicked persons overcome us
Once, Ọ̀ṣun was plucking medicinal leaves
Ọ̀sanyìn (herbal god of medicine) was also plucking his own leaves
Before Ọ̀sanyìn turns around,
Ọ̀ṣun had taken Ọ̀sanyìn's leaves from the grinding stone
Only Ọ̀ṣun can mold my destiny (*orí*)
So that it becomes as strong as rock
Ọ̀ṣun Òṣogbo, I greet you
Òṣogbo oròkí emerges from afar off,
And the crowd in the market went wild with joy
The Ọba's beloved water, do not forget me
Ọ̀ṣun who stands on the hill
And beckons at the kolanut seller in the market to bring kolanut
Ládékojú stands on the river bridge
And calls the seller of honey in the market
She beckons at the palm wine seller to bring her wine

75 The palm wine sells at an exorbitant price;
But my mother does not buy overpriced goods
The mighty water is rushing past
It is flowing to eternity.[1]

## *Introduction*

In every Yorùbá city, there is a major Òrìṣà whose mythistory, ritual, and symbols are intricately linked to both ancient and modern-day core values, as well as to the political and cultural lives of the Yorùbá people of that particular city. In the same vogue, the ideology and rituals of sacred kingship derive from this particular tradition honoring this same Òrìṣà. The *Ọba* (king), on his ascent to the throne, adopts this Òrìṣà as his own. Political kingship exists by the very presence of the Òrìṣà religious tradition. In spite of the eighteenth-century conversion to Islam and the nineteenth-century conversion to Christianity, and in spite of the influences of modernity, under the Òrìṣà tradition, the *Ọba* continues to define the identity of the Yorùbá people. Surprisingly, this ancient paradigm has relevance to the contemporary study of Yorùbá religion because in the last ten years there has been a veritable upsurge of what might be called, in Gerald Lawson's terms, "community-ship" (1995: 286) within the local context of towns and cities, in contrast to "citizenship" in the larger context of the nation-state. The force of "community-ship" derives from ethnogenesis, mythic narratives, symbols, and rituals that forge an identity for the people of these towns and the ancient city-states in Yorùbá-speaking areas and indeed throughout Nigeria. As Lawson recently described modern India, "the claims of community-ship" are at least as strong and, in many contexts, are much stronger than the claim of "citizenship."

If "community-ship" describes a positive phenomenon (and I believe it does) that highlights an essence of modern Indian social reality and of modern India's commitment to the well-being of all its communities, "communalism," or the selfish and separatist efforts of a particular religious group to act in ways contrary to the larger community and the nation, can be seen as the negation or tragic distortion of "community-ship." "Communalism" can be seen therefore as uncivil religion, the opposite of India's community-based civil religion.

In line with Lawson's argument, I propose that the recent development of Yorùbá community-ship is anchored in ancient discourses of cultural identity and Òrìṣà traditions. Despite occasional disruptive moves arising from claims of competing traditions, such as certain forms of Islam and Christianity, this specific Òrìṣà discourse offers the most compelling and strongest support for the development and peaceful coexistence of traditions in modern Yorùbá societies. The Òrìṣà tradition presents "an understanding of the [Yorùbá] communities' experience in the light of ultimate and universal reality" (Rouner 1986: 71).

## *Òṣogbo Identity and Community*

In this essay, I use Òṣogbo, the most significant Ọ̀ṣun city, located 170 kilometers from Lagos, as a case study to pursue two central themes. First, the myth, ritual, metaphor, and symbolism of Òrìṣà Ọ̀ṣun, the most revered goddess in the Yorùbá pantheon, have evolved as the communal "glue" holding Òṣogbo together. The Òrìṣà Ọ̀ṣun tradition is the source of the Òṣogbo core of spiritual, economic, and ethical values. These values, infused with transcendent meaning and significance, define the basic ideology of Òṣogbo "identity and community" (Woocher 1990: 154).

Second, Ọ̀ṣun provides a shared religious system of meaning that predates and transcends the community's "division of belief and practices" (ibid., 157). Such overarching transcendence and contextual meaning, which is also called Òṣogbo's civil religion, constitutes the sacred canopy of beliefs in Òṣogbo's pluralistic society. To develop these themes, I will explore the following topics: the narratives of Òṣogbo's ethnogenesis; the goddess nature of Òrìṣà Ọ̀ṣun; her relevance to gender discourse; her associations in popular parlance with Òṣogbo's economy and entrepreneurship; the links between the Ọ̀ṣun tradition and Òṣogbo's sacred kingship; and the Ọ̀ṣun festival performance as the embodiment of Òṣogbo's civil religion.

## *Òṣogbo Ethnogenesis: Narratives of Origin*

Shrouded in myth and legend, Òṣogbo recalls the founding narratives of Yorùbá towns and cities. Although these narratives contain historical facts, they are intertwined with sacred narrative and metaphor that the community believes to be true. Scholars and local historians have presented differing versions of this central narrative, but there is no sharp disagreement on the basic sequence of events comprising the foundation of the community. This myth of origin is closely knit with the myth of both the Ọ̀ṣun River and the powerful goddess inhabiting the river. According to this mythistory, Òṣogbo was founded by a prince of Ilésà, a Yorùbá city-state about 20 kilometers from Òṣogbo. Prince Ọlárooyè (Lárooyè) had settled in a village called Ìpolé, near Ilésà. As a result of a water shortage in Ìpolé, Ọlárooyè and Olútìmẹ̀hìn (Tìmẹ̀hìn), a hunter, led a group of people in search of water, as was the custom in ancient days. The duo and their cohorts discovered a large river, later called Ọ̀ṣun. They went back to report to Ọwátẹ̀, Ọlárooyè's father, and to invite Ọwátẹ̀ to settle in the new place on the Ọ̀ṣun riverbank. But before they left, they decided to make a mark on the riverbank where they discovered Ọ̀ṣun. They felled a big tree that made a very loud noise on the river, whereupon they heard a loud booming voice say: *Wọn ti wó ìkòkò aró mi ò, èyin Ọṣó inú igbó ẹ tún dé* (You have destroyed my pots of dyes. You wizard of the forest, you're here again). They were frightened and offered

sacrifices to the deity. But the goddess Ọ̀ṣun appeared to Ọlárooyè and Tìmẹ̀hìn asking them not to panic.

Ọwátẹ̀ decided to remain in Ìpolé, but gave his blessing to his son Ọlárooyè's and Tìmẹ̀hìn's mission to settle in the new land. With these revelations, Ọlárooyè and Olútìmẹ̀hìn's party came back and settled by the riverbank.

There is another narrative that complements the central Ọ̀ṣun story. When Tìmẹ̀hìn arrived at Ìpolé after discovering the Ọ̀ṣun River, he narrated how Lárooyè and he had encountered and fought with spirits believed to be led by Ọ̀sanyìn, the god of medicine inside the grove. According to this event, Lárooyè seized from these spirits the "magical" lamp of sixteen points (*àtùpà olójúmẹ́rìndínlógún*). The people of Ìpolé took these revelations to mean that settling near the Ọ̀ṣun River was sanctioned.

By the next rainy season, the river flooded, probably as a result of the power of Ọ̀ṣun. Those who once lacked water now had an overabundance of floodwater that was of no use to anyone. Lárooyè's party consulted Ifá divination, as was the custom, and learned that the goddess Ọ̀ṣun was angry because the Òṣogbo people were too close to her abode, the source of the floods. Sacrifices were offered to appease her; as a sign that Ọ̀ṣun was pleased with the offerings, the fish-goddess messenger, *Ikọ̀*, surfaced to reveal herself to the people. The king stretched forth his arms to welcome the fish-deity, a gesture causing the Ọba of Òṣogbo to be called *Àtáója* (one who spreads forth hands to welcome fish).[2] Ọba Adénlé interpreted his title as "the one who stretched forth his hands to receive the water from the fish's mouth." This fish-water is regarded as sacred, as a potent medicinal substance that the ọba and the Òṣogbo people may use for healing and other rituals. They therefore moved to their present abode in Òṣogbo and settled a few kilometers from the Ọ̀ṣun River. They adopted the river goddess as the tutelary deity of the town and as protector of their king and their royal lineage. The annual Ọ̀ṣun festival functions to propitiate the goddess Ọ̀ṣun and serves as the festival of the king, stemming from the mythology as an essential renewal of the life of the Òṣogbo community.

In several works on African religion and gender—most appropriately on religion and women—a major theory argues that religion and ritual in the "hands" of men play a major role in taming and controlling the "dangerous and destructive" power of women (d'Azevedo 1994), power symbolized and actualized in the form of a witch. Witches are believed to be human agents whose reputed antisocial behavior obstructs the social and communal order. Yorùbá tradition and scholarship support this argument. The Yorùbá proverb *ológùn ló lèe sọkọ Àjẹ́* literally means "only the medicine man can be the husband of a 'witch'." "Husband" here connotes domestication: the husband must control through "brute" force; he is not the peaceful spouse of a beautiful woman. In a new feminist interpretation of Yorùbá tradition, female symbols and experiences are privileged over male images. Feminist interpretations present powerful images and symbols of deities as mothers, wives, warriors, and other female roles. We are

indeed experiencing the Yorùbá concept: the transcendent and the sacred in a radically different and fresh context. This new hermeneutics in the recent works of scholars — Diedre Badejo, Mei-Mei Sanford, Deidre Crumbley, and Oyeronke Oyewumi — indicates that researchers should continuously and rigorously interrogate myth and ritual as those described above in which male and female images are pitted against one another. No longer can we rely on conventional wisdom that assumes male superiority in all cultures! New hermeneutics are attempting, as Ursula King remarked, to balance and contrast male images of the sacred "which have been predominant" in most world religions, especially in Islamic and Judeo-Christian traditions, including rich images of the sacred as mother "and other female expressions" (King 1990: 203).

In interpreting the Ọ̀ṣun myths cited above, I would like to pursue King's lead by examining contrasts in Ọ̀ṣun's symbols and images with predominant male symbols and expressions of the sacred in Yorùbá thought and ritual. I am arguing that Ọ̀ṣun tradition overturns both conventional wisdom and the prevalent theoretical position that is assumed to be "part of a very African definition of humanity" (Van Beek and Blakely 1994: 9). From the mythic narrative, we see Ọ̀ṣun as a benevolent deity, a source of goodness and kindness. Not only does she "affirm the legitimacy and beauty of female power," but she is indeed a "symbol of life, death, and rebirth of energy" (King 1990: 207).

Significantly, Ọ̀ṣun abhors evil machination, especially of medicine men (*oloogun*). She champions the cause of devotees who seek her help in struggling against evil magic and medicine. A close reading of the narrative suggests that there is a clash between both powerful and moral opposites (Wald 1997: 67), one represented and championed by the wizards of the forest (*osó inú Igbó*), the male hunters who inhabit the mainland and the forest, together with medicine men, and the other symbolized in Ọ̀sanyìn, the god of herbal medicine.

Another opposite, represented by the female, is symbolized in Ọ̀ṣun. In this opposition, Ọ̀ṣun claims a clear victory. This victory seems to verify Victor Turner's comment about Ndembu people: "in the idiom of Ndembu ritual, hunting and masculinity, or virility and symbolic equivalent, and the symbols and gear of hunters are reckoned to be *mystically* dangerous to female fertility and reproductive processes" (Turner 1957: 27 in Turner 1992: 109). Several *orin* Ọ̀ṣun and other Ọ̀ṣun traditions point to these moral opposites. A melodious lyric recalls the power of the forest mother:

| | |
|---|---|
| *Ọ̀ṣun gbólóògùn, eruleḷẹ gbólóògùn lọ* | Osun drowned the medicine man |
| *Ó mà gbólóògùn, eruleḷẹ gbólóògùn lọ* | The forceful and torrential water drowned the medicine man |

Here Ọ̀ṣun is employed by both men and women devotees to ward off evil: although Ọ̀ṣun heals with her cooling water, she also uses torrential water to destroy the evil medicine men. The narratives show that in the contest between Ọ̀sanyìn, the god of herbal medicine, and Láróóyè with Tìmẹ̀hín, they defeated

Ọ̀sanyìn and wrested the sacred sixteen-pointed lamp (*àtùpà olójúméẹ̀rìndìnlógún*) away from Ọ̀sanyìn.

The lamp now constitutes an important insignia of Ọ̀ṣun. Incorporating potentially powerful symbols and ritual objects of magical and potent force belonging to the ritual apparel of cultural heroes characterizes West African Yorùbá societies. Another *orin* Ọ̀ṣun refers to a direct encounter between Ọ̀sanyìn and Ọ̀ṣun:

> *Ọ̀ṣun ńjáwé, Ọ̀sanyìn ńjáwé, Agbébú yanṣẹ́. Ọ̀ṣun ti kó t'òsanyìn lọ lójú ọlọ.*
>
> Once Ọ̀ṣun and Ọ̀sanyìn were plucking medicinal leaves. Ọ̀ṣun, who lives in the deep water, yet sends errands to the hinterland, removed Ọ̀sanyìn's leaves from Ọ̀sanyìn's grinding stone without his knowledge.

Here, once again, Ọ̀sanyìn, the god of medicine, personifies the male malevolent force and the evil medicine men on whom Ọ̀ṣun relentlessly wages war on behalf of her clients, with Ọ̀ṣun ultimately gaining the upper hand.

As the young virgin carries Ọ̀ṣun's sacred calabash containing Ọ̀ṣun's brass objects from the king's palace to the riverbank, several people assembled at Ọ̀ṣun's shrine wail in prayer to Mother Ọ̀ṣun to take the "hands" and "eyes" of evil people from their bodies (*Iya ọ́wọ́ oṣó, ojú àjẹ́, mu kúrò lára mi o*). Babalawo Ifáyẹmí Ẹlébuìbon remarks on the mechanism of Ọ̀ṣun's healing power: "Ọ̀ṣun does not use herbal medicine to heal, she uses ordinary cooling water to heal" (*Oroki:* A *Video Film on Ọ̀ṣun Òṣogbo Festival*, 1997). To receive Ọ̀ṣun's healing, one cannot combine herbal medicine with Ọ̀ṣun's cool water.

Just as these narratives of Òṣogbo ethnogenesis and her relationship to Ọ̀ṣun are within the very traditional purview of the Yorùbá religious structure, a nineteenth-century narrative affirms Ọ̀ṣun's significance in the modern history of Òṣogbo. According to this legend and historical narrative, during the Yorùbá civil war an event took place that changed the course of Yorùbá—and Nigerian—political history. Having liquidated the former Ọ̀yọ́ empire, the Fulani Muslim Jihadists camped outside the gates of a city near the home of Ọ̀ṣun, ready to overrun the remaining Ọ̀yọ́ soldiers who took refuge in surrounding villages and towns. But the invaders met their "Waterloo" in Òṣogbo when Ọ̀ṣun, who turned herself into a food-vendor, sold poisoned vegetables (*èfọ́ Yánrin*) to the Muslim Fulani soldiers. The Jihadists instantly developed uncontrollable diarrhea; in their weakened state they were routed out of Òṣogbo. The Òṣogbo battle had significant consequences for the Yorùbá people, especially since it stopped the Jihadists' rapid expansion into southwestern Nigeria. Moreover, Ọ̀ṣun's victory over the Muslim forces continues to be recalled in Ọ̀ṣun's festival, in which Ọ̀ṣun's songs castigate fanatical forms of religious and secular tradition, especially those hostile and antagonistic toward Ọ̀ṣun's moral authority.

From the nature and character of images of Òrìṣà Ọ̀ṣun described above, it remains clear that the goddess Ọ̀ṣun appears as the dominant deity in Òṣogbo social and religious life. One of the Ọ̀ṣun verses cited earlier refers to her as

*Olódùmarè mi*, my Supreme Goddess, a metaphoric reference to Ọ̀ṣun as a great goddess, having the qualities of the Supreme God for the devotee. She has attributes encompassing other deities and cultural heroes in Òṣogbo myth. This universalism is demonstrated in mythical and in practical ways. In addition to serving as the home and courtyard of the river goddess, Ọ̀ṣun's sacred grove also houses the shrines of several of Òṣogbo's deities (Ogungbile 1998a: 70). Among the shrines is the temple of Ògbóni, serving as the meeting place for Ifá diviners. Ọ̀ṣun provides shelter for the Orò grove that is used as the meeting assembly of Ògbóni members. The hunter's Epa grove is also located here in the Ọ̀ṣun compound. The first market stall in Òṣogbo is named after the first Ọba, Láròóyè's, market (Ogungbile 1998a: 70); it was a center of trade and commerce in ancient times.

## *Ọ̀ṣun and Òṣogbo's Political Economy*

The tradition of Ọ̀ṣun links the goddess with Òṣogbo's prosperity and entrepreneurship. Centrally placed at the intersection of various Yorùbá cities, Òṣogbo has emerged as a growing political and economic center of the region. As a major trading center and administrative headquarters in the colonial period, Òṣogbo served as a main railway terminal between Kano in the northern region and Lagos in the southwestern region (Egunjobi 1995: 27–28). During the colonial period, Òṣogbo also had an airport. Linked with Ọ̀ṣun, its traditional trade and commerce brought Òṣogbo fame for its indigo dye, kolanut trade, and arts and crafts. The *oríkì* Ọ̀ṣun, cited at the beginning of this paper, reflects these various economic interests.

*Oríkì*, or praise poetry, emphasizes that Ọ̀ṣun specializes in many trades, including kolanut and indigo dye. From the ordinary bean, Ọ̀ṣun makes a variety of dainty treats—bean cakes (*àkàrà*) and bean porridge (ọ̀lẹ̀lẹ̀). Ọ̀ṣun owns stables for trading in horses. The oríkì emphasizes that Ọ̀ṣun is superwoman. No form of work is too difficult for her to perform. As Ọ̀ṣun trades in kolanut in the public market, at the same time she rushes to grind corn to make tasty corn torte to sell. All the while she maintains her dye trade. The well-established indigo dye industry and markets sustained the ancient Òṣogbo kingdom. Hence, the town is often referred to as *Ìlú aró* (the town of indigo dye). Ọ̀ṣun's encounter with the first settlers of Òṣogbo occurred when Lárooyè and Tìmẹ̀hìn felled a big tree on the river Ọ̀ṣun. The goddess claimed it destroyed her pots of dye (*Ìkòkò aró*). Another *oŕikì* Ọ̀ṣun refers to the goddess as a strong woman owning a wealth of coral beads (*Ìlẹ̀kẹ̀*) and brass ornaments (*Idẹ*). She is described as *arípẹpẹ kódẹ sí obìnrin l'Ọ̀ṣun* (a strong woman, she has good storage places for her valuable brass ornaments).

Ọ̀ṣun is an archetypal woman who embodies the core values and impetus for Òṣogbo's economic success. Here moral and economic order are intricately linked, but not in the Weberian sense. Ọ̀ṣun's social and economic empow-

erment of the inhabitants of Ọ̀ṣogbo forms the basis of her popularity today. Ọ̀ṣun's role in Ọ̀ṣogbo's economic order is also reflected in the Ọ̀ṣun ritual. On "outing day," as the Arugbá dances to the riverbank, market women exclaim that through Ọ̀ṣun's help, they have paid off their debts (*mo já gbèsè*). Their excitement can be compared to that of Americans who suddenly discover they are able to pay off huge credit card debts!

## *The Ọ̀ṣun Festival and Ritual of Kingship*

Starting from the first day of *Wíwá Ọ̀ṣun* (literally, "to search for our goddess Ọ̀ṣun"), the annual Ọ̀ṣun festival and kingship ritual lasts fourteen days. The Ọ̀ṣun festival begins when the community is informed by the visit of Ọ̀ṣun devotees to their lineage houses and various places in the town. During this ceremony, senior priests and priestesses of Ọ̀ṣun, dancing to the *bembe*, Ọ̀ṣun's sacred music, visit the home of key Ọ̀ṣun functionaries, other civil chiefs, and the private homes of the *ọba* who reign in Ọ̀ṣogbo. With public affirmation, the town begins in full swing to prepare for the Ọ̀ṣun festival.

In a comprehensive account of Ọ̀ṣun's 1972 festival, J. O. Olagunju (1972: 2) helps us understand the changes in the Ọ̀ṣun festival over the past two-and-a-half decades. Olagunju reports that in the evening of *Wíwá Ọ̀ṣun*, the Àtáója and the Iya Ọ̀ṣun visit the market to declare publicly that it is time "to eat the new yam," and thus remove the taboo forbidding the harvesting and selling of new yams in Ọ̀ṣogbo. From its very nature and name, *Wíwá Ọ̀ṣun* is a multi-variant ceremony with complex symbolic meaning. To link the start of Ọ̀ṣun with the new-yam ritual is a recognition of the fact that Ọ̀ṣun nurtures the Ọ̀ṣogbo people. The Iya Ọ̀ṣun and the Àtáója are intricately linked in the ritual washing of Ọ̀ṣun—Ọ̀ṣun is present everywhere in Ọ̀ṣogbo's spatial and temporal life.

More importantly, by its very meaning and essence, *Wíwá Ọ̀ṣun* represents a quest for the divine presence and power of the goddess Ọ̀ṣun, who is harnessed at this auspicious time to aid individuals and to serve communal ritual purposes. The motif of service remains constant in the numerous private and public ritual ceremonies comprising the Ọ̀ṣun festival. *Wíwá Ọ̀ṣun* may be seen as an entry into the *communitas* stage of a community's own rite of passage. Characteristic of a transitional stage in rites of passage, the festival represents a time when the Ọ̀ṣogbo people, both individuals and lineages, forget all squabbles. One Ọ̀ṣogbo inhabitant remarked, "We do this so that our prayers and requests will be answered by our Great Mother."

The last stage of *Wíwá Ọ̀ṣun* appears to be a recent innovation in Ọ̀ṣun festivals—never mentioned in previous descriptions of the festival: the Ọ̀ṣun festival includes the visit of Ọ̀ṣun priestesses, *Ìyá Èwe* (mothers of the little ones), to the marketplace to solicit gifts from those buying and selling. Jingling the Ọ̀ṣun sacred bell and bestowing prayerful blessings on market products, the priestesses

move around the market stalls, soliciting buyers and sellers to dig deep into their pockets to donate to the Ọ̀ṣun coffers. Although in the character of Ọ̀ṣun as a trader and powerful marketing merchant, this innovation can be explained in terms of the changes in the political economy of the city. In the past, hundreds of Òṣogbo indigenes would bring gifts of farm produce to the Ọba and Iya Ọ̀ṣun. But as the tradition of harvest gifts diminished, a system of voluntary sacred market gift-giving has evolved, by which the expenses of the Ọ̀ṣun festival are partially met.

In *Ìwọ́ Pópó*, the first public ceremony in the Ọ̀ṣun festival, the Àtáója—accompanied by a great assemblage of his wives, the chiefs of the town and the palace, and courtiers, friends, and palace messengers—proceeds through the main street which runs the length of the ancient city. This was the street that allowed major access to and from the ancient city before modern development began. In this stately procession, the Àtáója is greeted by his subjects who gather to pay him homage, to acknowledge his rule, and to praise his majestic walk. It is not uncommon to hear the greeting *Kémi ọlá ó gùn* (May your prosperity last long) and *Kádé pẹ́ lórí, kí bàtà pẹ́ lẹ́sẹ̀* (May you long wear the royal crown and the royal shoes).

Gary Ebersole, commenting on a similar ceremony in Japanese culture, noted that ritualized public processions demonstrate, "charisma, order and status" (1989: 40). As in the *Kunimi* ritual of ancient Japan, in *Ìwọ́ Pópó*, a "ritual act of viewing the land," the Àtáója "represents himself to the people precisely as the sacred king who, as premier ritual intermediary between the realm of the [Ọ̀ṣun] and the human sphere, had sole power to assure peace, prosperity and fertility of the land" (ibid.). *Ìwọ́ Pópó* is, above all, a boundary rite similar to the ritual of *Omiabẹ́* in Ondo's kingship festival (Olupona 1991). In *Ìwọ́ Pópó*, one Chief Ọ̀gáálá goes against all odds, leads the strong men of his family to secure the space where Ọ̀ṣun's festival and procession take place. Like Chief Olotualẹwa in Onǹdó's *Omiabẹ́*, whose role was to clear the ancient Onǹdó's territory of vagabonds or other disturbing elements who might obstruct the king's festival, Chief Ọ̀gáálá's triumphant return from Àtáója's errand in which he secures "the dangerous path of Jamigbo to Ọ̀ṣun's river" (Ogungbile 1996: 24) is greeted with joy and great merriment. The people in his entourage sing on their return that Ọ̀gáálá deserves to be given a gift of meat to eat. Indeed, he is presented with a live goat by the king as a reward for his bravery and assistance. The *Ìwọ́ Pópó* ceremony symbolically establishes Òṣogbo's ancient space and territory over which the king exercises his power and dominance. On the other hand, the king also pronounces blessings on his subjects and the territory.

The *Ìkúnlẹ̀ Ọ̀ṣun*, or ritual washing of Ọ̀ṣun's paraphernalia with the sacred leaves (*ewe òrìṣà*) occurs the day after *Ìwọ́ Pópó*. Here Ọ̀ṣun's images are brought out from the inner shrine, washed, and adorned in readiness for her feasts. As Chief Ifáyẹmí Ẹlẹ́buìbọn remarked, *Wọ́n ní láti sọ àwọn ìbọ Ọ̀ṣun di ọ̀tun* (They

must renew all Ọ̀ṣun's propitiatory objects). On this day too, the *Arugbá Ọ̀ṣun*, the virgin who carries Ọ̀ṣun's sacrificial apparel to the riverbank, begins her initiatory ceremony in preparation for the Herculean task to follow.

In the evenings of *Ìkúnlẹ̀ Ọ̀ṣun*, the sixteen-pointed lamp (*àtùpà Olójúmẹ́rindínlogún*) sacred to Ọ̀sanyìn is lit for the night vigil of the Ọ̀ṣun festival. This is the legendary magical lamp which the founding ancestors seized from Ọ̀sanyìn, the god of medicine. The lamp represents Ọ̀ṣun's superior power over sorcerers (*oṣó*) and medicine men (*oloogun*), because, having seized the lamp, Ọ̀ṣun incorporates it into her paraphernalia. By doing so Ọ̀ṣun recalls a method of power-acquisition that appears in several cultures, whereby a foreign source of power considered beneficial is acquired and incorporated into a chief's or warrior's arsenal for control and mastery. As a royal ritual, the town's babalawo (Ifá priests) supervise the ceremony of lighting the magical lamp to ensure its proper use and continued domestication by Ọ̀ṣun and her protégé, the Àtáója. The presence of the babalawo at the ritual may also be connected to the fact that Ọ̀ṣun was wife to Ọ̀rúnmìlà. The diviners burn the oil lamp until early morning.

In this reenactment ritual, the cutlass chiefs, the Arugbá and Ìyá Èwe, take turns dancing around the lamp. The king, his wives, and the chiefs also dance around the lamp three times, after which the king proceeds to the Ògún shrine of Olútìmẹ̀hìn, the first hunter and discoverer of the Ọ̀ṣun River. Upon his return, the sacred lamp will have been removed, and the king and his entourage will dance as they return to the palace. While the ritual acknowledges the reality of Ọ̀sanyìn's medicinal power—the reality that the Òṣogbo's indigenes and Ọ̀ṣun's devotees will continuously encounter, and wrestle with—the ritual ultimately reaffirms Ọ̀ṣun's domestication and appropriation of Ọ̀sanyìn's medicinal power. It affirms Ọ̀ṣun's skill in outmaneuvering controlling male forces of evil, symbolized by bad medicine (*oogun buburu*). It is no coincidence that Ifá diviner priests, experts in the confluence of spiritual and medicinal forces, are at hand to supervise this highly theatrical performance. The removal of Ọ̀sanyìn's lamp before the return of the king from Olútìmẹ̀hìn's (Ògún) shrine indicates the victory of the Ọ̀ṣun sacred power because "the moon must disappear before the day dawns" (*oj́ọ́ ò kì ń mọ́lẹ̀ bá òṣùpá*).

An important aspect of the Yorùbá kingship ritual is the propitiation of royal ancestors and the king's own *orí* (head). In the twin rituals of *Ìbọrí* and *Ìbọadé*, four days before Ọ̀ṣun's day, the town's notables, royals, and priestly class assemble in a palace hall in which all ancient crowns and other royal wares, such as the beaded shoes and staff of office, are kept. The king, with schnapps (liquor), prays to the royal ancestors. Though he acts as the successor to the former wearers of the royal emblems, he himself is simply dressed. In his prayers, he invokes the spirit of all ancestors "in the name of Odùduwà, our forefather, and in the name of Lároóyè, the first king." The Àtáója prays for this community, the people present, and Nigeria.

The schnapps and condiments are passed around for all to taste. The language

of the ceremony reflects a simple, non-sectarian tone. The liquor was called *ọtí àdúrà* (prayer liquor) to counteract any claim that a Muslim *Ọba* drinks alcohol. But we know that in Yorùbá society, no Christian or Muslim would refuse *ọtí àdúrà*, with which schnapps is associated. The chanting and recitation of the names of the past and present kings from Olárooyè to Àtáója Matanmi III, accompanied by the royal drum, brings the first part of the ceremony of *Ìbọrí* and *Ìbọadé* to a close. After each king is mentioned by the chants, there is a response of *Kábíyèsí* (Long live the "kingship") from the audience, an acknowledgment of the power that the deceased royals, though dead, still live on and that the incumbent king needs their blessing and assistance to achieve a peaceful and prosperous reign. While the occasion commemorates the memory of the deceased royal ancestors and cultural heroes, it also allows the king to renew his own kingship. The royal chanters and drummers, in their recitation, usher the community into active participation in the reality of the sacred time and Òṣogbo's mythistory as charted by past rulers. By reciting his list, the king reaffirms the chain of authority, and in an attempt to authenticate the present, links the present with the mythic past. The audience too acknowledges the power of the ancestors' living presence by their response of *Kábíyèsí*.

The ceremony is followed by a private ritual during which the spirit head (*Orí Inú*, literally "the inner head") of the king is propitiated. As in the *Ìbọrí* ceremony of Ila-Ọrangun's kingship ceremony, discussed by Pemberton and Afọlayan (1996), the purpose of Àtáója's *Ìbọrí* is to enable him to invoke his "spirit-head" who is believed to be the shaper of his earthly destiny. The propitiation of the king's *Orí* follows a logical sequence to *Ìbọadé* because the king must reaffirm his kingship through his own head (*Orí*) on which he wears the crown, the most visible symbol of kingship. This he does, in communion with the previous wearers of the crown in the *Ìbọadé* ceremony.

The main attraction of the Ọ̀ṣun festival is the ritual procession and pilgrimage of the king, the Arugbá, and the Òṣogbo people to the Ọ̀ṣun River to present their sacrificial offerings to the goddess. The major players in the ceremony are the Iya Ọ̀ṣun, the chief priestess of Ọ̀ṣun; the Arugbá, the young virgin who conveys Ọ̀ṣun's paraphernalia and sacrificial objects to the riverbank in a large brass bowl (*Igbá Ọ̀ṣun*); and last, the king himself, the chief sacrificer. A day before the pilgrimage, Ifá divination is consulted to ensure the Arugbá's successful journey, a tedious and Herculean task fraught with many taboos. The Arugbá is chosen by a divination process as well. When the present Arugbá Gbọnjubọla Oyewale Matanmi was chosen—summoned to the palace and informed by the king—she was quite surprised. "How could that be, when I never visited Ọ̀ṣun river nor participated in Ọ̀ṣun's tradition before" (Oroki 1997) was her initial reaction! Reminiscent of the annunciation to the Virgin Mary in Christian traditions, the Arugbá is presented before a host of Ifa priests in the home of Oluawo, the Ifá chief priest. The Ifá is consulted by a middle-aged diviner and the revela-

tion announced to those present. In Faleti's *Oroki* video cited above, the Arugbá was enjoined by Ifá to be happy and relax (*ko dára yá*). Ifá promised to keep all evil away from her (*Ifá ní òun ó dinà ibi*). Most importantly, Ifá predicted that through her carrying the sacrificial offering to Ọ̀ṣun, the town of Òṣogbo would prosper and the Arugbá's own prospects would be accomplished (*Ire ilu Òṣogbo á dé; ire tì ẹ ná à dé*).

On the day of Ọ̀ṣun, the Arugbá is escorted to the Ọ̀ṣun chamber in the palace compound to prepare for the journey. Having ritually prepared her for the task ahead, the Igbá is placed on her head and two lobes of kolanut are stuck into her mouth to prevent her from talking. Like the Olojo kingship festival in Ile-Ife, in which the Ooni (the Ile-Ife king) must not utter any word once the sacred *Are* crown is placed on his head, the Arugbá's silence is to prevent her from uttering any curse, because whatever she says will come to pass. From here the Arugbá proceeds to the king's palace to receive his blessings and to inform him that the ceremony has commenced.

The king's own entourage in a car convoy follows the Arugbá's procession to the Ọ̀ṣun River very closely. The crowd, numbering thousands of visitors and Òṣogbo natives, who by now have gathered on the streets and on balconies of houses on the route where Arugbá's procession passes, besiege her, shouting their prayers and wishes for long life, children, wellness, and prosperity. And at times they curse their enemies as well. There is the belief that the Arugbá, as she proceeds toward the Ọ̀ṣun River, conveys the community's prayerful wishes to the "Mother Ọ̀ṣun." To prevent mishaps that may occur as the teeming crowd besieges her, young boys with whips (*atorin*) and other Ọ̀ṣun devotees provide safe passage for the Arugbá who is piloted along the route on her way to the riverbank. As she moves along, she stops in auspicious places, in shrines and temples of supporting deities to whom priests in various places offer prayers for a peaceful pilgrimage.

On reaching the Ọ̀ṣun grove, the Arugbá enters the Ọ̀ṣun shrine where the brass *Igbá Ọ̀ṣun* is removed from her head and carried into the inner shrine. The Ọ̀ṣun festival has become a popular public festival and a strong tourist attraction. This new image has enhanced its performance but has also turned it into a choreographed spectacle. A public ceremony takes place here in which the king and his visitors are entertained by different segments of the society. In turn, the chief members of the religious groups, diviners, hunters, and traders, rise up to pay homage to their king while an announcer takes a roll call of every group present, and the Ọba waves his horse tail (*irunkere*) in acknowledgment of the greetings of his subjects.

One of the dancing groups that pay homage to the Ọba is the ancestral masquerades (*egungun*). Clad in colorful costumes, depicting their image-symbols, many of the *egungun* appear before the king to pay obeisance and salute him, acknowledging his spiritual and temporal authority in Òṣogbo. The distinguishing mark of the ancestral masquerade is that their wood masks and cloth veils

indicate that they are of Ọ̀yọ́ origin, symbolizing immigrants, outsiders whose migration to and sojourn in the land is still a remembered and celebrated event in Òṣogbo history. Having outnumbered the autochthonous group of Ìjèṣà origin (of whom the king is an integral part), the Ọ̀yọ́-Ìjèṣà conflict continues to be a matter of concern in contemporary Òṣogbo. The festival thus represents the Ọ̀yọ́'s attempt to ameliorate conflicts and neutralize competing claims by acknowledging the Àtáója as the head of a diverse, multi-clan, heterogeneous community. As Richards argues, "the mask," and I would argue, its cloth veil, appears to have "exemplary qualities as a conceit or metaphor for discourses which attempt to characterize the cultural identities and differences which epitomize the representations" of the people. (Richards 1994: 5). *Egungun*, ancestral spirits, are deceased elders who appear during festivals to celebrate with living members of their lineages. As Richards further states, "remembrance of the ancestors is vital to the success of human endeavors; to ignore them will result in witchcraft, plagues, and social dissolution" (1994: 7).

Why would the Ọ̀yọ́ ancestral masquerades appear in a ceremony that is, strictly speaking, not a festival of lineage ancestors? Their appearance is to acknowledge their own bond and allegiance as sacred representatives of the Ọ̀yọ́ lineage sojourning in Ọ̀ṣun's domain, a place where the sacred king guarantees them rights of abode, in spite of their foreignness—even though the Ọ̀yọ́ groups outnumber the aboriginal Ìjèṣà people in present-day Òṣogbo. The ritual of paying homage is all the more important when we recognize that in real terms, there is always the possibility of conflicts breaking out between the Ọ̀yọ́ immigrants and the Ìjèṣà aborigines. Such rancorous conflicts resulting from economic and sub-ethnic identity issues are temporarily submerged in order to celebrate the unity of the community, an indication of Òṣogbo's preference for communityship over communalism. That the *Egungun* agency plays this role becomes clearer when we recognize, as Richards has rightly observed, that throughout Yorùbáland *Egungun* provides a strong "sense of collective identity," especially in places where "diverse groups and lineages required a homogenizing influence to which they could demonstrate their shared allegiance" (1994: 7).

One special attraction of the festival in the video is the appearance of a young man standing inside a large empty carton of schnapps dressed like a Muslim Imam, holding prayer beads. While this may be interpreted as an unofficial Muslim presence, it is also a parody, making a statement about a Muslim consuming alcohol. At the same time the performance provides glimpses of what I will discuss later as uncivil religion, a protest against the new Islamic resurgence as an expression of antagonism toward Ọ̀ṣun ceremony. Indeed, some of the Ọ̀ṣun songs sung on this day reflect tension with Islam, as I will also show. The Àtáója gave a stately address in which he located Ọ̀ṣun ceremony within the context of Òṣogbo's mythistory and civil religion. He denounced those who claim that Ọ̀ṣun is a "pagan" worship. Instead, he claimed, "it demonstrates man's search for his origin in consonance with the practice of our ancestors." The Àtáója's

speech reflects his own personal struggle with the changing face of religion in Ọ̀ṣogbo. A staunch Muslim, a former Islamic teacher, and now a king, he recognizes the significance of Ọ̀ṣun in the kingship rituals. He, therefore, locates Ọ̀ṣun as *àṣà* (tradition) as opposed to *ẹ̀sìn* (religion or worship). If American discourse on civil religion faces criticism and debate at the intellectual and cultural level, so does the meaning of Ọ̀ṣun in contemporary Ọ̀ṣogbo.

After the stately ceremony, the Ọba wears the ancestral veiled crown, which he dons like the Ooni's *Arè* in the Olojo festival in the Ile-Ife, once a year. Like the Ooni, who would then encounter Ògún, the god of iron and war and Ife's patron deity, the Àtáója proceeds to Ile-Ọ̀ṣun and sits on the sacred stone where Larooye Gbadewolu, the first king, sat to take Ọ̀ṣun's blessings. There, the priests and priestesses of Ọ̀ṣun propitiate Ọ̀ṣun on his behalf and there he encounters the goddess.

Sacrificial offerings to Ọ̀ṣun at the river ends this ceremony. The priests and priestess of Ọ̀ṣun, led by the Iya Ọ̀ṣun, place the sacrificial offerings of food presented by the king inside a big bowl (*Ọpọ́n Ọ̀ṣun*) which is carried by a young man to the riverbank, where Iya Ọ̀ṣun will present it to Ọ̀ṣun. The solemnity of the ritual is indicated by the teeming crowd who appropriately remove their head scarves and caps as the sacrifice is conveyed to the river. This is both a reference to the goddess and at the same time an indication that this sacrificial moment is the most auspicious time. Water taken from the river at this stage is seen as especially efficacious. The Ọ̀ṣun priestesses claim that in the past this was the moment when Ọ̀ṣun would send her messenger (Ikọ̀) in the form of a big fish, who would appear and pour water from his mouth into the big bowl. The water, they claim, served as a source for healing women, children, and all who seek the deity.

With the sacrifice over, the Arugbá leads the procession and returns with the Ọ̀ṣun bowl to the palace where the bowl is kept. Five days later, in a ritual called *gbígbéṣè r'odò*, there is a joyful return to the Ọ̀ṣun shrine, though this is performed mainly by women and children. This is the occasion when those whose prayers have been answered by Ọ̀ṣun bring their pledges and offering of thanks to her. In a more relaxed atmosphere, the Arugbá, her friends, and the previous carriers of Ọ̀ṣun's sacrificial offerings interact and converse about their experiences as bearers of Ọ̀ṣogbo's gift to the great mother. A large portion of the gifts presented to Ọ̀ṣun are displayed so that people can behold the wonders and healing powers of the goddess. At the appropriate time, part of the food offerings are taken to the river and presented to Ọ̀ṣun—they are thrown into the water.

The Ọ̀ṣun festival is very complex; and so will be any attempt to interpret it. It encompasses various motifs and, given some of the chronological changes that have occurred in the accounts of the festivals available to us, it clearly shows that it is a composite festival. In the character of city festivals in the history of religions, such as the Roman Parilia festival, Ọ̀ṣun probably developed from an agricultural new-yam festival into a festival commemorating the foundation of the city of Ọ̀ṣogbo. As Ọ̀ṣogbo developed from a small settlement into a large town-

ship, Ọ̀ṣun became a political celebration just like the Parilia celebration, a simple pastoral festival that grew to become a "noisy" celebration of Rome's birthday (Beard et al. 1998: 119).

The Ọ̀ṣun festival manifests attributes of new year festivals characteristic of agricultural societies. As in the new year festival of the Ila people, beautifully described by Smith and Dale (1920) and later interpreted by Evan Zuesse (1987), ceremonies and rituals of Ọ̀ṣun combine various elements: the invocation of a savior goddess and the two cultural heroes and founders of Òṣogbo, Olútìmẹ̀hìn and Olárooyè, for the purpose of bringing about human and agricultural fertility. Human fertility provides a popular and continued relevance in modern Òṣogbo.

As the founding ritual of Òṣogbo, the burden of its performance lies with the king who has adopted the festival as his own ritual and ceremony. The ideology and ritual of sacred kingship embodies the totality of life in the Yorùbá communities. Sacred kingship is a fundamental cultural construct. It is a mode of connection to ancestors and the gods and their powers, a charter for land title, a basis for political status, and the definition of seniority and gender.

Òṣogbo civil religion emanates from the institution of sacred kingship which derives its source and energy from the traditions of Òrìṣà Ọ̀ṣun. This sacred kingship is also the focus of a multi-religious Òṣogbo community. To illustrate the logical connection between sacred kingship and Ọ̀ṣun, it is germane to our argument to see the way in which the crowd responds to the appearance of Arugbá carrying the sacred calabash to the river. The drummers for the festival recite that the Arugbá is the real king:

| | |
|---|---|
| *Ìwọ l'ọba* | You are the King |
| *Ìwọ làgbà* | You are the Elder |
| *Ìwọ ọba ọba ọba. . . .* | You are the King, the real King |

(Ogungbile 1998b: 7)

Olagunju (1972) observed that the Arugbá's attendant, in sympathy with the heavy load that the Arugbá was carrying, uttered the following incantatory words of assistance: *Olúwa mi, ọfẹ o* (My lord, may the load be lighter), *Mọọ rọra ṣe, Ìyá Àtáója* (Walk gently, Àtáója's mother). The Arugbá, as the reincarnation of Ọ̀ṣun, displays the persona of the great goddess. She is honored as the surrogate "mother" of the king and she is bestowed with the sacredness that befits the Ọ̀ṣun. Hence, she must accomplish for her community the observance of the elaborate taboos that surround the office of the Arugbá and the rituals required of her.

## *Ọ̀ṣun as Civil Religion*

There is a tendency in the scholarship on Yorùbá religion to divide the pantheon of deities into major and minor deities and to privilege the so-called major deities. It is assumed that these major deities are at all times and in all places

quintessential and that they hold supreme power in all Yorùbá towns and cities. Such an approach neglects the myths and historicity of particular towns and cities and the broader spectrum of their complex ritual life that "celebrates a real beginning, the coming into being of a new sub-ethnic entity" (Hikerson 1996: 84). I have shown from my description and interpretation of the Ọ̀ṣun festival that city tutelary gods and goddesses play central roles in Yorùbá city spirituality. City spirituality can be described as a phenomenon whereby a particular place, settlement, city, or township derives its sacredness from its relationship to a deity, ancestor, or cultural hero who performs the central role in its myths, legends, and history. Myths, ritual, performances, and symbols of this sacred being form the core of Yorùbá civil religion.

Civil religion, a concept first used by Rosseau (1988 [1762]) and popularized in Robert Bellah's (1970) seminal essay "Civil Religion in America," is a multivarious concept, adopted in general to interpret how a nation, community, or political entity endeavors to "understand its historical experience in religious terms" (Wald 1997). In my own previous works on the subject (Olupona 1988, 1996; and Nyang, 1993), I tried to relate the idea beyond the analysis of the interaction of religion and polity in the emerging African states, especially in Nigeria, to examine its application to the understanding of the ideology and rituals of local communities (Olupona 1991; Ilesanmi 1995). My basic thesis is that in several Yorùbá towns and cities generally under the aegis of sacred kingship, the community annually reaffirms its core values and mythistory. We have seen that the Ò ṣogbo people claim descent from a common ancestral origin — Oláróóyè and Olútìmẹ̀hìn. Even though the Ò ṣogbo people today "espouse different, even conflicting ultimate meaning systems" (Woocher 1990: 156), the people acknowledge "themselves as participants in a common social order" (1990: 157) under the canopy of sacred kingship whose ideology, rituals, and symbols are derived from Ọ̀ṣun's religious experience. Civil religion, then, is as Jonathan Woocher claims, "a religious meaning system which symbolically expresses and sustains the unity of [Ò ṣogbo] society even in the face of religious diversity" (ibid.). Civil religion has its deepest meaning in the understanding of Yorùbá communal tradition when it is viewed as a tradition, "a sacred organic reality into which one is born" (Wentz 1998: 51). I will further examine this issue in the last section of this essay.

The Ọ̀ṣun festival is a theatrical and visual rendition of, and statement about, Ọ̀ṣun's personality and essence and her role in the salvation history of Ò ṣogbo, as the one who provided an abode for the drought-stricken people of Ìpolé. More importantly, Ọ̀ṣun plays a role in Ò ṣogbo's modernity as the source of an invisible religion that heals potential social and religious cleavages within Ò ṣogbo society, and that provides the basis of Ò ṣogbo's economic prosperity. I will pursue several of these themes, drawing from my analysis of Ọ̀ṣun festivals presented above and other historical and oral sources, especially the *Oríkì Ọ̀ṣun* which I used as a preface to this chapter.

## *Religious Pluralism and Civil Religion*

Ọ̀ṣun tradition, especially her ritual process, illustrates not only that Ọ̀ṣun is the embodiment of Òṣogbo's ideology and rituals of sacred kingship, but that she is the very expression of royal protection (Frankfurter 1998: 3). Ọ̀ṣun is at the center of both royal kingship and the pantheon of deities in Òṣogbo's cosmology. Several verses of Ọ̀ṣun's *Oríkì* show this linkage. First, Ọ̀ṣun encompasses the Òṣogbo universe of meanings. Ọ̀ṣun is addressed as my Olódùmarè (Supreme God), a symbolic reference to Ọ̀ṣun as the Ultimate Being and the source of Òṣogbo's essence. Second, another Ọ̀ṣun song reads: *Ab'Owa s'odun, aba Sango s'ose* (One who celebrates the festival with Owa [the Ìjèṣà Ọba] and also shares a holy day with Sango). The collective propitiation of Òṣogbo's deities and cultural heroes by the king takes place in conjunction with Ọ̀ṣun's festival. As in the ritual of *arebokadi* (the ritual offerings to palace deities and the royal ancestors enshrined in and around the palace) in Ondo's kingship festival (Olupona 1991) and, in Òṣogbo too, three major spiritual agents: *Ifá* (divination god), *Eégún* (ancestor spirit), and *Ogun* (god of iron and war) are particularly prominent in Ọ̀ṣun's festival.

One of the major tests of civil religions in contemporary Yorùbá society is the way in which the two world religions, Islam and Christianity, feature in a town's religious landscape. Both Islam and Christianity have been domesticated by Yorùbá religious traditions, but by their sheer size and influence they continue to effect changes upon Yorùbá indigenous traditions. Are these two global traditions subsumed under the sacred canopy of Ọ̀ṣun and Àtáója's authority? By and large, Òṣogbo Muslims and Christians acknowledge Àtáója's kingship and Ọ̀ṣun's role in their town's mythistory. But in modern Òṣogbo, with the growth of militant Islamic and Christian influences, skirmishes between followers of Ọ̀ṣun traditions and those of the two world religions have resulted in uncivil practices. The case of Islam deserves particular mention because it poses the greatest challenge to Òṣogbo's civil religion and because it has a special relationship to Òṣogbo.

## *Islam, Ọ̀ṣun, and Uncivil Religion*

What is the importance of Islam to Ọ̀ṣun's festival? Muslims constitute about 70 percent of Òṣogbo's total population. Islam is therefore a major religious tradition in the city. Besides, a large number of Ọ̀ṣun's devotees and Ọ̀ṣun priests and priestesses are Muslims. Paradoxically, Ọ̀ṣun festival day, normally a Friday, coincides with the Muslim prayer day, thus making Ọ̀ṣun, Sango (god of thunder and lightning), and Muslims share a similar holy day, which also creates conflict.

In the last few years, the people of Òṣogbo protested against a small group who would abuse Ọ̀ṣun through uncivil religious responses, such as religious intolerance, or what Simeon Ilesanmi, in his critique of my earlier works, called "experiences of civil religion tumults" (1995: 62). While the Òṣogbo people's

protestations against Ọ̀ṣun's cultural despisers are not new, their tempo has increased, with the recent rise of militant Islam in contemporary Òṣogbo. The reasons are both ancient and new. We have it on record that in the nineteenth century, under the war of expansion of Islam from Northern Nigeria, Òṣogbo became a major center of conflict between the Fulani Jihadists and the remnants of the old Ọ̀yọ́ Empire. As the Muslim forces took Ilorin, a Yorùbá city and gateway to Northern Nigeria, and sacked the Ọ̀yọ́ Empire, the Yorùbá who fled the region took refuge in Òṣogbo, thus making the town a target of the Jihadists. Òṣogbo was attacked in 1839, but with the assistance of Ibadan soldiers, the Jihadists were effectively stopped in 1840 (Gbadamosi 1978: 10). The victory of Òṣogbo and the defeat of the Muslim forces is given prominence in Ọ̀ṣun's tradition, which claims that Òṣogbo's victory was achieved through the assistance rendered by the Great Mother when Ọ̀ṣun poisoned the Jihadists' food, according to the famous story recounted earlier.

In spite of this temporary halt to the expansion of Islam, the tradition made further inroads at a later date, and Islam now constitutes the most dominant proselytizing religion in the city. Modern Òṣogbo is a highly heterogeneous town, where multiple though often divergent values are viewed as ideal, in consonance with Yorùbá modernity. Within this plurality, Ọ̀ṣun provides the symbol and avenue for the "construction of a collective identity," in Òṣogbo based on what is perceived as tradition (*asa*) and not strictly religion (*ẹ̀sìn*). Whenever Islam, and to a lesser extent Christianity, and modern development present conflictual ideologies, the Òṣogbo people react in protest. An old popular Ọ̀ṣun song states that for centuries before Western doctors arrived, people depended on the flowing water of Ọ̀ṣun to raise their children (*Sélẹ̀rú àgbo, àgbàrá àgbo, lòṣun fi n wo 'mọ rẹ kí dókità ó tó dé*). Another stanza of the same song condemns the excesses of modernizers (*aláṣejù*) whose exclusive terms go against cultural norms and decorum. Òṣogbo can accept foreign traditions, but only if they do not compete with their host's ideologies.

The following two popular Ọ̀ṣun songs recorded by Badejo (1996) and Ogungbile (1998), are directed against Islam's "hegemonic ambitions" and sense of religious superiority. They strike at the very root of Ọ̀ṣun's encounter with Islam:

| | |
|---|---|
| (I) *Bàbá Onírugbòn* | You long-bearded Malam |
| *Yéé gbọ́ t'ẹbọ wa* | Stop poking your nose into our rituals |
| *Enìkan ò mò ní o mọ́ mọ́* | No one disturbs you from performing |
| *Kírun l'ojójúmọ́* | Your daily prayer (sallat) |
| (Ogungbile 1998b: 137) | |
| (II) *Níbo lo ní n gbé Yèyé mi sí ó?* | Where do you want me to cast My Great Mother? |
| *Enílàwàáni òsì* | You with wretched turbans |
| *Tó ní n wá sè 'mòle* | Who want to convert me to Islam |
| *Níbo lo ní n gbé Yèyé mi sí?* | Where do you want me to cast My Great Mother? |
| (Badejo 1996: 150) | |

This strong critique of exclusivist Islamic ideology is an attempt to protect Òṣogbo's religious harmony in an atmosphere of increasingly pluralistic value systems. The critique of Islamic militancy is *not a rejection of Islam.* Indeed, most Ọ̀ṣun participants and devotees of Ọ̀ṣun profess to be Muslims.

Another song clearly shows that both traditions can be practiced by the same person, a claim that the Yorùbá worldview enables people to make this accommodation:

| | |
|---|---|
| *Méjèèjì l'a ó ma ṣe* | We shall practice both together |
| *Kò bàájẹ o* | It is not wrong |
| *Ká s'àlùwàlá* | To perform ablution (a Muslim ritual) |
| *Ka wọ'dò Ọmọ* | And to go to Ọ̀ṣun River to seek for children |
| *Méjèjì l'á ó maa ṣe* | We shall do both. |

(Ogungbile 1998b: 136)

It is through the role of the kingship in protecting this right of practicing Islam and visiting Ọ̀ṣun simultaneously—the right to ask for the three blessings of life: children; prosperity; and long life—that the significance of Òṣogbo civil religion becomes clearer. The incumbent king, as an individual, is a staunch Muslim and a former Quranic teacher, and as a trained accountant, a modernizer. But as David Laitin (1986) remarked, all religious traditions belong to the king (*ọba oní gbogbo ẹ̀sìn*). Indeed, the rhetoric surrounding the Àtáója during the annual Ọ̀ṣun festival supports this view. When he was asked what were the happiest days of his life, he did not say, to the surprise of everyone listening, "it was the day [he] ascended the throne of [his] forebears." Rather he replied that there were many happy days, including the day Òṣogbo was granted an Anglican Diocese (Ajayi 1996), an affirmation that civil religion is a pointer to "values that are larger than personal purposes" (Lorin 1986: 334).

## Notes

1. My translation of an Ọ̀ṣun recording by the Institute of African Studies' Research Team, University of Ibadan, Nigeria; carried out with an unnamed Ọ̀ṣun priestess, 1970.

2. As an undergraduate at the University of Nigeria, Nsukka, in 1973, I heard a similar story from the late Àtáója Adenle, in my class at Òṣogbo on a research expedition.

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CHAPTER FIVE

# Nesta Cidade Todo Mundo é d'Oxum

## In This City Everyone Is Oxum's

*Ieda Machado Ribeiro dos Santos*

*Nesta cidade todo mundo é d'Oxum.*
*Homem, menino, menina, e mulher*
*Toda a cidade irradia magia*
*Presente n'água salgada*
*Presente nas águas doces*
*E toda a cidade brilha.*

*Seja tenente ou filho de pescador*
*Ou importante desembargador*
*Se der presente é tudo uma coisa só*

*A força que mora n'água*
*Não faz distinção de cor*
*E toda a cidade é d'Oxum.*

*—Vevé Calazans and Jerônimo*

In this city everybody is Oxum's.
Man, boy, girl, and woman
And all the city irradiates magic
Gifts in the salt waters
Gifts, in the sweet waters
And all the city shines.

Either a lieutenant or a fisherman's son
Or an important Justice man
If they give presents
  they are about the same
The power living in the waters
Does not distinguish between colors
And all the city is Oxum's.

This song, well-known all over Brazil, and the musical theme of a television series, brings to light a very true feeling of the people of Bahia, Brazil, especially when it says, "the power living in the waters does not distinguish between colors."[1] Indeed, the popularity of African deities in Brazil reaches persons from all ethnic roots and social levels. It may be an exaggeration to say that everybody in Bahia is Oxum's because many are Ogum's and Xango's. All the Yoruba divinities or *orixás* have their children in Bahia. But this Yoruba goddess's prestige is really extraordinary and more and more it is spreading to the most distant regions of Brazil. However, this popularity has its price. Mãe Oxum (Mamãe Oxum, as we like to call her in Portuguese) has had to suffer a kind of metamorphosis due to our *mestizo* soul.

One can find in Bahian shops selling religious articles, statues of Oxum represented by a blond woman, wearing a long yellow dress, similar to the images of Iemanja who is older and better-known. A Bahian newspaper once referred in its gossip section to "the blond Oxum and the brunette Iemanja" as if the columnist had simply forgotten the African origin of the two goddesses.

This abusive use of her sacred symbols is a cause for great grief among Afro-Bahian priests and priestesses of the Candomblé Nagô, the orthodox Yoruba communities of Bahia. Such modifications are said to take place in the profane part of our society, among the so-called *arioko*, the "people of the bush," that is those outside the pale of the Candomblé. Yet even here Oxum is not free from the famous syncretism that assimilates her to Our Lady of Conception or to Saint Luzia (Oxum Apara) or Our Lady Aparecida (Oxum Miwua) and others. Nor can we forget the influence of native Indian myths like the Yara or the European mermaid or other African deities of the waters like the Angolan Quiandas.

In Bahia, where we have a mini-Africa made up of different African cultures, there are three major Candomblé nations. In the Angola nation, with Bantu roots, Oxum is the *inkisi* Dandalunda, Kicimbi, or Samba. In the Jeje nation, with its Ewe-Fon roots, she is the *vodum* Aziri. Among the Nagô she is the goddess of the Osun River in Nigeria. She became in Brazil the queen of sweet waters such as rivers, lakes, and waterfalls. Her qualities of divine love and beauty are especially emphasized. However, her motherly qualities are maintained. Jacimar Silva writes that she is the "protector of beauty, youth and love, being also the protector of birth, defender of mothers and adoptive mother of helpless children" (Silva 1995).

So Oxum, whether worshiped in the most orthodox Yoruba tradition or with the most fantastic Brazilian creativity, has her presence assured in every aspect of Bahian life. From Bahia her influence has crossed our borders into countries where the European traditions have always been predominant, as for instance, Argentina.[2]

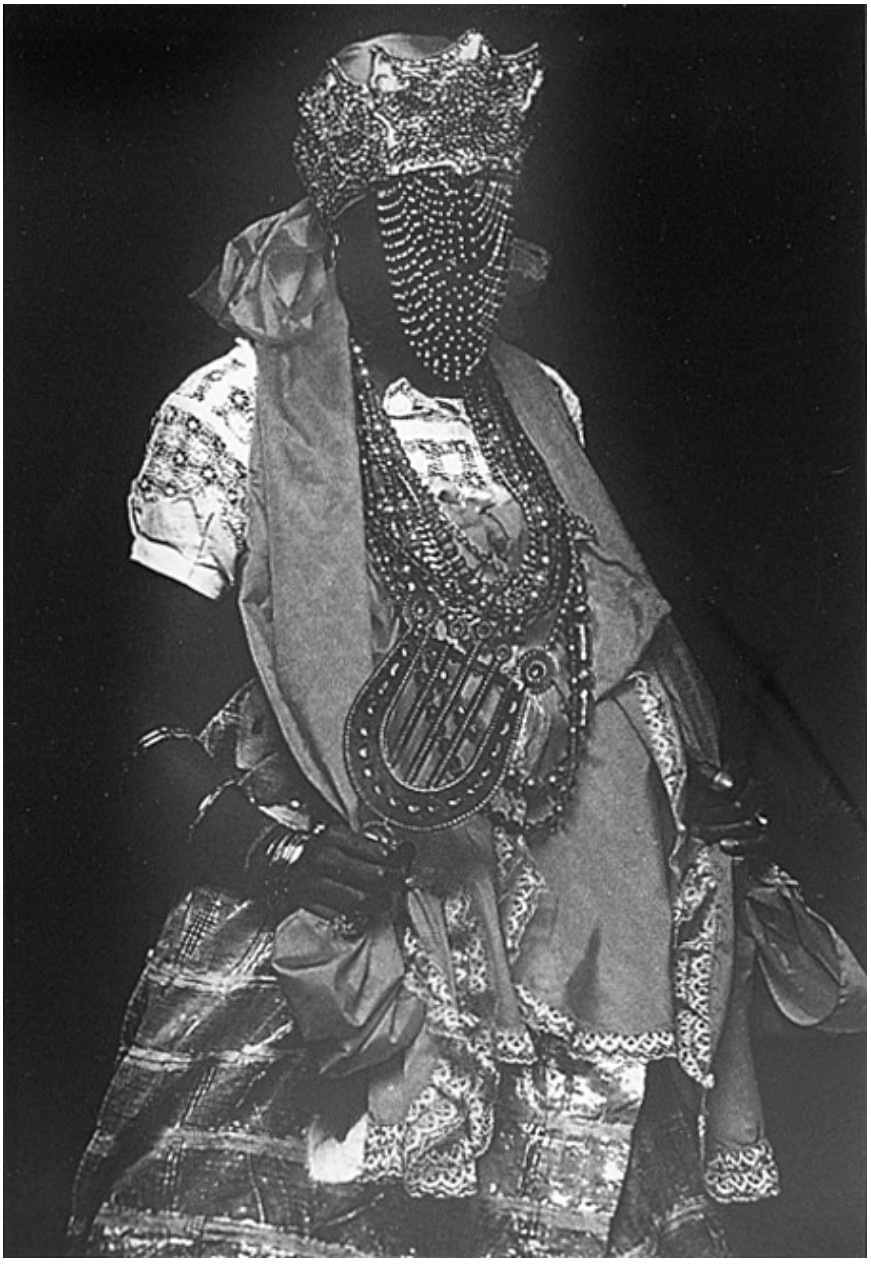
## *Oxum in Bahian Terreiros*

Nothing is more beautiful than seeing an Oxum daughter dancing in a Bahian Candomblé house or *terreiro*, wearing luxurious, brightly colored costumes, with yellow and gold predominant. Her delicate face is covered by a thin veil made of golden beads attached to a crown, Oxum's *ade*. Heavy bracelets cover her arms. She holds a fan, *abebe*, and, according to her quality, a sword or bow and arrow, showing that even the most beautiful and sweet female *orixás* can become warriors, if necessary.

The orchestra, made up of three drums—the large *rum*, the middle-sized *rumpi*, and the small *le*—together with the *agogo* bell, plays the Ijexa rhythm, dedicated to her. The *alabes* sing:

*Yeye o!*
*Yeye ye sorodo!*

Oxum dances gracefully and elegantly, moving her shoulders, as if bathing in a lake. The other priestesses help to open her starched skirt. She touches the



5.1 Oxum in Candomblé regalia.
*Postcard from Bahia.*

floor with her shoulders, always dancing. The audience, rejoicing, enthusiastically greets her:

*Ora yeye o!* (Hail, mother!)

When she finishes her dances, Oxum embraces the nearest persons in the audience. These embraces are significant, bringing children to barren women, love to lonely persons, health and beauty to all.

Mighty Oxum! Her power extends well beyond her Candomblé children. The Brazilian anthropologist Ordep Serra tells of an encounter between Oxum and a Catholic nun who was visiting an old *terreiro* in Salvador:

> The sister was calmly watching the almost-completed celebration. The *orixás* were already dancing, wearing their costumes when she was seized by an irresistible power and started dancing in the room, her veil floating, until the moment when she fell down, dominated by Oxum's song. (Serra 1955: 259–260)

In Bahian *terreiros*, the major or minor importance given to the different *orixás* is due to several reasons. Certainly they all deserve sacrifices and honors and all of them are celebrated during each house's cycle of festivals. However, the *orixá* who owns the head of the main priest or the founder of the house is celebrated in special festivals. Hence, Oxum's ceremonies may be included with those of the other *yabas*, the female *orixás*, such as Oya (Iansan) Iemanja, Oba, and Eua, or she has her special day, according to the tradition of the *terreiro*.

Some of the most important houses of Bahia, among them Casa Branca (Ilé Ya Nasso) and Gantois (Ilé Iya Omin Axé Iyamassé) give Oxum a very high status, because important priestesses in those houses were Oxum's daughters. Casa Branca, one of the oldest *terreiros* in Brazil, has a very interesting monument at the building's entrance: *o navio de Oxum*, Oxum's ship. It is a kind of altar in the shape of a ship. Antonio Agnelo, one of the oldest *ogan* priests of Casa Branca, says that in old times the ship was rectangular. "I was the one that put up the stern and prow, he says proudly."[3] According to Agnelo, the ship celebrates the arrival of African "aunts" who started the *orixá* traditions in Bahia.

Oxum's festival at Casa Branca is beautiful. The house is situated on a hill and a long staircase leads down to a lower patio where the ship awaits. The worshipers go down the staircase, dancing and singing to the sound of the Ijexa rhythms. The ship is filled with all kinds of gifts to Mamãe Oxum: flowers, dolls, mirrors, combs, jewels, ornaments, and everything that can please a woman. A ritual is performed inside the ship and the devotees go back, still singing and dancing, to the house where the celebration continues, as the other *orixás* come to greet Oxum, including her son Logum Ede, her husband Xango, her sister Iansan, and her mother Iemanja.

At Gantois (Ilé Iya Omin Axé Iyamassé), another very important and traditional *terreiro*, Oxum is equally celebrated with a special festival closing the house's annual cycle of ceremonies. Gantois has in its hierarchy of priests and

priestesses the title of Maie Oxum. According to the Yoruba historian Samuel Johnson, "Maie" is a Yoruba military term equivalent to generalissimo (Johnson 1921). The present Maie, Marcia Maria de Souza, a graduate of Social Sciences from the Federal University of Bahia, tells how she was chosen for this honorable position: "I did not have any connection with the religion of the *orixás*," she says. "I just went to watch a celebration, taken by a friend, when I was surprised seeing Oxum who gave her crown to me." Marcia was told that Oxum had chosen her to fill a position that had been vacant for more than twelve years, since the previous Maie's death.

Similar events occur frequently in Candomblé, showing that the *orixás*' will is above our humble understanding.

## *Presents and Offerings*

Every Candomblé house in Bahia includes in its cycle of festivals the present-in-the-waters day. These presents are offered to both Iemanja and Oxum. Most *terreiros* close their cycle with this celebration but Jocenira Barbosa, *eguede* priestess of Alaketu (Ilé Maroialaii), another very important Bahian house, warns that this is not a general rule. Deoscoredes M. dos Santos, writer, sculptor, and the Alapini of the Egungun tradition — the only one in Brazil — narrates how his mother Senhora[4] used to make this offering: "Every year, after completing her obligations to Oxum, her *orixá*, mother Senhora chose a Wednesday to organize a day of presents to Iemanja and Oxum, and put them in the sea, out from the beach" (Santos 1978: 74).

Presents are also put in rivers, lakes, and waterfalls by people wanting to please Oxum, to thank her for any grace, or to pay her back for promises made. These persons may or may not be initiated in Afro-Brazilian religions. Sometimes these presents include food in which case it is necessary to obtain the help of a priest or priestess because special knowledge is required to prepare food for the *orixás*. Oxum likes *omolokum*, made of black-eyed beans or peas, palm oil, and eggs; and *pete*, made of yam, shrimp, and palm oil. Animals sacrificed to her must be female, like she-goat. But animals can only be sacrificed by a male priest, the *axogum*.

## *Mythology*

Current Bahian myths tell how Oxum was once the wife of Oxossi or Ode, the hunting *orixá*, and the mother of his son Logum Ede. Oxossi is hardly known in Nigeria — maybe because he is known in Bahia as the king of Ketu, a Yoruba kingdom in Benin. It is said that since Oxossi lived in the jungle, hunting, Oxum felt too lonely and abandoned him, becoming the second wife of Xango.

A very well-known myth tells how Oxum deceived Oba, the first wife of Xango, and made the poor lady cut off her own ear. Oba was old and not very

attractive, hence Xango openly showed his preference for his second wife. Poor Oba was innocent enough to ask Oxum the reason for this preference and Oxum told her that she had cut off her ear and given it to Xango to eat. To match her rival's action, Oba cut off her own ear. She prepared *amala*,[5] Xango's favorite dish, and put the ear in it. When he discovered it Xango became horrified with such barbarity. In great anger, he chased away the old *yaba* from his presence. Today, when Oba comes down in a Bahian *terreiro*—and she seldom comes—she dances hiding her missing ear. And if she finds any Oxum in the place, one should not be surprised that she might try to beat her.

There are many myths and stories linking Oxum to Obatala or Oxala (Santos 1981), and to Exu, who gave her the nuts for divination (Braga 1977). Oxum's vanity is well-publicized. A booklet printed by an Umbanda house in Rio de Janeiro has on its cover: "To make you know all about this charming goddess, the most vain of all deities" and later, "Oxum is surely the most vain among all the Candomblé goddesses" (*Oxum* n.d.: 1).

If her qualities as the goddess of love and beauty are always emphasized, her characteristics as protector of maternity are equally respected by the people of the Candomblé. It is generally known that any year governed by Oxum will be a year of unexpected pregnancies.[6]

Her characteristics are normally transferred to her daughters. Oxum women, people say, are incapable of leaving home without earrings, necklaces, or any kind of ornament. Her children are also known as people with great gifts of divination and magical powers.

## *Oxum in Bahian Life*

The eminent scholar in the field of Afro-Brazilian religions, Vivaldo da Costa Lima, once wrote that Bahian Candomblés were the focus for Afro-Brazilian cultural and social resistance. Besides the valuable preservation of African traditions and priceless contributions to our culture, these *terreiros* were instrumental in the support of slave rebellions.

The following episode shows how Mamãe Oxum extended her protection to a very famous Brazilian outlaw. From 1930 to 1945 Brazil was under the dictatorship of Getulio Vargas. This period was known as Estado Novo (The New State). Prosecution against the regime's enemies was vicious, particularly against the communists. In 1937 Bahia had an interventor, a kind of governor, named by Vargas. It was Lieutenant Juracy Magalhaes, famous for his rigorous actions against students, intellectuals, journalists, and, of course, communists. Edison Carneiro, author of such classic works of Afro-Brazilian studies as *Ladinos e Crioulos* and *Candombles da Bahia*,[7] was afraid of the furious prosecution of the lieutenant. He searched for protection in the *terreiro* Ile Ashe Opo Afonja, where his father, Souza Carneiro, author of *Mitos Africanos no Brasil*, occupied a very high position in the hierarchy of the Candomblé. The *yalorixá* at the time was

Mãe Aninha. She hid him in Oxum's house. Mãe Aninha contacted Mãe Senhora, then a young Oxum priestess, and asked her to take care of Edison. Senhora's son, Deoscoredes M. dos Santos, tells the story in his book about Ile Ashe Opo Afonja and states: "This fact was only known by Senhora until the day when Edison himself made it public" (Santos 1978: 14).

## *The House of Oxum*

The first female mayor of Salvador was elected in 1992, 443 years after the foundation of the city. Lidice da Matta e Souza, an activist for human rights, realized through her political campaign that the main concern of Bahian citizens was the "criancas de rua" (street children), a very serious problem existing all over Brazil. As soon as she assumed leadership of the city's government, she created a program called Cidade Mãe (The Mother City). Her aim was to help the poorest section of Salvador's population, particularly by taking the children off the streets to give them an opportunity to study and to prepare for a better life. The program worked in partnership with the Bahian community and was successful to the point of receiving awards from UNESCO, UNICEF, and other international institutions.

To provide a place for the children, the mayor built two houses, one for the boys and another for the girls. The boys' house was named D. Timoteo Amoroso Anastacio to honor a recently deceased Catholic priest, famous for his humanitarian ideas and continuous action in defense of human rights. The girls' house was named *Casa de Oxum*. Explaining the choice of this name, Mayor da Matta affirmed, "I intended to pay tribute to our African roots. Besides, the program wanted these children to be reborn into a new life, a life of hope. And to be reborn, they needed a mother. I chose Oxum because of her motherly character, her femininity, her sweetness. It was the sweetness that I desired to transmit to the girls."

In this way the government of Salvador, the city once called the Black Rome, officially recognized the maternal and sweet character of Mamãe Oxum. *Ora Yeye o!*

## *Of the Sacred and the Profane*

We have already mentioned that the popularity of Oxum has its inconveniences, not only because of the transformations she suffered in our mestizo culture, but principally because of the profanation of her sacred symbols. Soon after independence, Brazil aimed to be a white country, with European roots. When slavery was abolished, German and Italian immigrants were imported to "clean" the race. The African heritage was, consequently, carefully hidden. So, our religious communities suffered police persecution. Priests and priestesses were

arrested and sacred objects were taken by the police as evidence of criminal offenses (Braga 1995). In the forties, this persecution came to an end, but Candomblé houses were registered in police departments for games and entertainments, along with night clubs, bordellos, and similar establishments. Only in 1976, by a decree of Governor Roberto Santos, were Candomblé houses free of this humiliation (Barbosa 1984: 69–72).

Presently, the problem that Candomblé priests and priestesses have to face is totally different from what they had in the past, but a problem nonetheless. Since anthropologists, artists, and intellectuals showed to the "white" side of our society the beauty of Candomblé music, dance, and mythology, the abusive use of this beauty has become the new problem with which the Candomblé priests and priestesses have to deal. Artistic and folkloric groups often stage scenes that should be restricted to the intimacy of the *terreiros.* Even carnival groups with the political purpose of defending Negritude values sometimes make this mistake and parade persons wearing *orixás*' costumes.

Among all the *orixás,* Oxum, with her golden dresses and jewels, her beauty and grace, her elegant and delicate dance, is most often a victim of these abuses. She appears in theater plays, folk shows, carnival groups. Her rhythm, the Ijexa, is the basis of the so-called Axé music, created by Bahian musicians and very popular all over Brazil, with African inspiration. So, in studying the presence of Mamãe Oxum in Bahian life we must carefully analyze its positive and negative aspects. If we are proud that the mayor of Salvador gave Oxum's name to a house for homeless girls, we are worried about the choice of Oxum of the Year, as we are going to see later. It is very valuable that the Ijexa rhythm has become a symbol of Afro-Brazilian struggles against racial discrimination, but we share the anger of old priests and priestesses against the carnivalization of her sacred symbols, or the use of her sacred prayers in folkloric shows (Riseiro 1981). In fact, this protest by priests and priestesses found an echo in the State of Bahia's constitution which forbids the use of Afro-Bahian religious symbols in secular activities.[8]

## *Oxum in Carnival*

Today Brazilian carnival is the most important popular event of the whole country. It has become a very profitable industry with a real war between beer producers and a fantastic amount of informal economic activities. It is a serious cultural and even political happening. Carnival is broadcast by all Brazilian and some international television networks and watched by millions of people. Bahian carnival is one of the most famous in Brazil, due to the popular participation rather than being simply a show as in other Brazilian cities. In Rio, for example, people watch Escolas de Samba and their parades, while in Bahia everybody dances together. Bahian carnival is famous for the creativity of the

musicians and dancers of the Afro-Bahian groups, with their special music and their beautiful people wearing African costumes, filling the streets of Salvador with colors and rhythms. Some of these groups may include as many as eight thousand people, such as Filhos de Gandhi, the oldest and most traditional of all.

Filhos de Gandhi (the Sons of Gandhi) was created in 1949 by a group of Bahian dock workers, most of them coming from Candomblé communities. The group is exclusively male, singing in the Yoruba language, playing the Ijexa rhythm, wearing white costumes. The name was a tribute to Mahatma Gandhi, due to his struggle against racial discrimination. They perform some Candomblé rituals before going out to carnival and have a special devotion to Oxum Apara, who is represented by the Catholic St. Luzia. Since women are not allowed to be members of Filhos de Gandhi, there are two female groups linked to it, the Filhas de Gandhi and the Filhas de Oxum. Filhas (Daughters) de Gandhi was created by Gliceria, a Candomblé priestess from Gantois (Ilé Iya Omin Axé Iyamassé). According to her they are not linked to Oxum because their Catholic protector is St. Anthony of Categiro, a black St. Anthony, who represents Ogum.

Filhas de Oxum, as the name indicates, are devotees of the goddess. Every year they come out with a different theme concerning Oxum's life, myths, or qualities. The group is very beautiful, with girls wearing yellow costumes, dancing the Ijexa rhythm played by highly skilled *alabes*. Their leader is Rosangela, a schoolteacher, very serious in her research to find the theme for each carnival.

Oxum's presence in carnival is not limited to Bahia. Escolas de Samba from Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo like to represent her in their parades. In 1997 the Escola de Samba Nene de Vila Matilde from São Paulo presented a section of female dancers with "A Song to Oxum," according to the Escola leaders, "to honor the most vain among the African goddesses." In that same year, Rio de Janeiro's winner, Escola de Samba Unidos de Viradouro, mentioned Oxum in its song and represented her as an element of nature, water.

## *Oxum's Ball*

Bahia has a tradition of pre-carnival balls, so a group of persons linked to theater and to entertainment created "Oxum's Ball" in the seventies. At Oxum's Ball, they crown the "Oxum of the Year," a woman who has played an important role in Brazilian cultural, political, or social life. One of these Oxums was Luiza Erundina, the first female mayor of São Paulo, a very brave and worthy woman, but with no connections to Afro-Brazilian culture or religion. She probably had no idea of Oxum or any other *orixá*.

This ball and coronation provoked great indignation among Candomblé priests and priestesses. It was held in the Meridien Hotel, a five-star and very expensive hotel, with a guest list of Bahian bourgeoisie, tourists, and artists from different parts of Brazil.

## *Oxum in Arts and Literature*

After Candomblé was discovered by the "white" side of our society, the *orixás* became the subject of numerous writers and artists, white and black, Brazilian and not. It was inevitable that Oxum, with her golden ornaments, and the symbol of all the beauty a woman may have, would be the favorite theme for most of them.

Nina Rodrigues, the first Brazilian scholar to do an in-depth study of the African presence in Brazil, published in 1904 an article entitled "The Fine Arts among Black Settlers in Brazil: Sculpture." In this defense of Afro-Brazilian artists he warns his educated readers: "The natural disdain expressed towards the enslaved by ruling classes is everywhere and in all cases a continuing threat of misrepresentation to the most decided intentions of arriving at an impartial appraisal of the merits and virtues of subject peoples." He goes on to say: "The belief found in several authors that the black slaves who colonized Brazil, along with the Portuguese and the Indians, belonged in all cases to the most simple-minded and rustic of African population . . . That was more than an injustice; it was a mistake" (Rodriques in Araujo 1988).

However, when he mentions a sculpture of Oxum, particularly elegant and delicate, Nina Rodrigues cannot avoid his Eurocentric tendencies. "That is an artistic production, due to a half-bred artist," he writes. He emphasizes the narrow, high-bridged nose, small mouth, and other features that he believes came from the white race. While we may agree that the Oxum sculpture shown in the article is more gracious than the sculptures of the other *orixás*, this delicacy is more likely due to Oxum's own characteristics. In Nigeria as well as Brazil, her elegance has been depicted in *oriki* poetry and artistic works.

If we consider how African art is concerned with the spiritual aspects of life, the words of the Yoruba art critic Babatunde Lawal—"Arte pela vida e vida pela arte"—lead us to the conclusion that Oxum's sculpture is elegant and delicate because she is the most beautiful *yaba* rather than the influence of European values.

Manoel Bonfim, a Bahian artist who is also an *ogan* in Casa Branca (Ilé Yá Nasso) is the sculptor of a statue of Iemanja at Rio Vermelho beach that has become a symbol of Salvador. He has sculpted and painted many *orixás* with different techniques and materials. About Oxum, he says, "It is difficult to make her. She has too many ornaments. I have made Oxum in tapestry, in wood and in several other techniques. It is always difficult. But," he concludes, "when we finish we are happy. The feeling of having reproduced her beauty is something else."

Another artist who finds Oxum difficult to depict is Solon Barreto. He, too, is well-acquainted with the *orixás* though he does not belong to the religious community. His reasons are different from Bonfim's. He says, "I have made

Oxum many times, in collage, painting, and other techniques. What is extremely difficult for me is to reproduce something she has beyond physical beauty. It is some kind of quality I can hardly explain. She is sexy, it is true, but at the same time she is ethereal, spiritual, untouchable. I am always under a great emotion when I paint Oxum."

Thus Oxum, painted and sculpted by many artists, academic or popular, has assumed different shapes and features, from African-like statues mentioned by Nina Rodrigues to the most modern tendencies. Among all these representations, perhaps her greatest portraitist is the late Bahian artist Carybe. Born in Argentina as Hector Barnabo, Carybe lived in Bahia for over 40 years, where he was a priest in Ile Ashe Opo Afonja.[9] He has depicted scenes of Bahian life with his characteristic stylus and is the author of several books of *orixá* representations.[10] His extraordinary *Painel dos Orixás*, a group of twenty-seven pieces in carved wood, to which he added metals and other materials according to each *orixá*, attracts the attention of every visitor to the Museu Afro Brasileiro in Salvador.[11] The collection is composed of 19 pieces measuring 3 × 1 meters, and eight others measuring 1 × 1 meters. In her panel, Oxum appears as beautiful as ever, with the sweetest expression of femininity. Carybe's Oxum is very gracious and elegant, wearing her *ade* of pure gold and holding her golden *abebe*. Her arms display the bracelets mentioned in so many *orikis* and songs. The figure is slim and looks like a young black woman. The idea transmitted by the picture is of a great ethereality. At her feet lies a she-goat, an animal usually sacrificed to her.

## *A Chant to Mother Oxum*

Oxum's presence in Brazilian music is not restricted to popular music. On June 29, 1995, the Theater Castro Alves in Bahia hosted the premiere of "Lidia de Oxum," an opera by Lindembergue Cardoso with a libretto by Ildazio Tavares. In this opera Cardoso harmonizes Afro-Bahian traditional music and international standards of contemporary tendencies with perfection. The soloists are both classical and pop stars, and so are the dancers. The symphony orchestra is augmented with Afro-Bahian instruments. The lyrics are both in Portuguese and Yoruba. Lidia de Oxum, the principal female character, is played by a conventional soprano while Tomas de Ogum, one of the leading male characters, is played by a pop singer.

Lidia de Oxum is the mestizo daughter of the slaves' leader, Bomfim. Since she is Oxum's daughter, and therefore beautiful and attractive, she is loved by the white master's son, Lourenco de Aragao, played by a conventional tenor. Tomas de Ogum, a black rebel, also loves her and does not trust Aragao's good intentions. The opera tells the story of a slaves' rebellion and ends with the abolition of slavery.

In popular music, besides the song that lends its name to this chapter, there

are innumerable compositions like Jorge Alfredo's "Oxum Mulher" (Oxum Woman) in which he says, "Look at Oxum! Her dress is painted / With the same yellow color . . . "

Dorival Caymmi wrote "Oracao a Mãe Menininha" (Prayer to Mother Menininha) to praise the most famous *yalorixá* of Brazil, the head of Gantois for over fifty years. In this song, Caymmi underlines her qualities as Oxum's daughter:

| | |
|---|---|
| *E a Oxum mais bonita hein?* | And the most Beautiful Oxum, hein? |
| *Está no Gantois. . . .* | She is in Gantois. . . . |
| *Olorum quem mandou esta filha de Oxum* | It was Olorum who sent this Oxum's daughter |
| *tomar conta da gente e de tudo cuidar* | To look after us and to take care of everything |
| *Olorum quem mandou e o, ora yeye o!* | It was Olorum, oh yes, *ora yeye o!* |

The Ijexa rhythm used in Candomblé for her and her son Logum Ede was adopted by carnival groups similar to Filhos de Gandhi. These carnival groups, called *afoxés* and Blocos Afros, were formed with the purpose of defending Negritude values and fighting racial discrimination.[12] Due to the wide influence of these groups, the Ijexa rhythms of Oxum have become a symbol of the Afro-Brazilian struggle for justice.

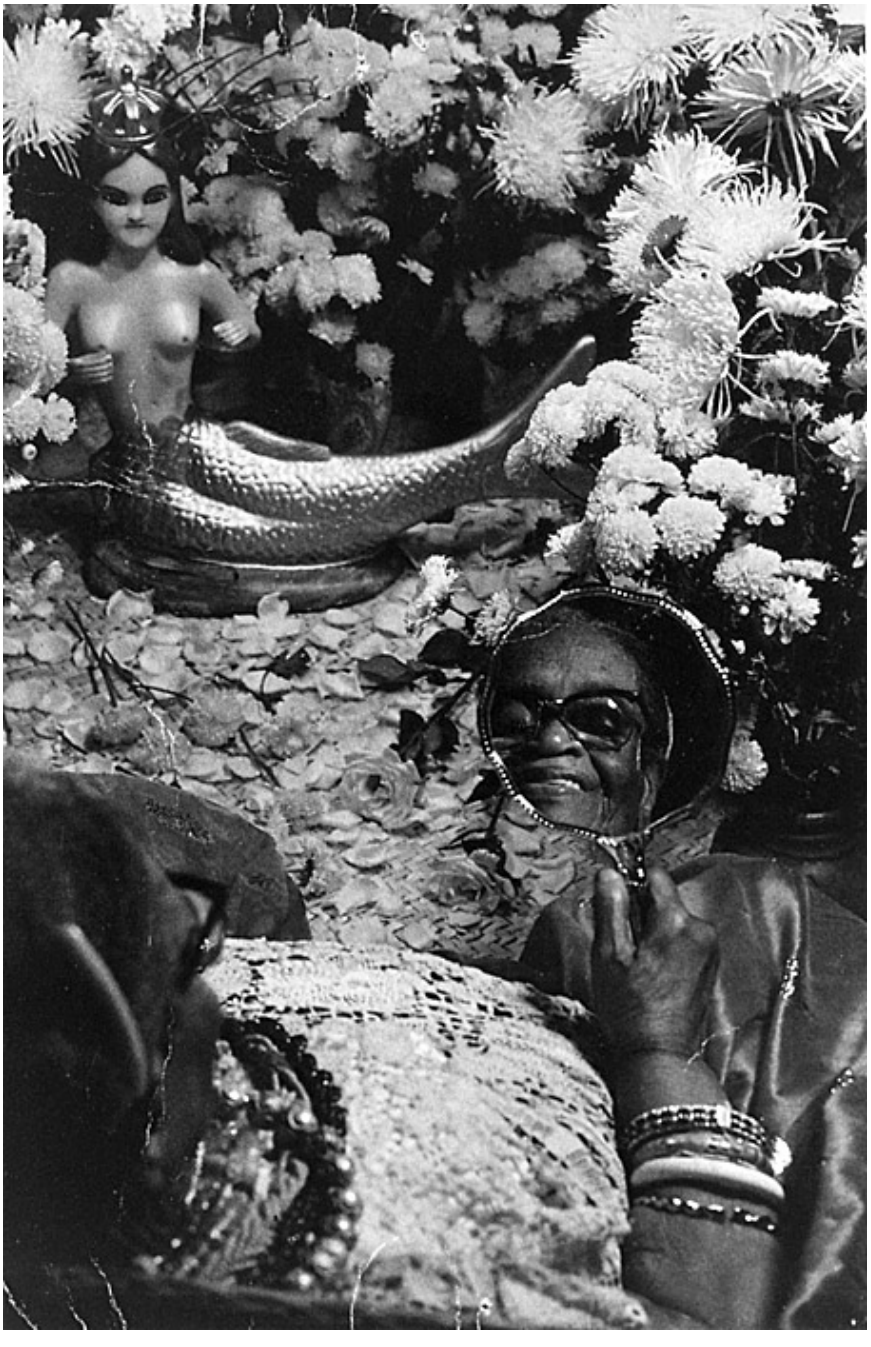
## *Oxum Viewed by Brazilian Writers*

Jorge Amado, the most translated Brazilian novelist, makes many references to Oxum in his novels, always speaking about Bahia, where she never can be absent. Amado is a member of Ile Ashe Opo Afonja. In *Tocaia Grande*, he represents Oxum as Epifania, a very beautiful black woman. Her suitor, Castor Aboin, nicknamed Ticao, plays the role of Oxossi or Ode, Oxum's first husband. Alluding to Bahian mythology Amado writes, "The hunter laid his burden on the ground, further, where the river widened. . . . Coming to the surface, Ticao caught a glimpse of her, sitting among the waterfalls. The figure of a *yaba*, certainly Oxum in person, owner of all the rivers" (Amado 1984: 177).

In this same novel, he echoes the popular belief in Oxum's vanity: "Which of the two was more vain, Oxum or her daughter? Epifania had a yellow necklace, made of African beads, her greatest treasure" (Amado 1984: 198–199). Amado, a good son of Oxossi, makes Epifania a heartless Oxum. Just as Oxum left Oxossi in myth, so Epifania abandons Ticao at the riverside. Amado writes:

> But Oxum, as we from the [Candomblé] sect know, *ogans* and *ekedis*, is elegance, seduction, capriciousness and pride with a frivolous heart. She never gives herself as a partner, only as a lover, and a lover's time is troublesome and short. Epifania left [Ticao] and took with her the golden *abebe*. (Amado 1984: 303)

Zora Seljan makes Oxum one of the principal characters of her play *Tres mulheres de Xango* (The three wives of Xango) and *Lavagem do Bonfim* about the washing of the church of Bonfim, a traditional Bahian event. She wrote on Mother Senhora's fiftieth anniversary of initiation, "We must say how beautiful



5.2 Mãe Menininha, "The most beautiful Oxum is at Gantois."
*Postcard from Bahia.*
*Photo by David Glot.*

was our *yalorixá*. Covered with jewels, dressed in rich clothes, carrying flowers and a wonderful *abebe*, she smiled sweetly. It was not only the mother that we all loved: it was Oxum herself dancing, Oxum Miuwa, *yaba* of beauty, the winner, owner of all wealth" (Seljan 1978).

Finally, Vasconcelos Maia, a contemporary Brazilian author well-acquainted with Ile Ashe Opo Afonja and the *yalorixá* Senhora, wrote the novel *O legue de Oxum* (Oxum's Fan) in which he emphasizes the attractive power of Oxum and her daughters. The book tells the story of a Swedish man who falls in love with a Bahian *yalorixá*, Matilde, a daughter of Oxum. The *orixás* do not accept the romance, especially Xango, Oxum's husband. Matilde, as a priestess, had seen in the cowries that she would be mortally punished if she followed her heart's command. But she also knew that "no human or supernatural power would prevent her from following him. She was waiting for him. Her fate was, since her birth, linked to his. Ifa never deceived her. She knew that she would have a very short life if she went with him" (Maia 1977: 60).

The novel ends in tragedy. Matilde disappears into a storm (lightning and thunder are Xango's element). As a sad souvenir, the unfortunate lover finds, near Oxum's fountain, a golden fan, Oxum's fan, the novel's title.

One can see a certain similarity between this plot and Lidia de Oxum's. The two women, Lidia de Oxum and Matilde, are black and, due to their charm, Oxum's charm, they conquer a white man's love. A subtle overestimation of this white lover and the faith in Oxum's power as goddess of love and beauty is equally present in the opera's libretto and in the novel. Also the jealous black man—Tomas de Ogum in the opera, Xango himself in the novel—appears in both plots. These may be discreet mentions of a racial clash.

## *Oxum Mope O: Popular Devotion to a Motherly Goddess*

In Brazil and particularly in Bahia, one can learn an infinite number of stories from persons involved with Oxum and how the goddess has played an important role in their lives. Some of these stories denote a kind of naive fantasy such as the Nipo-Brazilian who was going to give birth and saw a band of yellow butterflies flying. She immediately concluded that, firstly, Mother Oxum was going to the maternity ward, in order to protect her. Was not Oxum the protector of pregnant women? Secondly, the child would be Oxum's, without any doubt.

This is also the case of the white woman who could not cut her blond hair because Oxum would punish her with an accident, a sudden illness, or something else. Needless to say, none of these ladies was initiated in Candomblé. A very beautiful story, however, is that of the slippers of Mother Oxum. It demonstrates popular faith in her motherly heart.

A lady had a pair of golden slippers and dreamt of herself putting a miniature pair on the waters as an offering to Oxum. When she told the dream to her

friends, they were unanimous: "You have to do it. Mother Oxum is asking you clearly to do so."

The woman sent her driver to the shoemaker with a slipper as a model. The next day, the driver told her, "He made a mistake. He made white slippers. I told him the slippers had to be golden and he asked me if you were Oxum's daughter." Later, the driver came with the news, "Madam, the slippers are ready. But you must go there and talk to him. The man is asking a fortune for his work. You could buy big shoes to put on your feet instead of these doll's things with all that money."

She went. And she met a Caucasian man, with very white skin and very thin hair, seeming to have Italian or Spanish ancestry. He said, "I am a devotee of Mother Oxum," and showed her a large picture of Our Lady of Conception (the Catholic counterpart of Oxum) on the wall. "I never miss her processions nor Oxum's celebrations." Proudly, he showed the slippers and the customer was amazed. He had made a pair of slippers looking like jewels. He had used satin, velvet, laces, and ribbons but, above all he had put in it his creativity and his heart.

Even so, she tried to bargain. "Since you are a devotee of Mother Oxum, you should cooperate and . . . "

The man did not allow her to continue. "Don't bargain," he said, almost angrily. "You cannot bargain. Do you know why?" And, without waiting for her answer, he went on, "She sent you here. Mother Oxum sent you here! I had prayed to her. I had begged her. Oxum, my mother, send me a customer. For almost a week I haven't seen a customer cross this door. I told her, 'Send me a customer or I will not be able to buy food for my family.' And, you see? She sent you. To make herself a customer. You cannot bargain!"

"No sir," the lady replied. "I can't. I am extremely honored to be an instrument of Oxum's will. May our mother bring many customers to you."

The following Saturday, a day devoted to all the *yabas*, she prepared a basket with flowers, perfumes, ornaments, and, of course, the golden slippers. They must be in the depths of a small lagoon in Salvador. Or, who knows? On the blessed feet of Mother Oxum, ora yeye o!

## Notes

1. The song is "Nesta Cidade Todo Mundo é d'Oxum," by Vevé Calazans and Jerônimo. It is the theme for the television series "Tenda dos Milagres," based on the novel by Jorge Amado.

2. There is a house of Oxum in Buenos Aires of Bahian origin: Ilé Axé Oxum d'Oyo.

3. Unless otherwise attributed, all quotes are from personal communications between the author and the artists, priests, and priestesses of Bahia.

4. Maria Bibiana do Espirito Santo, 1900–1967, priestess of Ile Ashe Opo Afonja, one of the most famous *yalorixá* of Brazil.

5. Bahian *amala* is totally different from the Nigerian food of the same name. It is made of okra, palm oil, and shrimp and is uniquely Xango's food.

6. According to Bahian tradition every year is ruled by one *orixá*. To know which one it is necessary to consult the *buzios* or cowries.

7. Edison Carneiro, *Candombles da Bahia*, 3rd ed. (Rio de Janeiro: Conquista, 1961).

8. See *A Lei e o Direito do Negro*.

9. Born in 1901, Carybe died in October 1997, after attending an *orixás* celebration.

10. See his beautiful collection of *orixá* watercolors in Carybé 1980.

11. Museu Afro Brasileiro, the Afro-Brazilian Museum, is part of Centro de Estudos Afro Orientais (CEAO), of the Federal University of Bahia.

12. Afoxé in Brazil refers to carnival groups basing their music on Ijexa rhythms. Perhaps the origin of the word is related to the Nigerian meaning of a charm to be put in the mouth that gives magic powers to the person who uses it. Blocos Afros such as Olodum and Ile Aiye have received international recognition.

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CHAPTER SIX

# Mãe Menininha

*Manuel Vega*

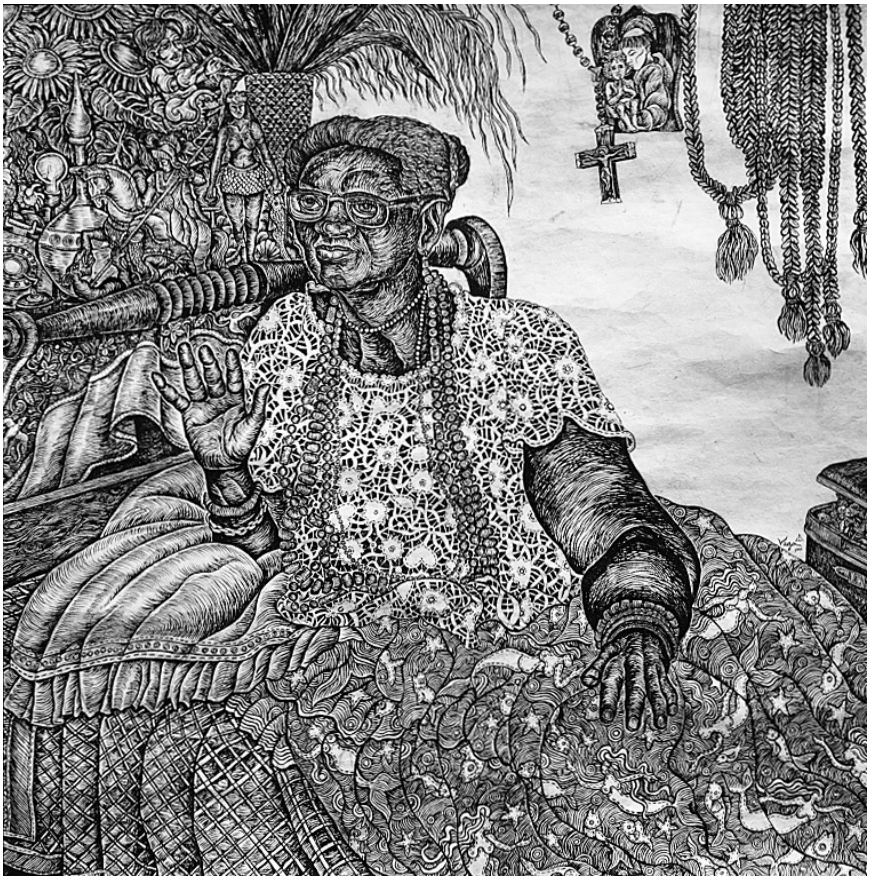
Maria Escolastica de Conceiçao Nazaré was born on February 10, 1894, in Brazil, a descendant of the royal family lineage Egba Alaké from Abeokuta, Nigeria. Her great-grandmother Maria Julia de Conceiçao was the founder of the first Ketu candomblé temple in Brazil, the Ilé Iya Nasso.

In the same year that she was born, Maria Escolastica was initiated as a daughter of Ọ̀ṣun in the temple Ilé Iya Omin Axé Iyamasse, the second Ketu temple founded in Brazil, in 1849. At the age of twenty-eight, she became Iyalorixá (senior priestess) of the temple and received the name Mãe Menininha do Gantois.

As a young woman, she overcame great obstacles, including persecutions by the police and government officials, and resistance from other members of her temple. In time, she converted her adversaries into allies and brought Candomblé to such a level of respect as a spiritual and cultural institution that it has become one of Brazil's greatest treasures. This is an Ọ̀ṣun trait. One of her favorite sayings is: *Nada faz ben como fazer o ben*, "Nothing is better than being good and doing good." Then too, Ọ̀ṣun's waters are strong and vital like your own bloodstream. To deny Ọ̀ṣun within yourself would be to spend your life swimming against the current.

Political and military leaders became her supporters. Mãe Menininha invoked and nurtured the creative powers of many artists, writers, and scholars. Many of Brazil's foremost performing artists including Gilberto Gil, Gal Costa, Maria Betanhia, and Caetano Veloso created music in her honor. In 1984, I was a personal witness to the pilgrimage of people who came from all over the world to seek her support and blessing.

Mãe Menininha and her daughters Cleuza and Carmen initiated me in 1985. At that time, she reminded me to utilize my purpose in life to generate love and support in the world, to be responsible always for my efforts, and to set a good example as a member of the temple.



6.1 Mãe Menininha.
*Original drawing by Manuel Vega.*

Her lessons defined the ọ̀rìṣà and Ọ̀ṣun for me and gave me important insight into the spirit world. I learned great courage from her. She taught me to honor Ọ̀ṣun and all women, to recognize them as the fountainhead of life, and to defend and provide for them always. Mãe Menininha is, to Brazil, the actual personification of the goddess Ọ̀ṣun. Her entire life was to serve everyone who came to her door. Always inviting, comforting, and generous, her room was a boat that we boarded to greet a living queen. At my first meeting with Mãe Menininha, I understood Ọ̀ṣun profoundly. When Mãe Menininha sang, the ọ̀rìṣà came down like stars from the sky!

Mãe Menininha taught me by example to seek out the best of myself and others as a life mission. Most importantly, she taught me to love my *eleda*, the ọ̀rìṣà owner of my own head, Ọ̀ṣóọ̀ṣì, because her own road of Ọ̀ṣun is the wife of Ọ̀ṣóọ̀ṣì, and Ile Iya Omin Axe Iyamasse is an Ọ̀ṣóọ̀ṣì temple.

On August 13, 1986, Mãe Menininha passed on to the orun, the other world, at the age of ninety-two. She is the last of the great mothers whose lives paved a path that we continue to walk upon.

I executed this portrait of Iya (Mother) thirteen years later, as an homage to her eternal presence in my life, and to perpetuate all her grace, dignity, and àṣẹ.

| | |
|---|---|
| *Iba Iya Omin* | Homage to the Mother of Water |
| *Moforibalé Iyanlá* | I salute the Great Mother |

CHAPTER SEVEN

# Yéyé Cachita

## Ochún in a Cuban Mirror

*Joseph M. Murphy*

*¡Ochún era en Yesá, decía ella, tan misericordiosa y accesible como en Cuba con el nombre de la Virgen de la Caridad!*

Ọ̀ṣun was in Ìjesa, she said, so compassionate and approachable like in Cuba with the name of the Virgin of Charity!

—*Iyalocha Niní to Lydia Cabrera (Cabrera 1980: 69)*

Niní's testimony to Lydia Cabrera about the Cuban name of Ọ̀ṣun reveals an extraordinary cultural resourcefulness and spiritual creativity. In crossing the waters of the Atlantic, Ọ̀ṣun's devotees in Cuba encountered desperate challenges to their integrity and very survival. They responded by constructing a complex religious world in which Ọ̀ṣun could continue to protect and inspire them through a variety of new symbolic media appropriate to the new world in which they were exiled. They found in the image of La Virgen de la Caridad del Cobre a means to represent Ọ̀ṣun in a number of social, cultural, and psychological contexts that extended her meaning and manifestations. This essay traces the history of the representation of Ọ̀ṣun as La Caridad del Cobre and explores the implications of such a strategy for understanding Osun in the Americas. I am arguing that the image of La Caridad del Cobre, while surely a mask that disguised Ọ̀ṣun's worship from the police power of a brutal, slaveholding oligarchy, was also an innovative way to understand Ọ̀ṣun. La Caridad del Cobre is a "way" that Ọ̀ṣun is present to Cubans who come from an array of social, economic, and racial groups. A mask reveals as much as it conceals, and it is this dynamic simultaneity of inner and outer, African and Catholic, black and white, that informs my interpretation of Ọ̀ṣun's reflection as La Caridad del Cobre.

In order to see the sense and power of the representation of Ọ̀ṣun by a Catholic Virgin, it is important to see what La Caridad del Cobre represents. She is Cuba's patron saint, identified with the self-image of Cubans as a people: in their suffering, longing, triumphs, and contradictions. When Ọ̀ṣun's priestesses and priests chose to image Ọ̀ṣun through the island's patroness they established a

current of associations running between the two images of divine female power. The Yoruba chose La Caridad del Cobre to stand for Ọ̀ṣun and also to stand for themselves in the mosaic of Cuban history and society. It is worthwhile to explore the image of La Caridad del Cobre to see how it might reflect Ọ̀ṣun and present her to the Cuban people.

*

Long before sugar plantations extended over the island, the first wealth of Cuba was extracted from copper mines. In 1530 a large deposit of the mineral was discovered outside the eastern settlement of Santiago del Prado and was appropriately called Cerro del Cobre, "Copper Hill." Native Tainos were the first laborers in the mines at Cobre, "recommended" to the backbreaking work by a colonial system of forced labor. By the middle of the sixteenth century, the Spanish mine operators saw the advantages of African slaves, who were more resistant to European diseases and so devastatingly dispossessed that they had no alternative to the mines.

In this environment of exploitation and toil, La Caridad makes her appearance. In a story known to every Cuban schoolchild, La Caridad appeared to three Cobre workers in a small canoe, caught offshore in a terrible storm in the Bay of Nipe. They prayed to the Virgin to save them, and in the miraculous calm that followed, they found resting on a floating plank a small statue of the Virgin. Carved in the plank were the words, *Yo soy La Virgen de la Caridad*, "I am the Virgin of Charity."

The testimony to this miracle comes from one of the men in the canoe, Juan Moreno, who in a deposition as an old man in 1687 recalled the events as taking place in 1611 or 1612.[1] Moreno is characterized in the document as "un negro esclavo," (a black slave) and "un esclavo del Rey" (a slave of the king). His companions are two brothers, Juan and Rodrigo de Hoyos, called "indios natuales del país" (Indians native to the country). The three have been elided by folk tradition into "los tres Juanes" (the three Juans) to evoke their role as Cuban everymen.[2] Yet their non-Spanish ethnic backgrounds are a touchstone for the complexity of the image of La Caridad del Cobre. Although she is the Queen of Heaven and the patroness of the island, she first appeared to Indian and African Cubans and has ever since been seen by them as one of their own. And though she is the most holy Mother of God she is often called by the affectionate and familiar nickname "Cachita." Her complexion on the statue itself is "morenicita" (a little dark) and so La Caridad del Cobre has been invested with expressing something of the racial and class dynamics of Cuban society. She is at once a figure in the struggle for racial and social identity among African Cubans as well as a symbol of the inalterable mixture of identities in a creole society. She is herself a creole, born out of the stormy waters of the Atlantic.

After the discovery of the floating statue, the three Juans carried the image to a Franciscan hermitage in Cobre where proofs of its miraculous powers multiplied.


7.1 Popular lithograph of La Caridad del Cobre across the waters.

Attempts were made to move it to grander locations, but it would miraculously return to Cobre, preferring to be "over a vein of copper" (Cabrera 1980: 68). A series of shrines were erected over La Caridad's chosen spot, sealing in folk culture the association of the Virgin, the town of Cobre, Native and African Cubans, and copper. Each shrine was more elaborate than the last. The image was dressed in robes of gold thread while vessels of silver and gold, emblazoned with gems, surrounded her. In 1756 Bishop Morell de Santa Cruz wrote to the king to say that the sanctuary of Cobre was "the richest, most visited and devout of the Island, and the Lady of Charity, the most miraculous effigy of all that are vener-

ated" (quoted in Marrero 1980: 28). The successive shrines of La Caridad became the principal pilgrimage point for the entire island, and the Virgin was famous for miraculous cures of the infirm and the insane. Perhaps the most frequent petition of La Caridad was from women in childbirth who would tie yellow ribbons obtained at the shrine around their bellies in a hopes of a safe delivery (Bolivar Aróstegui 1990: 122; Arrom 1971: 192).

In 1731, enslaved African Cubans at Cobre refused to participate in a militia parade and withdrew into the wilderness around the town to build a *palenque*, a fortified community. The island's governor, Pedro Ignacio Ximénez, referred to the "fantastic ideas of these slaves" in wanting "to live in full liberty" (quoted in Marrero 1980: 27). While the rebels were induced to return to Cobre a course toward freedom had been set. In 1779 they petitioned the king for their liberty after the transfer of the mines from royal control to private owners. Within the petition was a promise to build a new sanctuary for La Caridad del Cobre. At last in 1799, with the war of slave liberation raging in Haiti, one thousand sixty-five Cobre slaves won their freedom in the Spanish courts (Marrero 1980: 31).

La Caridad del Cobre continued to be associated with ever-wider struggles of liberation in Cuba. It was at her shrine in 1868 that the revolutionary leader Carlos Manuel Céspedes pledged himself and the majority-black Cuban army to the independence of the island from Spain. In the second war of independence in 1895, Cuban soldiers, perhaps 80 percent of whom were black and many recruited from the independent black palenques of Cuba's interior, sewed images of La Caridad del Cobre on their uniforms. The soldiers called themselves *mambises*, a word of uncertain but likely African origin that seems to have meant powerful and fierce.[3] La Caridad del Cobre is still called "La Virgen Mambisa" in memory of her ferocity in fighting for Cuban independence.[4]

It is this water-born saint, identified with healing, richness, and liberation struggle that the Yoruba encountered when they rebuilt their shattered communities in Cuba. Enslaved Yoruba began to arrive in Cuba in large numbers toward the end of the eighteenth century as Cuban sugar interests were wrested from exclusive Spanish control and opened to the world market. Vast stretches of the island were cleared for cultivation, and with the liberation of Haitian slaves and the subsequent collapse of Haiti's plantation system, Cuba became the largest exporter of sugar in the world.

The different peoples that are called Yoruba today were known as "Lucumi" in nineteenth-century Cuba, a designation that was likely a variant of seventeenth-century names for Oyo.[5] A revealing folk etymology for "Lucumi" suggests that it came into usage as a result of the greeting that Cuban Yoruba offered each other, *oluku mi*, "my friend."[6] This meaning of the word points toward a Yoruba-speaking community in Cuba who might offer traumatized passengers of the slave ships a greeting as "friend" and a chance to reorient themselves in the new, harsh world. While the regimen of slave labor on a sugar plantation virtually insured an early death, many Lucumi were compelled to work in the cities and

towns of Cuba where they were able to find opportunities for association, recreation, and sometimes freedom. They formed *cabildos*, chartered assemblies of women and men from their own African *nación*, slave and free, ostensibly devoted to the cultivation of Catholic virtues, where Yoruba music, dance, and religion were celebrated. Bishop Morell de Santa Cruz visited the *cabildos* of Havana in the mid-eighteenth century when he wrote,

> I attempted the gentle method of going by turns to each of the cabildos to administer the sacrament of confirmation, praying the holy rosary with those of that organization before an image of Our Lady which I carried with me. Concluding this act, I left the image in their houses, charging them to continue with their worship and devotion. (Quoted in Klein 1967: 100)

The Swedish traveler Frederika Bremer was a visitor to several cabildos in the mid-nineteenth century when she noted,

> Here also were several Christian symbols and pictures. But even here, also, the Christianized and truly Christian Africans retain somewhat of the superstition and idolatry of their native land. (Bremer 1968: 383)

Fifty years later another, more severe, foreign visitor noted the same juxtaposition of African and Christian symbolism. American researcher Irene Wright concluded from her cabildo visit:

> It was the most astounding confusion of heathenish and Catholic worship one could imagine: they sang in barbarous tongue to Christian saints, and to them they sacrifice white cocks occasionally; in the dances, which must have originated about African campfires, they flaunt yellow as the color of Our Lady of Cobre, white for Mary of Mercies, purple and green for Saint Joseph, and red for the favorite saint, protecting Barbara, each of whom has an African name. In honor of these respective patrons they wear copper, silver, bead and coral trinkets. The local Catholic church recognizes this same symbolism, in color and in ornament. (Wright 1910: 150)

Wright's perceptive, if judgmental, description of the multiple meanings of the iconographic symbolism of the cabildo allows us to see something of the ways that the Lucumi constructed their representation of Ọ̀ṣun. Ripped from the cultural contexts that organized Ọ̀ṣun's imagery in Yorubaland, her priests and priestesses in Cuba both condensed and expanded her symbolic array. La Caridad del Cobre represents one form of a creolized Ochún who can appear to new peoples in new ways.

The Lucumi found in the image of La Caridad del Cobre a crowned female divinity, who miraculously appeared from the waters to save humble people of color from the storm. She herself is "of color," and the warrior patroness of the black men and women who fought for slavery's abolition and Cuba's independence. She is a compassionate mother who lovingly holds her child and fiercely protects her children. She comes to the aid of mothers in the throes of childbirth.

She is identified with the red wealth of copper and the golden richness of her shrine. She is at once a mother and a warrior; a woman of color and a queen of riches.

We might look again at iyalocha Niní's parallel between the Ìjèṣà Ọ̀ṣun and the Cuban one "con el nombre de la Virgen de la Caridad." She implies that Ọ̀ṣun's compassion and accessibility can be found in Cuba with another name. A name is a focus of identity, a persona, mask, or presence by which a part of the identity of an individual or group is present to others. That each Western person has at least two names, and that the social contexts for their separate uses are highly coded, ought to suggest something of the multiple identities of Ochún in Cuba. Her new name does not supplant the old one: it adds to it, offering a rich, new identity for the Ìjèṣà orisa to assume.

Issues of multiple identity are right at the heart of the creole experience of Cuba. Listen to Esteban Montejo, born a slave in Cuba in the nineteenth century:

> No person is one thing pure and simple in this country, because all the religions got mixed together. The African brought his, which is the stronger one, and the Spaniard brought his, which isn't so strong, but you should respect them all. (Montejo 1968: 143–144)

This respect for multiple identity has become a classic issue in the study of religion and culture change. The correspondence of African òrìṣà and Catholic saints has been seen as a prime example of religious syncretism, a mixing of symbols from disparate historical and cultural sources. Melville Herskovits first flagged this phenomenon in the nineteen-thirties as a process that reveals the mechanisms of cultural adaptation and change (Herskovits 1937; 1966 [1945]). The association of òrìṣà and saint reveals a psychological dynamic of culture for Herskovits:

> the tendency to identify those elements in the new culture with similar elements in the old one, enabling the persons experiencing the contact to move from one to the other, and back again, with psychological ease . . . (Herskovits 1966 [1945]: 57)[7]

This bridging of worlds by the Lucumi, their ability to negotiate different meanings in different social contexts, reveals the orisa-saint correspondence as an elegant reflection of complex social experience. Herskovits has been criticized as seeing the processes of culture change as too mechanistic and unidirectional, thus undervaluing Lucumi agency in building their culture and in resisting European power (Apter 1991).

More recently, the òrìṣà-saint correspondence has been interpreted as a strategic deception on the part of the Lucumi, "hiding" their misunderstood and proscribed faith behind a facade of Catholic imagery.[8] This interpretation recognizes agency on the part of the Lucumi, highlighting their courageous resistance

to the oppressive conditions that necessitated the public profession of Catholicism. Rather than victims of blind mechanisms of acculturation, the Lucumi can be seen as actors in their own drama, maintaining their authentic traditions behind the false front of those of their captors.

While the repressive goals of the white and peninsular Spanish establishment in Cuba should not be underestimated, the Lucumi's use of yellow clothing and copper jewelry at cabildos suggests something at work more complex and more creative than mere deception. Irene Wright, a foreigner to Cuba, was not deceived as to the presence of African religions and understood that the saints of the Lucumi might be known by multiple names.[9] It seems clear that the Lucumi were signifying several things at once by juxtaposing Catholic and African symbols. Something was hidden by the Catholic symbols, but also revealed. The yellow coloring and copper ornamentation may be better understood as creole extensions of Ọ̀ṣun's presence into media that were not only strategically protective, but more broadly recognized as powerful and efficacious.[10]

Herskovits himself noted the facility with which many West Africans incorporate religious symbols and images from external cultural sources, intensifying and nuancing religious meaning by accumulation and juxtaposition. When this trait is coupled with African traditions of cult secrecy and multiple strata of symbolic exegesis then it seems plausible to think that the Lucumi made La Caridad del Cobre and Ochún different forms of reference for the mother of water at different levels of social and spiritual experience. La Caridad del Cobre thus might be seen to represent Ochún's power at the level of Catholic and national social life: that is, the public life of interaction between the Lucumi and the other ethnic and racial communities of the island. Ochún, on the other hand, was appropriate to a more intimate sphere of social and religious experience. In their display of images of La Caridad in public processions or home altars, the Lucumi were not so much "pretending" to venerate La Caridad as venerating her and something else again. That this something else—Ochún—had to be concealed, does not militate against the Lucumi's appreciation of Caridad del Cobre's power—to heal, to soothe, or to fight—within her proper social context.

Andrew Apter, drawing on his research on the political implications of òrìṣà ownership in contemporary Nigeria, argues that Catholicism in the African diaspora

> was not an ecumenical screen, hiding the worship of African deities from official persecution. It was the religion of the masters, revised, transformed and appropriated by slaves to harness its power within their universes of discourse. In this way the slaves took possession of Catholicism and thereby repossessed themselves as active spiritual subjects. (Apter 1991: 254)

All this would indicate that the Lucumi venerated La Caridad del Cobre as La Caridad del Cobre, recognizing her power as a Catholic saint and as a woman

of color who can heal, fight, and bring new life into the world. To this appropriated saint they corresponded another identity, making her their own by seeing her as a coded representation of Ochún. La Caridad del Cobre offered the Lucumi a broadly shared social representation that could access and exploit the power of Ochún: living water, sweet compassion, liberating militancy, and the maternal gateways of life and death.

The multivalence of the orisa in general and Ochún in particular worked well in colonial Cuba where only official devotions to Catholic saints could be expressed without fear of condemnation. Ochún's multiple identities allowed her to assume a public one, understandable and available to all Cubans, acceptable to official authority, and redolent with the power of the island's spiritual patroness. La Caridad del Cobre was a new identity of Ochún, a new name, appropriate to the broadest social identity of the Lucumi, that of creole Cubans. In the creole Caridad del Cobre, the great symbol of Cuban unity, the power of water-born and mighty Ochún could be displayed, venerated, and shared with every social and religious constituency of the island.[11]

The complexity and creativity of the Ochún–La Caridad correspondence rests on their simultaneous identity and difference. They are both the same and not the same. The Lucumi are the agents of this symbolic play on identities, a kind of religious double entendre. Because we "get" the joke—and let's remember that so did Wright and every other observer of Lucumi religion though they were not amused by it—it should not tempt us to break the ironic tension by claiming one identity to be the true one and the other false. The correspondence has power precisely because of the multiple truths it upholds. The correspondence of Ochún and La Caridad is at once an accommodation to the dominant social metaphors of power as well as an ironic critique of them. The Lucumi are empowered by the knowledge that La Caridad del Cobre and also Ochún mean more and different things than they seem.[12]

Ochún both is and is not La Caridad del Cobre. Calixta Morales, another Lucumi teacher of Lydia Cabrera, puts it this way:

> The Saints are the same here as in Africa. The same with different names. The single difference is that ours eat a lot and have to dance, while yours are accommodated with incense and oil, and don't dance. (Cabrera 1975: 19)[13]

Cuban oricha priest and writer Agún Efundé makes this observation:

> Ochún and La Caridad are the same, yet at the same time different, because while the former is light-hearted, coquettish, and earthy in the Lucumí religion, this is not so in the Catholic religion.
>
> We are full of emotion when she descends and possesses one of her children during a religious festival in which the drums are sounded. But when we go to church, and we see her with her fine mantle, her crown and the three little mariners in the rowboat, we feel another type of religious emotion. Here again we see

> her as Ochún, but manifested in a distinct way: as the Most Holy Caridad del Cobre. (Efundé 1978: 49)[14]

Finally, Willie Ramos, a prominent priest and scholar of the tradition in Miami, offers this experience of Ochún with La Caridad:

> I personally have experienced Oshun, in divination, claim as hers offerings or promises that have been made to Caridad or some other Catholic virgin. Is this an indicator of syncretism? I would say that, in the case of Oshun, it may be, but then her nature tends to be capricious. It could just be her "natural" way of asserting and imposing her dominion. (Ramos: personal communication, 10/7/97)

There is indeed a distinct Ochún in Cuba: an Ochún who eats and dances at ceremonies; who is famous for being cheerful, flirtatious, and profane. This Ochún is not the same as La Caridad del Cobre. She is an *oricha*, a constellation of traits: human and non-human; visible and invisible; personal and impersonal. In Lucumi thought an oricha is not simply a person and, in fact, not fundamentally a person. An oricha is a power, or mystery which can be a person, but is other things as well. Ochún is water, river, mirror, gold, honey, peacock, vulture, gestation. If she is spoken of as a person it is because the complexity of personhood conveys her nature so directly. She may in fact be more than one person. Ochún manifests several personalities depending on the way that she is invoked in divination and ceremony. Knowledge of these Ochúns is passed down in the *odu*, the divination verses of the Ifa and dilogun oracles. The *odu* contain hundreds of stories about Ochún that have been ceremonially organized into several "ways" of understanding her. Here again Ochún is not one thing or even one person, but an array of qualities. These are her *caminos* or "roads" by which she travels to her followers and is recognized by them.[15] Lydia Cabrera lists at least fourteen distinct *caminos* of Ochún that are recognized by her devotees, ranging from the famous coquette Ochún Yéyé Moró to the elderly and severe Ochún Yemú (Cabrera 1980: 70–72). Ochún is several persons in one, organized by the devotions of her children. This facility of Ochún to be many things to many people is reinforced by her ability to take on the attributes and images of the environment around her in order to be effective in protecting her devotees.

Ochún in Cuba is most popularly imaged as a *mulata*, a woman of mixed race who lives between the worlds of black and white, at once both and neither. Her liminal status gives her great power and great sorrow for she is at once beyond some of the restrictions of social categories while at the same time without their identity and security. Perhaps it is with reference to her image as a mulata that Ochún is conceived as a flirt, courtesan, or prostitute. Mixed-race women occupied a peculiar niche in colonial Cuban society where they might achieve a level of social prominence, financial independence, and upward mobility for their children if they became official mistresses of wealthy Cuban white men. This ambivalent position between worlds gave rise to images of mulatas as creatures

of desire and scorn. The love of such women could never be self-determining and so their gracious and flirtatious manner could never be free of their desperate need to defend themselves and their children. The arts of the coquette concealed ulterior motives.

Ochún, in the guise of this mulata charmer, may reflect this socially-constructed ambivalence in that her outward character is rarely what it seems. What seems flighty can be serious, what seems to be feminine weakness can be powerful, what seems erotic can be deadly. Lazaro Benedí, a Cuban son of Yemaya, has this to say about Ochún:

> Many aspects of Ochún are not at all what they first seem to be. She's always smiling and friendly, but take care! She smiles a lot at her enemies to fool them. Then, the next day, the person she smiled at is found dead and nobody knows why. Ochún's no softy. She can tear a person limb from limb and laugh while she's doing it. She has no pity: she'll take anybody's child away. (In Lewis 1977: 136)

Ochún is not who she seems to be. Behind the fan, beneath the surface of the waters, there is always another Ochún. Her famous gaze in the mirror puns on this two-facedness: she is Yéyé Sorodo, mother bubbling with the sweet waters of life; and Yéyé Kari, a raging flood that overwhelms those who don't respect her. There is always a secret with Ochún. She is powerful but doesn't seem to be powerful, and the failure to recognize her power leads the unwary to humiliation and danger. Hidden behind or within the *coqueta* is a torrent.

La Caridad del Cobre shares Ochún's ability to be many things simultaneously. She too is mulata, a creole neither Spanish, nor Indian, nor African. She is born of the sea and is patroness of the land. She is a lofty queen and dear little Cachita who lives among the poor, and raises her child alone. She is a great lady but she is one of us, "just folks." She is a serene queen of peace and La Virgen Mambisa, a fierce freedom fighter. She is a virgin and a mother, a symbolic paradox itself that places her between and beyond the idealized social roles constructed for women. The virgin mother is a mystery percolating with allusions to spontaneous generation and the infinite regress at the source of life.

The "betweenness," the "both/and" of Ochún and of La Caridad del Cobre, and of their correspondence as well, may be the dynamic principle in all religious symbols: their ability to live in more than one world at once. In addition to reading this betweenness socially as a representation of ambivalent and ambidextrous social experience, we might also see it in more theological terms. Religious symbols, says Mircea Eliade, are representations of "hierophanies," experiences of the "irruption" of another reality into our own (Eliade 1958). They are understood to stand between the divine world and ours and so are ambivalent, radiating the power of the fission of sacred and profane. Like Moses's burning bush that flamed but was not consumed, the symbol offers a contradiction to trigger an experience of the "numinous," the dreadful and fascinating reality for which religious people thirst. Ochún and La Caridad del Cobre, each in her own unknowable nature

and in the brilliant decision to correspond them, represent the experience of the holy mystery of water that comes from nowhere to give life and take it away.[16]

## *Epilogue*

The meaning of symbols rests, of course, on social conditions that make them intersubjectively understandable. As these social conditions change so too do the meanings associated with symbols and thus their ability to represent social and experiential categories. The social world of colonial Cuba that upheld the representational power of the saints has changed in innumerable ways. Independence, republicanism, and socialism have disestablished the Catholic Church and altered the ability of Catholic symbols to organize social groups. Within the post–Vatican II Catholic Church itself, the cult of saints has been rigorously deemphasized. And nearly a million Cubans have come to the United States, the most religiously plural society on the planet. In the United States there never was a "sacred canopy" spread by a religious institution that defines the values of American society and empowers its mores. In this social environment it is not surprising that the correspondence of Ochún and La Caridad del Cobre no longer has the social and spiritual power it once generated.

La Caridad del Cobre creates different and sometimes conflicting associations among the Cuban exile communities of the United States. For many she has come to stand for a pre-revolutionary Cuba of the heart, a warrior to win back the island from tyranny. Thomas Tweed witnessed her feast day procession in Miami in 1994 and wrote:

> Recently arrived by boat from her short journey from the shrine, the Virgin was welcomed by thousands of devotees. She made her way through a sea of fluttering white, red and blue as followers waved white handkerchiefs and Cuban flags . . . elderly women and men nearby were weeping. One woman sobbed aloud, "May she save Cuba. We need her to save Cuba." (Tweed 1997: 116)

This community of La Caridad's devotees, largely white and prosperous, has generally been hostile to her identity as Ochún, though they may acknowledge it (Tweed 1997). In response, many Cuban-American devotees of the orichas no longer find meaning or utility in the old correspondence between oricha and saint. Like the name *santería*, these American devotees are leaving the saints behind, either by returning to a vision of Lucumi purity or by seeking new symbolic correspondents that the American milieu offers. The representation of Ochún in the United States seems to be going in both directions at once. In the quest for authenticity reformers excise attributes of Ochún that cannot be found in *pataki* divination narratives, while innovators bring in new images to reflect her. Willie Ramos offers his own experience with these twin trends:

> I am seeing a considerable number of Oloshas [priests and priestesses] drifting farther away from Catholicism, particularly the younger ones who have had exposure

to literature and higher levels of education. The Church's attack has helped push them away as well. That's to say nothing of other groups such as the Afro-Americans who radically eliminated all residues of what they were able to identify as syncretism.

Interestingly, it is quite possible that new analogies may come about. I've seen Mexicans in LA refer to Oshun as La Lupita, Our Lady of Guadalupe. African Americans have compared the Orishas with other African deities, and I've even seen one who is making his own analogies with the Hindu deities. There's another who sees Ochún as Isis. (Ramos: personal communication, 10/6/97)

It is perhaps the genius of the women and men touched by Yoruba religion to be so adept at cross-referencing the powers of the òrìṣà. Yoruba religion is justly famous for its ability to adapt, absorb, and accumulate spiritual powers. Beneath every outward representation of an orisa is another more puissant one, and so the identities of the orisa might go on forever. With each new social environment Ochún will contract and expand, ebb and flow, conceal and reveal. Ochún is always at the source of the waters, yet on the surface she may be reflected in many things: birds, brass, honey, or a sweet, dark Virgin. Ochún is always the same and always different. One cannot step into the same river twice.

## Notes

1. The most authoritative historical account of these events is found in Marrero 1976 and 1980. See Tweed 1997: 154–155, notes 7 and 8, for a comprehensive review of the literature on the historicity of the Nipe apparition.

2. Many Cubans have told me that the *tres Juanes* represent the "three races" of Cuba: Indian, African, and European. They see in the story a model of racial equality in the veneration of La Caridad. For a full discussion of this rhetoric, see Tweed 1997. Antonio Benítez-Rojo writes of this ideological power of La Caridad:

> the Virgen de la Caridad represented a magical or transcendental space to which the European, African and American Indian origins of the region's people were connected. The fact that the three men carried the name Juan — they are known as the three Juans — that they were together in the same boat, and that all were saved by the Virgen conveys mythologically the desire to reach a sphere of effective equality where the racial, social, and cultural differences that conquest, colonization and slavery created would co-exist without violence. This space — which can be seen at the same time as a utopia to be reached or as a lost paradise to be recovered poetically — is repeated time and again in the diverse expressions that refer to the Virgen, such as images, medallions, prints, lithographs, printed prayers, songs, popular poetry, and even tattoos. (1992: 52–53)

3. Antonio Benítez-Rojo cites Nicomedes Santa Cruz to say that "mambi" derives from the kiKongo word *m'bi*, which connotes "the cruel, savage, harmful, as well as the powerful and the divine: *Nsa-mb'i*, god" (Benítez-Rojo 1992: 291–22). Perhaps the dual meaning might be paralleled in the related meanings of the English words "terrible" and "terrific."

4. Throughout the struggle for Cuban independence there was a close but ambivalent relationship between the goals of black emancipation and national independence. While

the black soldiers of 1868 were inspired by the hope of linkage between the two struggles, the landed officers were bitterly divided on the issue. See Thomas 1971: 247f.

5. Robin Law (1977: 16) cites the use of "Lucumies," "Licomin," "Ulcuim," "Ulkami" by Alonzo de Sandoval in 1627 and Olfert Dapper in 1668. See also Isabel and Jorge Castellanos (1987) on the African origins of enslaved Cubans. They argue for "Lucumi" as a political designation, citing maps of Africa printed in 1668 and 1734 that refer to West African areas as Ulcami, Ulcumi, and Lucamee.

6. While early on, Bascom (1951: 19) recognizes the "Ulkami" possibilities, he states later that Lucumi comes from a Yoruba greeting "My friend" (1969: 5). See also Bascom (1972: 13).

7. I am indebted to Apter 1991: 240 for citing this revealing quotation.

8. The idea of religious deception on the part of the enslaved goes back, of course, to the earliest commentators. In the quote from Irene Wright cited above, her reference to "flaunting" Catholic symbolism implies the "hiddenness" of the African traditions. Herskovits (1948: 4) refers to the "devious reinterpretations" whereby African meanings are ascribed to European symbols. More recently Edwards and Mason (1985) and Canizares (1993), respectively representing African American and Cuban lines of òrìṣà traditions, have argued for the relationship of saint and òrìṣà to be understood as a deception. Ernesto Pichardo, the most prominent spokesman for the Lucumi religion, speaks of the apparent conversion of Cuban slaves who hid their "true beliefs" (*verdaderas creencias*) before white Catholics (Pichardo and Nieto 1984: 2). A recent review of the literature by Andrés I. Pérez y Mena concludes that Eurocentric observers were deceived by presuppositions of religious syncretism and in interviewing participants failed to recognize the "true basis of their beliefs" (1998: 17).

9. Wright's use of the word "flaunting" to refer to Lucumi-Catholic symbolism suggests a brazen display of double meanings. For Wright, it would seem, the Lucumi know that she knows that the Catholic symbolism has multiple signification. It is interesting that Wright speaks of Catholic saints with African names, while Niní speaks of an Ijesa òrìṣà with a Catholic name. While each suggests a different prioritizing of identities that the names refer to, neither indicates that one name is "true" and another "false."

10. Babaloricha Bamboche told Lydia Cabrera that Ochún was associated with copper in Ijesa:

> *sus cinco manillas, sus* odani *(adornos de cabeza) era de cobre en la tierra de los lucumis Yesa donde nació.*
>
> her five bracelets, her *odani* (head adornments) were copper in the land of the Ijesa Lucumi where she was born. (Bamboche in Cabrera 1980: 55)

11. Benítez-Rojo writes of the unifying power of La Caridad del Cobre, a "Gran Madre mulata" for the *patria blanquinegra* (1992: 54).

12. Perhaps not the least of the jokes involved in the juxtaposition of Ochún and La Caridad is the mirroring of the pure Catholic Virgin by Ochún in her guise as the shameless whore Panchaga or Panchágira (see Cabrera 1980: 69). Cuban journalist Manuel David Orrio sports with Cuba's self-image by calling attention to this association between the Island's patroness and Ochún, *justamente la diosa del jineterismo*, "rightly the goddess of hookerism." "Filosofar Sobre las Prostitutas" *Desde Cuba* 30 May 1996, www.voicenet-sl.com/desdecuba/300596a2.htm.

13. "Los Santos son los mismos aquí y en Africa. Los mismos con distintos nombres. La única diferencia está en que los nuestros comen mucho y tienen que bailar, y los de ustedes se conforman con incienso y aceite, y no bailan" (Cabrera 1975: 19).

14. "Ochún y la Caridad son la misma, aunque a la vez son diferentes, porque mientras

la primera es alegre, coqueta, y dicharachera en la religión Lucumí, no lo es así en la religión católica.

"Nos llenamos de emoción cuando baja y se posesiona de alguno de sus hijos, durante una fiesta religiosa en que suenan los tambores. Pero cuando vamos a la iglesia, y la vemos con su lindo manto, su corona y los tres marineritos en el bote, sentimos otro tipo de emoción religiosa. Y la vemos como a Ochún, pero manifestándose de distinta manera: Como la Santísima Caridad del Cobre" (Efundé 1978: 49).

15. See Isabel Castellanos's "A River of Many Turns" in this volume.

16. "Water from nowhere," *seleru,* is at the source of Mei-Mei Sanford's view of Ọ̀ṣun. See her essay in this volume as well as Sanford 1997.

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CHAPTER EIGHT

# Osun and Brass

## An Insight into Yoruba Religious Symbology

*Cornelius O. Adepegba*

### *Understanding the Brass Symbolization of Osun*

The popular saying, *Idẹ ni àpébo Ọ̀ṣun*, meaning, "brass is collectively worshiped as Osun" sums up the symbolism of brass objects in the Osun worship context. Most of her shrine objects and the jewelry of her votaries are made of brass and the variety of brass objects in her worship context depends on the means of the owners and whether the shrines belong to individuals or communities. In individual shrines, the brass objects may not be more than bangles—unadorned, twisted, or engraved—simply called *idẹ*, brass alloy. Whereas in community shrines such as Ikere Ekiti, there are cutlasses, fans, and staffs in addition to such bangles (see Agboola 1997). During the finale of Osun's popular annual festival at Osogbo, two brass anthropomorphic figurines, *ẹdan*, carried to the river in a covered calabash, are said to be her symbol (Beier 1957: 170). In Ikere, hair pins, *aginna*, and hair combs, *òòyà*, which are usually made of ivory in most of her other shrines, are also in brass. Also in Ikere, a brass basin referred to as a calabash is a substitute for the covered calabash in which all her brass objects are carried to the river during her annual festival (Agboola 1997: 24). In addition, various figural sculptures, especially human group compositions and animals such as the crocodile, chameleon, and lizard, all in brass, used to be in the collection of the Institute of African Studies, University of Ibadan in Nigeria (Adepegba 1991: 51–54).

Although Obalufon is the deity credited with the introduction of brass and brass work, Osun is variously referred to as the owner of brass in their oral traditions. In *Ọ̀ṣẹ Tùrá*, the Ifa poem that narrates the position of Osun among the leading Yoruba deities, her peers gave her the appellation, *a rí pẹpẹ kó idẹ sí* (Adeoye 1985: 205) which literally is, "she who has a shelf to keep brass." Her other praise names which have to do with brass include *a fi idẹ rẹ ọmọ* (she who

8.1 Brass group likely for Osun (18 × 27 cm).
*All photos in this chapter by C. O. Adepegba, reprinted from his* Yoruba Metal Sculpture.

lulls her baby with brass) and *a gbé inú òkun yìn ibọn idẹ* (she who shoots a brass gun from the sea), the sea in this context meaning any river with which she is associated (Ibid.: 208, 214).

### *Association of Osun with Rivers*

The worship of Osun in annual festivals in communities such as Osogbo and Ido Osun takes place in the biggest river named after her that passes by or through the communities. Her association with the river in such communities is so strong that Osun appears human only in her deified conception. For example, in the story of how she became the titular deity of Osogbo, she is said to have manifested herself as a river spirit, complaining of her dye pots which Timeyin, the founder of the town, unknowingly broke as he felled a tree into the river (Osogbo 1977: 5–7). In the tradition, she is portrayed as existing as a water spirit before the town was founded and although brass objects—two brass figurines in Osobgo and a variety of brass objects in her sanctuary in Ikere—are carried to the river during her annual festivals, offerings and supplications are made to her through the rivers designated as hers (Speed and Beier 1964).

An explanation that quickly comes to mind for associating her with rivers is

the claim that Osun, like some other female Yoruba deities, did not die but became a river at the end of her life. According to the story of her last day as narrated in the *Ìká Ẹlẹ́ja* Ifa poem, Osun, Yemoja, and Yemoji were fellow wives of Sango, the god of thunder (Adeoye 1985: 222). Orunmila predicted for Sango that unless he sacrificed that feather of the parrot's tail which he always wore as an ornament on important occasions, he would lose three of his valuable belongings. But Sango did not heed the prediction. Then came a general festival of all deities for which his three wives were angry because they were not invited. In anger, each of his wives reacted by having her own separate festival. Among the Yoruba, the successes of ceremonies are judged by the number of people in attendance, hence Yemoja decided to wear Sango's ornamental feather to attract people to the arena of her own festival. As a result, she outshone her fellow wives and the feather she wore made many people say that she must have been Sango's favorite wife, a comment which could not but anger her fellow wives. The fellow wives, reacting to the comment, decided to desert Sango who then realized their departure as the losses that Orunmila predicted for him but that he had failed to heed. He then started to pursue them to explain what had happened but as he was about to reach them, each became a river on the spot. Yemoja, on hearing what had happened, instead of feeling happy that she would become the only wife of Sango, followed her co-wives' example and became a river as well. The tail feather of the parrot, however, is today displayed together with hair pins and combs as hair decorations by Osun's devotees in the annual festival of the goddess in Ikere (Agboola 1997: 22).

Other Yoruba deities that are similarly associated with rivers are Erinle, especially in Ilobu, and Yemoja in Obadan and Ayede. Although the big river in Osogbo is the famous Osun River, Osun worshipers in towns far away from it used to designate any chosen river near them as hers. A stream designated as hers in Oyo is the first stream on the way to Ilora (Adepegba 1984: 70–86).

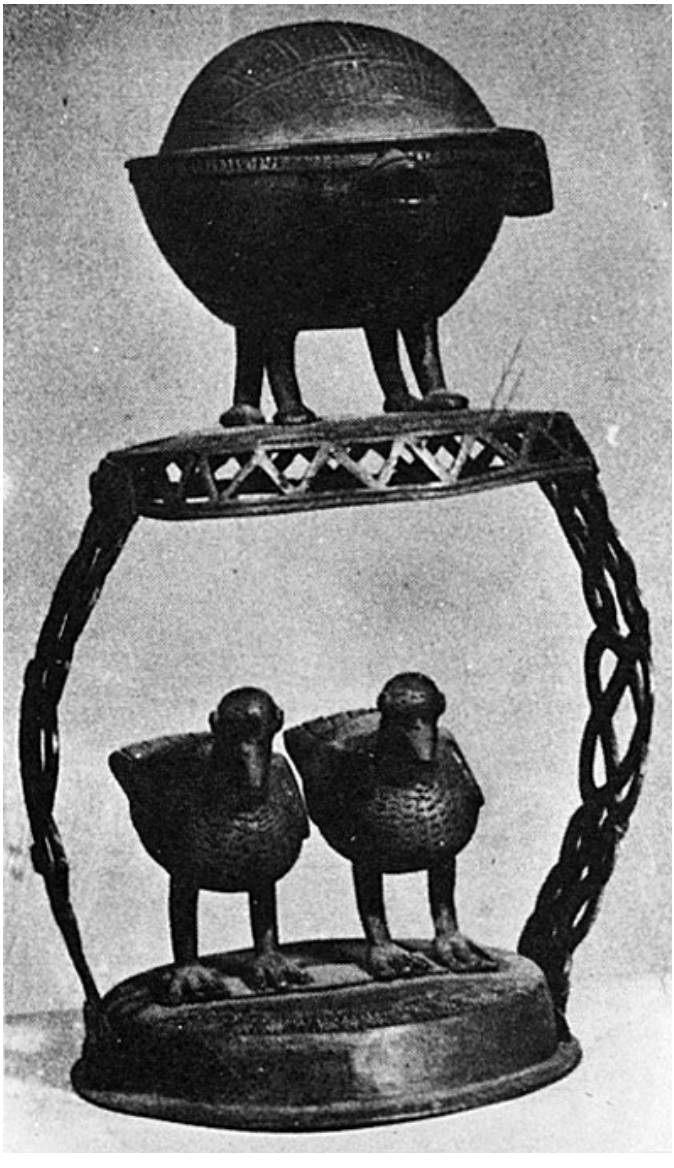
Water is so significant in Yoruba traditional worship that a water pot, *awe*, filled with river water and small round stones from riverbeds, *ẹta* or *ọta*, is a common sanctuary symbol. Water is considered medicinal and salutary, a panacea to all life problems that can be taken from any river, as in the words of a common religious song: *Odò gbogbo l àgbo, níbo ni ngbé bù ú?* (Every river is medicinal, where do I go to drink it?).

Water is considered efficacious when taken very early in the morning before the river is disturbed, and a common Yoruba prayer or wish is that their lives should be as cool and clear as water drawn from rivers early in the morning. The pebbles, *ẹta* or *ọta omi*, in their own cases symbolize longevity as they may wear down but rarely break. *Òyígíyigì, ọta omi, òyígíyigì, ọta omi, àwá d'òyígíyigì, a ò kú, òyígíyigì, ọta omi* (*Òyígíyigì*, the water [river] pebbles, we have become *òyígíyigì*, we will not die again, *òyígíyigì*, the water pebbles), goes an Ifa song.

If water is, therefore, as important as that in the worship of many deities, rivers

8.2 Brass equestrian figure container, likely for Osun (32.5 cm).

in the worship of Osun or indeed any other deity whose worship takes place in rivers are more or less adjuncts to the other symbols of such deities. In fact, sixteen cowries strung together representing *ẹ́ẹ̀rìndìnlógún*, the divination system which Osun introduced, are also constant in the shrine symbols of Osun (Adeoye 1985: 209).



8.3 Brass bird figure container, likely for Osun (30 × 19 cm).

## *Osun: A Biographical Sketch*

Osun was one of the Yoruba primordial deities. Yet she was at first not considered to be a fellow deity by her peers. According to *Ọ̀sẹ́ Tùrá*, the Ifa poem already mentioned as explaining her position among the other Yoruba deities, she was the seventeenth of the primordial *orisa* and was at first not involved in the management of the world because she alone was a woman. But the earlier sixteen deities were having problems until they went to God for direction and were told

8.4 Brass musicians in uniform, likely for Osun (17.5 cm each).

to invite Osun to all that they wanted to do, for normalcy to be restored. According to God, she should be involved because she was as powerful as men. Even in those early times, she was already associated with knowledge, brass, and Ijumu, one of the places with which she is still traditionally identified. It was when they were inviting her to join them as God directed that she was addressed by the male deities as *A rí pẹ̀pẹ̀ kó ide sí*, which is, "She that has a shelf to keep brass," already mentioned, and *Ìyá Ìjùmú, òyéyé ní imọ̀*, meaning, "The mother [old woman] of Ijumu that is full of understanding" (Adeoye 1985: 205).

Osun is said to have first married Orunmila, the god of wisdom, whom she later divorced to marry Sango because she was childless. It was when she was Orunmila's wife that Orunmila gave her *ẹ́ẹ̀rìndínlógún*, the divination system she is said to have originated. The system involves the use of sixteen cowries and a simplified Ifa poetry. Her barrenness continued after leaving Orunmila and when she did not know what to do, she went back to Orunmila for consultation on what to do to enable her to have her own child. As stated in *Ògúndásèé*, the Ifa

poem that advised her on what to do, she could not have her own child unless she sacrificed to God to send children *en masse* to the barren women of the earth and it was out of the children that God would send that she would have her own child. She sacrificed as prescribed and it was when God sent many children to the world that she too had a child. But it did not end there. Any time that the children of the other barren women were sick, it was to her that Orunmila directed their mothers for their care. The association of both her and Orunmila with the introduction of similar divination systems might also be the reason for pairing them together as husband and wife.

As for Osun's occupation, it is only in the story of the origin of Osogbo already cited that Osun is portrayed as a dyer. Osun is better known for *éẹ̀rìndínlógún* divination and the power to cure diseases and solve any life problems. In fact one of her praise names, Modeni, *anínla ní 'lé awo*, refers to her as someone very eminent in the house of secrets, another name for divination as well as other supernatural practices (ibid., 214).

Osun's association with places such as Osogbo, Iponda, and Igede seems to have been based on her being actively worshiped there at present. There is nothing to indicate that any of them was her place of birth or abode. In the light of recent archaeological data from Iffe Ijumu, only Ijumu is as old as Ile Ife, the city with which most of the major *orisa* are associated and it is just a district and not a town or village (Oyelaran 1997). The present population of the district are so dominantly Christian that there is hardly any trace that Osun was ever actively worshiped there. Thus the generation to which Osun belonged and where she hailed from and lived are difficult to ascertain. However, she is addressed as an Ijesa woman (Adeoye 1985: 214) and a close look at the communities in which she is actively worshiped shows them as concentrated in Ijesa areas: Iponda, Iperindo, Odo, Ibimogba, and Osogbo (the last, though, only in origin). She is also worshiped in Igede and Ikere in Ekiti as well as in Ido Osun in the Oyo-speaking area.

## *Osun Brass Objects and Brass Alloy in Yoruba Culture*

The brass objects associated with her worship and priesthood could be classified into two: those that are exclusive to her shrines and those that are also found in the shrines of other deities in brass or any other metals. Those that are exclusive to her shrines are bangles, hair pins, and combs, containers (lidded, small containers decorated with cast figures and a basin), ladles, and fans. Those objects that are also found in the shrines of other deities, though in metals other than brass, include cutting tools such as swords, cutlasses, and knives; and sound-making objects such as rattles and bells; as well as staffs in the size of walking sticks.

Those that are found only in her shrines are obviously personal effects that are exclusive to women. They are bangles, hair pins, and combs which are adorn-

8.5 Brass crocodiles associated with Osun, collected in Osi, (27 × 9.5 cm each).

ments, fans which in secular contexts are for comfort and prestige, figural small containers which serve the same purpose as trinket or vanity boxes, and basins, bowls, and ladles which are basic objects for food preparation and other women's occupations. However, the interpretation of some of them is not quite unambiguous. For example, as Osun symbols, the fans are in specific numbers. As a rule, they are eight, four with holes—usually four on the handle of each—and four without any holes. They are also not called *abẹ̀bẹ̀*, the Yoruba word for fans, but rather *ẹdan*, the Yoruba word for spiked brass figures of the *Ògbóni*, the secret cult of elders (Adeoye 1985: 209). As already indicated, a pair of *ẹdan* that is carried to the river in a closed calabash during her annual festival in Osogbo has been reported to be her symbol. It has however not been ascertained that the fans serve the same purpose in Osun's context as the spiked figures do in the *Ògbóni* traditions. The bangles, especially the unadorned ones, may be more than ordinary hand jewelry as they are often rubbed with the squeezed juice from the leaves of a local plant, *crossopteryx febbrifuga*, as a common cure for chronic sores (Adepegba 1991: 54). The cooked juice is also used for the same purpose among the Hausa and when applied to sores gives the same peppery sting. This means that, ordinarily, the plant's chemical property is the basis of the efficacy of any preparations in which it is included and the rubbing of the metal to the juice connects Osun's healing qualities to the sore-healing property of the plant.

The interpretations of the objects which are common to the shrines of Osun and other Yoruba deities are also not unambiguous. The cutting tools, swords, cutlasses, and knives are weapons for defense and attack. Deities are not expected to defend themselves against any negative forces as their powers are limitless. Hence their followers depend on them for safety and protection against any evils, including their enemies' attacks. The weapons therefore are only to subdue their worshipers' enemies. Osun's knife, however, is believed to have the power of ensuring healthy menstruation, a prerequisite for women's fertility, which is an important specialty of Osun as a child-giving goddess (Adeoye 1985: 210). The sound-making objects are for invocation and the ones made in brass are especially valued for the quality of their sounds as evident in the saying, *Saworo ide, b' ó balè, a ró,* which literally means, "the brass rattle that sounds as it touches the ground."

Walking sticks, besides being carried for prestige by eminent personalities, are used by the aged and the infirm (Adepegba 1991: 31–32). Hence the staffs in shrines might have been adopted because of their supportive significance and association with longevity, a common desire in Yoruba prayers.

All the metal objects in Osun shrines are made of brass, the alloy which was of high ornamental value to the Yoruba. Only coral beads, or *okun*, were equal to it in value. Both coral and brass were appreciated as jewelry, brass as bangles and coral as neck beads. Only children are rated higher as possessions than the two ornaments, as seen in the saying, *Ọmọ l' okùn, ọmọ n' idẹ*, "children are corals and brass." It is an instructive saying to the people that are prone to flam-

boyance that the most precious belonging a person should strive after is his or her own children.

Brass, like lead, is valued for its rust-free and enduring quality. In an Ifa song (Adepegba 1991: 3), the lasting quality of the two metals is pointed out as follows:

| | |
|---|---|
| *Mo f'orí ba 'lẹ̀, mo d'iwin o, mo f'orí ba 'lẹ̀, mo d'iwin* | I bowed my head to the ground (was humble), hence I have become a spirit. |
| *Mo f'orí ba 'lẹ̀, mo d'iwin o, mo f'orí ba 'lẹ̀, mo d'iwin* | I bowed my head to the ground (was humble), hence I have become a spirit. |
| *Ikán kì í mu 'dẹ̀, òròrò kì í r' òjé* | White ants never devour brass, worms do not eat lead, (both do not rust). |
| *Mo f'orí ba 'lẹ̀, mo d' iwin* | I bowed my head to the ground (was humble), hence I have become a spirit. |

The two alloys are precious because they do not weather. Hence both of them were made into bangles, brass for Osun and lead for Obatala, the *orisa* of creation. The reference to the bangles made in both metals simply as *ide* and *òjé*, the respective Yoruba names for the alloys, most likely suggests the original objects into which the alloys were manufactured. In the case of Obatala, the bangles are always unadorned. Thus it is likely that originally, the brass bangle of Osun was also unadorned. As the unadorned brass bangle used to be a medicine for curing sores and Osun is a reputable diviner and native doctor, the use of the brass bangles in that context probably started as a way of enlisting the support of the deity in the cure of sores.

Brass is an alloy of copper and zinc but copper has not been ascertained to be obtainable in Nigeria and there is no word for zinc in Yoruba language. Hence brass used to be obtained pre-mixed and any alloy containing copper must have been obtained from outside Yorubaland. It is for this reason that the bronze, brass, and copper used for ancient Nigerian sculptures such as those of Igbo Ukwu, Ife, Tsoede, and Benin are said to have come from outside Nigeria, especially from the north through the trans-Saharan caravan trade (Adepegba 1995: 13–14). Any such alloys, therefore, must have been an expensive commodity and any jewelry made from them, a highly valuable treasure. Osun then must be a very rich *orisa* to have been referred to as owning enough brass to "keep on a shelf" and "lull her children with" as indicated in her praise names. The association of brass with Osun shows her as a powerful medicine woman and diviner, popular and rich enough to wear the most valuable ornaments.

The shrine symbols, taboos, and types of offerings associated with most *orisa* are reflections of the deities' earthly tastes, interests, and dislikes, specific experiences, occupations, and habits. However it is not in the shrine objects alone that Osun's earthly taste is reflected. *Yanrin* (*lactuca taraxacifolia*), the vegetable that is usually offered to her as sacrifice is also said to be the vegetable she very much liked to eat in her earthly life (Adeoye 1985: 211). Ironically, many Yoruba do not eat the vegetable because of the common belief that eating it destroys the

efficacy of traditional medicines. But this is to be expected as the healing power of Osun does not rest mainly on medicines but in water therapy. Medical care given to children under Osun's protection rarely involves the use of medicines (Osunwole 1997).

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CHAPTER NINE

# Overflowing with Beauty

## The Ochún Altar in *Lucumí* Aesthetic Tradition

*Ysamur Flores-Peña*

You know that La Caridad del Cobre [Ochún]
is the beloved of all the santos.
Whatever Ochún does is always right.
—*Cunino, Santiago de Cuba, 1996*[1]

No *Lucumí*[2] altar is as lavish as an altar for the goddess of love, sensuality, beauty, and many other things. In Ochún, Olodumare (God) created beauty in such excess that, like her element, the river, she overflows with power and magnificence. Hers is the realm of absolutes. Her power is supreme because all creation in one way or another feels love and is driven to manifest it. With Ochún the *Lucumí* envisioned the depth of human and divine feelings in the ever-changing flow of the river. It is this image of constant flow and change that must be reflected by those who want to honor the youngest female of the *Lucumí* pantheon.

Ochún, Yalode, Iyalode, Yeyeo, and Orí Yeyeo are common praise names that devotees use to address the most desirable of the divine females in the Yoruba/*Lucumí* heaven. Ochún is the manifestation of beauty both physical and otherworldly. Castellanos states:

> the feminine deity most worshiped and loved among Afro-Cuban believers is undoubtedly Ochún, Yeyé, Cachita, Our Lady of Charity, patroness of the island. The Lucumí Venus is adorable, coquettish, and graceful, although she possesses avatars or "caminos" where she is unhappy and wears rags. (Castellanos 1992: 49)

An earlier appreciation from Lachatañeré confirms Castellanos's remarks: "Our Lady of Charity, which corresponds to Oshun in Yoruba cultures, called Ochún in Cuba and perceived as a mulata with straight and beautiful hair like her [Catholic image] in the shrine of El Cobre, near the mountain range of the same name; who is the saint patron of Cuba . . ." (Lachatañeré 1992: 99). In *Lucumí* tradition she is the youngest of the *santos*,[3] yet her power has been felt from Olofi (God) to the most detached human being. Ochún is beauty in shape,

word, and action. Like her element, the river, Ochún is unpredictable. She displays with her behavior the many phases of the river current. She can be placid and contented; flowing and gracefully nurturing and nourishing those who worship and indulge her. Regardless of the event or mood she will laugh: that is Ochún's hallmark. It is because of her laugh that devotees say that no one knows when she is mad because she is always laughing. Many old *olochas* argue that it is better when she cries because then her true self can be known. Like the sweet water she rules, Ochún is gentle and molds herself to the environment as many sacred narratives or *patakí* demonstrate. There is also the other face of the goddess, the one that is better characterized as the raging river. Here, the laugh is a roar, capable of burying the land it formerly nurtured in a mélange of destruction and death. She becomes the unforgiving torrent which carves a new face and paths where there were none before.

Like many of the *Lucumí santos*, Ochún possesses avatars or manifestations that comment on her many facets. Despite her character and moods she is desirable. The perfect mistress, ever-changing and always the same. On a recent trip to Cuba I met a priest of Changó who was surprised that I had made Ochún. His reasoning was that my size and physical bulk was more like Changó or Agallú than the "delicate" goddess. My response to him was that as a child of Ochún I could approach her like a lover courts a beloved and obtain whatever I want, and he being a priest of Changó could never do that with his *santo* without infuriating the god. After a good laugh the argument was dropped. The imagery of the goddess is clear. Ochún is delicate, feminine, and above all cultivated. All these qualities are played out during the construction of her altars.

If the consecration of a child of Ochún is the coronation of a divine monarch,[4] the celebratory altar is the state dinner.[5] The idioms of royalty and splendor of heaven (*orun*) and earth (*ayé*) intermix in the personality of the most human of the *santos*. In Angarica's characterization of the goddess, such humanity makes her approachable and compassionate:

> Ochzún [*Ochún*], this Yoruba word means spirit, and it is true; because the body of this powerful *santa*[6] vibrates with a beneficent spirit spurred by indomitable restlessness. (Angarica n.d.: 61)

## *The* Lucumí *Altar*

*Lucumí* altars are installations that celebrate the power of the *santos*. The assemblages' main purpose is to define a provisional sacred space where humans can freely interact with the power contained in the *soperas*.[7] The throne[8] is an audience hall of sorts where everyone in the community can prostrate, kneel, or stand to pray and celebrate the powers of *Lucumí* religion. The altars are color-coded with the main color representing the *santo* being celebrated. The size of the throne varies and it is left to the individual constructor to decide its dimen-

sions. The lavishness and creativity of the installation depend on several factors: the builder, economics, availability of materials, and purpose. The throne speaks to the beholder about the success of the individual celebrating in the language of fabrics, offerings, and adornments. Cuban scholar Joel James Figarola characterized *Lucumí* culture as "a culture of ostentation" (personal communication, 1996). According to Figarola, the culture and worship are geared toward visually manifesting the power and might of the divinities and their worshipers. The altar or throne is a nonverbal statement and at the same time mediates three potentially antagonistic forces: the community, the celebrant, and the divinities. In a celebration, the flaunting of wealth becomes socially acceptable because it is shared and the celebrant does not "eat alone" as the old *Lucumí* adage goes. The *aché* that the celebrant possesses is contained in the altar. It becomes accessible for all to feel and enjoy. However, divine forces, though visible and close, remain contained within the *sopera*, the mantles, the *mazos*,[9] and the embracing color-coded fabric of the altar.

Robert Farris Thompson's conceptualization of the Afro-Atlantic altar is an excellent point of departure to discuss what the *Lucumí* altar tradition attempts when erecting the sacred space dedicated to the worship of the heavenly court:

> Westerners need not abandon Judaism or Christianity to recognize the parallel validity of the altars of the Black Atlantic world. It is simply a matter, as Alan Lomax has pointed out, of letting active awareness make us less afraid of one another. Indeed, comprehension of the fundamentals of the Afro-Atlantic altar—"additive, eclectic, non-exclusivistic," ever dissolving opposition into unity—can inspire a stronger sense of the best Christianity, the best Judaism, the best Islam, reconfirming world cultural tolerance. (Thompson 1993: 20)

In fact the idea of the altar in *Lucumí* tradition draws more from the concept of a hearing room where solutions to problems are sought. It is because of this notion that instead of speaking of an altar, *Lucumí* worshipers refer to this sacred space as a throne. At the dais of the throne the devotee greets those forces that can organize the universe in order and beauty, or in *Lucumí* terms, *frescura* or coolness. In Joseph Murphy's words: "By speaking, feasting, and dancing with the Orishas, human beings are brought to worldly success and heavenly wisdom" (Murphy 1994: 82).

*Lucumí* altars are earthly conceptualizations of each *santo*'s heaven. The space in which they are constructed becomes sacred not because of the decorations but because of what they contain. The altars are usually the creation of an individual artist; however, the elements he or she uses must conform to aesthetic and religious conventions. Individual creativity is not hindered by these conventions since the sacred narrative and the character of each deity provides an ample laboratory for individual and communal interpretation. For example Eleguá's environment is the bush and the open road. His altars are built with greenery and

myriad toys and trinkets to convey the idea of both the bush and the roadside stalls full of goodies for children and adults. Ochún is not only beauty but refinement and shrewdness as well. Her altars conceptualize a place where beauty exists for a purpose and not for its own sake. The goddess's heaven is as malleable as her element, and the point of view is always in tandem with the reflections created by the use of gold and yellow. The throne is a stage where the *santo*'s wealth, status, and seniority become the parameters. The throne could be in a corner or take an entire room, yet, the main concern of the artist and devotees is to reveal the unseen as a whole. Folklorist Lydia Cabrera's characterization of the *trono* still wears well both in Cuba and in the *Lucumí* diaspora. Cabrera's description focuses on both the modest and the opulent thrones. Nevertheless, the opulent altar is the one that has survived.[10]

> The back wall is decorated with fabric—kele—making a canopy. The lavishness [of the fabric] depends on the economic means of the initiate or the Babá [*santero*] or Iyá [*santera*] who owns the *ilé*. The canopy can be made [using] the most expensive fabric or a modest one. (Cabrera 1974: 176)

Compare this assertion with Brown's contemporary appreciation:

> Thrones employ a basic dominant form: an installation of colorful cloth creating a canopy overhead, a curtain backdrop behind, and symmetrically parted and tied-back curtains in front—either independent hanging curtains or the suggestion of them in swags of cloth stapled to the wall. (Brown 1993: 46)

Except for those of the warriors (Elegua, Ogún, Ochosi), *Lucumí* altars or thrones are made with fabric. There is a mystique about fabric and civilization among *Lucumí*. One of Obatalá's avatars, Babá Achó, is reputed to be the creator of such a coveted commodity. Like any divine gift, fabric is a text upon which the culture shows what it holds most precious. In the case of Ochún other elements such as peacock or buzzard feathers (among others) are often included.[11] The peacock is one of Ochún's obsessions. In one narrative she risked everything she owned to obtain the object of her desire. Neglecting her duties, she became destitute and was forced to make powerful *ebos* or sacrifices to regain status and character (*iwa*). As Ibú Colé (the vulture), she flew to heaven to deliver the earth's sacrifice and apologies in order to avoid a universal catastrophe. The ensuing rain sent by heaven to calm the earth's thirst established her as a formidable mediator between humanity and God. This *patakí* is the origin of her title "Olorun's messenger." Yellow flowers such as sunflowers aid in creating a seductive atmosphere. Glorious brocade and delicacies favored by the goddess move the theme of refinement forward. Ochún altars in Lucumí aesthetics also emphasize the reflection of light.

I agree with David Brown and his appreciation of how the Spanish aesthetic conventions were appropriated by the *Lucumí* in order to reflect their new histor-

ical situation. But, one must consider the fact that divine rulers of Yorubaland also appeared in state reflecting the theological axiom of *ibikeji Olodumare*, "similar to God." The altar for Ochún is a statement (like any altar is), but the noble tension among the elements must never obscure the fact that there is only one queen. Ochún's royalty is reassured with every gesture and offering. Devotees of the goddess (her children or not) will take special precautions to offer the best they can afford, even to the point of marking her special number (five) in bills by covering her *paño* with five-dollar bills. She is not the *oricha* of money, but like the river, she naturally carries gold, which she gives freely. The notion of Ochún as a provider is part of this gold complex. "The Mother"[12] is lavish and she alone provides for those she favors.

The altar for any of the divinities must tell a story and communicate their character as a means to celebrate him or her: "In order for a consecration ceremony to be considered aesthetically pleasing it must reflect the values assigned to the Orisha being honored" (Flores and Evanchuk 1994: 14). The truth of this assertion becomes apparent in the aesthetic conventions observed in the altars for Ochún. Her palette is in the yellow range, all the tones and hues from the earthy to the gold. These tonalities reflect the caminos or avatars from Ibú Colé (or Ibú Kolé), the crone, who rides vultures and presides over the witches, to the festive Ibú Añá, who, like Terpsichore, presides over dancing and movement. In addition to the ever-present gold and yellow tonalities, some distinctive elements serve to identify her various names. When her sacred container is atop a drum she is Ibú Añá, the drummer. If instead the vessel is on a divining tray, *até*, she is Ololodí, Orúnmila's wife or *apeteví* (*apetebí*). A sewing basket and a fishing net identify her as Ibú Yumú, the siren who lives at the bottom of the river. Endless are the artifices used by artists and devotees to pun the names of the goddess using her attributes. By using this show-and-tell method, the culture perpetuates the tradition and educates newcomers. This scheme assures the consistency between the decorations and the name association.

The aesthetics for the altars must include these visions of the goddess as a temptress, mother, lover, and mistress. Still, she is always refined. Cabrera's characterization sheds light on the issues of female power and the perception of lovemaking as sacred:

> It would be a mistake to think that Ochún is "panchaga" [prostitute] all the time, and despite her divinity a cheerful and unconcerned public woman. [By] emphasizing her folly one can disrespect her, by not realizing as an old worshiper of Ochún said "her hookery is sacred." (Cabrera 1974: 117–118)

All the opinions about the goddess are conflictive and her altars must mediate the conflicts by accentuating either a boudoir-like atmosphere or the palace. The feeling of being in the presence of absolute beauty becomes reflected in the folds of the fabrics that carry the beholder's gaze to the golden center where the object of everyone's desires lies. There, "the Mother's" reign is supreme.

## *The Gold Complex*

Yellow is the traditional color associated with the goddess on both sides of the Atlantic. Brass is her favorite metal because it was considered the most valuable commodity by the Yoruba. Many divination verses describe her fondness for the metal and how rich she is because of its possession. To this day all her ceremonial implements or *herramientas* are made of brass. Her children also wear *manillas* (bracelets) made of the same metal. That is the link to the "old land."

> "Only the anthill slowly crawls onto the road
> And covers its base with shrubs."
> Cast for Brass, the first-born of Oshun. (Bascom 1980: 235)

In Cuba, brass is not the most precious metal, gold is. For the *Lucumí* to cover the goddess in gold is the epitome of luxury. Gold is not only valuable but bestows value to everything around it. To engulf the altar in gold is to invoke the river stream. The Spanish placed value not on brass but gold. Gold was the object of desire that "launched a thousand ships" across the waters of the Atlantic. In the Caribbean islands much of the gold was in the rivers (Ochún's domain) where most of the original mining operations took place.

Joel James Figarola remarked that it was logical to associate gold and Ochún for two reasons: it was in the rivers, her natural element, where gold was mostly found, and because of the undulating movements made by those (primarily women) panning for the metal (personal communication, 1996). For the *Lucumí* it was a matter of changing the old symbol of wealth (brass) for the new (gold). The Spanish custom of presenting to miraculous images gifts of gold, precious stones, and other objects resonated with the *Lucumí*. Ochún, already transformed into a mulata, a mixed-blood woman, acquired the taste for the new symbol of wealth and power. As Yalode or Iyalode she is a woman of rank, refined in the art of negotiating. Of all the *santos*, Ochún in this vision represented the New World and opened the door for new aesthetic experimentation.

> *Yeyé, Yeyé Moró, Con sus manillas de oro.*
> Yeyé, Yeyé Moró, with her golden bracelets.

This verse from a well-known creole praise song for Ochún celebrates the goddess's gold bangles. The song is a call-and-response:

> *Yeyé, Yeyé Moró con sus manillas de oro.*
> *Sus manillas de oro, sus manillas de oro.*
> *Yeyé, Yeyé Moró con sus manillas de oro.*

The dance is intoxicating. Everyone in the audience lifts hands to heaven as if admiring the goddess's gold bangles. The sound of the bangles is reminiscent of wind chimes; chimes that announce the arrival of the owner of laughter. A celebration of beauty and a welcoming to one who is lavishly adorned and a sight

to behold. Ochún is the epitome of the new reality. No longer African but a mulata, she reflects the end result of the collision of cultures. Her altar is a celebration of what is desirable in all the cultures that made Cuba home. Fabric such as brocade from Europe, beads and feathers from exotic and endemic birds, Chinese pottery, and the sheen of gold proclaim her wealth and desirability.

Fernándo Ortíz describes a Cuban folk character, the *curra*, as a woman of color, who coveted gold and used excessive jewelry. The *curra* was said to be wrapped in fabric imported from Spain who wore her new-found wealth daily to attract lovers and customers. In many ways she resembles the popular perception of the goddess. Ochún is a worldly woman and her altars, like the creole *curra*, wrapped in their folds all the nuances of a divine female who took to the streets to be with those who needed the joy of her presence.

Riches untold exist at the bottom of Ochún's mythic abode. However, as rich as she is she never keeps those riches to herself. After turning the Ibeji, the divine twins, over to Yemayá, her despair knew no limits. Olodumare sent her another child, Ideú, to console her. In her happiness she covered him with everything she owned. Once, while walking in the bush, the divine infant became lost and Ochún lost not only her happiness, but also all of her riches. After the appropriate *ebos*, she recovered everything with the help of Echu.

Another time, while married to Orúnmila, she came into the possession of untold riches. When she refused to make the prescribed sacrifices she was confronted by Echu who sold her three wooden dancing dolls that he had filled with magic. Enamored by the whimsical dolls she gave Echu her newly-acquired wealth in order to obtain them. Echu took off. When she got home the dolls were motionless, as Echu had withdraw the *aché* he had placed on them and rendered the dolls useless.

That is the way Ochún is: money and wealth never stay long with her, but miraculously they are replenished over and over. Many say that is the sign of being Olodumare's favorite daughter.[13] It is her *aché* to bestow all she possesses to make everyone happy.

## *Brocade, Silk, or Lamé?*

Making an altar for the goddess is like choosing a gown. When I make an altar and sort among the several fabrics in all shades of yellow and varied textures, my main concern is to find the most lavish. I prefer corners to make the altars. By placing her sacred pot in the corner she becomes the absolute center of attention. All the other elements (*santos* included) stand guard around her. The altar becomes the banquet hall where she allows us to converse and exchange ideas. *Lucumí* altars are formal creations, but at the same time there is an intimacy to them. The onlooker faces the altar in awe but after saluting the goddess he or she is home. Most times people gather in front of the throne to talk and joke and reacquaint themselves. In Evanchuk's words:

> Specific rituals are carried out in front of the shrine but even when no special events are taking place, people stand or sit in front of the altars enjoying their variety and artistry. (Flores 1994: 27)

The main spatial elements of a *Lucumí* altar are: a canopy-like space demarcated with fabric that houses the sacred vessels and implements of the *santos*, and the *plaza*, the area that displays the various offerings. This area contains food and gifts. The *plaza* is the most changing aspect of the installation. As people arrive they bring offerings to add, thus changing the appearance and feel of the entire construction. Like the throne itself the offerings are directed to the goddess. Many of them are shared at some point during the event and others remain as votive offerings in front of her permanently. These votive offerings are permanent prayers from those who are thanking her or asking for something.

Individuals approaching an Ochún throne have in their minds the notion of the divine queen, the eternally young and beautiful spirit of love. However, the goddess is admired not only for the feelings she can inspire but for her intelligence and cunning. If fabric can be used as text, the throne for the goddess speaks volumes. The throne shown (fig. 9.1) is a celebratory altar for Ochún. This particular altar celebrates a little-known avatar of the goddess, Ibú Eyelé. One outstanding characteristic of this *camino* or "road" is that it appropriates some of Obatalá's qualities and values. This avatar is ancient, a manifestation from the time of creation. In Santiago de Cuba an *oriaté*[14] informed me that this particular road of the goddess is the pigeon that Obatalá and later Odúa carried while creating the world. For this reason he called her *un Obatalá de río* (river dwelling Obatalá). Her representation is the pigeon and her color is white with yellow accents. By sharing the "whiteness" of the senior *oricha* she also partakes of his characteristics and attributes, and in many cases his seniority. She also participates in the constant renewal of the world in her role as co-creator by extending her power to the mysterious realm of the womb where she facilitates conception in order for Obatalá to sculpt the body. I hypothesize that the verse *Arubo oriki Yeyeo* (Ochún's praise name is ancient) is a reference to these facts.

The conventional altar for Ochún, mostly yellow and gold, had to be softened for this particular personality of the goddess. I selected a white fabric with gold motifs for the walls and a soft yellow with gold motifs for the canopy and the medallions on the wall. To further emphasize the association with Obatalá I chose a white fabric. Thrones speak without a voice and this one had to address a particular interesting story or *patakí*. The story in question is the famous seduction of Changó by Ochún.[15]

> Changó and Ochún married—some say they just lived together—and Changó decided to leave his palace and duties in order to enjoy his romance with the beautiful Ochún. The kingdom was falling apart to the extent that no one knew where power resided. Was Changó still the king? If not, who was? A great upheaval ensued

9.1 Ochún initiation throne.
*Photo by Ysamur Flores, Los Angeles.*

> and when Changó opened the window, *Echu*, who was waiting for the opportunity, knocked the crown off Changó's head. The crown rolled downhill and into town. The townspeople passed the crown from house to house forcing the king to knock on every door and to witness the result of his neglect. Changó in shame returned to the palace and his duties, but Ochún remained the object of his desire. (*Lucumí* corpus)

The coolness of the altar begins to thicken by using bridal fabric to cover the *sopera* of the goddess. Now, the throne already suggests the passion in the outbursts of gold on the wall and on the top. Also, a gold fan, the symbol of atonement and supplication, hovers over the *sopera*. The story is complete with the red and white crown-shaped cake (Changó's) at the feet of the goddess. The ultimate gift to one who owns everything! Ochún's own crown is conspicuously missing from the assemblage. Instead her *edán*, the token of authority and execution, crowns her.

The altar in *Lucumí* terms reflects the mystery that is the river, but more importantly it conveys the message of coolness, the ultimate *Lucumí* virtue. *Aché* can only be useful in a cool environment. As cool as Ochún is, one must never forget that in many ways her actions provoke changes that will heat society up in order to advance it. It is her prerogative to bring about conception. However, sometimes her work breeds individuals who will recreate society from its foundation at the expense of the old order. In those instances the cool waters of conception become like magma creating the foundation for a new beginning. The goddess is the bearer of the *aché* to the world and Echu, the trickster, is its keeper.[16] As bearer of the sacred creative force it is she who bestows on the other members of the pantheon the ability to speak to the human world. The five shells placed aside during divination are a monument to her prowess. Many mysteries dwell in the river. Ever changing and nurturing, the altar for such a mistress must convey all those elements held dear by the culture. Ogún may be the cultural hero to the Yoruba/*Lucumí*, but it is "she-who-cures-with-cool-water" who is the one ultimately responsible for the civilized application of his benefits. Perhaps that is the reason for Ogún's platonic love for Ochún.

## *Coda*

Discussing culture and tradition necessitates some sort of working definition. Tradition in the context of the present work means those practices accepted as true by the majority of society: in Vansina's words: "a changing, inherited, collective body of cognitive and physical representations shared by their members" (Vansina 1990: 259). Traditions and cultural retentions tend to change or adapt in the midst of a hostile society. The new group perceived to be inferior suffers the assault of new ideas that present themselves as more desirable. In such instances the original raw material tends to acquire a second underground exis-

tence. Traditional narrative, beliefs, and superstitions are often the venues used by people to express these relegated outmoded traditions. In those genres the "old" ways resurface and contradict the new accepted ways. Society may or may not negotiate such contradictions. Folklorist Ruth Benedict recognized such "lags" while researching Zuni folk narrative. In her words, "folklore is a mirror . . . that reflects not the customs and beliefs of the narrators of the tales but those of many generations past" (Benedict 1968: 105). The same lag can be applied to the art and aesthetics of *Lucumí* altars. *Lucumí* religion will always be in tandem with other "world religions" with which it coexists. The African goddess retained her "old traits": royalty, polyandry, sexual independence, procreation, wealth, and assertiveness. Although those qualities are taken for granted now, they were not desirable in the "traditional" Spanish wife. The royalty she kept intact but the rest spelled out all the vices condemned by the church and the colonial authorities. Those "new" qualities became confrontation weapons in the hands of the deity and her altar-makers.

Ochún's altars are a compilation of piety and exuberance. No other altar amalgamates the diasporean energy with a sense of continuity. The goddess was no longer confined to a river in Africa but extended her influence to all the rivers in the world. Her ports to acquire wealth increased. No longer confined to a town or geographic area, which directed and controlled her cult, she moved to new domain areas. One can see these new areas in the ways her thrones are set. Love, money, marriage, conception, and mediation are her customary areas of influence. But what happens when the same areas are expanded to companies, contracts, and mergers? American society fell head over heels over the goddess. Her actions empowered new *Lucumí* worshipers in America, providing a paradigm of assertiveness at home and in the workplace. As one client stated, "in the work place one needs as much sweetness as in love if one is to succeed." The same client came one day to ask the goddess for help in a negotiation he was to undertake with another company; in order to call her attention he brought yards of gold brocade for her next altar. Ochún's influence is no longer the sweet war of the sexes. Her cunning and abilities extend beyond the realm traditionally assigned to women and goddesses of love.

The constant re-invention of the goddess moved the cause of women forward in *Lucumí* society. Being the youngest in a stratified society where the elders' rule is absolute, she carved a niche for herself and her kin. Her altars prove her success in defining the character of a society potentially misogynistic. She never was the "damsel in distress" and most probably she placed some of her male suitors in distress instead. However, her altars celebrate the contradictions of modern society regarding women. Society expects them to nurture home, children, and relationships while at the same time demanding a more active role in the marketplace. In that sense *Lucumí* altars for the goddess are a window into the divine perception of such a state of affairs. Her altars are opulent statements. She is a

mother and in the seclusion of her abode we all find refuge. Her other facets evoke the woman, who, while tending her children, must address the issues of the society at large. Business conducted with her must follow that same pattern, the intimacy of home with the openness of corporate operation. Her corporate operation is the well-being of society at large.

Ochún's aesthetic conventions are a laboratory of female power and rank. Every *Lucumí* altar for the goddess epitomizes Olofí's (God's) mandate that in order for creation to follow its due course she must be included in the divine assembly. As inspirer of love and passion, she is also vulnerable to those emotions. When *Lucumí* dream of altars for the goddess, the culture envisions the wealth and blessings of an orderly society. There is nothing wrong to desire prosperity, the sin is to not share it. The decisions that accompany the altar for the goddess are those that must face anyone courting a lover. The excess of the courtship is a prelude to the lavishness of the expected rewards. But like the river she inhabits it may suddenly dive into the ground and reemerge renewed and replenished. Her altar is like that: an eternal proclamation that there is a mystery in our midst that must be wooed in order for us to partake of the benefits of her grace.

The *Lucumí* altar for the goddess is a departure from the African matrix on the point that divine and earthly beauty are accessible to all, and the sacred grove (*igbodu*) had transformed the *mariwó*[17] into a fabric that can accommodate all visions. With Ochún the culture was free to explore all the idioms of the new reality. All the *santos* are black, but she alone is a mulata. Her altars must always drive that point home, for with her there is no turning back. She not only converses with the old land but understands the new land as well. The altars for her celebrate our independence from both polarities, neither African nor Spanish, but undeniably creole. That is the reason for the lavishness and artistic liberties altar-makers take with her altars and sacred implements. With her, one is free to use anything beautiful regardless of its origin. With that notion in mind she embodies the economics of the region. Ochún's economics are that of the New World. Abrahams's words aptly characterize this state of affairs:

> Most of the countries in the New World were created by economically motivated European colonizers who invaded this hemisphere and defeated the resident population. The dominant cultural life of these areas is based on the institutions, values and expressions carried by these seekers after empire, as modified by conditions and cultures encountered in the new lands. (Abrahams 1967: 456)

A newcomer also, this African goddess set out to understand and apply her "market-woman" mentality to gauge the possibilities of the new outlet. Even though the political and cultural colonization of Cuba is attributed to Spain, it is also true that Africa colonized Cuba and many parts of the hemisphere through religious institutions and practices. This African colonization took many shapes and nuances.[18] The aesthetics of *Lucumí* religion is one of them. Through Ochún, creole society exhibits what is most desirable. Robert Farris Thompson

characterized the Yoruba as a people concerned with beauty, people that use beauty as a measure of perfection:

> The Yoruba assesses everything aesthetically—from the taste and color of a yam to the qualities of a dye, to the dress and deportment of a woman or a man. (Thompson 1984: 5)

The measure of beauty for Ochún is universal, she owns beauty from every part of the world and, like a river pregnant with possibilities, she endows culture with the freedom to desire, and the ability to acquire. The Mother encompasses all, heaven and earth included. Maferefún Yalode.

## Notes

1. Cunino, priest of Eleguá, personal communication, 1996, Santiago de Cuba.

2. *Lucumí* is the name given to the Yoruba in Cuba. Many hypotheses have been debated by scholars to explain the origin of the name and the reason for the Yoruba to adopt it. In the context of the present essay I use *Lucumí* to identify the people, the religion, and the culture. I will use *Lucumí* orthography in this essay. In Cuba the Yoruba language underwent significant changes that ultimately produced the *Lucumí* dialect.

3. The Spanish word *santo* does not refer only to those celestial beings of Catholic tradition. Any object of power regardless of its origin for lack of a better word many times is called a *santo*. The English translation of "saint" does not convey the popular conception of *santo*. A *santo* is both what it signifies and also what it can manifest on its own volition.

4. *Santeros* in the *Lucumí* tradition are crowned. The language of consecration is that of royalty. The *santos* are kings and queens and that royalty is transmitted to their children during the *kari-ocha*. According to *Oddedeí*, one of Cabrera's informants: "To make a saint is to make a king," and *kari-ocha* is a ceremony of kings; like those in the *Lucumí* oba's place (Cabrera 1983: 24).

5. After completing the novitiate which lasts one year, the *Iyawo*, *Yabó*, or *Iyabó* hosts a celebration to mark the anniversary. For such an occasion *Santeros* build an elaborate altar in honor of their patron deity. There are other occasions when altars are erected, such as drumming ceremonies, but the two most common occurrences are initiation and anniversaries.

6. Angarica uses *santa*, i.e., female *santo*.

7. *Soperas*, or soup tureens, are the containers of the sacred stones of the *oricha*. They remain in an area of the house where only those individuals consecrated to their cult can handle them. Though many times they are seen by uninitiated individuals they remain off-limits to them. *Alejos* or non-initiated individuals must not see what is inside these sacred vessels.

8. The *trono* or throne is the most common *Lucumí* term for these installations. The idea is that the deity sits in state as a king or queen. The language of consecration in the religion and culture is that of royalty. *Olochas* are crowned, and the priesthood perceives itself as discharging a sacred royal office.

9. *Mazos* are large, beaded necklaces presented to the *iyawo* at initiation.

10. Even in today's Cuba the altar is as costly as can be afforded.

11. The decorative elements used in the construction of a throne must relate to the deity and his or her avatars or roads. Sometimes elements that relate to other deities are used

when an oracular consultation, *itá*, dictates its use. Such cases are very rare, as most of the time the altar celebrating a particular deity must conform to its sacramental symbols. In the case of Ochún, rare and exotic bird feathers can be included because they relate to some of her avatars. If a feather of a particular bird that does not belong to the goddess appears on the altar it is because it is exceedingly beautiful, costly, rare, or all of the above. The Mother deserves it and she gets it.

12. This way of referring to Ochún is very common among practitioners. The use of "Mother" points to her maternity and also to the power of femalehood. *Iya* is one of the euphemisms used in the Yoruba language to refer to powerful women associated with witchcraft.

13. In other traditions the favorite is *Yewá*, the virgin, who lives among the dead.

14. The *oriaté* is the priest or priestess in charge of all consecration ceremonies in *ocha*. They rank equal to the *babalao* in power and knowledge. Their authority is such that when presiding over a consecration they become senior to everyone present regardless of their age in consecration.

15. In many of the stories it is Ochún who falls helplessly in love with Changó. In this particular variant it is Ochún who made the god a willing prisoner of her many charms.

16. In the *Lucumí odu* corpus, *aché* comes to the world in the *odu oché*, which is *odu* number five. This divination figure is Ochún's signature *odu*. Her sacred and sacrificial universe is characterized by five and its combinations.

17. *Mariwó* is a curtain made of palm fronds that when placed at the entrance of sacred spaces warns the uninitiated to stay away.

18. The influence of African cultures in the hemisphere runs side by side with those of Europe. One can look at any cultural expression in the New World and find Africa's influence in one way or another. The concept is not new; I am proposing that if we are to understand the Black Atlantic it is time to give Africa its due place in the development of a cultural personality that bears the best of all worlds.

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CHAPTER TEN

# Authority and Discourse in the *Orin Ọdún Ọ̀ṣun*

*Diedre L. Badejo*

This essay explores the cosmological and socio-cultural idiom of authority and its discourse in the *orin ọdún Ọ̀ṣun*, that is, the festival songs of the Yorùbá deity *Ọ̀ṣun*. It examines the historical and contemporary themes and inspirations located within the sacred and secular liturgy of Yorùbá orature (oral literature). It also illustrates how this culturally-bound cosmic premise authorizes the position of women politically, socially, and economically within the Yorùbá worldview and social praxis. It should be noted here that the central feature of this cosmic authority is its validation of complex human interactions which explore the notion of gender dichotomy in the form of gender functionality. By gender functionality, I refer to the linguistic and cultural deference to social role rather than biological gender as the primary determinant in social function. Indeed, the traditional oral record and the Yoruba language itself are at odds with the ideological tools of Western colonialism, cultural, and religious hegemony that are used to critique it. Symptomatic of the protracted struggle against foreign cultural dominance, it is necessary to discuss Yorùbá women's authority as an element of distinction within Yorùbá studies discourse. Four of the festival songs that I have chosen confirm women's source of authority and autonomy within the *orin ọdún Ọ̀ṣun*. Two other songs reflect contemporary themes in Yorùbá social discourse. I will briefly discuss the scope of meaning of power and destiny, and how the Yorùbá definition of power and destiny provide the foundation for understanding these festival songs and their contemporary themes.

## *The Source* Àṣẹ *(Power) and* Àyànmọ́ *(Destiny)*

Most human organizations validate their socio-cultural mandates and behaviors with some theological or cosmological premise. Collective historical experiences and memories interwoven between divine revelation and human need often create the ontological nexus of authority in which human groups validate

their social discourse. The Yorùbá people of western Nigeria, from pre-colonial, pre-Islamic, and pre-Christian times, reveal their own sources and nexus of authority in diverse oral genres. Woven among the rich layers of verbal virtuosity are the golden threads of an extensive Yorùbá epistemology which includes *Ifá* (divination poetry), *orin* (songs), *oríkì* (praise names and poetry), *itan* (stories), and *ijálá* (hunters' poetry for Ogun), among others. Images and themes that allude to the spectrum of power and authority underscore the existence of a cornucopia of literary, material, and artistic culture, in short, a treasure trove of knowledge and a worldview of acknowledged distinction. Scholars such as 'Wande Abimbola, Rowland Abiodun, Sandra Barnes, Joseph Murphy, Jacob Olupona, and Robert Farris Thompson attest to the fortitude as well as historical and cultural dynamism of Yorùbá culture and its global offspring.[1]

To fully appreciate the meaning of these Ọ̀ṣun songs, one must acknowledge that for the Yorùbá, nothing exceeds life itself. The orature, the annual festivals, the panoply of ceremonies and rituals that mark the diverse phases of life are life's insurance policy against short and purposeless living. Life for the Yorùbá is defined by an infinite continuum intertwined through ancestral life, earthly life, and unborn life, all actualized within and through the womb. As a matrix of mystery and awe, the womb is the source and point of departure for the vagaries of life, its potentialities, and its destinies. Longevity is achieved not only through long life on earth, but also long life in the memory of one's descendants. Likewise, to become an ancestor, one must be born and then remembered by those born after one's death. In both cases, women are the conduit through which all life flows. Giving and nurturing life is one aspect of the source of and validation for women's authority generally. As the owner of the beaded comb, *Olóòya-iyùn*, which she uses to part the pathways of human life, Ọ̀ṣun's authority, and validation specifically, lies within this complex ontological nexus (Abiodun 1989: 3; Bádéjọ 1996a: 7–10).

The other source of authority and destiny lies in the power of the metaphysical (Barnes 1989: 1–26). In Yorùbá thought, like most theological or cosmological ordinances, authority evolves from Deity (Supreme Creator) known as Olódùmarè, the source of quintessential power (*àṣẹ*) and destiny (*àyànmọ́*). The union formed by these concepts, *àṣẹ* and *àyànmọ́*, prescribes balance and a unity of opposites among and within the eclectic forces of divinity, humanity, and nature alike. Obìnrin (woman) and okunrin (man) are the quintessence of balance between life and death on the one hand, and the manifestation of creativity found in the unity of opposites on the other. In Yorùbá thought, *àṣẹ* and *àyànmọ́* are found in both obìnrin and okunrin, each with the potential to negate and empower the other.

This cosmic charge is found among both women and men, each deriving *àṣẹ*, that is, creative power or energy, from Olódùmarè. In this cultural worldview, the ability to create as well as to destroy derive from the same *àṣẹ* or power (Abiodun 1994: 72; Bádéjọ 1996a: 175–76; Barnes 1989: 14–18). From a Yorùbá per-

spective, female authority and male authority evolve from the same divine source, each with its own quintessential deified power and attendant social prescriptions and manifestations (Bádéjọ 1996b: 49–60). From a Yorùbá perspective, the human *beingness* of woman and of man is best knowable in terms of the unity of the one with the other. Numerous Ifá narratives reveal this unity of opposites which emphasize that part of the responsibility of female *àṣẹ* is to maintain the cycle of life, while part of the male *àṣẹ* is to penetrate the unfathomable in order to reveal its mysteries. I am not suggesting dichotomous relationships between female and male orisa but rather a unity of opposites which demonstrate unending potentiality. For example, Ogun, one of the most biologically charged male orisa, destroys, or cuts through, matter, in order to create, while Obatala uses his creative talents to shape human beings both perfectly and imperfectly. Only Olódùmarè possesses the life-breath, however. Ọ̀ṣun, on the other hand, who stores children and swords within her body, uses both constructive and destructive energies with equal aplomb.

With motherhood as her central motif, her image creates a balance between birth and death, while symbolizing a watery, ever-flowing connection between physical life and ancestral life. With longevity as a focal cultural goal, the biologically charged female symbolizes both a sensual and maternal conduit for such balance. In the cosmological scheme of things, Ọ̀ṣun symbolizes spiritual triumph over finite and fragile human existence. As the leader of the *àjẹ́*, or powerful beings, she also protects the covenants of both positive and negative energies and beings. Her wealth, femininity, and fecundity are currency in both spiritual and earthly terms. As the seventeenth òrìṣà among the original Irúnmọlẹ̀ and the only woman present at creation (Abiodun 1989: 5), Ọ̀ṣun and her followers occupy a critical position in both the pantheon and the society. As one of the *orin ọdún* presented here illustrates, the combination of divine prerogative and its well-articulated jurisdiction in human affairs further authenticates the assemblage of female and male Ọ̀ṣun worshipers. Group solidarity follows such authentication, and her followers vocalize their own specific prerogatives in accordance with the tenets of the Ifá corpus and, in this case, with Ọ̀ṣun religious practice.

## Orin ọdún *and the Authoritative Voice of Women*

What does it mean to be an Ọ̀ṣun worshiper? What concepts of Ọ̀ṣun worship are important to her followers, what sense of authority do they gather from the method of her worship, and what confirmation do they receive from her divine position within the Yorùbá pantheon? Like the flow of the river Ọ̀ṣun itself, the cosmic authority given by Olódùmarè to the Irúnmọlẹ̀, the sixteen-plus-one òrìṣà who were present at creation (*èdá*), flows from each òrìṣà to her or his worshipers (Abiodun 1989: 1–7). Ọ̀ṣun, as one aspect of this polythetic flow (Barnes 1989: 12), is the agency through which priestesses, priests, and initiates employ *àṣẹ* in

order to facilitate the pursuit of their individual share of destiny (*àyànmọ́*). Ọ̀ṣun is Yèyé, the Good Mother, who gives and sustains life. By definition, this motherhood is active, is central to female destiny and empowerment, and is expansive in both meaning and application. Priestesses, devotees, and supplicants use their *àṣẹ* as artists, entrepreneurs, healers, educators, political power brokers, and social agents of change. Yorùbá women organize collectively and wield the power of their collective voices in diverse arenas.

In cosmological and sociological terms, women who embrace the principles of Ọ̀ṣun worship, individually and collectively become *àjẹ́*, powerful beings who activate their *àṣẹ* to help others who consult them. When such people are recognized as *àjẹ́*, they accrue to themselves social prowess and awe within their communities. They become catalysts who move the dialogue between the corridors of humanity and divinity. As *àjẹ́*, the olórìṣà Ọ̀ṣun operate literally between these two domains and, in turn, are answerable to the deity Ọ̀ṣun and to the source of *àṣẹ* ultimately. Women, therefore, *must* perform as both sacred and secular agents (Bádéjọ 1996a: 73–80; 175–185). In this spiritually energized secular environment, the acceptance of female authority is tantamount to the successful operation of day-to-day human affairs including marriage, career, travel, birth, health, wealth, death, enemies, and immortality. As the following *orin ọdún* indicates, the definition of female power, as well as the ability to identify with and to be empowered by it, constructs a major form of socio-political and cultural-historical authority.

***Orin ọdún Ọ̀ṣun 1***

| | |
|---|---|
| *Mo j'ogún 'nú ẹgbẹ̀ ò ee!* | I carry an inheritance in the group ò ee! |
| *Mo j'ogún 'nú ẹgbẹ̀ o àà!* | I carry an inheritance in the group o àà! |
| *Olórìṣà l'ó j'ogún òjé* | The Òrìṣà priest(ess) is responsible for lead (brass)[2] |
| *Mo j'ogún 'nú ẹgbẹ́!* (Repeat twice) | I carry an inheritance in the group! (Repeat twice) |
| *Mo r'ógún sí t'ẹgbẹ̀ ò ee!* | I find a legacy in that of the group ò ee! |
| *Mo r'ógún sí t'ẹgbẹ̀ o àà!* | I find a legacy in that of the group o àà! |
| *Mo rọmọ l'àwọn oniṢàngó* | I find children is what Ṣàngó worshipers say |
| *Mo r'ógún sí t'ẹgbẹ́!* (Repeat twice) | I find a legacy in that of the group! (Repeat twice) |

The annual Ọ̀ṣun festival provides the context for oral literary recitation, performance, and social renewal. Over its sixteen-day enactment, Ọ̀ṣogbo township and its well-wishers revisit the pact between humanity and divinity under the auspices of its patroness (Bádéjọ 1996a: 103–130). The festival becomes a forum for historical and contemporary discourse which is a major part of its agenda. Songs such as the one cited above clearly remind devotees and visitors alike what it means to be an Ọ̀ṣun worshiper. For worshipers, it suggests that belonging to the group carries not only a sense of identity but also a sense of destiny, inheri-

tance, and responsibility as illustrated by the first line of the first stanza, *Mo j'ogún 'nu egbé o ee!*, that is, "I carry (responsibility for) an inheritance in the group o ee!" In this song, "ogun" refers to an inheritance and the phrase *j'ogun 'nu egbé* refers to collectively carrying responsibility for the inheritance of Ọ̀ṣun's legacy. Further, the word *ẹgbẹ́*, refers to both women and men who form the organization of Ọ̀ṣun worshipers. For Ọ̀ṣun worshipers, this group identity is coded by the "priest(ess)" who carries "lead," that is brass, the iconographic symbol of Ọ̀ṣun herself indicated by line three, *Olórìṣà l'ó j'ogún òjé* (The Òrìṣà priest[ess] is responsible for lead). The authority and pride bolstered by the language and performance of the poem confirms and, is confirmed by, its larger social responsibility and the non-devotees who, nonetheless, seek their accord. The song inscribes solidarity and social responsibility as an expression of the deity herself. In this manner, the olórìṣà accomplish a metaphoric unification of the forty or more manifestations of Ọ̀ṣun under the common symbol, brass.

Ọ̀ṣun priestesses and priests, as the inheritors of this manifested Ọ̀ṣun, activate the principles which she represents through their personal and collective use of *àṣẹ*. Both òrìṣà (deities) and olórìṣà (owners of the òrìṣà) are themselves indicative of the multifaceted aspects of human and divine existence. Her devotees inherit the legacy and responsibility carried by Ọ̀ṣun. That inheritance elevates them by protecting the covenants of powerful beings (*àjẹ́*), giving life and nurturing children (*abíyamọ*), healing and maintaining health especially in the case of women (*alaafia*), accessing wealth (*ìyálodẹ*), and assuming defensive positions when necessary (*Ọ̀ṣun balogún*). The efficacious performance of these roles supports the authoritative position of Ọ̀ṣun worshipers in a universal social context.

Of these, healing is the most efficacious role among Ọ̀ṣun worshipers. Health is intrinsically tied to the continuous cycle of life signified by the word, *àìkú*, meaning without death or longevity. Eldership and seniority become the hallmarks of life, and similarly, the intertwining life-cycle marked by the phases of ancestry, living, and unborn which can be nullified by a short, unproductive life. One achieves longevity (*àìkú*) through good health procured in part by wealth, and most especially through children. These interlocking phases of life are achievable through the awesome biological power of women who menstruate every twenty-eight days without death, and who stop doing so in order to bring forth new life. This strictly female ability is tantamount to being *àjẹ́* (powerful beings). This *àjẹ́* of women unifies the contradictions of life within the core of the womb, itself *the* source of *àyànmọ́* or *ipín* (destiny), its earthly manifestation which begins with *abìyamọ* (childbirth).

The following *orin ọdún Ọ̀ṣun* speaks to both the spiritual essence and confidence garnered by Ọ̀ṣun worshipers:

***Orin ọdún Ọ̀ṣun* 2**

| | |
|---|---|
| *Ṣẹ̀'lẹ̀rú àgbo,* | Owner of sacrifice (who) expels medicinal waters, |
| *Agbára àbo,* | Powerful healing waters[3] (flowing gently like eroding water), |
| *L'Ọ̀ṣun fi ń w'ọmọ rẹ̀.* | This (sacrificial birth water) is what Ọ̀ṣun uses when the child is coming. |
| *Kí dókítà ó tóó dé,* | Before the doctor finally arrives, |
| *Abímọ-mọ́ọ̀-dá'na' lé,* | The newborn (arrives safely) without warming the house. |
| *Ọ̀ṣun l'à ń pè léégún.* | Ọ̀ṣun is one we call spiritual being (ancestor). |

Within these six lines we find the consummate source for spiritual and social authority which Ọ̀ṣun and her devotees (*ìyáloṣà Ọ̀ṣun*) use. The reference to *àgbo* (healing waters), *abímọ* (childbirth), and *erú* (sacrifice) allude to the powerful waters of Ọ̀ṣun as *élérú àgbo,* the owner of the sacrificial healing waters. Efficacious use of these healing waters underscores the central life-giving and life-saving roles of the olórìṣà Ọ̀ṣun, Ọ̀ṣun priestesses and priests. It subtly acknowledges the inherent risks to women during the birthing process (*ṣẹ̀ . . . àgbo*) while praising the inherent power of midwives and birthing mothers to usher in new life successfully even without a doctor's attention (*kí dókítà ó tóó dé*). This *orin ọdùn Ọ̀ṣun* articulates the confidence with which Ọ̀ṣun priestesses midwife humanity. It unifies the cycle of life by vocalizing the bond between birthing (*abímọ*) and ancestry (*éégún*). Ọ̀ṣun, as ancestress and midwife who is imitated by her devotees, establishes the precedence and tone for women's authority in spiritual and social affairs. The olórìṣà Ọ̀ṣun, we may surmise, form a powerful group whose authority flows from Olódùmarè through the agency of the òrìṣà Ọ̀ṣun to them. As the agents of new life and the couriers of its survival, these women speak with unquestioned authority.

***Orin ọdún Ọ̀ṣun* 3**

| | |
|---|---|
| *Ẹgbẹ́ olówó l'ẹgbẹ́ẹ wa* | The group of the owners of wealth is our group. |
| *Ẹgbẹ́ olọ́mọ l'ẹgbẹ́ẹ wa* | The group of the owners of children is our group. |
| *Ẹgbẹ́ Òròkí ì ṣ'ẹgbẹ́ olè.* | The Òròkí group is not a group of thieves. |
| *Àjẹ́ olọ́mọ l'àjẹ́ àwa* | Powerful beings (who are) the owners of children are our powerful beings. |
| *Ẹ tèlé mi ka'lọ* | You [pl.] can follow along with me, |
| *Ẹ lè r'ọ́mọ gbé jọ.* | (so that) You can carry children and dance (joyfully). |

Although men are also members of the *ẹgbẹ́ Ọ̀ṣun*,[4] the women who chant this *orin* are its major thematic focus as confirmed by the last line of the poem, "You can carry children and dance (joyfully)," an activity of women. The specific allusion to women is also intimated by the symbolic relationship between Ọ̀ṣun, as an owner of wealth and of children (Bádéjọ 1996a: 1–14), and women as

members of this special sisterhood. The declaration of the *ẹgbẹ́ olórìṣà* Ọ̀ṣun (membership of Ọ̀ṣun devotees) elevates the status particularly of women who are both wealthy and mothers. According to this *orin ọdún*, this women's collective states that their power (*àṣẹ*) lies in owning wealth and children. The former refers to their external roles in the traditional market economies (*ìyálódẹ*) and the latter refers to their internal roles as givers of life (*abíyamọ*). This particular *orin ọdún* also demonstrates the relationship between giving birth to children and providing for those lives through the agency of the traditional market economy. Unlike many in the Western world, the Yorùbá affirm that women's attainment of material and monetary wealth is inextricably tied to producing children, also considered wealth, which ensures both the continuity of life and the activation of one's *àṣẹ* (God-given power) and *àyànmọ́* (God-given destiny).

Central to women's authority, peopling and nurturing humanity carries the added responsibility of maintaining an environment in which human beings survive eternally. For Yorùbá women, social criticism and decision-making are the mechanisms through which those responsibilities are voiced. This suggests that part of the legacy of the *ẹgbẹ́* is its engagement with whatever contemporary issues may arise. The integrity, security, and efficacy of the group are central to its survival and ability to pass its legacy of authority and social activism along to subsequent generations. In modern times as in the past, the survival of the *ẹgbẹ́*, its authorship and its membership require the vigilance of those women who are its caretakers. However, challenges to its survival and theirs do surface as indicated by the subject of the last two *orin ọdún Ọ̀ṣun*.

***Orin ọdún Ọ̀ṣun 4***

| | |
|---|---|
| *Níbi l'o'ní n gbé Yèyé mi sí o?* | Where did he say that I should leave my Mother (Yèyé)? |
| *Níbi l'o'ní n gbé Yèyé mi sí o?* | Where did he say that I should leave my Mother (Yèyé)? |
| *Oníláwàní-òsì, ni nṣe 'mòle!* | The owner of the horrible turban (who) said (I should) embrace Islam. |
| *Níbi l'o'ní n gbé Yèyé mi sí o?* (Repeat twice) | Where did he say that I should leave my Mother (Yèyé)? (Repeat twice) |

The complex relationship between foreign-source religious traditions and traditional African religions has been well articulated by many scholars[5] (Ajayi, Asare, Achebe, Olupona, Salamone). During my documentation of the 1982 festival where this song was collected, the tension between the Ọ̀ṣun worshipers and the local Muslim community intensified. This was a particularly intense period in national politics which, in part, took on a distinctly religious overtone. In Òṣogbo, a town which celebrated its compassion for migrating populations and embracing of diverse traditions, the Ọ̀ṣun practitioners were particularly miffed at the disdain and disrespect shown to the deity who, according to oral tradition, welcomed well-behaved strangers. This *orin ọdún Ọ̀ṣun* marks an indigenous re-

10.1 The Àtáója of Ọ̀ṣogbo at a press conference during the Ọ̀ṣun festival, Ọ̀ṣogbo.
*Photo by Diedre Bádéjọ.*

sponse to the phenomena. In terse poetic form, the song questions the purpose of substituting Ọ̀ṣun òrìṣà worship, that is, "leaving" Yèyé, the Good Mother Ọ̀ṣun, for another religious tradition which, from their perspective, does not carry the efficacy of Ọ̀ṣun worship. As with Christianity, the tensions are historical in nature and contemporary in their persistence (Opoku 1978). In Ọ̀ṣogbo, this long-standing issue is captured by the present-day Atáọ́ja (traditional ruler of Ọ̀ṣogbo) who *must*, by history and custom, participate in the Ọ̀ṣun festival despite the fact that the man who occupies that position today is himself Muslim. For the olórìṣà Ọ̀ṣun, the fact that the co-ruler of Ọ̀ṣogbo is a practicing Muslim is less troubling than it is for the Muslims themselves. Indeed, for many olórìṣà Ọ̀ṣun, their roles as agents of life and its sustenance amasses greater authority than that of a secular ruler who can be dethroned (Bádéjọ 1996a: 104–111). From the perspective of these practitioners, the primordial, divine authority of òrìṣà Ọ̀ṣun exceeds that of any form of human authority. This is especially true since the Atáọ́ja represents the position of immigrant rulers who settled in Ọ̀ṣogbo during an earlier historical period rather than primordial, indigenous rulers represented by Iya Ọ̀ṣun (Bádéjọ 1996a: 155–174). Consequently, this song serves as a demonstration of both religious autonomy and as a reminder of the social solvency of an indigenous group (Bádéjọ 1996a: 97–98, 104–109). This reminder is reiterated in the following *orin ọdún Ọ̀ṣun:*

***Orin ọdún Ọ̀ṣun* 5**

| | |
|---|---|
| *Bàbá onírungbọn, jẹ́ á ṣẹẹbọọ wa,* | Elder (father) bearded one, let us do our festival. |
| *Bàbá onírungbọn, jẹ́ á ṣẹẹbọ ti wa,* | Elder (father) bearded one, let us do our own festival. |
| *Àwa è mọ̀ pé ẹ mọ́mọ̀ kirun l'ójúmọ́* | We don't say that you should not pray daily, |
| *Bàbá onírungbọn, jẹ́ á ṣẹẹbọ ti wa.* (Repeat twice) | Elder (father) bearded one, let us do our festival. (Repeat twice) |

In this *orin ọdún*, the olórìṣà Ọ̀ṣun call for a truce between Ọ̀ṣun worshipers and Muslims. The Ọ̀ṣun worshipers view daily Moslem prayer (*ikírun l'ójúmọ́*) and Ọ̀ṣun festival (*ọdún Ọ̀ṣun*) in terms of their respective spiritual relevancy. They stress a mutual autonomy of worship stating that they don't tell Muslims not to pray daily, so Muslims shouldn't tell them not to perform their festival. Thematically, this song implies more than a local religious confrontation. At a more visceral level for Ọ̀ṣun worshipers and followers, it illuminates a fundamental challenge to the substance of women's authority vested in the cultural historical worship of the goddess Ọ̀ṣun. Clearly, the breadth and depth of authority articulated in the *orin* and *oríkì Ọ̀ṣun* from sacred to secular matters from birth to ancestry lies beyond the scope of similar roles for women outside of the òrìṣà traditions. Indeed, the position taken by the olórìṣà Ọ̀ṣun protects the autonomy of worship for both women and men Ọ̀ṣun worshipers as well as the autonomy of women's active social, political, economic, and religious roles.

This final song cited below reaffirms, as stated earlier, that the core objective of Ọ̀ṣun worship is successful living in our complex world. Sung in a call-and-response mode, this *orin ọdún Ọ̀ṣun* in both form and meaning indicates that group autonomy and solidarity provide the security for living a successful life and defeating life's enemies.

***Orin ọdún Ọ̀ṣun* 6**

| | |
|---|---|
| *Gbé mi lé'kè, jẹ́ n jù'kà lọ!* | Put me on top, let me rise above wickedness! |
| *Gbé mi lé'kè, jẹ́ n jù'kà lọ!* | Put me on top, let me rise above wickedness! |
| *Ọ̀ṣun, gbé mi lé'kè, jẹ́ n jù'kà lọ!* | Ọ̀ṣun, put me on top, let me rise above wickedness! |
| *Gbé mi lé'kè, jẹ́ n jù'kà lọ!* | Ọ̀ṣun, put me on top, let me rise above wickedness! |
| *Ọ̀tá mì ń bọ̀, bá mi lẹ̀'kò mọ!* | My enemy is coming, help me to hurl stones at him/her! |
| *Ọ̀tá mì ń bọ̀, bá mi lẹ̀'kò mọ!* | My enemy is coming, help me to hurl stones at him/her! |
| *Ọ̀tá mì ń bọ̀, bá mi lẹ̀'kò mọ!* | My enemy is coming, help me to hurl stones at him/her! |
| *Ọ̀ṣun Òṣogbo, bá mi ṣe tẹ́mi* | Ọ̀ṣun Òṣogbo, my enemy is coming, help me to hurl stones at him/her! |
| *Ọ̀ṣun Òṣogbo, bá mi ṣe tẹ́mi* | Ọ̀ṣun Òṣogbo, help me accomplish mine (successful living)! |

| | |
|---|---|
| *Ọ̀ṣun Òṣogbo, bá mi ṣe tẹ́mi* | Ọ̀ṣun Òṣogbo, help me accomplish mine (successful living)! |
| *Ọ̀ṣun Òṣogbo, bá mi ṣe tẹ́mi.* | Ọ̀ṣun Òṣogbo, help me accomplish mine (successful living)! |

Here, the struggle between good (*gbé mi lé'kè*) and evil (*jẹ́ n jù'kà lọ*) is explicit. Good which is synonymous with successful living and evil which refers to a spectrum of possible misfortunes fundamentally illustrate the day-to-day context in which worshipers, practitioners, and clients view their complex human environment. The metaphor of "hurling stones," implied by the context of the festival and meaning of Ọ̀ṣun worship, empowers olórìṣà Ọ̀ṣun and their clients to use their spiritual and physical power to defeat enemies (*ọ̀tá*).

## Ayè *(The World)*, Àjẹ́ *(Power), and* Àìkù *(Longevity)*

Ọ̀ṣun Ṣẹ̀ẹ̀gẹ̀sí Olóòya-iyún is the òrìṣà who, as "hair expert," as confidante of fate who watches over the covenant of the *àjẹ́*, and as owner of the beaded comb used to part the pathways of human existence (Abiodun 1989: 3), envelops worldliness, powerful beings, and longevity in her literary and ritual knowledge. As Ṣẹ̀ẹ̀gẹ̀sí Olóòya-iyún, she parts the pathways of human destiny suggesting that she, nevertheless, does not choose the pathway, but can be implored to influence the path one takes. As a confidante of fate, Ọ̀ṣun knows the offenses and sacrifices necessary to appease the *àjẹ́*. In the larger cosmological scheme of things, this particular epithet also suggests that she plays an intriguing role in her relationship to both Orúnmìlà, her husband, who is also the deity of wisdom and knowledge, and Ẹ̀ṣù, the guardian of the crossroads who is sometimes referred to as Osẹtura, the firstborn of Ọ̀ṣun and Orúnmìlà (Ibid.: 3–7), and the name of a very important odu Ifá. Ọ̀ṣun is positioned between both Orúnmìlà and Ẹ̀ṣù, her husband and her offspring, sharing in their knowledge of human frailties and the vagaries of human life.

This cosmic role, coupled with her divine assignment as leader of the *àjẹ́*, authorizes Ọ̀ṣun and her devotees to negotiate the vagaries of life. Her articulation of power and its application in social discourse designates the nuclear role of women in both sacred and secular environments. For the olórìṣà Ọ̀ṣun, her beingness, defense of the *ẹgbẹ́* (collective group of individuals), and her symbiotic flow between divinity and humanity, between heaven and earth, between life and ancestry, between children and wealth, between woman and man, legitimizes their own active social responsibility. Group membership confirms solidarity among Ọ̀ṣun worshipers themselves and this, in turn, helps them to execute their social obligations. Thus, "I carry a responsibility within the group," is both internal (self) and external (collective), and their domain is global. That intra-group responsibility includes care-taking of Ọ̀ṣun's paraphernalia, especially brass, symbolizing the responsibility of caring for the òrìṣà herself. By meta-

phoric representation and literary interpretation, taking care of brass also symbolizes the acquisition of wealth intimated by the title *ìyáloja*, mother of the market, and the title *ìyálóde*, mother of the outside, both of which are praise-names and titles for Ọ̀ṣun. Collectively, these material, literary, and social references demonstrate that the domain of Yorùbá women is expansive. For them, motherhood, power-brokering, and market economies form the practical aspects of successful living and underscore their authority in it. For many modern Yorùbá women, the Ọ̀ṣun legacy, as demonstrated in an earlier *orin ọdún*, specifies their license not only to earn a living, but also to enjoy a fruitful maternal life. For contemporary women, the legacy of female empowerment lies in the undeniable relationship between Ọ̀ṣun, her divine authority, and her secular manifestation. The presence of that legacy is confirmed by the need to address daily challenges to living successful lives, and the assistance rendered by the *olórìṣà* in its manifestation. For non-devotees, the inheritance of such a divine legacy by her worshipers, specifically her priestesses, ensures their own ability to access similar autonomy despite structural paternalism and its challenges.

Because of their training in various healing arts, the *olórìṣà* Ọ̀ṣun are revered for their ability to assist with fertility problems and childhood diseases. Their specialty is obstetrics and gynecology referenced by the term *àgbọ*, the healing waters. The mind-body-spirit connection which has revolutionized Western attitudes toward alternative healing is standard procedure for most òrìṣà practitioners, especially the olórìṣà Ọ̀ṣun. As giver of life, she bridges the river of life as a primordial ancestress unifying the ancestors, the living, and the unborn. In the Yorùbá worldview, women who can heal and give life are truly the great ones worthy of ancestry. Demonstrable social responsibility activated by one's personal power (*àṣẹ*) is the legacy of Ọ̀ṣun. It is what makes her a great ancestor worthy of remembrance. Such ancestry is the cornerstone of *àìkú*, longevity.

## Ipari *(Conclusion)*

As long as Yorùbá women continue to bear children, the power of Ọ̀ṣun and her devotees will enable them to act on their own behalf as well as that of the male and female children they bear. Womanhood carries a "legacy" of successful reproduction, business acumen, and social responsibility. The most awesome aspect of that legacy is the continuity of human life. And since humanity's domain is extensive, the purview of women is equally extensive by direct or indirect participation. As the Ọ̀ṣun festival songs demonstrate, Ọ̀ṣun worshipers, secure in their practice and performance of its rituals, exercise the right and have the responsibility to execute certain activities within the social body politic. The reality of enemies and religious conflict as well as the ongoing human desire to procreate and enjoy the fruits of one's labor are very contemporary indeed. Certainly, we can concur that as these women continue to exercise their authority in diverse

arenas of life, they also continue to sway public opinion and gather together followers in her name.

Finally, Yorùbá women's authority derives primarily from those culturally defined cosmological sources which form the only basis of and justification for human authority generally, and female authority specifically, in social discourse and cosmic interaction. Women as individuals and groups of individuals must activate those cosmic sources through the pursuit and employment of their own *àṣẹ*. There is no passivity here. The notion of deity is a pragmatic one which carries a mutual expectation of deity itself to perform in the mundane sphere, that is, to "put me/us on top" or become extinct through social abandonment. The power of the deities rests upon their ability to serve the needs of humanity, and women as a major part of humanity have dominion over its continuity, symbolically ebbing and flowing between human survival and the efficacy of divinity. Consequently, without the sacred and secular correspondence found in Yorùbá cosmological thought, non-Yorùbá religions remain unattractive to women whose positions of authority and social engagement are upheld by the Yorùbá pantheon. Truly, the womb embodies the ontological nexus which indicates humanity's cornucopia of possibilities and experiences. As the owners of the womb and caretakers of the "healing waters," women's voices must be heard in concert with as well as apart from men's voices if the passageway between birth and ancestry is to remain eternally well-traveled.

## Notes

1. Writings of 'Wande Abimbola, Rowland Abiodun, Sandra Barnes, and Robert Farris Thompson, along with such classic studies as William Bascom's, demonstrate the diversity of Yorùbá studies both in Nigeria and in the African diaspora. Newer works, including Oyèrónkẹ́ Oyèwùmi's *The Invention of Women: Making an African Sense of Western Gender Discourses*, contribute to the growing scholarly interest in Yorùbá culture and ideology.

2. According to the *Encyclopædia Britannica* (Chicago, 1997), a 10 percent combination of zinc and lead added to 90 percent copper produce brass, Ọ̀ṣun's associative element. Clearly, the lexical meaning for the Yorùbá words *òjé* and *ide* are closely related not only as elemental minerals but also as compounds that comprise the makeup of brass, bronze, lead, and copper. While brass is the known symbol of Ọ̀ṣun, the phrase *ogún òjé*, "(to) inherit lead," is neither symbolic nor poetic. Poetically speaking, we can however deduce that the phrase, *ogún òjé*, and the term, *òjé*, refer to the fundamental strength of inheriting the symbols of Ọ̀ṣun, and possibly inheriting access to or control of its metallurgic site and its usage. As the encyclopedia points out, the third group of brass is corrosive-resistant and is known as lead brass. It is more easily machined or sculpted and its color can be more readily modified. The translation of the term, *òjé*, reinforces the poetic rather than prosodic context and meaning of both the word and the poem.

3. *Agbára àgbo* can be transliterated as powerful water that flows gently causing erosion, an obvious allusion to the power of Ọ̀ṣun's medicinal waters.

4. Yorùbá is a contextual language, that is, it is difficult to discern meaning out of context. *Ẹgbẹ́*, for example, simply means some type of organization. However, it is most fre-

quently used in association with women, although it is not exclusively female in meaning. What type of *egbẹ́* is referenced depends upon the context in which it is used and the surrounding symbols and images.

5. Both historical and religious scholarship on the Yorùbá discuss the stresses, strains, and compromises that underscore the tenuous relationships among traditional and non-traditional religious practices. As Ajayi and others point out, economic and political motivations as well as religious factors more often than not underscore how these competing religious interests eventually co-exist. Since women play a significant role in the economic, political, and religious spheres, their views and attitudes weigh heavily upon the outcome of such practices or multiplicity thereof.

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CHAPTER ELEVEN

# The Bag of Wisdom

## Ọ̀ṣun and the Origins of the Ifá Divination

*'Wande Abimbola*

By "Ifá divination" we mean Ifá and related systems of divination based on the stories and symbols of the Odu such as *dida ọwọ́* (divination with the sacred divining chain called ọ̀pẹ̀lẹ̀) and *ètìtẹ̀-alẹ̀* (divination with the sacred palm nuts), *ẹẹ́rìndínlógún* (divination with the sixteen cowries), *agbigba* (divination with a divining chain slightly different from *ọ̀pẹ̀lẹ̀*), and *obi* (divination with kola nuts). The purpose of this essay is to examine the intimate connection of Ọ̀ṣun with Ifá divination both in her own right as a person, and through the instrumentality of Ọ̀ṣétùúrá, her son. We will start with the popular view of the involvement of Ọ̀ṣun in Ifá divination which states that she got to know about Ifá through Ọ̀rúnmìlà, her husband. We will then examine the importance of Ọ̀ṣétùúrá to Ifá divination sacrifice. In the later pages of this essay, I will make the claim that Ọ̀ṣun has much more to do with the origins of Ifá divination than the *babalawo* (Ifá priests) are ready to admit. I will, indeed, put forward the hypothesis that the entire divination system of Ifa started from Ọ̀ṣun from whom it got to Ọ̀rúnmìlà and not the other way round. I will base my claims on verses of Ifá which give us hints to that effect. We will then examine the possibility that *ẹẹ́rìndínlógún* is older than *dídá ọwọ́* and *ètìtẹ̀-alẹ̀* which are probably later developments of Ifa divinations.

Let us begin with the popular view that Ọ̀ṣun was introduced to Ifá divination by Ọ̀rúnmìlà. Several verses of Ifá tell us about this. For example, a verse of Ogbèsá states that Ọ̀rúnmìlà created the sixteen-cowry divination system and gave it to Ọ̀ṣun as a reward for saving his life. In this particular verse, it was after Ọ̀rúnmìlà had created the sixteen-cowry system for Ọ̀ṣun that both of them became married. But as will be seen later from another verse of Ifá, even though they were husband and wife, they did not live together in one place because it was not the custom for couples to live together at that time. Let me now take some

time to tell the story of Ọ̀ṣun and Ọ̀rúnmìlà as contained in Ogbèsá, especially because it relates to the importance of *ẹẹ́rìndínlógún* in the Ifá divination system.

The story goes as follows. It happened at a time that Olódùmarè summoned all the four hundred-and-one *Òrìṣà* to Ọ̀run (heaven). But to their greatest surprise, the *Òrìṣà* encountered a group of wicked "cannibals" in heaven (probably witches known to the Yorùbá as *aje*) who started to kill and eat up the *Òrìṣà* one by one. But since Ọ̀rúnmìlà had performed sacrifice before he left earth, he was miraculously saved by Ọ̀ṣun who successfully hid Ọ̀rúnmìlà from the cannibals, and substituted goat meat for the flesh of Ọ̀rúnmìlà which the cannibals had planned to eat on that particular day.

When both Ọ̀ṣun and Ọ̀rúnmìlà returned to the earth, they became much closer than ever before. It was probably at this time that Ọ̀rúnmìlà and Ọ̀ṣun became husband and wife. Ọ̀rúnmìlà then decided to reward Ọ̀ṣun for saving his life, and that was how he put together the sixteen-cowry system of divination and taught Ọ̀ṣun how to use it. Let me now quote a short portion of this verse of Ogbèsá. It goes as follows:

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| | *Báyìí ni Ọ̀rúnmìlà òun Ọ̀ṣun bá sún mọ́ raa wọn.* | This was how Ọ̀rúnmìlà and Ọ̀ṣun became close. |
| | *Ọ̀rúnmìlà ní irú oore tó ṣe fóun níjelòó,* | Ọ̀rúnmìlà said that the good turn which she did for him |
| 5 | *Kò sírú oore kan tó tún le tó èyiun mọ́.* | Was an exceptional one. |
| | *Kín ni òun ìbá ṣe fúnwọ Ọ̀ṣun báyìí o?* | He wondered what he should do in return. |
| | *Ìdí eléyìí pàtàkì ló mú kí Ọ̀rúnmìlà* | This was the most important reason why Ọ̀rúnmìlà |
| | *Ó dá ẹẹ́rìndínlógún sílẹ̀.* | Created the sixteen cowries. |
| 10 | *Ló bá kó o lé Ọ̀ṣun lọ́wọ́.* | He then handed them to Ọ̀ṣun. |
| | *Nínúu gbogbo ẹbọra òòṣà tí í lo ẹẹ́rìndínlógún,* | Of all the *Òrìṣà* who use sixteen cowries, |
| | *Kò sí ọ̀kan tó ní in saájú Ọ̀ṣun.* | There is none who had it before Ọ̀ṣun. |
| | *Ifá ló sì kó o fún Ọ̀ṣun* | It was Ifá who gave it to Ọ̀ṣun. |
| | *Pé kó máa dá a.* | And asked her to cast it |
| 15 | *Kóun náà ó máa fi ṣàyẹ̀wò.* | And use it as another form of divination. |
| | *Èyí ni Ifá fi san oore lákòókọ́ ná.* | This was what Ifá used to reward Ọ̀ṣun. |
| | *Báyìí ló fi jẹ́ pé Ifá pèlú Ọ̀ṣun* | That is why the relationship between Ifá and Ọ̀ṣun |
| | *Ẹnìkan kò le mọ ààrin araa wọn* | Is such that nobody else can know |
| 20 | *Ni Ọ̀rúnmìlà bá fẹ́ Ọ̀ṣun níyàwó.* | What is between the two of them. |
| | *Nifá bá di ọkọ Ọ̀ṣun* | Ọ̀rúnmìlà then got married to Ọ̀ṣun. |
| | *Nínúu gbogbo àyẹ̀wò pátápátá,* | Of the several forms of divination, |
| | *Ẹẹ́rìndínlógún ló ṣìkejì Ifá.*[1] | *Ẹẹ́rìndínlógún* is next in rank to Ifá. |

According to this particular story in Ogbèsá, even though Ọ̀rúnmìlà was the one who created *ẹẹ́rìndínlógún*, this system of divination later received its own *àṣẹ*[2] from Olódùmarè. It happened as follows:

| | |
|---|---|
| *Nígbà tó bá sì di ọdún kẹ̀rìndínlógún kẹ̀rìndínlógún* | Every sixteen years |
| *Ni Olódùmarè, Ọlọ́fin òrun, maa á gbé* | Olódùmarè, Ọlọ́fin of heaven,[3] used to |

*Àwọn tó bá ń ṣàyẹ̀wò nílé ayé é yẹ̀wò*
*Bó yá irọ́ ni wọ́n ń pa fáráyé*

*Bó yá òótọ́ ni wọ́n ń so fún wọn.*
*Ìdánwò tí í máa á ṣe fún wọn ni pé*
*Kí wọn ó ké sí Ọ̀rúnmìlà wá o*
*Àti gbogbo àwọn tó bá tún ń yẹ nǹkan án wò fáráyé*
*Pé òun fẹ́ẹ́ rí wọn.*

*Nígbà wọ́n bá dé,*
*Olódùmarè á ṣe àyẹ̀wò lódọ̀ araarẹ.*
*Ni Olódùmarè bá ní kí Ọ̀rúnmìlà ó yẹun wò.*

*Ọ̀rúnmìlà ṣe àyèwò tán,*
*Olódùmarè é ní ta ló tún kù o?*
*Ọ̀rúnmìlà ní àfi ẹni tó tún ṣìkejì òun*

*Tó jẹ́ obìnrin.*
*Olódùmarè wáá dáhùn pé*
*"Òun náà tún ń ṣàyẹ̀wò?"*
*Ọ̀rúnmìlà ní, "Bẹ́ẹ̀ ni."*
*Olódùmarè ní kó wáá yẹun wò.*
*Nígbà tí Ọ̀ṣun ó yẹ Olódùmarè wò,*
*Ó já gbogbo ohun tó dàníyàn sí.*
*Ṣùgbọ́n kò so ọ́ geere.*
*Ó so kókó ọ̀rò ni,*
*Ṣùgbọ́n kò hú u légbò légbò bí i ti Ifá.*

*Olódùmarè wáá bi Ọ̀rúnmìlà pé*
*"Èwo sì tún lèyí?"*
*Ló bá kó àlàyé, ló ṣe*
*Bó ti ṣe fi nǹkan yìí dá a lọ́lá.*

*Olódùmarè é ní, ó dáa.*
*Ó ní, "Ẹnuu bó ti ṣe so ọ́ mọ yìí,*

*Òun fi àṣẹ sí i.*
*Láéláé*
*Bó bá so ọ́ báta,*
*Bó bá so ọ́ bàta.*
*Ẹni tó bá dá a lójàá,*
*Kó sì maa ṣe mọ́ ọn lára lẹ́sẹ̀kẹsẹ̀*
*Lójọ́ náà;*
*Kò gbọdò dijọ́ kejì."*
*Ìdí nìyí tí ẹ́ẹ́rìndínlógún fi máa*
*Ń yára á ṣẹ.*
*Àmọ́ ohun tí wọn ó maa so kò nífà Ťàayàn lára.*

*Bí ẹ́ẹ́rìndínlógún ṣe gba àṣẹ*
*Lọ́dọ̀ Olódùmarè nù un.*[4]

Subject diviners of earth to a test.
To find out whether they were telling lies to the inhabitants of the earth
Or whether they were telling the truth.
This test involved
Calling on Ọ̀rúnmìlà and other diviners of the earth.

Olódùmarè would say that he wanted to see all of them.
When they arrived,
Olódùmarè would ask them to divine for him.
So, Olódùmarè asked Ọ̀rúnmìlà to divine for him.

When Ọ̀rúnmìlà finished divining,
Olódùmarè asked, "Who is next?"
Ọ̀rúnmìlà said that the next person was his partner

Who was a woman.
Olódùmarè then answered,
"Is she also a diviner?"
To which Ọ̀rúnmìlà replied, "That is true."
Olódùmarè then asked her to divine for him.
When Ọ̀ṣun examined Olódùmarè,
She hit on all those things in his mind.
But she did not say it in full.
She mentioned the gist
But she did not tell the root of the matter like Ifá.

Olódùmarè asked Ọ̀rúnmìlà,
"What is this one?"
Ọ̀rúnmìlà then explained to Olódùmarè
How he honored Ọ̀ṣun with the sixteen cowries.

Olódùmarè said, "It is all right."
He further said that even though she did not go into details,

He, Olódùmarè gave his assent to it.
He added, "From today on and forever,
Even if what *ẹ́ẹ́rìndínlógún* says may not be detailed,
Anybody who disbelieves it
Would see the consequences instantly.

It must not wait till the following day."
This is why the predictions of *ẹ́ẹ́rìndínlógún* come to pass quickly
Even though the stories may not be impressive.
That was how *ẹ́ẹ́rìndínlógún* received *àṣẹ*
Directly from Olódùmarè.

## *Ọ̀ṣẹ́tùúrá and Ifá Divination Sacrifice*

We will now turn our attention to myths of Ifá divination which tell us about the importance of Ọ̀ṣun in Yorùbá religion generally and how Ọ̀ṣẹ́tùúrá became the representative of Ọ̀ṣun in Yorùbá divination and sacrifice. The full story goes as follows:

When the *Òrìṣà* first came to the earth, they must have arrived in waves—not all the four hundred-and-one *Òrìṣà* arrived at once. In any case, according to this myth from the Odù Ọ̀ṣẹ́tùúrá, there were only seventeen *Òrìṣà* in the first party, and Ọ̀ṣun was the seventeenth. Olódùmarè gave instructions to the *Òrìṣà* about what they should do as soon as they arrived on earth to make the young earth a pleasant place to live. They carried out all the instructions without involving Ọ̀ṣun in any of their activities. The result was that things did not go well for them. Rain did not fall. There was illness, bitterness, and restlessness all over the earth. Let us quote a few lines from this Odù at this juncture:

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| | *Wọ́n délé ayé,* | When they arrived on earth, |
| | *Wọ́n lagbó orò,* | They created a sacred forest for Orò.[5] |
| | *Wọ́n lagbó ọpa.* | They created a sacred forest for Ọpa.[6] |
| | *Wọ́n lànà gbóóró ìtifẹ̀ wá.* | They made a small road leading to Ifẹ̀[7] |
| 5 | *Wọ́n rán ni okùn,* | They sent people to make okun beads.[8] |
| | *Wọ́n rán 'nii 'dẹ.* | They sent people to make brass objects.[9] |
| | *Ẹnìkan ò ké sí Ọ̀ṣun.* | But nobody involved Ọ̀ṣun in anything. |
| | *Ọ̀ṣun níí sì í máa á tójúu wọn* | Whereas Ọ̀ṣun was the person taking care of them |
| 10 | *Lóńjẹ, níwá, lẹ́yìn.* | Giving them food and other things. |
| | *Gbogbo ohun tí wọn ṣe, kò gún.* | All the things which the Òrìṣà were doing, none was successful. |
| | *Wọ́n pòjò, òjò ò rọ̀.* | They prayed for rain, but it did not rain. |
| | *Kíkan kíkan gbayé,* | Bitterness engulfed the earth. |
| 15 | *Òjòjò ó gbòde.* | Restlessness took over the streets of the city. |
| | *Wọ́n ní hà! Olódùmarè é ha jẹ́ puró fáwọn.* | They exclaimed "Did Olódùmarè tell us a lie? |
| | *Irúu kín lèyí?* | What is this? |
| | *Bó ṣe ní káwọn ó ṣe é làwọ́n ń ṣe é.*[10] | We are doing everything according to his instructions." |

The Òrìṣà then decided to send Ọ̀rúnmìlà to Olódùmarè to find out what actually happened. When Ọ̀rúnmìlà got to Olódùmarè, he stated the problem. He said that they were living on earth in accordance with the instructions of Olódùmarè but to their greatest surprise nothing they did on earth was good. Olódùmarè then asked whether they involved the only woman among them in all they were doing. But Ọ̀rúnmìlà replied that since she was a woman, they did not involve her. To which Olódùmarè replied as follows:

| | |
|---|---|
| *Olódùmarè ní dánidáni lòun,* | Olódùmarè said that he was a creator |
| *Òun è é dáni lẹ́ẹ̀mejì.* | But he would never create any person or thing twice. |
| *Ó ní ẹ padà sóhùún,* | He told Ọ̀rúnmìlà to go back to his colleagues |
| *Ó ní ẹ rèé bẹ̀ ẹ́,* | And that all of them should go and beg Ọ̀ṣun. |

*Kó máa báa yín lọ́wọ́ sí ǹkan.* So that she could agree to be involved in their affairs.

*Ó ní gbogbo nǹkan yín ó sì maa gún.*[11] He assured them that their affairs would then be good.

When Ọ̀rúnmìlà got to the earth, he reported back to his colleagues, and all of them started to beg Ọ̀ṣun, but Ọ̀ṣun did not yield until Ọ̀rúnmìlà appealed to her. She said:

*Ẹ máa bẹ oríi yín àtẹ́lẹ́daaa yín* Begin to beg your *ori* and your creator
*Pé oyún tí ń bẹ nínú òun yìí,* So that the fetus which was in her womb
*Kóun ó bí i lọ́kùnrin.* Would be delivered as a male child.
*Ó ní tí òun bá bí i lọ́kùnrin,* She assured them that if it was a male child,
*Nǹkan yín o ò gún.* Their matters would from then on be straight.
*Àmọ́ tóun bá bí i lóbìnrin,* But if it was born as a female child,
*Ẹ kangun.*[12] War would begin in earnest.[13]

Ọ̀rúnmìlà reported back to his colleagues what Ọ̀ṣun told him. When Oosaala looked at Ọ̀ṣun's womb with his *awo*[14] he found a baby girl there. He then pointed his *ado asure*[15] to Ọ̀ṣun's womb, and commanded that fetus to change into male with immediate effect. When Ọ̀ṣun delivered the baby, it was born as a male child.

Oosaala was the first person to carry the baby. He petted the baby and coddled it. Then Ọ̀rúnmìlà, the father, also carried the baby and named him Ọ̀ṣẹ́tùúrá. He, Ọ̀rúnmìlà, carried the baby with him wherever he went. Whenever anybody was to be initiated as an Ifá priest, Ọ̀ṣẹ́tùúrá must be involved. Whenever anybody was making a sacrifice, Ọ̀ṣẹ́tùúrá, the son of Ọ̀ṣun, must be invoked last before the sacrifice was delivered to Esu. If any person was suffering from illness, as soon as Ọ̀ṣẹ́tùúrá touched the person that person would be well instantaneously. Ọ̀ṣẹ́tùúrá is today a minor Odu of Ifá but he governs all sacrifices and rituals of Ifá.

Ọ̀ṣun then became happy since her son was deeply involved in the affairs of the male *Òrìṣà*. She then made the following pronouncement:

*Gbogbo obìnrin pátá pátá látòní lọ,* From today on, all women without any exception,
*Wọn ò gbọdọ̀ morò,* They must not know Orò,
*Wọn ò sì gbọdọ̀ wọlé Eégún* And they must not enter the shrine of Eégún.[16]
*Pé kéégún ó máa tojúu wọn jáde.* Eégún must not come out in their presence.
*Ó dèèwọ̀.* This must be observed as a taboo.
*Ṣùgbọ́n gbodo nnkan yòówù tí ẹ bá ń ṣe,* But all other things you are doing,
*E ẹ gbọdọ̀ mọ́ fi ti Ọ̀ṣun ṣe.* You must involve Ọ̀ṣun in them.
*Layé bá gún régí.* Their lives then became smooth.
*Wọ́n ní bóníyán bá ń gúnyán,* They said, "If someone is pounding yams
*Tí ò fi tỌ̀ṣun ṣe,* Without the knowledge of Ọ̀ṣun,
*Iyán an wọn a lẹ́mọ.* His/her pounded yam will not be smooth.
*Bí onírokà bá ń rokà,* If someone is preparing *ọ̀kà* food
*Tí ò fi tỌ̀ṣun ṣe,* Without involving Ọ̀ṣun in it,
*Ọ̀kàa rẹ̀ a sì mẹ̀rẹ̀.* His/her food will not come out fine.
*A fimọ̀ jọ́ tỌ̀ṣun o.* We will involve Ọ̀ṣun in whatever we do.
*A fimọ̀ jọ́ tỌ̀ṣun o.* We will involve Ọ̀ṣun in all our deliberations.
*Iyee wa,* Our great mother,

*A bá wọn pé nímọ̀.* Who must be present at every important deliberation.

*A fimọ̀ jọ́ tỌ̀ṣun.* We will involve Ọ̀ṣun in all our deliberations.
*Agbẹrẹgẹdẹ àjùbà,* Agbẹrẹgẹdẹ àjùbà,"[17]
*Àjùbà agbẹrẹgẹdẹ* Àjùbà agbẹrẹgẹdẹ
*A dífá fún Ọ̀ṣun sèǹgẹ̀sí,* Divined for Ọ̀ṣun Sẹ̀ǹgẹ̀sí,
*Olóòyàa yùn.* Owner of a hair comb decorated with *iyùn*.[18]
*Ó gbé kọ̀kọ̀,* When she was in a secret place,
*Ó ń bẹbọ irúnmọlẹ́ ẹ́ jẹ́.* She spoiled the sacrifice of other divinities.
*Ta ní ń rúbọ,* Who is performing a sacrifice
*Tí ò ké sẹ́lẹ́bọ.* Without involving the owner of sacrifice?
*Ọ̀ṣun, ẹ̀wùjí,* Ọ̀ṣun, whose other name is Ẹ̀wùjí,
*A kúnlẹ̀,* We are all on our knees.
*A bẹ̀ ó.* We are all begging you.
*Ẹ wólẹ̀ fóbìnrin.* Let us all kneel and prostrate before women.
*Obìnrin ló bí wa* We are all borne by women
*Ká tóó dènìyàn.*[19] Before we become recognized as human beings.

## *The Bag of Wisdom: Did Ọ̀ṣun Originate the Ifá Divination System?*

Our next story from the Ifá literary corpus about Ọ̀ṣun is taken from Okanransode. It was recorded from Babalawo Ifátóògùn, a famous Ifá priest from Ìlobùú, near Ọ̀ṣogbo. The story is about a bag of wisdom which Olódùmarè threw down from the sky and asked all the *Òrìṣà* to look for. Olódùmarè assured the *Òrìṣà* that anyone who found it would be the wisest of them all. Olódùmarè showed the bag to the *Òrìṣà* so that they would be able to recognize it as soon as they saw it. Since Ọ̀ṣun and Ọ̀rúnmìlà were a very intimate couple, both of them decided to search for the bag together. I will now quote this interesting story in full.

*Ọlọgbọn sodè, ó tú.* A wise person tied *idè*,[20] but it disintegrated.
*Ìmọ̀ràn sodè, a dẹ̀.* A sage tied *idè,* it became loose.
*Èèyàn tó bá fẹ̀yìn tọ̀pẹ̀* Only a person who leans his back on Ọ̀pẹ̀
*Ní ó sodè pẹ́ títí.* Will tie *idè* which will last for long.
*A dífá fún Ọ̀rúnmìlà* Ifá divination was performed for Ọ̀rúnmìlà
*Òun Ọ̀ṣun jọ ń wógbọ́n kiri.* When he and Ọ̀ṣun were searching for wisdom.
*Olódùmarè ló ké sí irinwó mọlẹ̀,* It was Olódùmarè who called the four hundred divinities (of the right)
*Igbaa mọlẹ̀.* And the two hundred divinities (of the left).
*Ó ní kí wọn ó wá sí èkìtì ìsálọ́run.* Olódùmarè summoned them to heaven.
*Wọ́n sì dẹ́bẹ̀.* When they arrived there,
*Ó ní òun ó gbèé pagidarì ọgbọ́n àti agbára fún un yín.* He told them that he wanted to give them deep wisdom and power.
*Ó ní ẹni tí ó bá le rí nǹkan yìí* He told the *Òrìṣà* that anybody who had
*Ní ó maa pàṣẹ lé e lórí.* What he was planning to give them Would be the source of wisdom,
*Olúwaarẹ̀ ní ó sì gbọ́n jù lọ láyé.* And that person would be the wisest person on earth.

*Ó ní tó bá di ọjọ́ mọ́kàndínlógún òní,*
*Òun ó ju àpò ọgbọ́n ọ̀hún sílé ayé.*

*Igbó ni òun ó jù ú sí*
*Ọ̀dàn ni o,*
*Odò ni o,*
*Ìlú ni o,*
*Ojú ọ̀nà ni o,*
*Òun ò níí sọ ibìkan.*
*Olódùmarè é fi àpò ọgbọ́n náà hàn wọ́n.*
*Pé òun "Nìyí o."*
*Ẹ wò ó dáadáa*
*Bó ti rí nìyí o.*
*Nígbà tí wọ́n délé ayé tán,*
*Ẹlẹ́bọ ń rúbọ.*
*Olóògùn ń sà á.*
*Eléte ń dá.*
*Pé "Kiní yìí, èmi ní ó ri sẹ́ẹ̀."*

*Ọ̀rúnmìlà òun Ọ̀ṣun sì nìyí, alájọṣe ni wọn.*

*Tó ṣe pé wọn è é yaraa wọn.*

*Làwọn méjèèjì bá mééjì kẹ́ẹ̀ta,*
*Wọn looko akónilógbọ́n*
*Pé kí wọn ó yẹ àwọn wò.*

*Nǹkan tí gbogbo irúnmọlẹ̀ ń wá yìí*

*Ó ha le jẹ́ pé ọwọ́ àwọn ní ó bọ́ sí?*

*Wọ́n ní kí wọn ó yáa rúbọ.*

*Wọn lẹ́wù ọ̀rùn ẹnìkọ̀ọ̀kan wọn lẹbọ.*

*Kí onírálùkù ó sì lọ lè é rú ewúrẹ́ kan,*
*Kó sì rú eku kan ṣoso.*
*Igba ọ̀kẹ́ àti wóró kan.*

*Ọ̀rúnmìlà ní ìwọ Ọ̀ṣun,*
*"Jẹ́ káwọn ó lọ rú ẹbọ yìí o."*
*Ọ̀ṣun ní, "E è é jéèyàn ó sinmi,*
*Fẹ̀wù rúbọ,*
*Fi nǹkan rúbọ ti wáá jẹ́ ńbi oun táwọn ń wá yìí!"*

*Ọ̀ṣun kọ̀, kò rúbọ.*
*Ọ̀rúnmìlà, Àjànà,*
*Ó yaa mú ẹ̀wù rẹ̀, ó fi rubọ.*

*Ó sì fi eku kan àti owó náa rúbọ.*

He told them that nineteen days hence
He would throw down a bag of wisdom onto the earth.
But whether he would throw it into a forest,
Or into a grassland,
Or into a river,
Or into a town,
Or on a road,
He would not tell them exactly where.
Olódùmarè showed them the bag of wisdom.
He said, "This is it."
Look at it well
And note its distinctive features.
When they arrived on earth,
Some of them started to perform sacrifice.
Some were making medicine.
Some were planning their own strategies.
They were saying, "This thing, I will be the one to find it."

Ọ̀rúnmìlà and Ọ̀ṣun used to do things together.

They were always going about in company of each other.

Both of them added two cowries to three,
And went to divine.
They asked the diviners to check both of them out.

"The thing which all the *Òrìṣà* are looking for
Could both of them be the persons who would find it?"

The diviners asked Ọ̀rúnmìlà and Ọ̀ṣun to perform sacrifice
With the big garments which they were wearing.

Each should offer a goat,
And a house rat
As well as two hundred-and-one *oke* full of cowries[21] for each person.
Ọ̀rúnmìlà counseled that they should make the sacrifice.
But Ọ̀ṣun said, "Please, let me rest.
Go make sacrifice with your garment,
Go make sacrifice with other things,
How does that relate to what we are searching for?"
Ọ̀ṣun refused to perform sacrifice.
Ọ̀rúnmìlà, whose other name is Àjànà,
Took his own garment,
and surrendered it for sacrifice.

He also used a house rat and money for the sacrifice.

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| | *Wọ́n wá àpò ọgbọ́n títí,* | They looked for the bag of wisdom, |
| | *Wọn ò rí i.* | They did not see it. |
| | *Gbogbo àwọn irúnmọlẹ̀ yókù náà,* | All the other *Òrìṣà* |
| 75 | *Wọn ò rí i.* | Did not see it either. |
| | *Wọ́n wá a dé ẹ̀gbá ajá.* | They searched for it up to Ẹ̀gbá ajá.[22] |
| | *Wọ́n wá a dẹ́sà adìẹ.* | They went as far as Ẹ̀sà adìẹ.[23] |
| | *Elòmîì wá a dé Ìkọ Àwúsí.* | Some went as far as Ìkọ Àwúsí. |
| | *Wọn wá a dé Ìdòròmù Àwúṣẹ̀.* | Others searched for it in Ìdòròmù Àwúṣẹ̀. |
| 80 | *Wọn wá á dé Ìwọnràn* | While some looked for it in Ìwọnràn |
| | *Níbi tí ojúmọ́ tí mọ́ ọ́n wá.* | From where the day breaks[24] |
| | *Wọn ò ri i.* | But they did not see it. |
| | *Nígbà tó dijọ́ kan, ni ekú bá sì bọ́ síbi ẹ́wù* | One day a house rat went to the garment |
| | *Ọ̀ṣun tó fi kọ́,* | Which Ọ̀ṣun hung up in her house. |
| 85 | *Ni ekú bá jẹ àpò igbá àyàa rẹ̀ lábẹ́nú.* | The rat ate up its chest pocket underneath. |
| | *Ní ọjọ́ kejì, ni wọ́n bá tún múra,* | The next day, they got themselves ready |
| | *Wọ́n tún bẹ̀rẹ̀ sí í wá àpò ọgbọ́n yìí.* | And started to search for the bag of wisdom once again |
| | *Ni Ọ̀ṣun bá rí i.* | Then, Ọ̀ṣun found it. |
| 90 | *"Han-in! Àpò ọgbọ́n nìyí!"* | She exclaimed, "Han-in! This is the bag of wisdom!" |
| | *Jùà, ó gbé e jù ápò àyà ẹ̀wùu rẹ̀.* | She threw it into the chest pocket of her garment. |
| | *Ló bá fọn ọ́n.* | She started to go in a hurry. |
| 95 | *Níbi tó gbé ń sáré é dá igi kọjá,* | As she was crossing dead woods |
| | *Dátàkùn kọjá,* | And scaling climbing stems, |
| | *Pọ́rọ́ ni àpò ọgbọ́n bọ́ ọ́ lẹ̀,* | Suddenly the bag of wisdom dropped down |
| | *Ní ọ̀gangan ibi téku ti jẹ àpò.* | From where the rat had eaten her garment's pocket. |
| 100 | *Ọ̀ṣun sí ń ké é pe Ọ̀rúnmìlà* | Ọ̀ṣun was calling on Ọ̀rúnmìlà, |
| | *Pé "Ọ̀rúnmìlà, Àjànà,* | Saying, "Ọ̀rúnmìlà, whose other name is Àjànà, |
| | *Máa bọ̀ o, máa bọ̀,* | Come quickly, come quickly. |
| | *Ọ̀ún ti rápò ọgbọ́n o."* | I have seen the bag of wisdom." |
| 105 | *Bí Ọ̀rúnmìlà ti ń lọ,* | As Ọ̀rúnmìlà was going, |
| | *Ló bá sì rí àpò ọgbọ́n un nílẹ̀.* | He saw the bag of wisdom on the ground. |
| | *Ló bá jù ú sínú àpò ẹ̀wùu tiẹ̀.* | He then put it inside the pocket of his own garment. |
| | *Nígbà tí wọ́n délé,* | When they arrived home, |
| 110 | *Ọ̀rúnmìlà ní, "Ọ̀ṣun, jẹ́ kí n wo àpò ọ̀hún."* | Ọ̀rúnmìlà said, "Ọ̀ṣun let me see the bag." |
| | *Ọ̀ṣun ní láyé yìí kọ́kùnrin ó ri i.* | But Ọ̀ṣun said that she would never show it to a man. |
| | *Ẹni tí ó bàá sì ri i,* | But if a man must see it, |
| | *Yóó maa nígba eku,* | He would give her two hundred rats, |
| 115 | *Igba ẹja,* | Two hundred fishes, |
| | *Igba ẹyẹ,* | Two hundred birds, |
| | *Igba ẹran,* | Two hundred animals, |
| | *Ọ̀pọ̀lọpọ̀ owó.* | And plenty of money. |
| | *Ọ̀rúnmìlá bẹ̀ ẹ́ bẹ̀ ẹ́ bẹ̀ ẹ́,* | Ọ̀rúnmìlà begged her for long, |
| 120 | *Kò gbà.* | But she did not yield. |
| | *Ló bá padà sínú ilée tiẹ̀.* | He then returned to his own house. |
| | *LỌ̀ṣun bá ní kí òun ó tiẹ̀ mú àpò náà jáde* | When Ọ̀ṣun tried to take out the bag from her pocket, |

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| *Kóun ó tún un wò lẹ́ẹ̀kan sí i.* | So that she could look at it once again, |
| *Ìgbà tí yóó ti ọwọ́ bọ àpò.* | As she put her hands inside the pockets, |
| *Ó di gbùrá.* | Her hands entered into a hole, |
| *Ọwọ́ọ rẹ̀ẹ́ yọ síta lódì kejì.* | And came out on the bottom part of the pocket. |
| *LỌ̀ṣun bá lọ bá Ọ̀rúnmìlà nílée tiẹ̀ lọ́hùún.* | So, Ọ̀ṣun went to meet Ọ̀rúnmìlà in his own house. |
| *Ló bá bẹ̀rẹ̀ sí í bẹ̀ ẹ́.* | She started to beg him. |
| *Ló bá bẹ̀rẹ̀ sí í ṣàálọ̀.* | She started to please Ọ̀rúnmìlà (with good things). |
| *Bí Ọ̀ṣun ṣe kó lọ sílé Ọ̀rúnmìlà nù un* | That was how Ọ̀ṣun went to Ọ̀rúnmìlà's house |
| *Tó bẹ̀rẹ̀ sí í gbé lọ́dọ̀ ọkọọ rẹ̀* | To live there with her husband |
| *Pé kó fi kọ́un lọ́gbọ́n díẹ̀.* | So that he would teach her a little bit of the wisdom. |
| *Nígbà wá ṣẹ̀ bí wọn bá fẹ́ obìnrin,* | In ancient times, when people got married, |
| *Kó pọn dandan kó bọ́kọ ẹ lọọlé.* | It was not compulsory for the wife to go to her husband's home to live with him. |
| *Bí ó ṣe di pé tọkọ taya ń gbé pọ̀ nu un.* | That was how couples started to live together. |
| *Èwù tí Ọ̀ṣun bọ́ ó lẹ̀ báyìí,* | When Ọ̀ṣun removed the big garment from her body, |
| *Àṣẹ ló fi banu.* | She put *ase* into her mouth, |
| *Ó ní láé láé, àtìrandíran obìnrin* | She said that from then on, no woman |
| *Kò gbọdọ̀ wẹ̀wù agbádá mọ́.* | Must wear the agbada dress.[25] |
| *Ló bá lọ lè é sọ ẹ̀wù sígbó.* | She then went and threw the garment into the bush. |
| *Nígbà tí ẹ̀bẹ́ pọ̀,* | After a lot of pleading from Ọ̀ṣun, |
| *Ni Ọ̀rúnmìlá bá mú tínńtín orí rẹ̀,* | Ọ̀rúnmìlà took a little bit of the wisdom |
| *Ló wáá fún Ọ̀ṣun.* | And gave it to Ọ̀ṣun. |
| *Òun náà ni ẹẹ́rìndínlógún* | That is the *ẹẹ́rìndínlógún* |
| *Tí Ọ̀ṣun ń dá un.* | Which Ọ̀ṣun is casting. |
| *Àpọ̀ ọgbọ́n ọjọ́ náà ni Odù Ifá,* | The bag of wisdom of that day is Odù Ifá, |
| *Àyájọ́, òògùn, gbogbo ọgbọ́n ìjìnlẹ̀ Yorùbá.*[26] | Medicines and all other profound wisdom of the Yorùbá people. |

In the Ifá verse quoted above, Ọ̀ṣun was the first person to find the bag of wisdom, but when the bag slipped through the broken pocket of her big garment, Ọ̀rúnmìlà accidentally stumbled on it and kept it. One can speculate as to the morality of Ọ̀rúnmìlà keeping for himself what should belong to his wife. But we must remember that before she discovered that she had lost the bag, Ọ̀ṣun herself had boasted that she would take so many hundred of things as well as plenty of money from anybody who would see the bag of wisdom.

One can further speculate that this myth is telling us that Ọ̀ṣun was perhaps the first person to make use of Ifá — the bag of wisdom — before it was passed on to her husband, and not the other way round. Let us now turn our attention to two other matters which confirm our suspicion.

The first one relates to *iyerosun*, the sacred yellow powder of divination on which Ifá priests print the marks of Ifá inside a divining board. Why is this powder yellowish like the color which is sacred to Ọ̀ṣun? Did Ọ̀rúnmìlà use this powder

as a mark of honor to his wife? We may never know for certain the answer to these questions; but given the intimate connection between Ọ̀ṣun and Ifá, especially in respect to the origin of Ifá as a bag of wisdom first found by Ọ̀ṣun, it may not be far-fetched to say that the yellow powder has something to do with Ọ̀ṣun.

The second issue which I would like to mention here is the simple fact that when one takes a look at the Odù of *ẹẹ́rìndínlógún* and those of Ifá, it would seem that the Odù of Ifá are based on those of *ẹẹ́rìndínlógún*, and not the other way round. *Ẹẹ́rìndínlógún* is based on sixteen single signs of Ifá such as Ògúndá, Ìrosùn, Ọ̀wọ́nrín, etc.; except Èjì Ogbè which is coupled as in the case of Ifá. Ifá, however, does not make use of single signs (even though Ifá literature refers to it). All the signs are coupled either as *ojú odù* (major odù) or as *ọmọ odù* (minor odù). It stands to reason to say that a single sign such as *Ògúndá*

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must exist in reality or at least in the mind before it is coupled to become *Odi Meji* (two odi).

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We can go further to speculate that the apparent simplicity of the signs of *ẹẹ́rìndínlógún* and even the short nature of some of its literature are indications of its antiquity upon which the more elaborate signs and wider frame of reference of Ifá were based. Whatever the case may be, there is no doubt at all that *ẹẹ́rìndínlógún* has not been given its rightful place as a part and parcel of the Ifá literary and divinatory system. In one of the verses quoted above, Olódùmarè, while giving *ase* to *ẹẹ́rìndínlógún* stated thus,

> From today on and forever
> Even if what *ẹẹ́rìndínlógún* says may not be detailed,
> Anybody who disbelieves it
> Would see the consequences instantly.
> It must not wait till the following day.[27]

## *Conclusion*

It is customary for researchers to refer to Ọ̀ṣun simply as an *Òrìṣà* of fertility. This is true. In fact, a recent chanter of Ọ̀ṣun's literature refers to her as

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| *Ìyá abóbìnrin gbàtọ̀.* | Mother who helps women to collect semen |
| *Ládékojú, abọ́kùnrin gbàṣẹ́.*[28] | Wearer of a veiled crown, who helps men to collect menstrual flow. |

There are many verses of Ifá which relate to Ọ̀ṣun as a mother of many children both in the biological and religious sense. The city of Òòró[29] (now simply called Òró) was where Ọ̀ṣun had so many children that she did not have any more space to sit down in her own house. Since her children had taken up all available space, Ọ̀ṣun was always found standing up.

Ifá also speaks of Ọ̀ṣun as a benevolent mother. She has the habit of bestowing wealth, fame, and honor on her adherents. A verse of Irete Ọba tells us how Ọ̀ṣun rewarded a poor priest of Ifá who had divined for her when she was childless and made it possible for her to have children. The name of the Ifá priest is Òjìyàòmẹ̀gùn; he had two apprentices: Ifon, Ifá priest of Ìdó, and Dùùrù, Ifá priest of Lìkì. When Ọ̀ṣun eventually had children, she rewarded the three of them with costly clothes, beads, and plenty of money. She brought all the presents personally to her Ifá priests, but Òjìyàòmẹ̀gùn had traveled out to a far place. Ọ̀ṣun gave the two apprentices a horse each. She also gave them their own share of the rest of the presents. She waited for a long time for Òjìyàòmẹ̀gùn. When he did not arrive, she ordered her servants to dig a very deep pit inside which she carefully kept Òjìyàòmẹ̀gùn's presents. But she first covered the pit with sand before she dumped the money and the presents there, and then covered it up again with earth. That is why Ọ̀ṣun is saluted as

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| *Oore yèyé Ọ̀ṣun.* | Hail the benevolent mother Ọ̀ṣun. |
| *Ò wa yanrìn, wa yanrìn,* | She who digs up sand, digs up sand, |
| *Kówó sí.*[30] | And keeps money there (for her own people). |

The benevolence of Ọ̀ṣun goes beyond bestowing money and riches on people. She nourishes her own just as she nourished the original sixteen *Òrìṣà* who first arrived on earth with Ọ̀ṣun as the seventeenth. She nourishes people with different kinds of vegetables, such as *yanrin* and *tete* (special vegetables of Ọ̀ṣun) which are still her favorite foods today. She also likes differents kinds of fruit such as pumpkins, bananas, oranges, etc. But she does not like guinea-corn beer. She drinks maize beer instead. Above all, she nourishes with the sweet waters of the sacred Ọ̀ṣun River.

We must not make the mistake of thinking that Ọ̀ṣun is always meek, quiet, and long-suffering. Sometimes she can be a fierce warrior. A verse of Ògúndá Ìwòrì (Ògúndá aráà Dó) tells us how Ọ̀ṣun Àpara (otherwise known as Yemesé[31]) delivered the people of Ìdó[32] when their town was conquered and the people were being taken away as slaves. She beheaded their enemies and freed the people of Ìdó. When her people said that they did not know the way back to Ìdó, she fell down on the spot, became a river and flowed back to Ìdó carrying her people along with her. That is why Yemesé is celebrated in Ìdó with the following song:

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| *Yemesé ilé Ìdó pagun ra o.* | Yemesé of Ìdó annihilated war. |
| *Ọ̀ṣun àpará pagun ra lónìí.* | Ọ̀ṣun Àpara annihilated war today. |
| *Ó pagun ra.*[33] | She annihilated war. |

Space will not allow us to go into other areas of the contributions of Ọ̀ṣun to the religion and culture of the Yorùbá people as a loyal wife of Ṣàngó, her second husband; as a physician who cures with her own water; as a founder of the Ògbóni society[34] to maintain truth and justice in the land; or even as the only *Òrìṣà* who knows how to deceive the "cannibals" of heaven (see first story, above). All these and more are contained in the stories of Ọ̀ṣun as enshrined in the Ifá corpus, a body of knowledge which she probably founded or at least helped to establish together with Ọ̀rúnmìlà. Her role in this regard is often not deeply appreciated.

To understand this ancient *Òrìṣà* is to know the intelligence, vitality, caring, and nourishing abilities of womankind—long-suffering, cheated, overlooked, and overworked, but always committed to the survival of humanity. In this sense, Ọ̀ṣun is the icon not only of women, but of all creation.

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| *Omi o!* | O! sacred water. |
| *Ota o!* | O! sacred stones. |
| *Ẹdan o!* | O! sacred *ẹdan* (symbol of Ògbóni). |
| *Ẹ kóre yèyé Ọ̀ṣun o.* | All hail the benevolent mother. |

## Notes

1. Collected from Babalọ́lá Ifátóògùn, Ìlobùú, near Òṣogbo, Nigeria.

2. *Ase.* A spiritual and magical power with which Olódùmarè created the universe, and copies of which he gave to the *Òrìṣà*. Human beings can also access *ase* through the right type of moral and spiritual connection.

3. Ọlọfin of heaven. Another name for Olódùmarè. Odùduwà, the founder of Ilé-Ifẹ̀, is Ọlọ́fin ayé (Ọlọfin of the earth which means law-giver of the earth).

4. Continuation of the same verse from Ogbèsá chanted by Babalọ́lá Ifátóògùn.

5. Orò. An ancestral spirit who makes use of the bull roarer and precedes the arrival of Egúngún on earth. His departure after seven days (in some places, seventeen days) is marked by a curfew during which women must not go out of the house. It is forbidden for women to see Orò and Egúngún.

6. Ọpa. A secret society which originated from Ilé-Ifẹ̀.

7. A small road which led to Ifẹ̀. In ancient times small paths led to Ifẹ̀ from other parts of Yorubaland since it was forbidden for ordinary people to visit Ilé-Ifẹ̀ unless they were summoned there for important rituals. This is why there were no broad caravan routes leading to Ifẹ̀.

8. Okùn beads. A costly bead manufactured in Ifẹ̀ in the past. There is at least one family carrying on the tradition in Ilé-Ifẹ̀ today.

9. Brass object. Ilé-Ifẹ̀ was an important center for the production of brass objects in ancient times.

10. Collected from Ònídọ̀ṣun of Ìlobùú.

11. Part of the same excerpt chanted by Ònídọ̀ṣun.

12. Continuation of the same verse chanted by Ònídọ̀ṣun.

13. Perhaps Ọ̀ṣun said that war would begin in earnest if she had a baby girl because instead of one woman, the sixteen Òrìṣà would have two women to deal with. But if it was

a boy, she would donate him to participate in the things men were doing and the child would then be a bridge between her and the men folk.

14. *Awo* (sometimes also called *iworan*) is a sacred object of Ọbàtálá with which he sees the future and other hidden things.

15. *Àdó àsúre* (sometimes also called *ìwo àbá*) also belongs to Ọbàtálá, and with it he generates ideas which his *ìwo àṣẹ* helps to bring to fruition. Ọbàtálá holds *ìwo àbá* (or *àsúre*) on the right, and *ìwo àṣẹ* on the left.

16. A woman is not allowed to enter the shrine of Egúngún unless she was born holding the umbilical cord in her hand. Such female children are called *ato*, and they are allowed to know all the secrets of Egúngún. Her male counterpart is called Amúsànán who can also know everything about Egúngún even without being initiated as *ọ̀jẹ̀*.

17. Agbẹrẹgẹdẹ àjùbà. Name of an Ifá priest which means "He whose large farm has just been cultivated from virgin forest."

18. Iyùn beads. A costly type of bead used by kings and important people.

19. Chanted by Òníọ̀ṣun of Ìlobùú.

20. *Ide*. Beads of Ifá worn only by Ifá priests. There are two slightly different types of *ide*. The one used by *babalawo* in Africa is green and maroon. But the same one used in the diaspora is green and yellow.

21. One *ọ̀kẹ́* full of cowries. Cowries were measured with a woven straw container called *ọ̀kẹ́* when the Yorùbá were using cowries as currency. One *ọ̀kẹ́* full of cowries is approximately twenty-thousand cowries. Two hundred-and-one *ọ̀kẹ́* will then be 200,000 × 201 = 40,200,000 cowries.

22. Ẹ̀gbá ajá. A place frequently mentioned in Ifá literature. It is probably a place in the Ẹ̀gbá dialect area of Yorubaland.

23. Ẹ̀sà adìẹ. Another place frequently mentioned in Ifá verses.

24. Ìkọ Àwúsí, Ìdòròmù Àwúṣẹ̀, and Ìwọnràn from where the day breaks. Some Ifá priests think that the Americas correspond to Ìkọ Àwúsí. Ìdòròmù Àwúṣẹ̀ refers to Africa, and Ìwọnràn from where day breaks corresponds to Australia.

25. Agbádá dress. The flowing garment worn by Yorùbá men. Women now wear a similar flowing garment but without a breast pocket.

26. Collected from Babalọ́lá Ifátóògùn of Ìlobùú.

27. It is the belief of the Yorùbá that pronouncements emanating from *ẹ́ẹ́rìndínlógún* come to pass more quickly than those of Ifá.

28. Chanted by Mọ́ládùn Ajítòní in Ògọ́, July 25, 1999.

29. The town of Òró is situated in the northeast of Yorubaland.

30. This is part of an Ifá chant rendered by Babalọ́lá Ifátóògùn of Ìlobùú.

31. Yemesé. An Òrìṣà of Ìdóo-Fábọ́rọ̀ who is related to Ọ̀ṣun.

32. Ìdó. There are many towns and villages known as Ìdó in Yorubaland. This verse, however, relates to Ìdóo-Fábọ́rọ̀ in Èkìtì state.

33. This is a song of Ifá which the people of Ìdó sing in honor of Yemesé.

34. Ògbóni society. An important secret society of Yorubaland. Ọ̀ṣun is believed to be one of the founders of the Ògbóni society. That is why she had her own *ẹdan* (symbol of Ògbóni). Anybody who is protected by Ọ̀ṣun cannot be judged by the Ògbóni. Other *Òrìṣà* who are intimately related to Ògbóni are Ifá and Ọbàtálá.

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CHAPTER TWELVE

# Ochun in the Bronx

*George Brandon*

## O Mio Ochun![1]

Legend has it that Ochun was once a native of Ekiti state in Nigeria and well admired there for her courage and clean habits (Epega n.d.: 25). Now her veneration extends to Cuba and Brazil, Venezuela and Mexico, Argentina and Spain, and the United States from Miami, Florida, to the South Bronx in New York.[2] In New York on September 8th, hundreds of *santeros*, *santeras*, and devotees show up at drum dances for Ochun and at church services honoring Ochun as the Virgin of Charity of Cobre, the patron saint of Cuba. The custom of making offerings to Ochun at the riverside still survives, but streams of fresh water are hard to come by in the Bronx and devotees have to travel some distance to the riverbank. When the winters are bitter cold, as they often are in New York, rather than go to the river one can bring the river to the devotee — in a pail.

Many Afro-Cuban stories tell of Ochun's love affairs with the male *orisha* and one of her roads in Santería is as a prostitute. Ochun's Nigerian love life was just as dense and complicated as in Cuba and in the Yoruba stories she married or lived with most of the important male *orisha*, learning from them, baring their secrets to the other *orisha*, and having their children.[3] All of this came to the Bronx and took root here along with her priesthood and devotees. It is clear that she relishes the power that her beauty gives her over men; and in some of her stories she may appear to have the attributes of a spoiled brat. Nigerian Yorubas often describe her as vain, beautiful, and somewhat narcissistic; by the time Ochun reached the South Bronx from Cuba she had also become a mulata with long, straight hair.

Ochun is an attractive but paradoxical figure: while she did not originate sexual love, she is its queen. Despite her knowledge of the erotic arts she never successfully married. Some *santeros* maintain that she never married at all. Inti-

mately connected with fertility, she is a bad mother who has children but doesn't take care of them. Ochun finally escaped the battles male *orisha* waged over her, and the demands of her numerous children, by turning herself into a river; yet she is willing to intercede on behalf of human beings in their relations with the other saints.[4] With her honey and cleverness she is able to sweeten and calm them so that they will be better disposed. When possessing her devotees in ceremonial trance Ochun shows her happiness through the possessed person's streaming tears and her displeasure through laughter. Ochun's basically sweet, charitable nature does not prevent her from being cunning and astute and her devotees sometimes fear that she will turn against them abruptly. In a prayer to Ochun the late Cuban *santero* Eduardo Pastoriza summarized her most apparent paradoxes for his Bronx devotees. He addressed her as "My mother, owner of all the rivers of the world, where every child of the saint goes to bathe and receive the blessing of sweet water to have happiness and joy." Then he continued, "But pay attention, take care, for we do not know when she is angry," and finally concluded, "Woman, death-maker, messenger of Olofi [God], I thank you" (Pastoriza Martinez 1972).

To tell something of Ochun's nature in contemporary New York I must tell you about Bianca, even though I can only write about that part of her life which she would tell me. There was, as surely as there is in any other life, much that we do not and could not tell even if we desired, and much that we manage to keep secret even from ourselves.

## *Bianca: A Priestess of Ochun*[5]

These things I heard and know; these she told me:

Bianca was born in Puerto Rico. Her mother gave birth nineteen times. Bianca was among the seven that survived to adulthood and, according to her mother, signaled her spiritual gifts before she was born by crying in the womb. Much of Bianca's early childhood experience was interpreted through the lens of spiritism.[6] Once, for no apparent reason, she simply walked away, and disappeared. Later family members found her a considerable distance from home and realized that she had been carried off and then left there by spirits of the dead, something that recurred throughout her childhood. Bianca was temporarily blind at two years of age, had some serious problems with her knees at four, and an unfortunate childhood encounter with fire yielded a large scar that still shows. Bianca's mother suffered much for her daughter's misfortunes. She suspected that Bianca's physical problems had spiritual origins and took the child to *espiritistas* for treatment. From seven or eight years of age onwards Bianca was frequently taken to spiritist centers by her mother and at fifteen she began her training as a medium. By then she had already been married for a year and had her first child. Another child was born the following year. At nineteen she got divorced. Her husband had transferred his affection to a younger woman who was

then pregnant with his child. Bianca never asked anything from her ex-husband for the support of the children they had together; she just left Puerto Rico.

Bianca came to New York right after the divorce but had begun to assume the healer's role before this. During her experiences in Puerto Rican spiritist centers she had made the transition from client to medium-in-training. This was supplemented by medical training outside of Espiritismo. In Puerto Rico she was struck by a runaway stolen car and had to be confined to a hospital for three months. She spent a great deal of time talking to chronically ill patients and even cured a woman who could not pass urine and had a swollen abdomen. After her release Bianca returned to the hospital, worked there for six months as a volunteer, and became a licensed midwife. By 1945 she was in New York leading spiritist meetings on a regular basis. In 1948 she cured a girl who was *loca* (Sp., crazy). The family was so grateful they insisted she license the group and charter it as a church. They even paid for it. Bianca's spiritist moral beliefs were pretty clear: "Love God above all things and love your neighbor as yourself. . . . If you don't ask for your neighbor, you can't ask for yourself. Ask God first and after that one of the saints. Spiritism cures the sick and the other religions can't. The other religions live by rackets. This is why other religions persecute the spiritualists."

It was not until 1958 that she became a priestess of Ochun. Bianca told me that no one would initiate you into the priesthood in the United States in those days; you had to go to Cuba. There were few Santería priests in New York then.[7] It was difficult to assemble enough qualified priests to do the complex initiation ritual. Everything was extremely secretive and many of the materials needed for the ceremony were not available. Many practitioners were not sure that the *oricha* would descend on U.S. soil and some priests did not even have their saints with them. Marta, who became Bianca's godmother and brought Bianca to Cuba, was a member of this early Santería network in New York. Bianca was her first godchild and the first person she ever initiated into the priesthood. Marta was really going to need some help and this was just one more reason to go to Cuba. So Bianca went, in the company of people now recognizable as early, key, and senior priests and priestesses of Santería in New York. They introduced her to a rich network of Cuban practitioners on the outskirts of Havana, many of whom eventually made their way to the United States and New York. It was they who initiated her into the priesthood of Ochun.

What kind of person is the priestess of Ochun? Bianca once told me that people make *ocha* (are initiated) for two reasons: sickness or a career. In other words, suffering or ambition. But neither relief from disease nor the attainment of material desire end obligation to the *orisha*'s service. The Ochun priestess is supposed to be special. She participates in the goddess's power, only a part of which is transferred at initiation. Ochun might be seen as the priestess's truer and better self whose accurate reflection enacts this more realized personality in all the great and small things under the deity's guidance. Ochun's priestess should not have the problems other people have nor be felled by them. Count-

less women have taken their tears to the river as an offering—for Ochun's abode is a safe house for the anguished and afflicted—but the Ochun priestess has Ochun within her, planted in her own head. The entranced priestess exists for Ochun and the people assembled at the ceremony, not for herself. She is like a piece of music with a prelude and a coda, but only a silent, blinding, climactic emptiness in between through which the ancient saint breaks as through a crack in the wall of time. And the benefits of continuing devotion? spiritual and material success; help for the sick and anxious; and a charity that always assures you that if you give, you will always have something *to* give. The Ochun priestess's name that will be recited and remembered down the genealogy of the priesthood and, when death no longer walks past the door without throwing a glance in her direction, she should be assured of ancestorhood and a new life to come, a life which—whether it be entirely as a spirit or back in the flesh—will be more highly evolved.

After Bianca returned from Cuba she still used candles, cologne, and goblets of water to work the spirits at a table covered with white cloth and saints' statues just as she always had; but she began to develop a separate, more secretive Santería clientele, as well.[8] And they needed to be secretive, too. Ordinary people didn't know anything about the *orisha* and for most *espiritistas* the thought of joining the Santería priesthood was the same as becoming an officer in an army of demons, witches, and black magicians. Later on there was much more overlap between the two clienteles and some limited influence of Santería on her spiritist work although she continued to distinguish between the two.

## *Orisha Is for When You Have Nothing*

By the time I met her in the early 1980s Bianca was an adept in three Caribbean religious traditions—Espiritismo, Santería, and Palo Mayombe—and she also went to mass at a Catholic church on a regular basis.[9] She had a widespread reputation as an *espiritista* and *santera* and her godchildren in Santería included Dominican, African-American, and Anglo-American devotees in addition to Puerto Ricans and Cubans. She had a large extended family in both New York and Puerto Rico with whom she stayed in contact. One of her children resided in New York and one in Puerto Rico but they were married to spouses who had no warmth and Bianca often said that the godchildren Ochun brought to her were more her children than the two that came from her belly. There were occasional, sporadic liaisons with men—and even hints of lesbian experiences—but nothing long-lasting.

Bianca's social life had come to revolve around spiritist and Santería colleagues and clients. In those early days they formed a small, secretive, and tightly knit community. But it was not long before there were more people involved, especially after the Cuban Revolution began bringing in wave after wave of expatriate exiles. Just as Bianca had been dependent on her network for her introduc-

tion and initiation into Santería, she came to be depended upon by immigrants who came after her. Bianca once told me about an incident from what had now become the halcyon old days of her involvement.

> One time the *santo* come down. It was Obatala. And he throw the *massotta* [initiation necklace] on this boy. The boy was very sick. He was drawn and thin as a finger. He had tuberculosis. And Obatala go to every *santero* there and ask for money for this boy because he had nothing. He say, "This boy must make *ocha* or he will surely die." And that day they collect one hundred dollars. And every *santero* there say, "I will give a *chivo* [Sp., a he-goat] for Obatala," "I will give a *chivo* for Eleggua," whoever is their head. In thirty days that boy make *ocha*. And all the *santeros* they bring what they promised and they work for free. I myself brought guinea hens, a goat. That was years ago. Never one do that now. It's not like that anymore. But I saw this, saw it with my own eyes when the *santo* come down. When you got money, that is not *orisha*. *Orisha* is for when you got nothing! That is *orisha*![10]

The fact that the religious community was small did not mean that it was not without its tensions and strains. Bianca's fierce independence had led her to found and lead spiritist groups on her own for years before she ever entered the Santería priesthood. Yet women were not as powerful in Santería as they were in Espiritismo and the priests kept the priestesses out of too many secrets. Her capricious and difficult temperament earned her enemies and made her the butt of a lot of unkind gossip among *santeros* who nonetheless needed her for spiritist sessions and to assist at ceremonies. Even the bond between godmother and godchild could prove fragile and break. Eventually Marta moved out of New York for the West coast, leaving with no forwarding address and, in effect, abandoning most of her godchildren including Bianca. Even before that they had fallen out over money owed to Bianca from a real estate venture, one in a series of old, cheap, dilapidated Bronx apartment-buildings Bianca bought over the years, each of them plagued by one problem or another.

But the big problem was that everyone was poor and everyone needed money to live and had to get it however they could. Money seemed to be changing everything, affecting everything. Since spiritists could not charge for anything, they were exempt from raw monetary temptation and depended on gifts from clients, income from running a *botanica*, or the wages of whatever non-spiritual work they did. But the *santos* did nothing without an offering and, since *santeros* charged fees, some priests seemed on the verge of turning Santería into a racket.

## *Ochun and Bianca in the Mirror*

I have written this just to trace Bianca's path to a few moments in time during which she revealed some things to me. This was in the early 1980s during a particularly trying period in her life. A sacrificial ritual in which she was participating had been raided by the police and the ASPCA and charges filed against

her. The ritual was for her Dominican godchild Amalia. Amalia walked into a spiritist meeting one night and they told her she needed to make *ocha* in thirty days, so she did it. She came to Ochun in tears and Bianca initiated her, but the woman was still confused. She would take information from almost anybody but her godmother and didn't understand at all what she was doing; it was all rote. Bianca had been arrested for assisting at her ceremony and, now that Bianca had decided to fight it out in court, Amalia refused to help her. Later thieves broke into Bianca's apartment and ransacked it. Among other things, they stole a number of important Santería religious objects which were later returned to Bianca just as anonymously as they had been taken. For the time being she was staying alone in her largely abandoned apartment building in a bombed-out section of the South Bronx. Just a couple of months before an irate tenant had set fire to the property. The fire was spotted early and the damage contained by firemen, but the few tenants remaining had to move to welfare housing or the Red Cross shelter. The arsonist meanwhile hid out in a hotel somewhere and the insurance claims adjusters hid their calculations behind doubletalk and silence.

The building was barely heated or sealed from the winter wind. A frigid breeze curled under the thick tin-lined door as we sat next to each other on an old couch and she told the following stories. Reciting stories about Ochun is one way a priestess imbued with the characteristics of Ochun manifests at that moment that part of themselves which is permanently intrinsic to the deity, that part of them that is the Ochun-ness of Ochun. Memory reaches and the priestess's voice opens out the story to suffering humanity, even if that humanity includes the priestess herself. Bianca looked vulnerable, scared, and depressed as she spontaneously chose to tell me two stories she had learned in Cuba and which had remained in her memory over the years.

### *Money in the Squash*

Once it didn't rain for a long time. For forty days and forty nights it didn't rain. The sun beat down continually. Everything dried up and there was no food. The people called on Ochun. They said, "Help us. Talk to your father, Olofi. He listens to you more than he listens to us. We have no food. We are suffering." So Ochun went up and talked to Olofi and interceded for the people. Olofi told her to take a squash down to the people on earth. On the way down Ochun met Chango and asked him to come with her down to earth. He came along.

When Ochun showed people what she had, they were disappointed. They said, "Is this what you went all the way up there to Olofi for? Just to bring back a squash?" They were angry and went away.

Ochun just laughed at them. "These people are stupid," she said. Then she broke open the squash. It was filled with money. She kept on laughing and said to Chango, "Come on. We'll share this money between us. Half for you and half for me."[11]

In this first tale Ochun's charity is rejected. The treasure she brings is rejected because people only see the outer covering rather than what is inside and also are unable to read the symbolic message conveyed by the choice of gift, the squash, one of Ochun's favorite foods. Yet these are the same people who sought her aid, begged for her help, and who will, by rejecting her, continue to needlessly suffer. Scorned by humans, she shares their intended fortune with another *orisha* while reserving some for herself. Here, charity scorned provokes scorn and Ochun regards the human beings as stupid and laughs, not at their suffering, but at their ignorance.

It is difficult to imagine this situation in a place where Ochun was a deity worshiped communally and by everyone, who could be expected to know her and her symbols and follow the advice of diviners and priests. Perhaps what we have here is a New York vision of Ochun and Chango in which they stand for the priesthood among ordinary people who scorn them and as a result cannot recognize the money in the squash. Nonetheless, the priests' abundance comes from trying to serve and what they have sought to give remains theirs anyway. The knowledge, power, and blessing they have to give remain with them whether or not they are recognized by other people.

*The Party*

One day all the *santos* were having a party. All of them were there: Eleggua, Obatala, Ochun, Oba, Oya, all of them; all of them except Ogun. Ogun was off somewhere hunting birds. Ochun looked around and said, "Where's Ogun?" The other *santos* said, "He's off somewhere hunting birds. We can party without him." Ochun didn't think this was right. So she stripped off her clothes, covered herself with honey, and began to dance. She danced in front of each of the *santos* and when she did each one abandoned their partying to follow her. Soon she had all of them in a line following her to where Ogun was hunting.

Naturally when Ogun saw Ochun coming toward him all naked and bathed in honey he was rather surprised. But pleasantly so, for Ochun was a beautiful mulata and Ogun was very much in love with her.[12] He saw the other *santos* too and asked Ochun why all the other *santos* were following her to which she answered coyly, "I don't know."[13]

Here Ochun exercises a dazzling sensual and erotic attraction over the other deities. Other variants of this tale have her smear honey on the lips of the other *orisha* while dancing in front of them.[14] This version is more extreme. Ochun does a virtual striptease and covers herself in honey, enticing all the *orisha*, male and female alike, to follow her.[15] But having put on an elaborate display to bring the party to Ogun, she feigns ignorance of why all the *santos* are following her as if not aware of her powers of seduction. In the previous tale human beings do not understand Ochun; in the second tale Ogun and possibly the other *santos*

do not understand her and she may or may not understand herself. In both cases her humor is either scornful or disingenuous. The attraction and need for her is universal—people feel it and the *orisha* feel it. To all she attempts to give a boon, but that does not mean that she is understood.

Bianca's comments on these stories were brief and telling. "Everyone is attracted to Ochun," she said. "Everyone loves Ochun. But no one understands her; no one but her daughters."

## *Conclusion*

I would like to conclude this brief mixture of hagiography, biography, and mythology with a few general and comparative remarks. When I think of Ochun and Bianca I am reminded of the Shiva-Trinity in Elephanta Temple in India which Heinrich Zimmer describes in his book on myths and symbols in Hindu and Buddhist art. It is a relief sculpture, and not even the central image in the temple, but it represents, according to Zimmer, "the mystery of the unfolding of the Absolute into the dualities of phenomenal existence, these being personified and culminated in human experience by the polarity of male and female" (Zimmer 1962: 148). Here male and female are derivative manifestations of an Absolute Being which transcends them and their differences, and resolves them all, but outside of the phenomenal world and outside of time. Hence the male and female figures flank a head whose aloofness and serenity are mask-like and sublime and whose vision looks out on an eternity enclosing time and proceeding from a space attained on the other side of a world that itself is ultimately illusory. This face is a window out of the world.

Santería is not salvationist in this sense. It does not view the world as something one can be saved from; it accepts the world more or less as it appears and is. There are secrets and veils hidden in the world or in phenomenal existence but behind these veils is not another world profoundly different from this one but rather layer after layer of this world and its multiple realities. The process of differentiation from the Absolute which both religions describe yields the differences and conflicts and ontological states that *santeros* try to manage, confront, complement, and incorporate. This they do without the idea of a final resting place or resolution in some timeless state separate from the world. In this way there is no afterlife, but simply more life.

The ultimate symbol of the feminine principle in Indian religion and philosophy is Maya, the apparent sensory world and its human-made conceptual distinctions, a dazzling, enthralling, and seductive display which is ultimately unreal and illusory. Santería affirms Maya as real, as the experience we have to participate in, master, and confront, and as the medium through which we will have access to such other realities as exist; hence Ochun and the other female *orisha* are represented quite emphatically as the queens of this world. The phe-

nomenal world then is the world—both inside and out—but it is layered. It is a world within a world—within a structure of powers and destinies which people have to learn to live with in order to access the powers to realize their individual, social, and communal aspirations, and attain wisdom and self-understanding.

What Ochun shows, then, is the embrace of the tangible sensory world in the body and ego, the joy and efficacy of creation and art, and both the summit and the abyss of divine enjoyment. She attempts to cope with the inevitable divisions to which life gives rise by incorporating them in hopes of a transcendent dissolution. Just as she attempted to escape the bickering her ineluctable attraction and beauty stimulated among the *orisha*, and the demands of her many children, by turning herself into a river, Ochun counsels the devotee to incorporate conflicts and divisions to the point of dissolution in the flow of life. Ochun promises then, not peace and serenity, but generativity and dissolution, and within generativity and dissolution, an incandescently intensified experience of life and the world.

## Notes

1. Ochun is the hispanicized pronunciation of the Yoruba Ọṣun.

2. For further information on the more recent spread of Ọṣun's worship in the Americas via Santería, see Brandon 1980, Brandon 1993, Pollak-Eltz 1994, and The World Orisha Conference 1982. Although I have not seen it documented in writing, I have met devotees from both Germany and Spain in Oshogbo, Nigeria.

3. My thanks to Oshuntoki Mojisola for insights from her continuing research in Ikoro-Ekiti, Nigeria.

4. Santería devotees in the United States use the Yoruba-based term *orisha*, the Spanish term *santo*, and the English term "saint" interchangeably.

5. The account which follows is based on field research undertaken from 1979 through 1982. All the names used in this account are fictional and are meant to protect the identities of my informants.

6. For classic accounts of Puerto Rican spiritism on the U.S. mainland, see Garrison 1977 and Harwood 1977. Also see Perez y Mena 1977 and Perez y Mena 1982.

7. For an account tracing the journey of Yoruba religion from Nigeria through Cuba to New York, see Brandon 1993.

8. On the interaction between Santería and Espiritismo in both Puerto Rico and New York, see the accounts cited in note 6 and compare them with the later descriptions of Perez y Mena 1982, Brandon 1989–90, and Brandon 1993.

9. For many groups, training as a spiritist medium was a prerequisite for initiation into any of the Afro-Cuban priesthoods. Palo Mayombe is one of a group of Afro-Cuban religious forms that derive from Central African Bantu traditions, particularly the religions of the Congo and Angola. It is not uncommon for Cuban *santeros* and *santeras* to be initiates in the Congo system as well as the Yoruba one.

10. Field Notes, 1980, Bronx, N.Y.

11. Field Notes, 1980, Bronx, N.Y.

12. In Santería the idea that Ochun is a mulata is quite widespread and displays the infusion of images and values from the socio-racial organization of the Caribbean, and Cuba in particular, into their conceptualization of the African goddess. In Cuba and throughout Latin American literature, ideology, and popular culture more generally, the

mulata is a heavily eroticized figure densely entangled in the political economies of race and sex. In Cuba, but also in Brazil and to a certain extent Mexico as well in the 1930s and 1940s, the mulata (and in Mexico, the mestizo) also became a trope for national identity.

13. Field notes, 1980, Bronx, N.Y.

14. For another version of this myth, see Gonzalez-Wippler 1985.

15. Compare this story to the *erindinlogun* verses, Oshe Tura, cited in Bascom 1980. In this story a war between the *orisha* and malevolent witches ends after Ọṣun approaches the enemy singing and dancing. The witches, attracted by her performance, follow her all the way from their abode, the Town of Women, to the king's palace where they are installed at court and put under his control.

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CHAPTER THIRTEEN

# "What Part of the River You're In"

## African American Women in Devotion to Òsun

*Rachel Elizabeth Harding*

A lineage of water and gold; the shaken gourd and the metal fan, the artist, the fabric, the painted beads. The connoisseur: good stuff when she sees it. Sunflower. A plate of coins. Yellow cloth gelé, draped long. A high bed, rose petals sinking beneath the brown plush of her thighs. Aromatic herb smoke: lemon thyme, manjericão, alfazema. The poem lifted like thin gold leaf from her lips. The song's bitter smell. The storyink damp; cuneiform spatter of falling water on rock. Gullysnake in the hips. Something the body knows about a current. Her line of women, the half-reed voices of her grown daughters in wingspan. . . .

This essay is a collective reflection on the presence of the deity Òsun and the meaning of Orisha religion in the lives of six African American women—four with parental roots in the southern United States, one Haitian-American, and one with combined Caribbean and southern U.S. ancestry. Two are simply allegiant devotees of Òsun, having been guided at certain pivotal points by Her energy, though not initiated as Her priestesses. Four others are consecrated to sacerdotal duties and are at various stages in their development as spiritual leaders and transmitters of Òsun's energy. The priestess who is youngest in years of initiation celebrated her second ritual anniversary in November 1998. The most senior Òsun initiate has been a priestess for twenty-eight years. All of the women were raised in greater-or-lesser proximity to the Christian church: Baptist, United Methodist, Catholic, Lutheran, and Presbyterian.

These six women presently represent several different traditions within Orisha religion: Lucumí/Santeria of Cuban origin, Yoruba/Ifá of Nigerian origin; African American Yoruba tradition; Brazilian Candomblé; and a combined experience of two or more traditions. Two of the women also serve the Haitian *lwas.* Iyalosha Osuntoki Mojisola, a priestess of Òsun, is a filmmaker and physical education teacher living in New York. Her godmother, Iyalosha Majile Osunbunmi Olafemi, was senior priestess of Òsun at Oyotunji, South Carolina, from 1971 to 1981 and lives presently in Tampa, Florida. Marcia Gibson Minter, art director at a women's magazine in New York, is a devotee of Yemanjá and Oxum and is

affiliated with the Ilé Axé Opô Afonjá Candomblé community in Bahia, Brazil.[1] Iyalosha Òsunnikantomi Egbénihun Ajoké lives in Cleveland, Ohio, where she works as a registered nurse and gives leadership to a Yoruba Ilé and healing ministry. She is a priestess of Òsun and the Egbeogba. Manbo Asogwé Dorothy Désir-Davis, a curator and scholar of African diasporan art and culture, is a devotee of Ochún and Yemaya as well as a Vodou priestess in the Minokan Sosyté of Haiti. She lives in New York. Iyalosha Osunguunwa, a Vodou *manbo sur-pointe* and priestess of Òsun, is director of a pre-school in Manhattan.

The devotees and priestesses speak of Òsun with tremendous gratefulness, recounting examples of the deity's beneficence in their lives. Iyalosha Osuntoki describes Òsun as the mother of kindness:

> [She is] the one who gives you anything you want. Especially when you know what you need in life—when you are focused and aware of what you need—to keep you healthy, to keep you at peace with your spirit. She is the giver. The mother of peace.[2]

The other women interviewed for this essay echo Osuntoki's sense of the deity's benevolence and further emphasize the creativity and aesthetic acumen associated with Òsun. She is healer, artist, mother, bringer of joy and laughter, consummate diplomat and reconciler, resource of grace, and connoisseur of that which has beauty and value. She is also the feminine principle of sensuality, of luxuriant sexual arousal, and the gratifying spirit that accompanies good food, good friends, and good times.

At points, however, some of the women speak with ambivalence about certain representations of Òsun, indicating discomfort with the popular stereotype of the river deity as "flirt" or "sex goddess." In other moments they affirm that recognizing their connection to Òsun was a critical, transformative experience in their lives—giving them new and deeper understandings of their most essential being. Both Iyalosha Majile Osunbunmi Olafemi and Iyalosha Osunguunwa describe Òsun's energy and presence as having "saved" them at very vulnerable points in their personal histories. The nurturing and self-affirmation Òsun passed on to these women upon claiming them as her daughters has helped sustain each through a variety of hardships—from physical illness and the loss of children in one case, to depression and disbelief in her own beauty in the other. Iyalosha Òsunnikantomi Egbénihun Ajoké and Manbo Asogwé Dorothy Désir-Davis speak of the very personal and particular influence Òsun has had in their lives as well. For Òsunnikantomi, Òsun is a deity tied specifically to the accomplishment of her personal destiny and chosen for very precise reasons by her *orí*, even though in some ways, the priestess feels equally close to another *orisha*, Yemoja. For Dorothy, Ochún represents an important, albeit partial, element of her existence—assisting her with a deeper appreciation of her femininity, sexuality, and aesthetic strengths. Osuntoki describes her relationship to Òsun in terms of the peace and kindness she receives from the *orisha*, and which, in turn, she attempts

to communicate in her life and work. And Marcia Gibson Minter, whose principal *orisha* is Yemanjá, talks about Oxum as representative of her youth, her playfulness, and the grace that brought her son into the world.

The specific nature of relationship to Òsun varies widely among the women. All speak eloquently and insightfully of their connection to the river goddess and her influence in their lives. For these priestesses and devotees, the lessons and blessings of Òsun are simultaneously very personal and applicable to others in search of a more profound comprehension of self and spirit.

## *"What Òsun Teaches": The Lessons and Blessings of Òsun*

Marcia Gibson Minter was informed in her first divination reading with a Brazilian *mãe de santo* (priestess) that she was a daughter of Oxum. Marcia had been so certain of her integral connection to Yemanjá that she found the reading hard to believe. "Oxum?!!" she asked in surprise. "Are you sure?" The priestess conducting the reading insisted that Oxum was indeed the *orisha* at the young devotee's head. Marcia remained perplexed about the pronouncement but began to search for ways to cultivate and acknowledge her connection to Oxum.

> I started trying to do things for Oxum to try to make up for all the time I had been giving attention to another *orisha* [Yemanjá]. I started reading more about Oxum, how I could connect with her energy. And, you know, I had to work on it. It was hard.[3]

The connection to Yemanjá seemed more natural to her. And eventually, Marcia discovered that indeed her strong affinity to Yemanjá was a true instinct. A second *mãe de santo*—the renowned Iyalorisha Stella de Oxossi of Axé Opô Afonjá in Salvador, Bahia—divined the relationship and confirmed Yemanjá as Marcia's principal *orisha*. But Mãe Stella further explained that it was not a particularly unusual occurrence to find Yemanjá and Oxum's presence shared. "That happens all the time," she said. "And why not? Yemanjá is Oxum's mother." In a sense, the Iyalorisha explained, the two deities are one. Marcia notes that during rituals for Yemanjá at the Axé Opô Afonjá candomblé, some form of offering or acknowledgment is made to Oxum as well, and vice-versa. Indeed, as time has passed, Marcia is more firmly aware of the conjoined energies of Oxum and Yemanjá in her own life. As she notes:

> My Oxum is so wrapped up in my Yemanjá. Oxum represents my youth. But I think my personality develops around Yemanjá being the principal influence. Oxum is the voice that keeps me a little more playful—but in a mature way. Not silly. The Oxum part of me balances my Yemanjá. My Yemanjá is so serious. I have, like a sad Yemanjá. Not so much sad as serious. My Oxum balances that. She brings more joy to it.[4]

Marcia recognizes a special relationship to Oxum in the circumstances surrounding the birth of her son, Azari. For two years prior to Azari's conception, Marcia felt that Oxum wanted her to have a child. "For some reason I didn't feel

like it was Yemanjá, but it was Oxum," Marcia says. Once Marcia and her husband, Daniel, decided to try to have a baby together, they determined to conceive in an atmosphere of supplication and thankfulness to the *orishas*. "It happened almost instantly," Marcia recounts, both grateful and somewhat awed that they would get pregnant after only a week of trying. The pregnancy itself was smooth. "I felt great," she recalled. "No problems whatsoever." Marcia had been actively cultivating the energy of the various *orishas* who guide and protect her family as well as praying for the health of the coming child. "So I was surprised to be in the delivery room with what happened," she said.

> I didn't expect the delivery to be three days long with so many complications. I'm certain it was the energy I asked for from the *orishas* that got us through. Azari was born with the cord around his neck twice and had to be sucked out [of my womb], and his heart had to be pounded to restart because it had stopped. He came into the world and then left that fast, and then came back. . . . Something happened in that moment when we almost lost him. I don't know if momentarily Yemanjá wanted him and Oxum gave him back to me? I don't know. But Daniel and I are certain that the *orishas* gave this child to us.[5]

Òsun is traditionally known for her role as mother. The Ibeji, the twin deities, are children from her union with Sàngó, and women who wish to conceive and bear children appeal to her especially in her form as Òsun Oshogbo. In addition to the images and stories of Òsun as mother, there is often a kind of counter-narrative in Yoruba-based religions that suggests Òsun's unwillingness to take on the full responsibility of parenting—giving her children to Yemoja to raise. Dorothy Désir-Davis speaks of her own relationship to Òsun in these terms. A devotee of the deity, she is uncomfortable with some of the arch, hyper-feminine aspects of Òsun's image. While she recognizes that the goddess's energy and influence have been pivotal in her development, Dorothy says she always had the sense that eventually another *orisha* would claim her:

> I don't *like* the extremely flirtatious aspect of Ochún. It's *not* my nature. When I studied Afro-Cuban dance I couldn't get into all that hip-wiggling movement. I knew I would end up with something else, another *orisha*. So, as things progressed, I ended up with Yemaya. Of course, Ochún gives away her children to Yemaya. Ochún flirts and Yemaya works and has a greater measure of responsibility. But you have to pay homage and respect to those who have protected you. Especially *orisha* and *lwa*.[6]

Majile also expressed dissatisfaction with the image of Òsun as "sex goddess":

> Another thing people should understand, Òsun is not a sex goddess. I wish they would stop putting the sex thing on her. She represents love more than anything, and love is everywhere. Love for parents, for children, for beauty, for objects. Love is not just sex. And sometimes it's not in sex at all.[7]

In contrast to representations of Òsun as less parentally responsible than some of the other *orisha*, several of the devotees and priestesses suggest an alternative experience with the mothering energy of Òsun. Òsunnikantomi describes her sense of Òsun's nurturing spirit in terms of both motherhood and inventiveness. In Òsunnikantomi's experience, the nourishing and sustaining qualities of Òsun are often expressed in artistic work.

> Most Òsun people I know are very nurturing and very creative in the field of art or performance, theater, that type of thing.[8]

Majile also sees the maternal influence of the river deity in her own life as a mother to eight children. When asked about the ways in which Òsun's energy manifests in her daily experience, Majile responds, "I'm still a mom—so her presence is strong in my family life."[9]

One of the most moving accounts of the nurturing and mothering spirit of Òsun comes in Osunguunwa's testimony. She was called to initiation into the deity's priesthood just days after a surgery. It was a difficult time. But as Osunguunwa recalls, Òsun's presence and summons in that moment were not surprising:

> This is her area. She saved my life. I've always had trouble having children. I've lost a lot of children. But I've had some strong spiritual experiences as a result—my sight increased. But it was very traumatic.[10]

As happened for Marcia in the distress and miracle of the birth of her son, Osunguunwa too felt Òsun's mothering restoration in the midst of her own suffering. When approaching her second anniversary as a priestess of Òsun, Osunguunwa considered the deity's meaning in her life:

> For me, Òsun represents healing . . . because she transforms you, in a way. She transforms your soul in a way that's a marvel. Òsun marked a transition for me.[11]

These sentiments of the *orisha*'s rescuing presence in times of adversity are amplified and complemented by other assertions relating to Òsun's aesthetic, artistic, and sensual energies and to the interpretations of womanhood she engenders in her devotees. Majile brings many of these elements together as she reflects on Òsun's significance for her life. "She's my whole life," the priestess affirms. As a young girl, Majile didn't consider herself attractive, and occasionally suffered from depression. She also had frequent experiences with disturbing spirits and visions which she later attributed to her need to be initiated and her own internal unused healing power.

> I've had so much experience with spirits. I've had a tough life. Not in terms of poverty, but with emotions. Coming from a family with natural ability in the occult—but with no training. But I survived all that madness. When I came to [Òsun] I was tired of life. Nobody seemed to see life like me. She bathed and healed me.

> Totally. She showed me that I was so beautiful. As a child growing up, I thought I was ugly. Òsun came into my life and opened my eyes and said, "Look at yourself through your own eyes, not someone else's."
>
> After I received Òsun I had an earth-shaking experience. I was going to the post office, and the post office had a big plate-glass window. As I rode up to the window I was looking at the window and I saw a woman getting off of a bicycle, and I said to myself "She sure is pretty." And as I walked closer I realized that the woman was me. I stood there looking with tears in my eyes.[12]

Dorothy describes her experience with Ochún as a process of coming to terms with her own femininity, which she had surpressed to some extent due to years of intensive martial arts training and a deep internal resistance to sexist images of women.

> I try to use Her as a guide, a feminist one; [a model for] how women need to operate to get what they need, what they want.

Arrival at this understanding of Ochún has been an ongoing process for the *manbo* and devotee. For many years she studied martial arts and was often the only female student in the classes.

> I shared the locker room with the boys, the men. And I heard how they talked about women—that macho shit. I learned a hell of a lot about dealing with them. How they think about women. I also scared a lot of men, in my neighborhood and in my school. Because everybody knew that Dorothy knew martial arts and could kick butt. But I also realized that I needed to be softer, I needed a sweeter disposition. And if Ochún was watching me then, it was likely the young warrior Ochún.
>
> I dressed androgynously for many years. I almost never wore dresses, because I hated how men would look and leer. As I got older, I realized, now you don't have to be so hard. I had to learn how you do the flirtation, charm, be sweet, without compromising myself.[13]

Dorothy's connection to Ochún was divined by priests Carmen and Tony Mondesire. "Ochún loves you," they told her, and explained that she needed to set up a place in her house dedicated to the goddess's energy.

> My Ochún wanted gold. Not copper and not brass. This is what Tony told me. And I was trying to understand not just the metal gold, but the concept of gold. It is flexible, it is malleable, it gives. . . . Gold is something that endures, it lasts. It is a weight, it is a measure of value.[14]

Although she later established a connection with Yemaya and also with the *lwas* of the Vodou tradition, Dorothy has maintained a relationship to Òsun that centers particularly around the aesthetic energy she brings to her living space and her work as a collector and interpreter of African diasporic art.

> I needed to provide Ochún a space. At the front of my house are shades of yellow. I have created an altar-like environment for Ochún in my living room. I don't pray

there but anyone in the religion recognizes Ochún's influence. It was under her guidance that I understood I needed to have a house.[15]

For Manbo Dorothy, the lessons she learned from Òsun were pivotal in her efforts to secure a house of her own. And as she describes the process and its impetus, she emphasizes that the house and what it represents are not just for her, individually, but are for her son as well.

I have a child. A black child. He's a black male in this society and he has to have every advantage I can give him. What I had to do to get the house—being extraordinarily creative, [using] the warrior aspect—it's all tools of Ochún. I've done my best to fill the house with art, wonderful fabric, tactile things, olfactory stimulants—it is a luxurious space. There is something for all the senses, literally everywhere you look. Paintings, sculpture—*anywhere* [my son] looks in this house affirms his sense of Self.

Ochún can teach you about creativity, softness, understanding luxury. So you have enough sense to surround yourself with the best you can afford. Part of the lesson Ochún gives is how you keep these things. For my son, they are in his head and heart, they will never be taken away. Knowledge is like that too. Not as a luxury, but [as] an essential thing. What Ochún teaches us is to acquire knowledge of things. Connoisseurship. You have to know something good when you see it. You have to know the value of Self and History as well. Beyond the surface, these ethical and philosophical manifestations in day-to-day living are what Ochún teaches.[16]

## *"Daughter of Two Waters": Iyalosha Òsunnikantomi Egbénihun Ajoké*

I was told I was a daughter of two waters—Òsun from the head and Yemoja from the neck down. At my initiation, I was told it would've been fine for me to be initiated to Yemoja, but my *orí* chose Òsun because the energies of Òsun following me, the roads of Òsun, would enable me to develop myself to the fullest—so that's why Òsun took over for me.[17]

Iyalosha Òsunnikantomi is a priestess of Òsun and the Egbeògbá. Born and raised in Cleveland, Ohio, she was initiated to Òsun in that city in 1992, and in 1996 to the Egbeògbá in Nigeria. She is a mother, a nurse, a lecturer, and the chief priestess at the Yoruba house she founded, Ilé Osungbarada. Although consecrated to Òsun and maintaining a strong relationship to that *orisha*, Òsunnikantomi does not give Òsun initiations. Her more public role within the Ifá system is as a priestess of the Egbeògbá—a collective spirit, little-known in the United States, which manifests in dreams, bringing information and healing, as well as disruption at times.

They are a group of deities, a group of spirits. They are looked at as comrades in Heaven—that's how my Baba describes them. And once we leave the Spirit world to come into this life, those comrades come with us. They come at night, in the form of dreams, to give messages.

The fact that she was advised by Ifá not to give initiations of Òsun is further evidence to Òsunnikantomi of the very personal nature of her relationship to the river goddess.

> It's a little different for me. Òsun seems to be for me very personally. But I don't give Òsun—other than an *eleke*. She is for me in a personal way.

This individual, focused relationship to Òsun is something the Iyalosha has considered deeply over the years since her first initiation. She is also a daughter of Yemoja and might have become a priestess of that *orisha* if circumstances had been different. Òsunnikantomi recounts that in light of her own inclination to put other people and their needs ahead of the necessities of her own life, her *orí* chose Òsun because of the river deity's capacity to help concentrate self-directed energy.

> For *me*, Yemoja does not force herself, does not make demands. She steps back and doesn't ask until the need is there. Then she'll step in and say, "Baby, this is what you need to do." Then she'll step back into her place of observation.

Òsunnikantomi insists that her experience of Yemoja is particular and she is careful not to make a general statement about characteristic paths of the deity. "This is how *I* envision [Yemoja]—this is the energy of the icon in *my* house." While recognizing the appropriateness of Òsun's energy for the specific needs of her life, the priestess continues to acknowledge the strengths of Yemoja. "When I visualize my Yemoja, I see, not an old woman, but an older woman, wiser, more matronly. But she's a fighter."

Marcia's and Dorothy's testimonies further affirm Yemoja's tendency to combine reticence with a fighting spirit. Like Òsunnikantomi, both women have a close relationship to Yemoja as well as to Òsun.

One of Òsunnikantomi's greatest struggles with Òsun arises from the goddess's exigency:

> She wants me to do these things but it seems like they're impossible. I can try to do what She wants me to do and if it's too demanding or seemingly impossible, I may deviate, but then She'll just shut the other things down. Like, "Didn't I tell you to do *this*?"

Like most of the devotees and priestesses interviewed for this essay, Òsunnikantomi describes the nature and spiritual energy of Òsun in very complex—sometimes contradictory—terms. This is not a simple deity. None is. But partly due to Òsun's close association with the Ajé, the witches of Yoruba myth, she is recognized as having sharp places in her personality, rages, and deep spells of fearsome, seemingly arbitrary power. French scholar of Yoruba religion Pierre Verger writes of this awesome, frequently misunderstood female energy as a "dangerous, aggressive force" which requires those who encounter it to observe an attitude of "prudent reserve."[18] Òsunnikantomi:

> Òsun is very complex for me. I was told once, by a *babalawo*, that if I wanted to know Òsun I should study the river. And I've done that a few times. Òsun is deep, she's murky, she's cloudy, you can't see what's going on. She can be clear, reflective—that's the whole mirror energy, cleansing. She can be destructive, unstoppable. She can be even parts of the river [that] are foul, static. She is all these things. Over the six years that I've been aware of having her, I've probably experienced many of her aspects. The *oriate* who did my initiation said She frightened him most of all the *orishas* because you never know what you're going to get with Òsun. She's very complicated—it just depends on what part of the river you're in. How the flow is going.

## *Finding the Way In: Roads to Orisha Religion*

The Black cultural-nationalist movement of the late nineteen-sixties and early nineteen-seventies was an important context for the development of African religious consciousness among several of the priestesses and devotees interviewed for this essay. The movement's emphasis on African historical and cultural identities often found a compelling parallel in a search for spiritual traditions that predated the diasporic experience of slavery. As with many of their contemporaries who were active in the nationalist period, Majile, Osuntoki, Òsunnikantomi, and Osunguunwa found the time especially conducive to the exploration of new meanings of self, community, and spirituality.

Majile and Osuntoki were members of the Yoruba-based community at Oyotunji Village in South Carolina for ten and twelve years, respectively. Majile and her then-husband, Oseijiman Adefunmi,[19] were among the community's founders. Initiated in 1970, a year before Oyotunji was formally organized, Majile became the community's first priestess of Òsun. Osuntoki was initiated at the village in the following year.

While Oyotunji was an important element in Majile's developing connection to African spirituality and culture, she recalls that it was in fact her own family that first taught her to view herself as African. As a child she heard stories of her mother's grandfather, whom they called "Grandpat," and who was likely one of the last Africans to arrive in the United States as a slave.

> I knew I was an African person—I got that from my family. . . . I felt this African blood real strong in me. Especially in music.[20]

Osuntoki refers to the nationalist period as a pivotal moment in her own exposure to Yoruba religious tradition. Osuntoki's introduction came by way of a Yoruba language instructor at a New York dance school.

> This was in the early seventies. Because of him [the teacher] I met other people, just in everyday socializing. . . . I was interested in African culture and I began to meet more people. . . . People who were living the culture, living the religion. The seventies was a time when lots of people were finding their roots. Especially [in terms of] African culture, religion, traditions. . . .[21]

For many of the women, attraction to Yoruba-based religion was a response to a deep search for a form of spirituality that felt consistent with their beliefs and constitutions and that offered an alternative to the dissatisfaction they felt with the traditional Christian church. Òsunnikantomi explains that at the time she was exposed to Orisha religion she was active in the United Methodist Church:

> But I was searching, I wasn't happy with some things. The structure—some things were going on in the Northeast Ohio conference, racial things, and I wasn't happy with the way they were being handled.[22]

Majile was also in search. Seeing an impotence on the part of her northern church in the face of the great trauma of Black suffering in the South, Majile, while still a child, began to grow disillusioned with Christianity.

> On Sundays, my grandmother would read the Bible to us and then read the newspapers about Black people who had been killed in the South. The lynchings, castrations, all the horrible deaths that happened, she would read to us about it. And she would pray about it. Then I would go to Sunday School and see this white Jesus and I'd be waiting for them to say something in church about the things my grandmother had talked about. But they never did. I was confused and angry. At Sunday School it seemed like the white Jesus was doing nothing for Black people. I was never a Christian at heart. Even at five, seven years old. I couldn't feel it.

At about age seventeen, Majile became a Sunni Muslim, still looking for a spiritual space that was comfortable for her. This aspect of her search was eventually frustrated by her awareness of problems of racism within the Islamic community. In contrast to her experiences with Christianity and Islam, Orisha religion moved her in a deep and personal way.

> The first time I saw an Elegba service I got so happy—I was about to walk up the wall, I felt so good. That was the first true experience with religion I had. It made me feel good.[23]

Òsunnikantomi also feels a sense of compatibility and comfort with Orisha religion. She describes learning of Yoruba traditions through friends of her sister, who was a student at Howard University in Washington, D.C. She also read an article in *Essence* by Iyanla Vanzant which led her to explore more on her own. For Òsunnikantomi as well as for others, the depth of personal focus in the African religion is pivotal. Through its central ritual of divination, Ifá offers a way to enter into a spiritual communion with one's destiny which takes into account the specific needs and conditions of each individual's life. Òsunnikantomi suggests that this orientation to religion contrasts strongly with the biblical tradition of commandments and general precepts applied indiscriminately to all people:

> In the church, it was more a group thing—this is how *everybody* is supposed to pattern their life. Whereas with Ifá, it was more personal—especially in terms of destiny. I felt at home! . . . For people who are looking for powerful changes in their lives and are willing to be obedient [to divination], it's a wonderful thing. Especially

> if they want to be able to participate in the changes. To have the Spirit speak directly to them. It's very personal.[24]

Osuntoki makes a similar assertion about her preference for Orisha tradition:

> African religion felt more interesting. I felt like there was more freedom in the African religion—more room for the development of people's personalities.[25]

In addition to the sense of comfort the devotees and priestesses feel in their relation to African deities and to Ifá tradition, several women talk about the role of dreams, nightmares, and visions in their impulse toward Orisha religion. Manbo Dorothy, who is Haitian-American, recalls that at the time she first started to explore her relationship to the *orishas*, she had been in some internal conflict about how to connect with her ancestral legacy. She experienced some very striking and disturbing dreams in which she was visited by recently deceased relatives and as a result of these she realized she needed to talk to someone about what was happening in her spiritual life.

> A while back I had a series of dreams that were very disturbing to me, about three people in my family. My paternal grandmother, my aunt (her sister), and an uncle on my father's side. All of them passed within nine months of each other [in 1992–93]. . . . When they crossed over, all of them, ten days later I had a visit from them. But the last one, the one from my uncle, kind of took me over the edge. Because it had a warning—it was directed at me, my sisters, my family in general; but especially at me.[26]

The dreams worried Dorothy and she began to search for their meaning. When Dorothy was growing up, no one spoke much within her household about the tradition of Vodou; but she does recall an accusation made that her mother's mother was a *manbo*. And this gave Dorothy some reference for the experiences she was having.

> I did know that in each family a *lwa* was to be served. And I do know that the gift of vision, of sight, of being a "real" priest—one born with a crown as opposed to being made—comes every other generation. Which means my mother was skipped, but I knew I was in line to receive Ocha, to use a Lucumí term.[27]

Although her mother had taken her to a few Vodou ceremonies when Dorothy was a child, it was not until she became an adult that she began to look more profoundly into her own spiritual identity and role (impelled in large part by the dreams of her deceased family members and by other dreams and visions as well). Interestingly, she explored the Lucumí path before eventually finding her way to the Vodou priesthood. It was through Lucumí that she made her connection to Ochún. Now she maintains responsibilities in both traditions, but is more active in Vodou because of her sacerdotal duties there.

> But I cannot abandon Orisha and there is no point in abandoning them because in Vodou we speak to them in our prayers. I used to think I needed hard and fast

divisions between them. But names don't matter. It is the spirit of the thing, its essence that matters.[28]

## *"All Our Path": Iyalosha Osunguunwa*

I have always loved spirituality. [As a child] I was very interested, and so I really studied. I was interested in theology and I asked a lot of questions. There were wonderful ministers at that [Presbyterian] church, African American ministers who let me challenge them. They enjoyed it.[29]

Osunguunwa's father, a Jamaican immigrant, and her mother, a native of Prince Edward County, Virginia, fed their daughter's spiritual interests and sensitivities in a variety of ways. The father was an initiate in the Egyptian Mysteries and when Osunguunwa was still a baby, he had her baptized in that path. Osunguunwa's father also studied with an Indian spiritual leader. She remembers visiting the guru and receiving his blessing when she was eight years old. The *iyalosha* describes her father as an agnostic, a philosopher, who encouraged her to read metaphysical literature.

He had all kinds of philosophy books around. When I was ten he was giving me books by Plato: "Read this." And books on Egypt. And then when I'd finished that, he'd give me something else. I was constantly being fed a diet of mystical writings.

Osunguunwa's mother was raised in the Baptist church. As a little girl, Osunguunwa went to Baptist services in New York City with her grandmother and great-aunt. Later, when the family moved to Queens, Osunguunwa's mother joined a local Presbyterian church and Osunguunwa regularly accompanied her there for most of her adolescence. In spite of her father's mystical influence, and Osunguunwa's own emerging spiritual sensibilities, the mother always encouraged her daughter toward a more conventional religiosity. "My mother fought the good fight to keep me a Christian. . . . That was very important to her." When she was around twenty years old, however, Osunguunwa became a Sunni Muslim. "I was still on my spiritual quest. . . . I stayed a Sunni for a long, long time."

The individual connection to God encouraged in Islam was especially attractive to Osunguunwa, although she eventually had difficulties with some of the more patriarchal aspects of the religion. After eighteen years as a Muslim, she began to desire a more Afrocentric spiritual grounding. "I looked long and hard. I even went back to the church. You know, there is a certain comfort in the Black church." But this time, the Black church Osunguunwa returned to was Catholic. It was a very progressive parish, where the priests were teaching liberation theology and where she became very involved in the life of the congregation as a kind of lay pastor.

Osunguunwa's attraction to the Catholic church was partly due to the fact that her brother, a professional musician, was living and working in Brazil and

would regularly send letters and postcards with stories of his experiences there. She became especially intrigued by Candomblé — a traditional Afro-Brazilian religion — and by the connections Africans and their descendants there had made between African rituals and mythologies and the rites and saints of the Catholic church.

In the late nineteen-eighties, in the wake of a series of conservative changes in the policies and personnel of her diocese, Osunguunwa left her Catholic congregation. Not completely sure of where her search would take her next, she happened to read Luisah Teish's *Jambalaya* and began to explore the strong affinity she felt with Afro-diasporan religions. During a conference at Hunter College on religious traditions of the Afro-Atlantic world, she was able to witness ceremonies from Vodou, Lucumí, Shango Baptist, Palo, and other Afro-Latin and Afro-Caribbean sources. It was a revelation for her.

In the same period she moved into a predominantly Latino neighborhood in Newark and started to investigate the local area with a friend:

> We went exploring and we found a *botánica*. We met a little man who started telling us about the tradition. He talked about his love for the tradition. But he was also Catholic. . . . He told us, "You need to go to church." We weren't interested in the church part, we wanted the *orisha* part.

Beginning with their initial connection with the man in the *botánica*, Osunguunwa and her friend slowly found other people associated with Orisha religion. For a time, Osunguunwa was connected with a Lucumí house where most of the members spoke Spanish. Eventually she affiliated with an African-based, multicultural house, which closely retained Nigerian cultural elements in its community life and rituals. Such direct connection to Nigerian traditions was important to Osunguunwa, and it was at this house, in the aftermath of an illness, that she was called to initiation by Òsun.

Like several of the other devotees and priestesses profiled here, a significant element of Osunguunwa's work is related to artistic expression. She is a visual artist who works with fiber, beads, and gourds, making *shekere* — a traditional gourd instrument of Òsun (which Osunguunwa also plays) — and an art form she calls "spirit vessels." She relates that the lessons of Òsun in this realm have been particularly valuable for her, and that since her initiation she has seen a flowering in her abilities and in her exposure through group and individual shows.

> [Òsun] represents creativity. . . . She represents artists. The imagination. She's your writer, your creative person. She's also a warrior. She has taken me from a quiet person to a person being more assertive and sure of herself.
>
> She's a wise woman. She represents all the positive aspects of womanhood. But she's not frivolous. My path in Òsun is Yeye Kare — which is supposed to be a frivolous path. But in my case She lightened me up. I've always been a very serious person — but She's helped me to lighten up. Accepting my femininity.

One of the more difficult aspects of Osunguunwa's path in Orisha tradition has been the tension it has created with her mother.

> It's been hard for my mother to come to terms with this path. . . . She doesn't understand it all. We come out of a middle-class Black family and it's like, "What are you doing? Why do you have to wear those white clothes for a year? What am I going to say when people ask me why you do that?" . . . She's very much Yemaya. I'm the only girl. I think it's hard to have your only girl be so different from you.
>
> It's been a little difficult for her to see me setting up altars. She asks me, "Why do you have to do all that stuff?" She says things like, "But it's modern times and we don't have to go through all those steps. Why don't you just take a shortcut?" And I tell her, "But I need to go through those steps. . . . "

Notwithstanding all the challenges, Osunguunwa eagerly acknowledges her mother's strength and wisdom and describes how much it meant to have her mother participate in a very important ritual:

> [My mother] even came to my initiation, my presentation ceremony. When I think of it, even now — my mother, saluting me — it brings tears to my eyes.

As mother and daughter continue to find ground on which to meet and understand each other, Osunguunwa points to instances of connection between the spiritual and cultural values of the Black South and those present in African traditions:

> Things like honoring the dead, the *eguns.* [Our older relatives in the South] go to the cemeteries. They take care of the graves. . . . And then when I see the nurses' board in church — the people who help you when you get the spirit. Getting happy in church, that's possession. When I explain it to my mother like that, then she's like, "Oh, okay."

The most essential element in Osunguunwa's ongoing dialogue with her mother around the place of Orisha religion in the daughter's life has been to convey the deep love and respect she feels for her mother and her mother's religion — even while moving forward along a different path.

> I never want her to think I'm rejecting her — I tell her that this path isn't just for me, it's all our path. . . . I want her to know, "I'm not giving you up, I'm reclaiming what's rightfully mine." I think now is a wonderful time because we have the choice to explore different paths. To feel comfortable and not be ashamed.

## *Family Relations*

To one extent or another, all of the women have had to negotiate their way around the difference between the nature of their lives as Orisha devotees and the sometimes divergent expectations of family and friends. In most cases, there is a continuing attempt at understanding and dialogue (however difficult at

times) with parents, siblings, and other relatives which, over time, results in deeper levels of appreciation on both sides.

Òsunnikantomi, like Osunguunwa, describes her struggles with family over this issue in terms of maintaining an ability to acknowledge the value of her roots in the Black Christian church. When Òsunnikantomi first began to move toward Ifá religion, there was some discomfort in her family about the meaning of this new direction. "They could not understand where Jesus fit in." Òsunnikantomi assured her relatives that it was not a question of abandoning Jesus, rather, that because the Ifá system predates Christianity, Jesus is not a focal concern in Orisha religion. Òsunnikantomi has also tried to explain her respect for Christ to family and friends within the context of her own belief. "Christ, Muhammad, Buddha, were all prophets," she tells them:

> And Orunmila is the prophet of this system. It's a matter of focusing on the prophet of the system. The prophet brings forth the spiritual content of the system. He or She is the deity who speaks for the system. Therefore for me there was no problem. I simply went to another system and there was another prophet.
>
> I don't see where there's a problem with who is the prophet, because I think there is universal truth. So when I started on this path, rather than try to convince people of what I was doing, I saw I had to try to live a life of great character so people couldn't condemn me based on how I live my life. And that's how it's acceptable now. They may not understand it, but they can see it's working for me.[30]

Osuntoki explains that while she never experienced any serious discord with relatives as a result of her religious orientation, the passage of time has helped them to become more comfortable with her life.

> I didn't have a deep conflict with my family. They didn't say I was sinning. For them it was like, "You're going backward." Which I was, in a way—going back to the ancestors. They felt that I was not going in the direction of progress. . . . I think their attitude has changed somewhat over the years. They are more accepting now. They don't see me as a fanatic. And I don't see them as fanatics.[31]

The difficulty of helping family members to understand their choice is something most of the priestesses and devotees have in common. However, there are also many instances of important familial support. Majile notes that her children are deeply connected to Orisha religion:

> All of my children are very much involved. I raised eight children and seven grandchildren. Five of my children are priests and the last three were born with natural *àse*, although they have not yet been accepted into the society [as initiates].[32]

For several of the women, the support of spouses has been especially meaningful. Òsunnikantomi says that her husband and partner of twenty-two years complements and sustains her spiritual energy in significant ways:

> It's interesting, my husband was initiated to Sàngó two-and-a-half years ago. . . . His personality is the stereotypical Sàngó. That whole idea of lightning and rain—he tends to replenish the water source.

The essential, nurturing aspect of Òsun as fresh water can sometimes mean that the psychic reserves of her priestesses are taxed to their limits. At times like this, the complementary resources of Òsunnikantomi's life partner are invaluable.

> Everything and everybody needs water. So everyone comes to you. When there is drought then there is a problem, but water replenishes itself if there is rain. . . . And Òsunnikantomi's husband is her rain.[33]

Marcia's husband, Daniel, too, has been an important source of support and accompaniment in her path. "We've gone through this together. It's something that makes our marriage stronger." Daniel, an artist, uses his artwork as a way to connect with ancestral energies—energies which, for him, include the *orishas* of Yoruba tradition:

> I would say, maybe that I am more "devout" if you want to use that term, or that my devotion is more "conscious," but he does the same thing through his artwork—not by keeping altars or going to ceremonies.[34]

As with Òsunnikantomi and her mate, Marcia and Daniel have been spiritual partners for each other; each encouraging the other to follow the paths along which they are most deeply led.

## *"A Baseful Thing": Marcia Gibson Minter*

When Marcia Gibson Minter was growing up in Richmond, Virginia, she was often aware of a presence, a kind of guardian spirit, around her. It was the kind of presence that manifested more as a feeling than anything else. Something accompanying her. Sometimes Marcia would try to write about it in journals or poems:

> It wasn't at the forefront of my thought, but I would tap into it sometimes, through the writing. . . . But I was not really pursuing it. [It was] not constant. But it was a kind of baseful thing.[35]

Marcia explains that her family was not very religious in a conventional sense. They did not go to church regularly. Nevertheless her mother always encouraged the children to respect spirituality and Marcia occasionally attended services at a local Baptist church with an aunt.

> My mother's sister . . . was a very spiritual woman. . . . Aunt Shirley went to church when the spirit moved her. . . . She would go for six months straight and then not go at all for a year. And in the six months that she was going regularly, I don't mean

> that she went every Sunday for six months. I mean she went to church every day for six months!
>
> As a little girl, I went with her to church sometimes. She went to a down-home Baptist church where people got happy. I would sit beside her and wait for the moment when Aunt Shirley would get the spirit, because it happened every time. She would jump up and run up and down the aisle and speak in tongues and people would have to hold her. I would look at her in amazement, knowing that something was going on. But not knowing exactly what.

Her mother's respectful, though not church-centered, attitude toward spirituality, her Aunt Shirley's example, and her own early sense of mystical connection to protective spiritual forces were important elements in Marcia's development toward the path of African religious traditions. Early in her life she encountered a sense of the wide possibilities of religious orientation, and as an adult, felt little restriction or displacement when exploring traditions outside of conventional Christian borders.

Marcia's closest sense of connection to the *orishas* has come through Brazilian Candomblé. She began her journey to the religion in an unexpected place: Cozumel, Mexico. In her mid-twenties Marcia decided to take a trip there, to spend some time alone and think.

> I was going through a time of definite, conscious spiritual growth. I needed to go away somewhere . . . to think about what was important to me. I chose Cozumel because it was cheap.

Immediately upon arriving in the airport, as she was showing her passport, the custom's agent asked her, in Spanish, if she was from Bahia. "I could speak enough Spanish to communicate with him and I said, 'No.'" The agent told Marcia that she looked like she was from Bahia and that her name was a Bahian name. Later that same day, as Marcia lay on the beach, a young woman passed by holding an empty tray in her hands, as if she had just finished selling the last of whatever she had been carrying. Marcia noticed that she and the woman bore a resemblance to each other:

> She was about my color, my height, her hair was like mine. She started speaking to me in a language I didn't understand, asking me something with "Bahia" in the question. I didn't understand much but I told her no, I wasn't from Bahia. And she walked away. . . . My eyes followed her until I couldn't see her anymore.

Before these events, Marcia had never had much occasion to think of Bahia, Brazil. However, for the remainder of her visit in Cozumel she was asked about Bahia so often that she soon began to believe there was something more than coincidence at work. Returning back to the States, she began to read everything she could about Bahia. Some of the first things she discovered were descriptions of the Afro-Brazilian religion, Candomblé. "It struck me very deeply that I had

some kind of connection to this place." Meanwhile, she married her husband and in 1990 they decided to visit Bahia; a decision Marcia says was based primarily on her "mild obsession" with the place and its religious tradition. During that visit, she saw an image of Yemanjá in an artist's studio. "When I saw it, I knew instinctively that she was my *orisha*. . . . I just knew: 'This is the spirit I have known all my life.'" Years later, on a second trip to Bahia she would have her instinct confirmed—and she would also discover that she has a close connection to Òsun, and to several other *orishas*.

Marcia wonders at times if perhaps she has an ancestral link to Brazil, somewhere in her family lineage. Even though she believes the *orishas* don't particularly care which tradition she comes to them through, she feels such a strong affinity to Bahia and to Candomblé that it makes her consider the possibility. "I wonder about that, the connection. Why, if it really doesn't matter, am I drawn to Brazil and to Candomblé the way I am?"

## *"A Lot of Us Retain a Lot": Ancestral Connections in African American Devotion to Òsun*

In Brazilian Candomblé, the *dom* or "gift" of an *orisha*'s guardianship is considered an inheritance as much physical as spiritual. The *orisha* live in the bloodline, are transmitted like DNA within families, and as such, travel with their children in diaspora. They are a part of who we are, who we have been, and who we will be. There is no leaving them as there is no way for them to leave us. We have come an ancient way in each other's tight company and have been through too much together (in this horrid and beautiful place, these Americas) to deny each other now.

The women who participated in conversations for this essay generally recognized some form of familial connection to African-based ways of being in the world. Four of the devotees and priestesses mentioned grandparents, especially grandmothers, who were healers and spiritual leaders and who represent for them a clear connection to older, ancestral forces compatible with their present paths in Orisha religion. One of Marcia Gibson-Minter's great-grandmothers was a conjure woman and another a midwife. And Marcia sees the intense, personal, distinctive spiritual pattern of her Aunt Shirley as a connection to ancestral sacred orientations:

> Especially now that she's gone on, I definitely see her as connected to the *orishas*. I say that with certainty. It was like, when the *orisha* came to her, when she got the spirit, they came hard. And they stayed. And then they'd leave her alone for a while.[36]

Dorothy too has *vodouisants* and healers among her immediate ancestors, although when she was growing up no one spoke much about them.

> I found out this year that my grandmother on my father's side was a *vodouisant*. . . . And *her* mother was an herb doctor. She knew herbs like nobody else. And usually, people who know herbs so well, if they are not actually initiated in the religion [Vodou] they're darn close.

In Dorothy's middle-class, Catholic family the tradition of Vodou in the ancestral line was not considered a subject for proper conversation. Nonetheless, Dorothy recalls that at a particular time of crisis her mother did consult an *oungan;* and she took Dorothy with her. An aunt was also present. It was at one of these ceremonies that Dorothy had her first physical experience of connection with the *lwa:*

> My mother took me to several Vodou ceremonies when I was a teenager. I remember witnessing my aunt being possessed. It scared me. . . . The drummers were drumming and I heard a "pop" in the drum and felt a "pop" in my spine and it felt like a snake. And I knew what it was. I tore out of that room like nobody's business! After that, I said to myself, "Dorothy, you can no longer say that Vodou stuff is just stuff. You may not believe in it, you may not worship it, but you better believe it's real."[37]

Iyalosha Majile recalls that her grandmother and grandfather were healers:

> People would come to the house and [my grandparents] would pray over them. And then they would take people into the back room and feed them clabbered milk and heal them.

The iyalosha's grandmother could also "talk the fire out of burns":

> She had these words she would blow on the burns. I remember when I was little, if I would get burned on the stove or an iron or something she would blow these words on the burn and the pain would stop and there would be no scar. . . . I couldn't get her to tell me what it was she said. I think she wanted to pass it on to my mother. We lost that.[38]

Other people in Majile's family also have psychic and healing abilities, including her own mother; and the priestess herself is known for her gifts as a diviner. Although such aptitudes are a strong familial inheritance, Majile remarks that few if any of the family members had formal training to develop their gifts. Initiation became, for her, among other things, a way to develop her natural strengths in that realm.

Like Majile, Osunguunwa was also told family stories of an African great-grandfather:

> My great-aunt on my father's side told me that her father was an African. He came from Dahomey, which was unusual in Jamaica. Usually there [the people were] more Akan and Ashanti. But in slavery time, people were all over the place and they moved around a lot between the islands. That's my possible lineage, but one never knows.

Osunguunwa was also told of an aunt in Jamaica who practiced Obeah. As was the case in the families of most of the other priestesses and devotees, Osunguunwa's relatives did not readily discuss African-based spiritual practices. Osunguunwa noted an especially strong restraint in this area among her Jamaican family members:

> In Jamaica, I think there's more resistance to owning it. [Referring to my aunt] they told me . . . "She's Obeah. But she's crazy."[39]

Reflecting further on the question of the silence around African and folk-based traditions of healing, divination, and spirituality in African American communities, Osunguunwa suggests that an important deterrent has been the desire among Blacks not to be seen as too different from the surrounding majority population:

> One thing I'm aware of is the fear that African Americans have of not wanting to be too different. Not wanting to call too much attention to themselves and not wanting to lose that part of themselves which is *American*. Not wanting to lose that identity.[40]

For the families of many of the women, the practice of Orisha religion raises uncomfortable questions about blackness and African identity within the larger American matrix. There is, of course, also a painful history of ridicule of so-called "superstition" and "hoodoo mess" which older African Americans often remember with especial poignancy.

Marcia notes, for example, that her mother is of an earlier generation which chose to forget (or at least give the appearance of forgetting) some of the ancestral traditions in order not to seem uneducated and unassimilated:

> My mother came from the generation where to acknowledge those things meant you were country or unsophisticated. So my quest has been good for her in that she knows more now than she claimed to have known before about ancestors on her side of the family. . . . I think my experience is helping her to be more open to some things she had put in the back of her mind.[41]

Those things forgotten, suppressed, shunted to the recesses of collective memory are not always so inaccessible as one might think at first. As Osunguunwa contends, "A lot of us retain a lot. African Americans, Afro-Caribbeans. The remembrance of signs, of remedies, of songs; the attention to dreams, to "sight"; the philosophic and moral complexity of stories; and the grandmothers and aunts and great-grandfathers who knew things and try still to tell us. . . . "

## "*Our Walk in the World*": *African Americanness as a Path to Òsun*

In addition to her work as a nurse, Òsunnikantomi is an accomplished singer. She has performed with several local choirs in the Cleveland area, including the

Cleveland Orchestra chorus. When she was a member of her parents' church she sang regularly there, but in more recent years she has had fewer occasions to practice her musical gifts in a public forum. This year she plans to give a concert at the church of African American religious (mostly Christian) music as an *ebó* (an offering) for the ancestors.

> I have an ancestral obligation to do a concert. . . . I'll be doing it in my parents' church. They can set the price, but I'll get nothing. It's an *ebó*. It's something I'm doing for the ancestors because they don't understand why I'm not singing now as much as I used to. They're saying, "You used to sing all the time. Why is it that we can't get any music from you?"[42]

A concert of music of the Black Christian experience becomes, for an African American priestess of Òsun, an *ebó* for the ancestors. This is an inclusive understanding of ancestry holding our history in the Americas as well as the prediaspora experience. Such inclusiveness is an essential element in the African American meaning of *orisha* tradition. Òsunnikantomi explains that she sees her spiritual journey from Christianity to Ifá as an evolution, a kind of continuum, rather than a transformation. She is able to carry all that she is and all that she has been en route to that which she is yet to be.

> I feel comfortable using all the experiences I've had. . . . If someone wants to refer to [the Bible]—say if I'm doing a consultation—that's fine. Because it's a point of reference. And if someone wants to refer to the Koran, that's fine too. I utilize the *orisha* system because it feels comfortable to me. It must be rooted in my genes. But our experience on this side of the water encompasses a lot of other things too. There's the Native American aspect—I really want to learn more about that. And then, our own ancestors in slavery used the Bible, they used what they had to use. . . . That's what my grandmother and my parents did and that's how they brought me up. It made me part of who I am today.[43]

In the urban spaces of North America, Osunguunwa suggests, the manifestations of Òsun may differ from those in Africa, Cuba, and Brazil; but this makes Òsun's devotees and Her worship even more inclusive.

> In the city, going to the river, to the Hudson, to talk to Her is a little different. I was initiated upstate, in the river. . . . It was so special. So beautiful. I associate Her with nature, nature in the upstate-cold of New York. . . . I see Her on the city's streets as the consummate businesswoman, or artist. I see so many Òsuns who don't even know they are.[44]

Osunguunwa sees a particular value in the empowerment and insight available to African American women through the energy of Òsun and the other *orishas*.

> It really makes you look at who you are and feel good about your walk in the world. Which is important, because quite often, we African American women don't walk

that way. We don't walk with our highest confidence. . . . They help us with understanding ourselves, our beauty.[45]

Osuntoki speaks about how Òsun affects her interactions with people—especially with the teenaged girls she teaches. The *iyalosha* says that the deity's influence encourages her to be a force for encouragement and reconciliation; and to share what she knows with the high school students about womanhood, how to nurture their talents, and how to treasure their innermost selves.[46]

Dorothy situates her Vodou priesthood and her devotion to Ochún in the context of her life as a "curator . . . thinker . . . and emerging scholar." Carrying an acute awareness of both the trauma and the transformative power of the African experience in the Americas, the *manbo* uses the example of her enslaved ancestors as a guide—trying to emulate their genius in "taking the pain and making it power." One of her present projects is to purchase a building which could be used as a unifying cultural and religious center: a place where ceremonies from all the diasporic traditions could be held and where classes in various languages, art, and dance styles would also be taught.[47]

From Òsunnikantomi's ebó concert for the ancestors to Osunguunwa's upstate-cold initiation, and from Osunguunwa's ongoing dialogue with her mother to Dorothy's collective cultural-religious center, African American devotees and priestesses are finding novel and creative ways to give expression to the conjunction of Orisha tradition and African American identity in their lives. In time, the conjunctions become maps, internal compasses, ancestral echoes reversed, reverberating back, so that old paths are signaled new, and as Manbo Do tells it, "No matter what road we take, we're never lost."[48]

## Notes

1. Variations occur in the spelling of names of the orishas according to different orthographic systems. I have adopted the particular spelling of each system where appropriate. The name Òsun is written variously herein as Òsun, Ochún or Oxum depending on the context of each speaker. For example, when quoting Marcia Gibson Minter on her relationship to Òsun, I use the Brazilian Portuguese spelling "Oxum." I have made similar decisions for the spelling of Yemoja/Yemaya/Yemanjá, for Sàngó/Shangó and for Ochosi/Oxossi.
2. Iyalosha Osuntoki Mojisola, interview, August 9, 1998.
3. Marcia Gibson Minter, interview, August 16 and 23, 1998.
4. Ibid.
5. Gibson Minter.
6. Manbo Asogwé Dorothy Désir-Davis, interview, September 21, 1998.
7. Iyalosha Majile Osunbunmi Olafemi, interview, August 23 and 30, 1998.
8. Iyalosha Òsunnikantomi Egbénihun Ajoké, interview, September 9 and 12, 1998.
9. Olafemi.
10. Iyalosha Shirley Panton-Parker, interview, September 25, 1998.
11. Ibid.
12. Olafemi.

13. Désir-Davis.
14. Ibid.
15. Ibid.
16. Ibid.
17. All quotes in this section are the words of Iyalosha Òsunnikantomi Egbénihun Ajoké. Author's interview September 9 and 12, 1998.
18. See Pierre Verger, "Grandeza e Decadência do Culto de Ìyàmi Òsòròngà (Minha Mãe Feiticeira) entre os Yorubá," in Carlos Eugênio Marcondes de Moura (org.), *As Senhoras do Pássaro da Noite*, (São Paulo: EDUSP, 1994), p. 16; also, Verger "The Orishas of Bahia," in Carybé, *Os Deuses Africanos no Candomblé da Bahia*, (Salvador: Bigraf, 1993), p. 253. In his writing on Bahian Candomblé, Verger notes Òsun's ties with Iyami-Ajé or Iyami Osoronga (Mother Witch), indicating further that Òsun Ijumú ("queen of all the Òsuns") and Òsun Ayalá or Òsun Ayanlá (the Great Mother or the Grandmother—who was the wife of Ogun) both have "a close connection to the witches, or Ajés."
19. Oba Oseijiman Adefunmi is the temporal and spiritual leader of Oyotunji Village, an African-inspired, strongly Yoruba-based community founded in 1971 in Sheldon, South Carolina.
20. Olafemi.
21. Mojisola.
22. Ajoké.
23. Olafemi.
24. Ajoké.
25. Mojisola.
26. Désir-Davis.
27. Ibid.
28. Ibid.
29. All quotes in this section are the words of Iyalosha Osunguunwa. Author's interview September 25, 1998.
30. Ajoké.
31. Mojisola.
32. Olafemi.
33. Ajoké.
34. Gibson Minter.
35. All quotes in this section of the essay are the words of Marcia Gibson Minter. Author's interviews August 16 and 23, 1998.
36. Gibson Minter.
37. Désir-Davis.
38. Olafemi.
39. Osunguunwa.
40. Ibid.
41. Gibson Minter.
42. Ajoké.
43. Ibid.
44. Osunguunwa.
45. Osunguunwa.
46. Mojisola.
47. Désir-Davis.
48. Ibid.

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Olafemi, Majile Osunbunmi. Telephone interviews, August 23 and 30, 1998.

"Òsun: Her Worship, Her Powers." 1994. Film produced by Iyalosha Osuntoki Mojisola, Nigeria/USA.

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CHAPTER FOURTEEN

# Ẹ́ẹ̀rìndínlógún

## The Seeing Eyes of Sacred Shells and Stones

*David O. Ogungbile*

This essay focuses on Ẹ́ẹ̀rìndínlógún, Sixteen Cowrie Divination, the primordial divination system claimed to have been owned by Ọ̀ṣun, the powerful goddess, a powerful and indispensable link between the humans and spiritual beings, both malevolent and benevolent. It identifies the multi-dimensional attributes of Ọ̀ṣun and her centrality in the maintenance and sustenance of the Yorùbá universe vis-à-vis her ownership of the Ẹ́ẹ̀rìndínlógún divination practice. The system follows a tripartite process of prognostication, explanation, and control (Ògúngbilé 1996: 54) which corresponds to the modern medical practice of diagnosis, prescription, and medication. Thus, this essay discusses the process in relation to the two major activities that constitute the practice of Ẹ́ẹ̀rìndínlógún: divinatory technique and curative practice. The study notes the importance of Ẹ́ẹ̀rìndínlógún as the "seeing eyes" of most other Yorùbá deities and how this has ascribed to Ọ̀ṣun a prestigious status in the ordering of the societies where she is acknowledged.

### *Ọ̀ṣun and Ẹ́ẹ̀rìndínlógún*

The connection of Ọ̀ṣun to Ẹ́ẹ̀rìndínlógún underscores her position and power within the complex scheme of two groups of powerful spiritual beings who struggle for the domination of the universe. This could be explained from (1) her diverse manifestations as spiritual, human, and natural phenomena and (2) her different levels of relations with some powerful divinities who are active in the creation and maintenance of the universe. While completing the male–female principle among the spiritual beings, Ọ̀ṣun conceptualizes a working principle of the natural forces in Yorùbá cosmology. Her feminine image therefore is of great biological and ecological significance among the people. It is noteworthy that Ọ̀ṣun plays a vital role not only in the creation of human beings and the

maintenance of the world, but also in determining the quality of life individuals live. All these are shown in the person of Ọṣun. And according to Bádéjọ (1991: 81), "the Òrìṣà or goddess Ọṣun epitomizes such an iconography in her many roles as giver of children, diviner, leader of the *àjẹ́* (witches or powerful beings) beauty, ruler and healer."

A popular cosmogonic myth states that Ọṣun is one of the principal ministers of Olódùmarè, the Yorùbá Supreme Being, who participate in the creation of the physical aspects of human beings. Ọṣun becomes indispensable in that she provides Ọbàtálá with the water that he uses to smooth the clay with which he molds human beings; Olódùmarè supplies the breath. Thus, Ọṣun knows the constitution of, and participates in, the formation of human beings (Ọṣúntóògùn, June 1998).

Ọṣun's intimate knowledge of the cosmic order and participation in the formation of human beings afford her the capability of influencing human destiny. Also, her marital link with Ọ̀rúnmìlà underscores her own connection to the practice of divination. Through these she can resolve the crises and conflicts brought about on human beings by the interactions of benevolent and malevolent spiritual beings. One of her praise poems by Ọṣun Òṣogbo Chief Priestess, Chief Asánde Ọyáwẹ̀óyè (January 1997) summarizes this:

| | |
|---|---|
| *Agbébú yan'ṣẹ́,* | The one who resides in the deep and yet performs various occupations, |
| *Onímọlẹ̀ Odò.* | The goddess of the river, |
| *Ọṣun ní ń t'órí ẹni tí kò sunwọ̀n ṣe;* | Ọṣun alters bad destinies. |
| *Ládékojú, agbenigbeni kó tó ń t'ojú ẹni;* | Ládékojú, the one who defends somebody's cause beyond expectation; |
| *Agbeni-má-dáwọ́-dúró,* | The untiring defender, |
| *Agbeni-má-rí,* | The unseen defender, |
| *Agbeni-má-yẹ̀.* | The unfailing defender. |

The acquisition of the Ẹẹ́rìndínlógún system of divination by Ọṣun is told in another myth. Ọ̀rúnmìlà undertook a divination expedition to a particular town. Before Ọ̀rúnmìlà left, he had introduced Ọṣun, his inquisitive and knowledgeable wife, to the practice of divination. Ọ̀rúnmìlà therefore gave Ọṣun sixteen cowrie shells and instructed her that however she manipulated the cowrie shells, even contrary to his own order of arrangement and recitation of Odù, the system would still work wonders. The journey that was meant to last only sixteen days took him sixteen years.[1] This long absence caused destitution for the multitude of clients who consulted Ọ̀rúnmìlà. The clients then persuaded Ọṣun to provide for them a sort of "first aid." She started to divine for them, using Ẹẹ́rìndínlógún. On returning from his journey, the great news of Ọṣun's divination feats greeted Ọ̀rúnmìlà. He was surprised, more so as his journey was more of a loss than a gain. Ọṣun, on the other hand, had gained a lot of money and materials to the delight of Ọ̀rúnmìlà. Ọ̀rúnmìlà hence approved and authorized the use of Ẹẹ́rìndínlógún for Ọṣun.[2] This story shows, despite the negative gender bias, that the

woman in this spiritual realm has the capability and competence to make great achievements in a way that would surpass the man's. Through this divination practice, Ọ̀ṣun could manipulate, capture, and condense the complexities involved in the ordering of the universe. This is attested to by some lines of *Oríkì Ọ̀ṣun* (Ọ̀ṣun praise poem), also showing her ubiquity and knowledge of secrets:

*Ládékojú*[3] *Oore Yèyé Ọ̀ṣun*
*Òyéyé ní'mọ̀;*
*Òrìṣà tí Í gb'órí ìtàgé*
*Tí Í ránṣẹ́ p'olóbì l'ọ́jà*
*Ó gbé'nú ibú,*
*Ó mọ ohun t'áwo ń ṣe.*

Ládékojú, the Most Gracious Mother
The most knowledgeable one
The Òrìṣà who stays on the stage
And sends for kolanut sellers from the market;
She resides in the deep,
And yet understands the secret activities of the diviners.

The Ẹ́ẹ̀rìndínlógún system today is the most popular, reliable, and commonly used form of divination among Òrìṣà devotees (Ògúngbilé 1998: 63–64; Fáníyì 1998: 56–59). This system is the form practiced in some places in the Americas and most significantly Brazil where it is called Dílógún Ifá (Abímbọ́lá 1994; Verger 1989; Bascom 1980). The popularity of Ẹ́ẹ̀rìndínlógún is further confirmed in the classic on Obatala written by the Àwíṣẹ of Òṣogboland, Ifáyẹmí Ẹlẹ́buìbọn (1989: 11):

> Most of Ọbàtálá devotees used to [*sic*] divine with cowrie shells (Ẹ́ẹ̀rìndínlógún). This was given to Ọbàtálá, as he was a friend to Ọ̀shun. It was Ọ̀shun who acknowledged the system of divination from Ọ̀rúnmìlà which was later spread to all orishas.

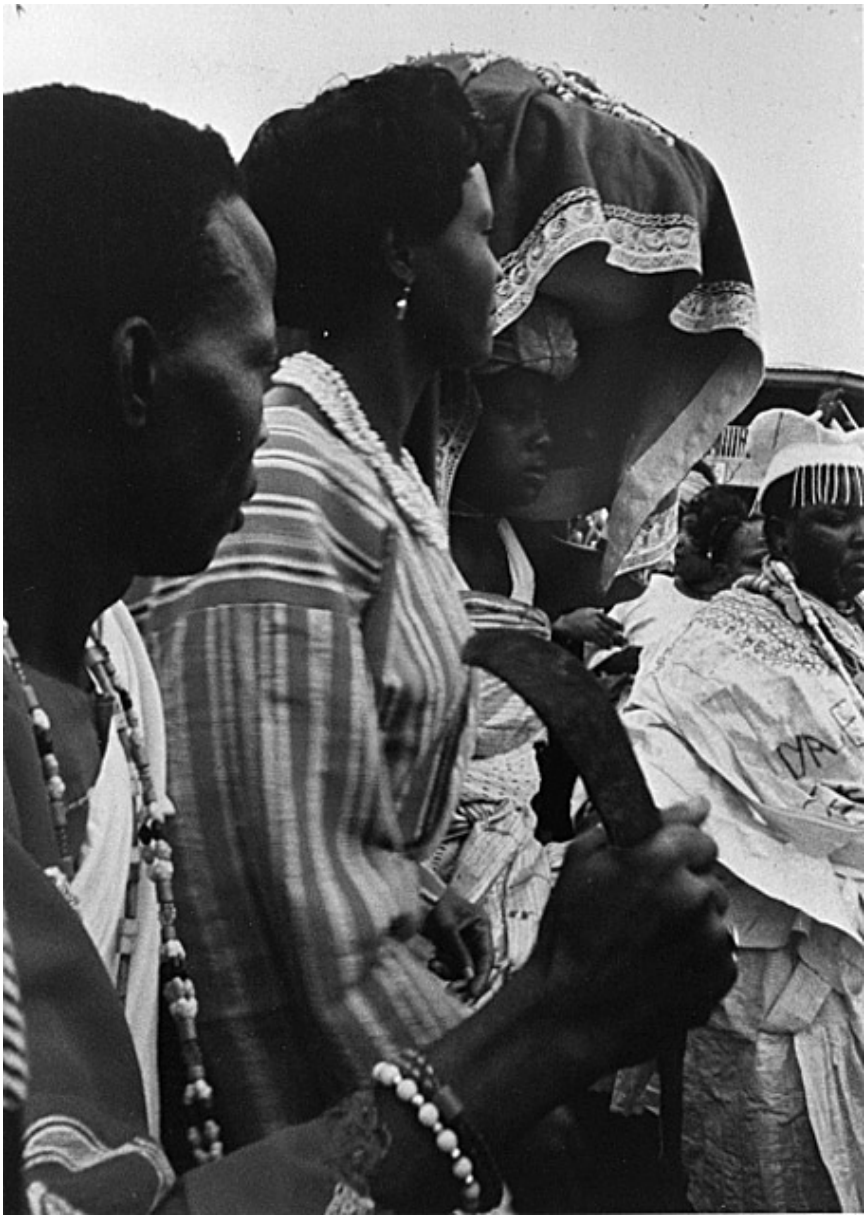
## *Ọ̀ṣun and* Woman-Power

Knowledge beyond the empirical, the ability to control physical and spiritual forces, the capability to extend the human life cycle through procreation and sustenance of life are considered in the Yorùbá worldview to be "ultimate" power. Ọ̀ṣun signifies and expresses three interrelated elemental levels of woman-power, the "real power" in Yorùbá cosmology. These are mystical (mysterious) power, temporal power, and physiological power. They emphasize the complementary nature and interdependence of male–female, natural–human, and spiritual forces. These elements exemplify women's status and power in the general divination practice and particularly in Ẹ́ẹ̀rìndínlógún.

Ọ̀ṣun's position in the Yorùbá pantheon as an embodiment of women's mystical power is recurrent in mythologies, her praise poetry, and Ifá oral literature. This is upheld further in *Odù Ọ̀ṣẹ́túá* collected from Babaláwo Oyègbadé Ọlátọ̀nà, the Ojùgbọ̀nà Awo of Òṣogboland:

*Kọ́mú-n-kọ́rọ̀,*
*Awo Èwí ń'lé Adó;*
*Ọ̀rùn-mu-dẹ̀dẹ̀ẹ̀dẹ̀-kanlẹ̀,*
*Awo Òde Ìjẹ̀ṣà;*
*Alákàn-ní-ń-bẹ-lódò*

*Kọ́mú-n-kọ́rọ̀,*
Their diviner in the town of Ado;[4]
*Ọ̀rùn-mu-dẹ̀dẹ̀ẹ̀dẹ̀-kanlẹ̀,*
Their diviner in Ìjẹ̀ṣà[5] kingdom;
*The-crab-is-in-the-river*



14.1 Arugbá of Òṣogbo in procession, Ọ̀ṣun Festival, Òṣogbo.
*All photos in this chapter by David Ògúngbilé.*

*Tí-ń-tẹlẹ̀-tútù-rin-rin-rin;*
*Á díá f'ẹ́ẹ́rìndínlógún Oródù*

*Níjọ́ wọn n t'òde ọ̀run bọ̀*

*W'óde ìṣálayé.*

*And-crawls-in-extremely-cold-ground;*
They all divined for the sixteen principal divinities
On the day they were descending from heaven
To the planetary earth.

| | |
|---|---|
| *Wọ́n dé'lé ayé.* | They arrived in the world, |
| *Wọ́n yẹ'gbó Orò,* | They cleared Orò[6] grove, |
| *Wọ́n yẹ'gbó Ọpa.* | They cleared *Ọpa*[7] grove. |
| *Wọ́n gbìmọ̀,* | They planned, |
| *Won ò fi t'Ọ̀ṣun ṣe.* | They never consulted with Ọ̀ṣun. |
| *Wọ́n ṣe'lé ayé títí,* | They tried to maintain the world, |
| *Ilé ayé ò gún rárá.* | There was no order in the world. |
| *Wọ́n gbé'ra páá* | They rose up immediately |
| *Wọ́n tọ Olódùmarè lọ.* | And went to Olódùmarè. |
| *Olódùmarè kí wọn tán* | Olódùmarè greeted them |
| *Ó béèrè èkẹtàdínlógún wọn.* | And asked of their seventeenth person. |
| *Olódùmarè ni, "kín ni ó dé-* | Olódùmarè asked them "Why |
| *Tí ẹ kìí fií kéé sí?"* | Don't you often consult with her?" |
| *Wọ́n ní, "Nítorí pé-* | They replied, "It was because |
| *Ó jẹ́ obìnrin láàrin àwọn ni."* | She was only a female among us." |
| *Olódùmarè ní, "Àgbẹdọ̀ o!* | Olódùmarè said, "No, it should not be so! |
| *Obìnrin bí ọkùnrin ni Ọ̀ṣun."* | Ọ̀ṣun is a manly woman." |
| *Olódùmarè ni,* | Olódùmarè said, |
| *"Boríborí, Awo Ìrágberí,* | *"Boríborí,* their diviner in Ìrágberí,[8] |
| *Ọmọ èkọ́ṣẹ́ Ọ̀ṣun ní í ṣe.* | Is a divination apprentice of Ọ̀ṣun. |
| *Ẹ̀gbà, Awo Ìlukàn,* | *Ẹ̀gbà,* their diviner in Ìlukàn,[9] |
| *Ọmọ èkọ́ṣẹ́ Ọ̀ṣun ni i ṣe.* | Is a divination apprentice of Ọ̀ṣun. |
| *Èṣe, ti i ṣe Awo wọn-* | *Èṣe,* who is their diviner |
| *N'Ìjèbú Ẹ̀rẹ̀,* | In Ìjèbú Ẹ̀rẹ̀,[10] |
| *Ọmọ èkọ́ṣẹ́ Ọ̀ṣun ni i ṣe.* | Is a divination apprentice of Ọ̀ṣun. |
| *Atómú, Awo wọn ni Ìkirè Ilé,* | *Atómú,* their diviner in the town of Ìkìre,[11] |
| *Ọmọ èkọ́ṣẹ́ Ọ̀ṣun ni i ṣe.* | Is a divination apprentice of Ọ̀ṣun. |
| *Àwọn Irúnmọlẹ̀ wọ̀nyìí,* | These divinities, |
| *Ní í jẹ́ k'ọ́mọ ṣòwò,* | They allow a person to trade, |
| *Àwọn ní í jẹ́ k'ọ́mọ jèrè,* | They allow a person to make gains, |
| *Ṣugbọ́n, wọn kì í jẹ́* | But they do not allow |
| *K'ọ́mọ kérè ọjà délé."* | The person to carry the gain home." |
| *Olódùmarè ni,* | Olódùmarè said, |
| *"Ohun tí ẹ kò tètè mọ̀* | "What you were ignorant of |
| *Ni ẹ wáá mọ̀ wàyí.* | Is what you now know. |
| *Ẹ padà sílé ayé* | Go back into the world |
| *Kí ẹ sì máa ké sí Ọ̀ṣun* | And consult with Ọ̀ṣun |
| *Fún gbogbo ohun tí ẹ bá fẹ́ẹ́ ṣe,* | In whatever you embark upon, |
| *Ohunkóhun tẹ́ẹ bá dáwọ́ lé* | Whatever then you lay your hands on |
| *Yóó sì máa tùbà-tùṣẹ."* | Will continue to prosper." |
| *Ìgbà tí wọn délé ayé* | When they got into the world |
| *Wọ́n bẹ̀rẹ̀ síí pe Ọ̀ṣun* | They now continued to call Ọ̀ṣun |
| *Ni wọ́n bá ń ki Ọ̀ṣun báyìí:* | And praise Ọ̀ṣun thus: |
| *A-rí pẹpẹ kó idẹ sí;* | One who has a store for brass in a big shelf;[12] |
| *A fi'dẹ rẹ'mọ.* | One who generously appeases her children with brass. |
| *Yeè mi, Afiyùn gbà'ṣè.* | My mother, she who accepts corals for ritual offerings. |
| *Ọta ò! Omi ò! Ẹdan ò!* | *Ọta! Omi! Ẹdan!* |
| *Awura! Olú! Agbaja!* | *Awura! Olú! Agbaja!*[13] |
| *Abáwọnpéjọ nidìí ìmọ̀ràn!* | The ever-present counselor at their decision-making meetings! |
| *Ládékojú! Oore Yèyé Ọ̀ṣun!* | Ládékojú! the Gracious Mother, Ọ̀ṣun! |

An analysis of the verses of this Odù reveals Ọ̀ṣun's mysterious and mystical power. Though she was the only female among the seventeen principal divinities,[14] her neglect rendered the efforts of the male divinities futile. Olódùmarè affirmed that Ọ̀ṣun as a female has been endowed with power as essential as her male counterparts. Olódùmarè instructed them to involve Ọ̀ṣun in their plans. This they did and succeeded. Thus, Ọ̀ṣun is noted to have the ability to withhold the life-force principle. She was able to do this with the assistance of her four powerful messengers: *Boríborí* (Overcomer), *Ẹ̀gbà* (Paralysis), *Èṣe* (Grievous Harm), and *Atómú* (Able and Strong Captor).[15] They were divination apprentices of Ọ̀ṣun and were in the group of the seventeen principal divinities who descended with her. *Boríborí* assisted Ọ̀ṣun in overcoming the others, *Ẹ̀gbà* paralyzed them, *Èṣe* caused terrible harm on them, while Atómú arrested their activities for refusing to consult and involve Ọ̀ṣun. One praise poem of Ọ̀ṣun recited by one of her priestesses further illustrates her masculinity, bravery, and prowess:

| | |
|---|---|
| *Obìnrin gb'ọ̀nà, Ọkùnrin ń sá* | The woman who blocks the road (by flooding it) and causes man to run. |
| *Ó torí ogun Ó dá'rungbọ̀n sí.* | Who keeps her beard[16] because of war. |
| *Agẹ̀gùn ṣ'orò.* | One who in fury causes trouble and chaos. |
| *Ọ̀gbàmùgbámú, Obìnrin kò ṣeé gbámú.* | The powerful and huge woman who cannot be attacked. |

Ọ̀ṣun uses the above network to provide a balance within the framework of opposing characteristics of destruction and construction, ferocity and nurture, disorganization and organization, and fortune and misfortune. She confers this mystical power on women, personified in *Àjẹ́,* the most powerful, most highly dreaded, and most revered women's cult in Yorubaland.

The *Àjẹ́* exemplify power in the Yorùbá worldview. They are mysterious, tough, powerful, fearsome, and ubiquitous. They maintain an ontological equilibrium between the several forces within the spiritual and mundane worlds. They play the dual roles of furthering and thwarting the plans of human beings. Barrenness, illness, or death of children, blindness, accidents, damages to farms, and other misfortunes are attributed to the influence of the *Àjẹ́.* They operate at any time of the day (Abímbọ́lá 1976: 165–169, 174–186). They assume the nonhuman forms of birds, cockroaches, lizards, cats, sheep, and spiders while performing their activities (Ládélé et al. 1986: 47–48). They are praised thus:

| | |
|---|---|
| *Ìyàmi, Ọ̀ṣòròngà* | My Mysterious Mother, *Ọ̀ṣòròngà* |
| *Apanimáhàágún,* | Vulture who kills without sharing.[17] |
| *Olókìkí òru;* | The dominant force at midnight; |
| *Ajẹ̀dọ̀ èníyàn má bì.* | One who devours human livers without vomiting. |
| *Èyí tíí lọ nígbà ọjà bá tú.* | One who vacates only when the market closes. |
| *A-lé-'mọ lójú àlá wìrìwìrì.* | One who terrifies in dreams. (Personal interviews, Adéfióyè, Elusọ̀ji, Ọ̀ṣúntóògùn, etc.) |

This group of ubiquitous, mysterious women operates under the leadership, guidance, and control of Ọ̀ṣun. Ọ̀ṣun's intimacy with *Àjẹ́* and her ubiquity are evident in her praise chant by Ọ̀ṣun priestess Kehinde Ọ̀ṣúndárà Ọyáwálé:

| | |
|---|---|
| *Ewúrẹ́ Ọ̀ràngún tí Í jẹ l'ẹ́ṣẹ̀ gbàgede,* | Òràngún's[18] goat that moves about the fence, |
| *Àkùkọ Ọ̀ràngún t'ó r'orí Ọ̀pẹ rè é lé téńté.* | Orangun's cock that stays on the top of the palm tree. |
| *Ojú tó'lé, Ojú t'óko.* | She is both at home and in the forest. |
| *Gbogbo ọ̀tọ̀ọ̀kùlú* | All eminent people in the town |
| *Ẹ bá n k'Óore Yèyé Ọ̀ṣun,* | Join me to shout praises to Gracious Mother Ọ̀ṣun, |
| *Oníkẹ, Ọba Am'awo mọ́ rò.* | The Honorable One, the Sovereign who knows the secrets of cults, but never discloses them. |

In the divination process, before a diviner casts the cowrie shells she pays homage to *Ilẹ́* (earth deity) pointing to the ground, and to Ìyàmi (*Àjẹ́*) pointing to the sky, and says:

| | |
|---|---|
| *Ìbàa yín o!* | Your worship! |
| *Èyin l'awo,* | You are the custodians of mysteries, |
| *Èmi l'ọ̀gbẹ̀rì.* | I am ignorant. |
| *Ẹ f'òrò yìí hàn mí o.* | Reveal this secret to me. |
| *Ẹ má f'ire pe 'bi.* | Do not reveal good instead of evil. |
| *Ẹ má f'ibi pe 're o.* | Do not reveal evil instead of good. |

Ọ̀ṣun's physiological and temporal powers define female identity and women's roles by their procreative power. Childbearing, which womanhood signifies, is a matter of deepest spiritual significance to Yorùbá people. Barrenness is viewed with disrespect, and regarded as a misfortune and divine curse. This is always attributed to women and their destiny. Thus, Ọ̀ṣun's woman image and concern for childbearing and children then become crucial to woman and society as a fertility goddess. Her role is indispensable to the continuance of human life and society as a bestower of the wealth of children. This concern for childbearing, the means through which humanity multiplies, finds explanation and solution in Ẹẹ́rìndínlógún divination and the use of water, the most powerful ritual element. Most women and men devote themselves and make offerings to Ọ̀ṣun (Ògúngbilé 1998: 63–64). Ọ̀ṣun's power to generate and sustain life is told in another myth (Ògúngbilé 1997b: 21–24). Ọ̀rúnmìlà divorced Ọ̀ṣun because she was barren. She married Ṣàngó, the Yorùbá divinity of thunder and lightning. After some ritual offerings prescribed through divination, Ọ̀ṣun was led to the abode of children. She also prepared beans for the children as instructed. This attracted many children to follow her. When they got to Àràgbàǹṣà, the midpoint between heaven and earth, the children retreated. After she offered them more beans, they continued. But, when she got to the earth, she looked for the children and discovered that they had disappeared. She started to cry.

Ọ̀rúnmìlà then appeared to her, consoled, and congratulated her! Ọ̀ṣun could

not believe it when she noticed three months later that she was already pregnant. In the ninth month, one hundred and twenty-four thousand babies were born by barren women. Ifá was consulted when these children started to fall ill. It was revealed to the women that the illness was caused by their non-acknowledgment of the replenishing work of Ọ̀ṣun whereby she opened the way for pregnancy. Ritual offerings were presented to Ọ̀ṣun as an appeasement and in gratitude. Thus, the children regained their health. It is noted here that Ọ̀ṣun does not only bestow life, she also nurtures it.

The role of women as diviners in Ẹẹ́rìndínlógún is immense. This is very closely linked with their status in African traditional life and religion. One reason is that Ẹẹ́rìndínlógún is woman-centered. Women not only form the majority in Yorùbá religion, they are pious and zealous (Awólàlú 1976: 93). Moreover, most women who are devotees or priestesses of Ọ̀ṣun, Ọbàtálá, Ọbalúayé, Ṣàngó, etc. use Ẹẹ́rìndínlógún. The materials used are cowrie shells, small sacks made of cloth inside which the cowrie shells are kept, *àtẹ* (a small wooden or woven tray covered with white cloth), and *ibò*. *Ibò* is comprised of pieces of stone shells and broken bones that are used to spell out, exemplify, or translate the details of broad and general statements into concrete details in a "yes or no" format. Many of our informants however hold that the use of *ibò* is unnecessary. Cowrie shells, with proper preparation, are capable, powerful, and sufficient in unfolding any inquiries and ritual prescriptions.

Ẹẹ́rìndínlógún divination requires an apprenticeship training of about five years.[19] It is important to note that most olórìṣà acquire both the practice of their orisa and Ẹẹ́rìndínlógún divination system as well as their elaborate ritual preparations from their aged biological parents with whom they spend the whole of their time.[20] Some among the olórìṣà augment their acquired knowledge with apprenticeship for a period of time from a more knowledgeable Ẹẹ́rìndínlógún diviner.[21] An interested person who is not an olórìṣà could undergo the training for an agreed period of time from an Ẹẹ́rìndínlógún diviner.[22] The system could also be learned by studying texts on Ẹẹ́rìndínlógún.[23] It is however apparent that the proficiency of an Ẹlẹẹ́rìndínlógún in the recitation of Ifá verses and narration of connected stories in Odù Ifá depends on his or her length and depth of training, retentive power, and commitment. From my observation, I have ascertained that Ẹlẹẹ́rìndínlógún who undergo a fairly long period of training have sufficient time to learn as many verses and stories as apprentices can endure to learn. Those who depend on texts to learn Ẹẹ́rìndínlógún are limited to the scanty verses in the available texts.

Priestesses and priests of Òrìṣà who use the Ẹẹ́rìndínlógún are identified with the title Olórìṣà. Anyone who operates it as a means of livelihood is simply called Ẹlẹẹ́rìndínlógún, possessor of, or one who practices the Ẹẹ́rìndínlógún system of divination. Oyèkúnlé Ọlátọ̀nà, however, added that an Ẹlẹẹ́rìndínlógún could be designated Ìyàwó Ifá, wife of Ifá. This title, according to him, is used to identify with Ọ̀ṣun (the wife of Ọ̀rúnmìlà whose other name is Ifá), the acclaimed

owner of the system. The title Ìyàwó Ifá distinguishes an Ẹ́ẹ̀rìndínlógún diviner from the Babaláwo who uses Ikin (sacred palm nuts) or Ọ̀pẹ̀lẹ̀ (divining chain) exclusively. Opinions of most of my informants however differ on the use of this last title.

It is very important to note that there is a ritual dimension to the effectiveness and accuracy of Ẹ́ẹ̀rìndínlógún divination. Apart from the sacred value of the shells and stone, and the sacred preparations of these materials, the diviner is ritually prepared. Some items like alligator pepper, bitter kola, kolanut, and herbs are prepared and chewed by the initiate. Moreover, she or he undergoes a process of ritual bathing in certain herbs, well-prepared with water (Ọ̀ṣun in her natural and spiritual form), to be able to acquire powerful inspiration for intuitive knowledge. All these will aid accurate and intuitive interpretation of the possible multiple meanings in certain Odù Ifá verses. Observance of purity taboos is necessary before handling the instruments of divination.

## Omi: *Principle of All Healing*

In Yorùbá religion, *omi* (water) is believed to be a divine element and is endowed with supernatural power, constructive and destructive, positive and negative. It is used at birth, during special traditional ceremonies, burial rites, and for life crisis rituals. One Odù Ifá says:

| | |
|---|---|
| *A-ṣe gbẹ́ẹ́ẹ̀ w'áyé* | The one who unexpectedly comes into the world |
| *Omi ló máa gbàá.* | Will be admitted by water. |
| *Arìnrìn gbẹ̀ẹ̀rẹ̀ lọ sóde ọ̀run* | The one who slowly goes back into heaven |
| *Omi ló máa gbàá.* | Will be received by water. |
| *Omi l'àbùwẹ̀,* | It is water that we bathe with, |
| *Omi l'àbùmu.* | It is water that we drink. |
| *Ẹnìkan kì í b'ómi ṣọ̀tá.* | No one makes an enemy of water. (Personal interview, Elúsọjí Ayéyẹmí) |

Moreover, water possesses therapeutic power and underlies the preparation of most ritual offerings. Water is generally used as libation, for purification and consecration of priestesses, priests, shrines, cultic objects, and for other therapeutic purposes. Another Odù Ifá talks of the divine power of water:

| | |
|---|---|
| *Omi ń wọ́ 'yanrìn gẹ̀ẹ̀rẹ̀rẹ̀ o.* | Water smoothly and easily moves the sands. |
| *Omi ń wọ́ 'yanrìn gẹ̀ẹ̀rẹ̀rẹ̀.* | Water smoothly and easily moves the sands. |
| *Omi kò l'ọ́wọ́* | Though water has no sounds |
| *Omi kò l'ẹ́ṣẹ̀,* | And water has no legs, |
| *Omi ń wọ́ 'yanrìn gẹ̀ẹ̀rẹ̀rẹ̀.* | Yet water smoothly and easily moves the sands. |

To devotees of most Yorùbá deities, water symbolizes life and it is synonymous with Ọ̀ṣun (interviews, Oyinloyè, Ọ̀ṣúnyíta, and Ọ̀ṣuntóògùn). Ọ̀ṣun's knowledge of human composition, her triple personification in spiritual, human, and

14.2 Devotees at Ọ̀ṣun River, Ọ̀ṣun Festival, Òṣogbo.

natural phenomena, and the essence of her originating power are crucial to the practice of Ẹẹ́rìndínlógún and ritual preparation and efficacy. Ọ̀ṣun river water becomes extremely important in the ritual process as a steady and powerful healer. It is fetched wherever it runs. There is also claimed to be a spiritual link between Ọ̀ṣun and other waters. To most Òrìṣà devotees, all waters emanate from Ọ̀ṣun. The expression *Odò gbogbo l'àgbo*, "All rivers are (Ọ̀ṣun's) medicine," summarizes this claim (interview, Ọ̀ṣuntóògùn).

The therapeutic power of Ọ̀ṣun water is shown in the relationship between Ọ̀ṣun and all other Òrìṣà, especially the fiery divinities who affect the fate of human beings in life. In the first instance, all Òrìṣà objects that carry the Òrìṣà's effectuating power are ritually consecrated with water. The dialectics of hot and cool, violence and gentleness, and fire and water, show their complimentarity. As a powerful deity, Ọ̀ṣun is noted for gentleness and coolness which she uses to seduce and quench the fury and hotness of male divinities such as Ògún (divinity of war and iron), Ṣàngó (deity of thunder and lightning), Ọbalúayé (deity of storms and winds), and all other Ajogun. Though the divinities manifest the wrath of Olódùmarè in certain evil occurrences, Ọ̀ṣun is believed to have a soothing effect on them so that they can benefit humankind. Olódùmarè uses this to control the universe and impose orderliness when human beings solicit the help of the divinities. Two lines of Odù Ìroṣùn Atẹ́ẹ́rẹ́ collected from Babaláwo Fátóògùn say:

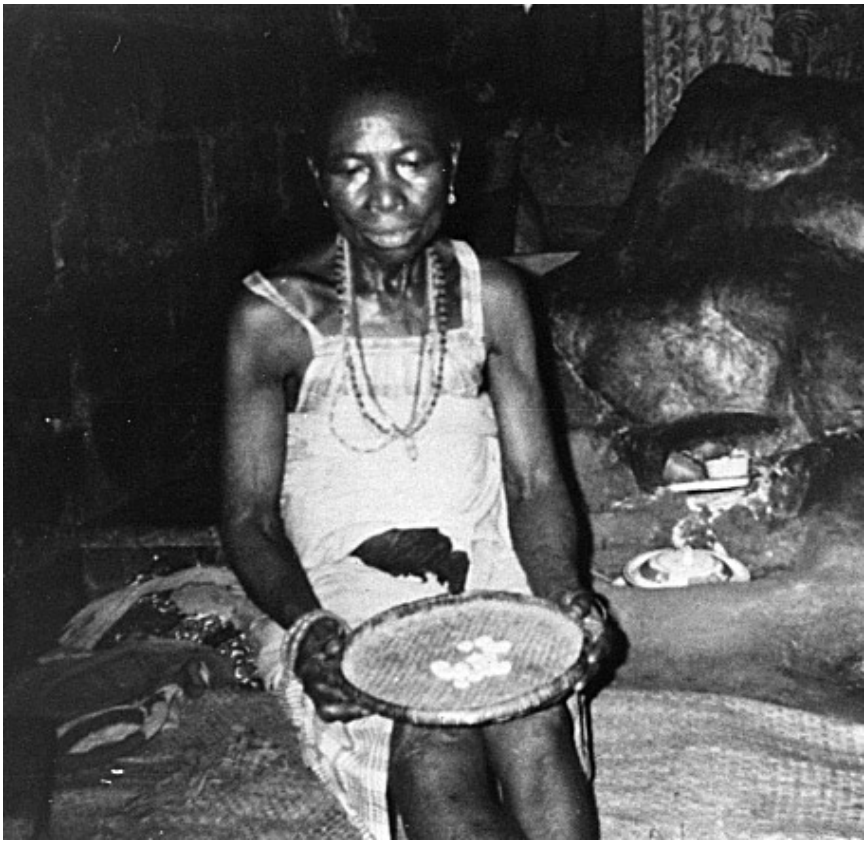
| | |
|---|---|
| *Taa ló tó ni í gbà lọ́wọ́ Ajogun?* | Who is capable of rescuing somebody from the Ajogun? |
| *Ọ̀ṣun, Òtòòlò Ẹ̀fọ̀n, ló tó ni ì gbà lọ́wọ́ Ajogun.* | It is Ọ̀ṣun, the great Ẹ̀fọ̀n king who is capable of rescuing somebody from the Ajogun. |

This Odù talks about the terrible encounter of the great Ọ̀ruńmìlà with the *Iná* (Fire), the Ajogun usually sent by Olódùmarè to carry other beings to heaven even against their wish. All other divinities are unable to rescue Ọ̀rúnmìlà for the fear of *Iná*. It is only Ọ̀ṣun who is able to withstand *Iná* by providing water to pour on *Iná*. This is expressed in several *Ọ̀fọ̀*, incantations to effect healing. An example is:

| | |
|---|---|
| *Omi ní í pa 'ná* | Water quenches fire, |
| *Iná kò gbọ̀dọ̀ p'omi.* | Fire does not quench water. |
| *Iná kì í tọ 'pa odò,* | No fire traces the course of a river, |
| *Iná tó bá tọ 'pa odò,* | Any fire that dares trace the course of the river, |
| *Kíkú ní í kú.* | It will be quenched completely. |

It is important to note that the appearance of the Odù that relates to the fiery divinities[24] is considered dangerous to the client to whom the Odù appears. Water is poured on the cowrie shells that gave the signature of the Odù before they are recast. Such an action is required to soften the terrible consequence of the Odù that appears. Also, the shrine of Èṣù, the neutral force who is also responsible for inspecting and bearing ritual offerings, is usually sprinkled with water to sooth Èṣù. Moreover, each Òrìṣà has *àwẹ̀* (sacred water pot). Beside this pot is also put *àwẹ̀* Ọ̀ṣun, "Ọ̀ṣun sacred water pot," inside which *àgbo* Ọ̀ṣun is kept. This signifies the needed assistance of Ọ̀ṣun in the healing activities of other deities.

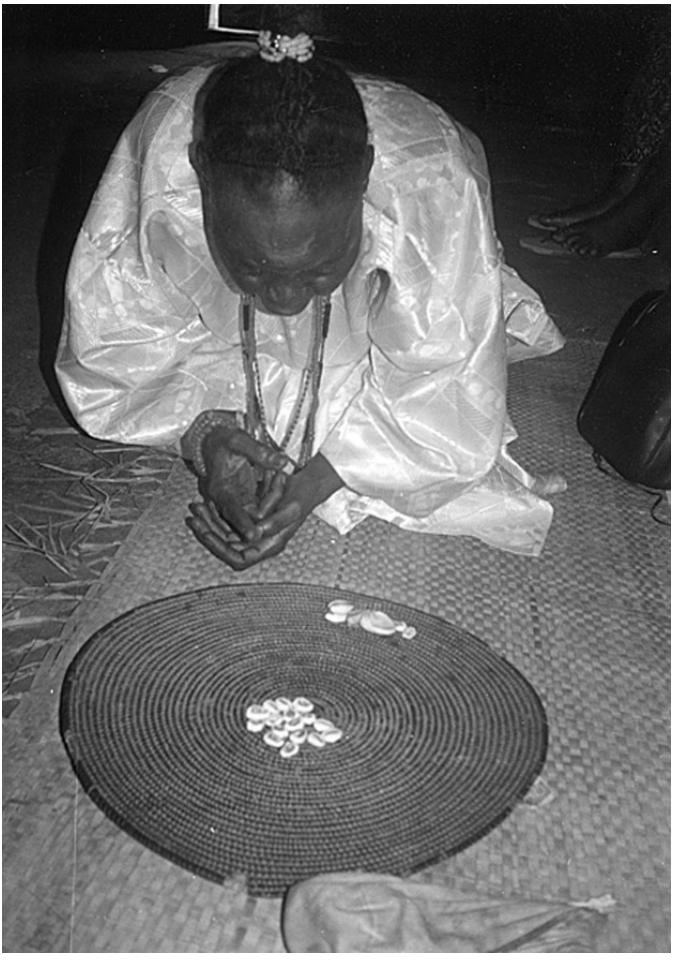
Ritual preparation for empowerment of sacred objects like cowrie shells with sacred water and other elements including herbs and the blood of some female animals is of high significance. This ritual consecration further makes cowrie shells, when they are cast, capable of seeing and revealing hidden and obscure matters and events. Kolanut, the one with four valves, is also noted to be the most common item used as a ritual offering for all divinities. Before it is used, it has to be washed with sacred water that personifies Ọ̀ṣun. It should be mentioned as expressed by most of our informants that it is only in the case of Ọ̀ṣun that sacrificial kolanut is not washed before it is used. This is contained in the expression: *A kì í fi omi bọ Omi*, "We do not use water as ritual offering for Water." Cowrie shells, *owó ẹyọ*, and Ọ̀ṣun's stones, *ọ̀ta* Ọ̀ṣun or *ẹ̀ta* Ọ̀ṣun[25] are the two most important instruments used in Ẹ́ẹ̀rìndínlógún divination practice for unfolding secret events and controlling temporal and spatial events. The connection between the two items and Ọ̀ṣun is that the two are taken from the river inside which the spirit of Ọ̀ṣun dwells, she herself being a metamorphosis of the river bearing her name. Cowrie shells are taken from the ocean—Ọ̀ṣun in her larger essence—



14.3 Ìyálóde Ọbalúayé with Ẹẹ́rìndínlógún, Obaluaye shrine, Iragbiji, 1997.

while the *Ọta* are collected from the Ọ̀ṣun river. Dry cowrie shells are collected from the seacoast. Thus, it could be asserted that Ọ̀ṣun produces both cowrie shells and *ọta* Ọ̀ṣun. *Ọta* Ọ̀ṣun, round and solid sacred stones collected from Ọ̀ṣun River, signify not only the eternal presence of Ọ̀ṣun in divinatory practices, but also empower the ritual water that is used for therapeutic purposes. While cowrie shells are used to unfold hidden matters and discover the divine will, water collected from the container where *Ọta* Ọ̀ṣun is soaked or washed is variously used as a ritual element.

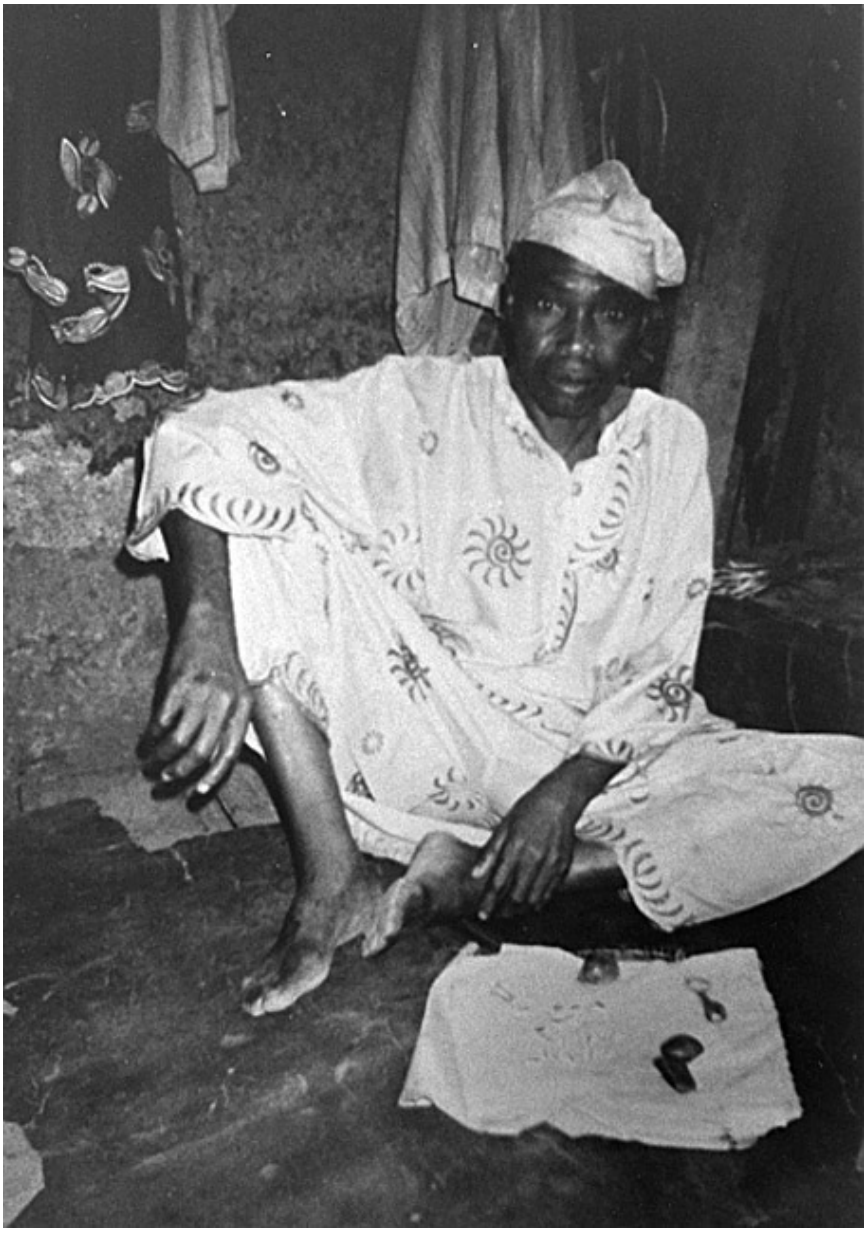
The collection of the stones from Ọ̀ṣun River is usually done with ritual ceremony. Before making the journey to the river where the stones are collected, female animals such as a she-goat or hen is killed and wine provided. Ọ̀ṣun praise songs are sung and poems chanted to invoke the spirit of Ọ̀ṣun so that the stones will be drawn closer to an open place where they can be easily collected. After the collection, the meat and other prepared food items are shared and distributed



14.4 Ìyá Ṣàngo, Ọ̀ṣun priestess with Ẹ́ẹ̀rìndínlógún, Òṣogbo.

among the devotees, priests, and priestesses. The stones are consecrated with water and leaves, including alligator pepper and bitter kola. Hens, pigeons, a female goat, and other animals are sacrificed to Ọ̀ṣun. *Ọ̀ta* Ọ̀ṣun are kept inside the earthenware or plastic container and covered. One of the stones is then put in a special pot. Water is poured into the pot, and changed daily with the cleanest water drawn at dawn from a spring. The person who draws the water must do so before anyone else has been there to disturb the spring. This water is called *àgbo* and is used for all healing purposes including fertility, security, success, protection, and progress.

It is believed that recitation of Ọ̀ṣun praise poems and singing of Ọ̀ṣun songs into ordinary water invokes the spirit of Ọ̀ṣun into the water making it sacred and curative. One of Ọ̀ṣun's praise poems that is commonly recited by Elúsọjí is:

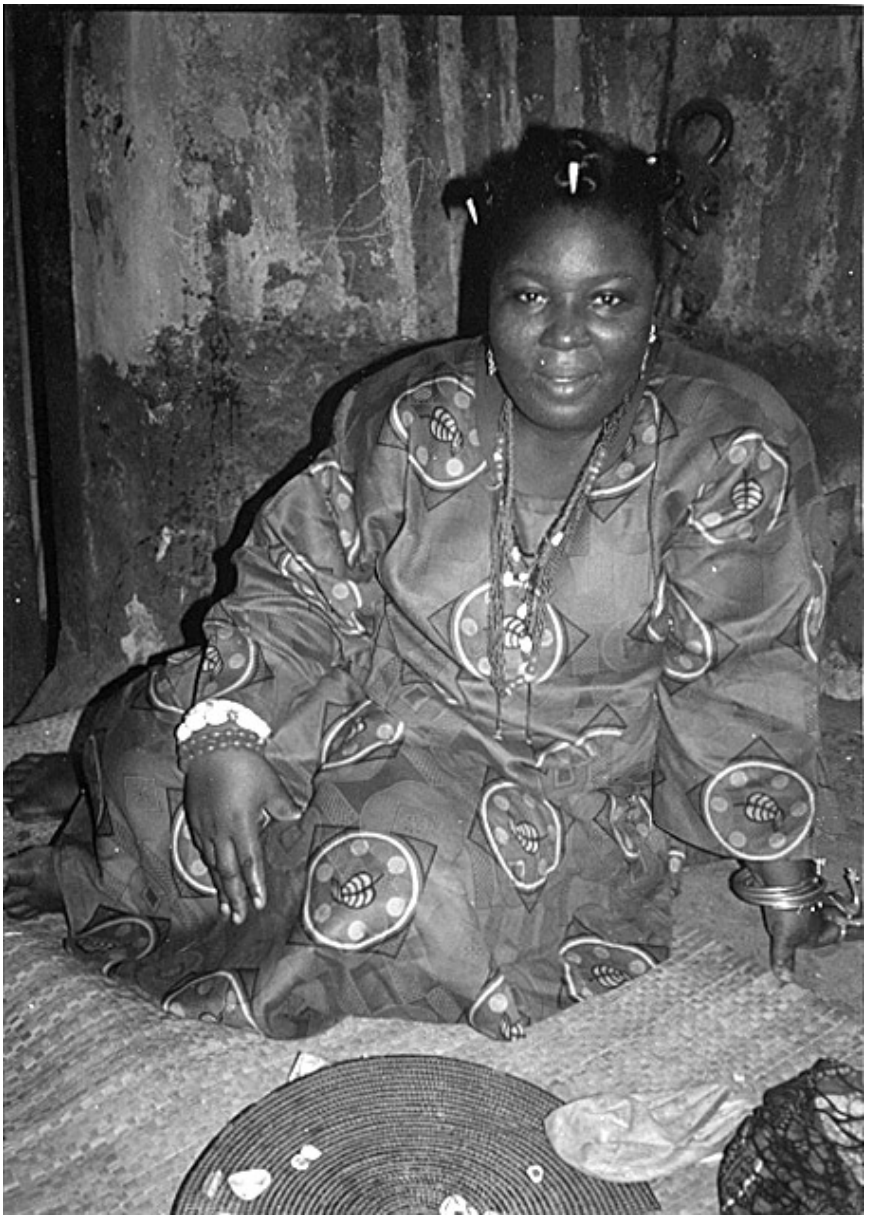


14.5 Ẹlẹ́ẹ́rìndínlógún Oyekunle Olatona with Ẹẹ́rìndínlógún, Òṣogbo.

*Ìwọ Omi, Arìnmásùn.*
*Àbùtán ẹlẹ́gan.*

*Afi'yùn gb'àṣè.*
*Ají b'Ògun jí,*
*Oníbodè Gbèrèṇgẹ̀dẹ̀.*

You water, who move without sleeping.
The ever-sufficient that completely silences the despisers.
One who receives corals for ritual offerings.
The one who wakes up with Ọ̀gún,
The porter at the gate of Gbèrèṇgẹ̀dẹ̀.



14.6 Ìyá Èwe, Ọ̀ṣun priestess with Ẹ́ẹ̀rìndínlógún, Òṣogbo.

A song collected from Adéfióyè, usually sung to the water that is intended to be empowered, runs thus:

*Onílé Odò ré, Ọ̀ṣun o!*
*Àwa o r'ọ́mọ pọ̀n,*
*Ọmọ dé o, Ọ̀ṣun!*
*Onílé odò ré, Ọ̀ṣun o!*

This is Ọ̀ṣun, whose house is in the river!
We are childless,
Ọ̀ṣun! We are sure you will give us children!
This is Ọ̀ṣun, whose house is in the river!

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| 5 | *Àwa ò rí'lé wọ̀,* | We do not have houses to live in, |
| | *Ilé dé o, Ọ̀ṣun!* | We are sure you will give us houses, Ọ̀ṣun! |
| | *Onílé odò ré, Ọ̀ṣun o!* | This is Ọ̀ṣun, whose house is in the river! |
| | *Àwa ò r'áṣọ lò,* | We do not have clothes to wear, |
| | *Aṣọ́ dé o, Ọ̀ṣun!* | We are sure Ọ̀ṣun will give us clothes! |
| 10 | *Onílé odò ré, Ọ̀ṣun o!* | This is Ọ̀ṣun, whose house is in the river! |
| | *Àwa ò r'ówo lò,* | We do not have money to spend, |
| | *Owó dé o, Ọ̀ṣun!* | We are sure Ọ̀ṣun will provide us with money! |

Most importantly, Ọ̀ṣun provides children for barren women, thus her appellation Ọ̀ṣun Ọlọ́mọyọ̀yọ̀, Ọ̀ṣun the mother of numerous children. The potency of Ọ̀ṣun river water is expressed in another Ọ̀ṣun praise poem, *Arómitútù soògùn àgàn, arómitútù soògùn àbíkú*, "Ọ̀ṣun who uses water to cure infertility and also prevents infant mortality." According to Odù Ògúndá Ìroṣùn, "Ọ̀ṣun provides water to cure all diseases that cause barrenness" (Ọlátọ̀nà 1997). Every day of the week in Ọ̀ṣogbo, fortune-seekers, children-seekers (the barren), and devotees come to Ọ̀ṣun priestesses and priests to collect water for healing purposes. Daily collection is done at the Ọ̀ṣun Ibúsanyìn shrine where the Ọ̀ṣun River runs through. Ọ̀ṣun priestesses administer weekly ritual baths after adequate divination is done. Food items presented as gifts for Ọ̀ṣun by her clients are thrown into the river at the close of the day's divination and ritual ceremony. The big calabash used for the purpose is also used to draw Ọ̀ṣun water which clients collect for use. During annual festivals, the sacred water is collected from the Ìyá Ọ̀ṣun, Ọ̀ṣun chief priestess, to cure diseases, bring fortunes to the clients, and inflict misfortunes on enemies. This is done by reciting one's request or problem into the water before it is used. Some clients are taken to the Ọ̀ṣun river to undergo open ritual bathing since the water is claimed to have potency in warding off evil spiritual forces. Most people, however, draw the sacred water from the river with the belief that it is a medicine for all purposes, both known and unknown, physical and spiritual. Their strong belief in Ọ̀ṣun water is encapsulated in the most common song of Ọ̀ṣun:

| | |
|---|---|
| *Ṣẹ́lẹ̀rú àgbo,* | A stream of herbal medicine, |
| *Àgbàrá àgbo,* | A torrent of herbal medicine, |
| *L'Ọ̀ṣun fi ń wo'mọ rẹ̀* | Has been Ọ̀ṣun's healing water |
| *Kí Dọ́kítà ó tó dé.* | Before the coming of Western medical experts (doctors). |
| *Abímọ mọ́ dá'ná 'lé,* | The one who gives birth without preparing fire, |
| *Ọ̀ṣun l'à ń þ'òwe mọ́.* | We are referring to Ọ̀ṣun. |

Showing Ọ̀ṣun and her negative water power, Simpson (1980: 27) writes:

> Ọ̀ṣun is a water goddess. She can cause a river to dry up or to overflow its banks, and she may attack people by drowning them when they try to cross a river. By filling a woman's stomach with water, she can make her look pregnant when she isn't pregnant, and she can cause difficulty in delivery.

## *Ẹbọ*: Principle of Conflict Resolution

*Ẹbọ*, ritual offering, is a strong element in, and the *raison d'etre* for divination activities. It plays a central role in divinatory processes. Ritual offering consists of elaborate worship focusing on the presentation of food and drink items whereby human beings manipulate and use the mediating deities to their own advantage. Olúpọ̀nà (1990) has noted in his phenomenological study of ritual that the relationship between human beings and divine beings is expressed and achieved in ritual. It invokes the presence of spiritual beings. Ritual connects the spiritual and physical worlds and primordial time and the present in order to bring harmony and coherence into society. It orders and re-orders any bad relationship with divinities and human beings. Abímbọ́lá (1994: 106) also notes this when he submits that,

> Every conflict in the Yorùbá cosmos can be eventually resolved by the use of sacrifice (*ẹbọ*). Sacrifice is the weapon that brings about resolution and tranquility in a universe in which conflict is the order of the day.

Four things are important in the efficacy of an *ẹbọ*. First, each ritual element is specified in the Odù that reveals the client's inquiry. Second, it has specific character and intention. Third, it needs to be spiritually treated by the priestesses and priests. Fourth, there is the necessity for a good network of relationships between the diviner, the client, and the spiritual forces to obtain a desired result. Furthermore, when a relationship is close, herbs or medicine, if and when required, can then heal. The importance of performance of ritual is expressed by an Ifá verse:

| | |
|---|---|
| *Rírú ẹbọ ní í gbe 'ni* | Performance of rites solves one's problems; |
| *Àìrú rẹ̀ kì í gb'-ènìyàn.* | Non-performance does not prosper one. |

Among the supernatural forces, the importance and role of Ọ̀ṣun and Èṣù as two great leaders in achieving resolution through ritual among the supernatural forces clearly underscore the diversity in unity within the supernatural scheme. Both are ubiquitous and are linked together in consequence of the connection between their respective functions. Èsù leads the Ajogun, a group of two hundred malevolent spiritual beings among whom are these principal ones: *Ikú* (Death), *Àrùn* (Disease), *Òfò* (Loss), *Ẹ̀gbà* (Paralysis), *Ọ̀ràn* (Serious Trouble), *Èpè* (Curse), *Ẹ̀wọ̀n* (Imprisonment), *Èṣe* (Terrible Harm), *Iná* (Fire), and *Ọ̀kọ̀* (Spear). Though these are essentially spiritual agents, they manifest as natural occurrences (Abímbọ́lá 1994: 106; Ògúngbilé 1997a: 100). As contained in the Odù Ọ̀sẹ́túá cited above, four of the Ajogun (*Ẹ̀gbà, Èṣe, Boríborí, Atómú*) are active messengers of Ọ̀ṣun. Therefore, whenever anybody gets into trouble through the agency of Èṣù and his messengers, the way out of the difficulty is revealed and ritual offerings prescribed through the Ẹẹ́rìndínlógún divination system.

Evidence from Odù Ọ̀sẹ́túá reveals that Ọ̀ṣun has an expansive knowledge of

the origin of the world and participates in its maintenance. Also, she has a powerful personality among the *Àjẹ́* who "influence and manipulate human and divine endeavours" (Bádéjọ 1991: 85). Ọ̀ṣun and the *Àjẹ́* are strongly instrumental in the acceptance or rejection of ritual offerings by spiritual forces. When acknowledged, they support and empower herbal preparations; otherwise they destroy the efficacy of such herbs and ritual elements. *Àjẹ́* inspire other spiritual forces including animals such as *igún* (vulture) and *ajá* (dog) who feed on the ritual offerings. Thus, the babalawo and Ẹlẹ́ẹ́ríìndínlógún revere them. Moreover, one of my informants, Chief Mrs. Elúsọjí, strongly emphasized that because of their very close relationship and association with Ọ̀ṣun, the leader of the *Àjẹ́*, the Ẹlẹ́ẹ́ríìndínlógún have direct access to herbs and roots. Hence, they are endowed with the power to use ritual and herbal elements at will unlike diviners in other systems who first need to pay special homage to the *Àjẹ́*; otherwise, the elements will not be efficacious. They recite certain praises to the *Ìyàmi* and solicit their support before herbs or roots are plucked for ritual preparations. All my sources agree on the position of *Àjẹ́* and the status of Ọ̀ṣun among them. This is summarized in the words of Ifá priest Babalawo Oyègbadé Ọlátọ̀nà:

> *Àjẹ́*, also known as *Ìyàmi*, are powerful. Olódùmarè has committed the universe to their care. He has given them power and authority over its affairs. They strongly hold the universe together. They maintain the order in the world. Ọ̀ṣun is not only one of them, she is even their leader.

Furthermore, the role of Ọ̀ṣun is crucial in normalizing any strained relationship. The status of Ọ̀ṣun among the spiritual beings explains her power in ritual processes as important in the resolution of conflicts and crises in the scheme of divination. The potency of ritual offerings prescribed by diviners is a solution through mediation with all spiritual agents. Thus, it is believed that Ọ̀ṣun, the leader of the *Àjẹ́*, has the mystical power of withholding or withdrawing the benevolent activities of other divinities and human potentiality and success.

The above discussion can be summarized in some verses of Odù Ọ̀sẹ́túá:

| | |
|---|---|
| *B'ògúnyán ó gún'yán* | If a pounder pounds yams |
| *Bí ò fi t'Ọ̀ṣun ṣe,* | And does not acknowledge Ọ̀ṣun |
| *Iyán rẹ̀ a lẹ́mọ.* | Her pounded yam will be full of lumps. |
| *B'órokà ó rokà,* | If a stirrer stirs yam flour, |
| *Bí ò fi t'Ọ̀ṣun ṣe,* | And does not acknowledge Ọ̀ṣun, |
| *Ọkà rẹ̀ a pà'pẹ̀tẹ̀.* | The yam flour will not mix and cook. |

One important concept on which the activities of all the spiritual forces including Èṣù and Ọ̀ṣun revolves, and which is vital to the efficacy of ritual preparations, is *Orí* (Head). *Orí* is regarded as a personal Òrìṣà which according to Abímbọ́lá (1976: 113) "is a symbol of free choice." It is the very essence of personality which every human being, animal, or plant is believed to have chosen while coming from heaven. In the same vein, Ìdòwú (1996: 180) notes that *Orí* rules, controls, and guides the life and activities of any person or animal. It is "an impor-

tant link between human beings and the spiritual world" (Abímbọ́lá 1994: 111). *Orí* provides the *àṣẹ*, vital force, that makes all accomplishments possible. It is actively involved in making ritual offerings acceptable. The importance of *Orí* in ritual offerings is explicit in the following Odù Ifá verse:

| | |
|---|---|
| *Orí, àdáyébá,* | Orí, the primordial divinity, |
| *Àtètèníran;* | The closest divinity; |
| *Àtètè gbe 'ni k'Òòṣà.* | The ever-present deliverer before other divinities. |
| *Kò s'Óòsà tí í dá ni í gbè,* | No divinity is single-handedly capable to deliver, |
| *Lẹ́hìn Orí ẹni.* | Without consulting one's Orí. |

The content of one's *Orí* determines one's success or failure in life. Therefore there is the need to consolidate *Orí* with good content or alter *Orí* with a bad one to become good. This underscores the whole process involved in the practice of divination with its attendant ritual prescription.

The connection of Ọ̀ṣun to *Orí* could be explained in relation to Ọ̀ṣun's influences on most divinities who act on the activities of the living beings. One of her praise poems states:

| | |
|---|---|
| *Ọ̀ṣun Òṣogbo ní ń t'órí ẹni tí kò sunwọ̀n ṣe,* | Ọ̀ṣun Òṣogbo is the one who repairs a bad Orí, |
| *Ládékojú, bá mi tún àjàlámọ̀ mi ṣe.* | Ládékojú, remake my Orí so that it becomes good. |

Secondly, the symbolization of *Orí Inú* (Inner Head) with *Orí Òde* (Physical Head) is important in the divination process. The client whispers a request or inquiry to a small amount of money and then touches the *Orí Òde* with it. It is believed that *Orí Òde* will connect and communicate with *Orí Inú* to reveal the client's inquiry with the aim of making appropriate ritual offerings. Also, beautification of hair, that is hairdressing or hair-plaiting, which is claimed to be the traditional occupation of Ọ̀ṣun, is a mark of honor to the *Orí Inú*. The perceived direct connection of hair with human destiny leads women to avoid haggling over the charges of traditional (women) hair-plaiters or hairdressers. Moreover, there is a reverent care of the plucked strings of hair. It is believed that one's enemies can use such plucked strings to affect one's destiny. Ọ̀ṣun's traditional hair-plaiting is comparable to the weaving of *Ilé-Orí* (House of the Head), an impressive and elaborate structure constructed with about twelve-thousand cowrie shells. The notion of building *Ilé-Orí* with cowrie shells that priests and priestesses keep in their rooms and shrines testifies to the significance of destiny which Orí idealizes (Abíọ́dún 1986: 16).

## *Conclusion*

The multidimensionality of Ọ̀ṣun has proven her to be the organizing phenomenon of the Yorùbá theocentric universe. These diverse manifestations as

TABLE 14.1
*Personal Interviews*

| *Name* | *Designation* | *Places/Address* | *Period* |
|---|---|---|---|
| Adéfióyè, Mobọ́lájí T. Táíwò (Mrs.) | Ìyálóde Ọbalúayé of Ilé-Ifẹ̀ | Odùduwà College Road, Ilé-Ifẹ̀ | May 1998 |
| Adénlé, Samuel Adéjàre (Prince) | P.R.O. Òṣogbo Cultural Heritage Council, Òṣogbo | Àtágìja's Palace, Òṣogbo | June–Sept. 1998 |
| Adépọ́nlé, Fátúnbí (Baba Lẹ́ripa) | Olórìṣà Ọ̀ṣun and Ògún | Ìbòkun Road Òṣogbo | June 1998 |
| Àdùnní Ámúdátù (Mrs.) | Olórìṣà Ọ̀ṣun and Olúfọ́n; Ẹ́ẹ́rìndínlógún Apprentice. | Ilé Aígè, Ìta Olóókan, Òṣogbo | June 1998 |
| Afọ̀lábí Sunday | Babaláwo | Òṣogbo | August 1997 |
| Elúsọjí, S. Ayéyẹmí Awóyẹmí (Mrs.) | Yèyé Mòkun-Mọ̀ṣà Ọbàtáálá of Ifẹ̀ & Yèyé Ọ̀ṣun of Wilda, France | Mọ̀ọ̀rẹ̀ Street, Ilé-Ifẹ̀ | May 1998 |
| Fákúnlé, Òni | Babaláwo Ọ̀tún Awo Ìlobu | Ìlobu near Òṣogbo | May 1997 |
| Fátóògùn, Adébóyè Babalọ́á | Babaláwo | Ìlobu near Òṣogbo | May 1997 |
| Ìyá Sàngó | Ọ̀ṣun priestess | Gbàgede Ọ̀ṣun, Àtágìja's Palace, Òṣogbo | January 1999 |
| Ìyálóde Sàfúrátù (Mrs.) | Ọlọ́ṣun. Ẹ́ẹ́rìndínlógún Apprentice | Ọ̀ṣun Búsanyìn Shrine | June 1998 |
| Ògúndíjọ, Adébáyọ̀ (Chief) | Máyégún Awo Àgbáyé of Ifẹ̀; Cultural Officer, I.C.S., O.A.U. Nigeria | Institute of Cultural Studies Ọbáfẹ́mi Awólọ́wọ̀ University, Ilé-Ifẹ̀, Nigeria | March–April 1997; May 1998 |
| Ọlátọ̀nà, Oyègbadé (Babalawo) | Ojùgbọ̀ìna Awo of Osogboland | Ilé Ìyá Dúdú, Òṣogbo | June 1997 |
| Ọlátọ̀nà, Oyekunle Ọladunjoye | Ẹlẹ́ẹ́rìndínlógún | Ilé Ìyá Dúdú, Òṣogbo | June–Dec. 1997 |
| Ọmọ Ọ̀dọ̀ Àgbà, Mukaila | Ẹ́ẹ́rìndínlógún | Ìṣàlẹ̀ Ọ̀ṣun, Òṣogbo | May 1998 |
| Ọmọ́bọ́ládé, Mrs. Fadérera | Ìyá Èwe Ọ̀ṣun priestess | Gbàgede Ọ̀ṣun, Àtágìja's Palace, Òṣogbo | January 1999 |

TABLE 14.1
***Personal Interviews (continued)***

| *Name* | *Designation* | *Places/Address* | *Period* |
|---|---|---|---|
| Òòsàníkẹ́, Amudatu (Mrs.) | Olorisa Ọ̀ṣun and Oosaala (Ẹ́ẹ́rìndínlógún teacher) | Ilé Odódó, Ìta Olóókan Òṣogbo | June 1998 |
| Ọ̀ṣúnkọ́mọdé Síḿbìátù (Mrs.) | Olórìṣà Ọ̀ṣun and Ògún | Òkè Abéṣù, Òṣogbo | June 1998 |
| Ọ̀ṣúntómiísìn (Mrs.) | Olórìṣà Ọ̀ṣun and Òrìṣà Oko | Ilé Aléégún, Plantation Area, Òṣogbo | June 1998 |
| Ọ̀ṣuntóògùn Babaloḷá (Chief) | Àwòrò Ọ̀ṣun Búsanyìn; Priest of Ọbàtálá & Ṣàngó | Isale Ọ̀ṣun, Òṣogbo | June 1998 |
| Ọ̀ṣunyíta, Ifájọ́kẹ́ (Mrs.) | Ọ̀ṣun Priestess; Májéóbàjé Ọ̀jẹ̀ of Òṣogbo | Ilé Àdìgún, Ìṣàlẹ̀ Ọ̀ṣun Òṣogbo | June–Sept. 1998 |
| Ọyáwálé, Kẹ́hìndé Ọ̀ṣundárà (Mrs.) | Olórìṣà Ọ̀ṣun; Ẹ́ẹ́rìndínlógún Teacher | Ìta Olóókan, Òṣogbo | June 1998 |
| Ọyáwẹ̀óyè Asándẹ (Chief) | Ìyá Ọ̀ṣun (Ọ̀ṣun Chief Priestess) | Àtáójа's Palace, Òṣogbo | August 1995 January 1997 |
| Oyinloyè Fọ́láwiyọ́, (Madam) | Ìyálóde Ọbalúayé | Ilé Ọ̀ṣájì, Ìrágbìjí | August 1997 |

A band of divination apprentices interviewed in Ìlobu near Òṣogbo includes:

| | |
|---|---|
| Babaawo Awóyìílù Ifámọ́jẹntẹ́ | Babaawo Fájùmọ̀ Ifádáre |
| Babaawo Ifákúnlé Ifálékè | Babaawo Ọládélé Àkàndé Ifáníran |
| Babaawo Ọyáníyì Ifáwuỳi | Babaawo Oỳeníyì Awólọ́wọ̀ |

natural phenomenon, human, and spiritual being are not only a necessary universal concern, they are factors of condensation of the spiritual and human worlds. They give meanings and forms to human societies and life expressions. Our discussion of Ọ̀ṣun on her possession of the Ẹ́ẹ́rìndínlógún system of divination and bestowal of the system on other divinities, and her role in the process of divination and effectuation, are of great significance in the lives of individuals and the community. Thus, she occupies a very important role in cosmology. Ọ̀ṣun holds the mysteries of life and has the capacity to maintain the universe, sustain humanity, and uphold life progression.

| | |
|---|---|
| *Ládékojú, Oore Yèyé Ọ̀ṣun,* | Ládékojú, Oore Yèyé Ọ̀ṣun, |
| *Obìnrin gb'ọ̀nà, Ọkunrin ń sá.* | When the woman takes the road, the man flees. |
| *Abáwọn pẹ́jọ nídìí ìmọ̀ràn.* | The ever-present one at their decision-making meeting. |
| *Ládékojú, Olódùmàre mi.* | Ládékojú, my Sovereign one. |

## Notes

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1. The number "sixteen" is significant in most traditions of the world. Sixteen (4 × 4) in the Indian tradition expresses completeness in ornament, features, meters, and poetry. Several Yorùbá mythologies show the importance of sixteen. Sixteen divinities and Ọ̀ṣun descended. Sixteen Odù exist in all Ọ̀rúnmìlà-source divination forms. Also, the total number of the principal and minor Odù is a product of sixteen (16 × 16 = 256). *Àtùpà Olójúméẹ̀rìndínlógún* (16-point lamp of Ọ̀sanyìn which is usually lit before the grand finale of Ọ̀ṣun festivals) is significant.

2. It is claimed that Ọ̀rúnmìlà possesses *àṣẹ*, vital force, to cause something to happen. Olódùmarè gave the *àṣẹ* to him. So whatever he tells his *àṣẹ* to accomplish becomes authoritative. Hence the Ẹẹ́rìndínlógún system becomes a powerful and trusted heuristic device.

3. *Ládékojú* is another name for Ọ̀ṣun.

4. Adó is a Yorùbá town in the present Èkìtì State of Nigeria.

5. Ìjẹ̀ṣà kingdom is a Yorùbá sub-ethnic kingdom in the present Ọ̀ṣun State of Nigeria.

6. *Orò* is a Yorùbá divinity exclusively for males. *Orò* has his shrines in thick forests, far from towns.

7. Ọpa is a mysterious grove where cult members make secret plans.

8. Ìrágberí is a small Yorùbá town.

9. Ìlukàn is an ancient Yorùbá town.

10. Ìjẹ̀bú Ẹ̀rẹ̀ is a Yorùbá town.

11. Ìkirè is a Yorùbá town.

12. Brass is a notable symbol of Ọ̀ṣun, worn and used by her devotees.

13. These are various nicknames used for Ọ̀ṣun to symbolize her diverse manifestations and power. *Ọta*, round stone collected from the Ọ̀ṣun River; *Omi*, Water; *Edan*, Brass Staff; *Olu*, Chief; and *Agbaja*, Serious Trouble.

14. Others in this group include Ògún, Ṣàngó, Ọbalúayé, Èṣù, Boríborí, Ègbà, Èṣe, Òrìṣà Oko, Baayannì, Ọ̀sanyìn Ewèlè, Àjàgà, Lágboókùn, Ológbojò, Gbùùkùú, Péépéé, and Ore (see Adeoye 1985: 30).

15. In Yorùbá tradition, everything, including animate and inanimate objects, has primordial human existence as their original state. The four personified spiritual beings had human nature.

16. A symbol of masculinity and bravery.

17. *Igún*, vulture, is noted for consuming human dead bodies.

18. *Ọràngún* is the traditional title of the ruler of Ìlá-Ọràngún, a Yorùbá town.

19. Elúṣọjí Ayéyẹmí is a good example of this. It is evident that she possesses a good skill in recitation of the verses of Odù and ritual preparations. She underwent her training with three Ẹẹ́rìndínlógún diviners.

20. Adéfióyè, Elúṣọjí, and Ọ̀ṣúntóògùn are three examples.

21. Kẹ́hìndé Ọ̀ṣúndárà Ọyáwálé and Elúṣọjí, for example, belong to this category.

22. Múkáílà ọmọ Ọ̀dọ̀ Àgbà is an apprentice to Ọ̀ṣúntóògùn. He professes to be a practicing Muslim but intends to use Ẹẹ́rìndínlógún divination, considering it a practical approach to solving problems.

23. Oyèkúnlé Ọlátọ̀nà claims to have learned the system from a book which was sent to him by a white man. He showed this book to me and I went through the contents. It is however noted that Ọlátọ̀nà is close to a Babaláwo, Oyègbadé Ọlátọ̀nà, a relative who is well versed in Ifá. It is possible for him to get personal instructions through their interactions.

24. For example, Èjìlá Aṣẹbọra belongs to Ṣàngó, Otúúrúpọ̀n belongs to Ọbalúayé and Èṣù, Ọ̀bàrà belongs to Ògún.

25. The dialectical variation here is noted among the general Yorùbá and other dialects. Ìjẹ̀ṣà-and Ifẹ̀-Yorùbá pronounce *Ẹta* while the general Yorùbá is *Ọta*.

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CHAPTER FIFTEEN

# Mama Oxum

## Reflections of Gender and Sexuality in Brazilian Umbanda[1]

*Lindsay Hale*

| | |
|---|---|
| ***Eu vi mamãe Oxum na cachoeira*** | **I saw Mama Oxum at the waterfall** |
| *sentada na beira do rio* | sitting at the river shore |
| *colhendo lírio*[*s*]*, lírio*[*s*]*, e* | gathering lilies, lilies, ay |
| *colhendo lírio*[*s*]*, lírio*[*s*]*, a* | gathering lilies, lilies, ah |
| *colhendo lírio*[*s*] *pra enfeitar nossa congá.* | gathering lilies to decorate our altar. |

The images and sentiments evoked in me by thoughts of Oxum are surely familiar to anyone who has known this Orixá from the temples and *terreiros*[2] and spiritual centers of Rio de Janeiro. The Umbanda song quoted evokes waterfalls and flowers to convey the serenity of Oxum and her concern for things pretty. Another song places Oxum at the bottom of the sea, in a water palace of compassion where she lives with the mermaid and the sea deity Iemanjá:

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|---|---|
| *No fundo do mar,* | In the depths of the ocean |
| *tem um palácio* | there is a palace |
| *onde Oxum mora* | where Oxum lives |
| *mora seréia,* | [there] lives the mermaid |
| *mora Iemanjá* | [there] lives Iemanjá |
| *também mora seus filhos* | [there] also live her children |
| *que não tem onde morar* | who have nowhere else to stay |

Water is her home and water is her sign. When Oxum enters the head of her child at the behest of drums or hymns, sometimes she dances with full glasses balanced on her open palms, twirling and spilling forth the water that represents her ready tears. Those who cry easily, those whose eyes brim over at a tender thought, are likely to be identified as children of Oxum, especially if they are of sweet and gentle disposition. On any Saturday, but especially on that one nearest the feast day in December for Our Lady of the Conception—Oxum's Catholic alter-image—her children flock to the waterfalls and rivulets of Rio's Tijuca for-

est to offer material signs of Oxum's sweetness, fertility, sensuality, self-love, and tears. There are cups of mineral water — her tears are the seeping springs — boiled eggs and black-eyed peas, honey, champagne. There are combs and makeup and flowers and sometimes even copper bracelets offered up for her exquisite vanity, and often there are mirrors in which the spirit of fertility and love and tears can reflect upon her soft and gentle and seductive beauty.

While Oxum's mirrors symbolically reflect a certain feminine archetype, the fact is that Oxum, as she is constructed in Umbanda, is a reflection of historical contests over race, gender, and sexuality. She is also powerfully implicated in Umbanda constructions of, and discourse about, personality — she is, in a sense, a mirror through which some Umbandistas come to see themselves. This essay explores Oxum in Umbanda not primarily as an Orixá, a bundle of mythical characteristics and ritual practices, but rather in terms of the social forces and contexts reflected in her many manifestations. I will not pretend to be exhaustive; rather I will focus on three themes that were especially salient in my ethnographic research: strongly conflicting attitudes in regard to Afro-Brazilian identity, surely a leitmotiv in Umbanda's historical development; deep ambivalence and repression about the feminine sexuality of Oxum, especially in regard to male homosexuality; and the role of Oxum in Umbanda ethno-psychology.

## *Oxum in Umbanda*

Although Umbanda grows out of centuries-old traditions that introduced and nourished devotion to Oxum in Brazil, in some important ways Umbanda is a relatively new invention, or as several of my informants put it, a "new synthesis." It combines Afro-Brazilian religion with Spiritualism, Vedic doctrines such as Karma, reincarnation, theories of *chakras*, and psychic energy, Cabalistic lore, traces of Rosacrucianism, European folk magic, alchemy, the secret texts of Saint Cyprian, and myriad other concepts and symbols engulfed and refashioned and re-deployed in the dynamic, creative *bricolage* that is Umbanda. A stiff dose of Catholic morality and loud echoes of positivist ideology coexist with the oft-times floridly esoteric Umbanda imagination, posing no apparent contradictions to believers. Umbanda is distinct from Candomblé, which is frequented mainly by persons of Afro-Brazilian descent and low socioeconomic status — with a smattering of well-off and educated participants perhaps attracted by its counterculture cachet and aesthetic and philosophical richness, along with political patrons cultivating clients in the Afro-Brazilian community. Umbanda, on the other hand, draws participants from all social classes and racial categories. Nationwide, Umbanda is practiced by millions of Brazilians (who nonetheless usually identify themselves as Catholic), but is most prevalent in the urban areas of the southeast.

Ubiquitous as Oxum is in Umbanda — perhaps a third of the female mediums in the groups I work with wear her baby blue (or yellow-gold) beads; numerous men have told me that the sentimental and gentle sides of their personalities

come with being a child of Oxum; and her songs are heard at every gathering—Oxum does not occupy the foreground in this religion. In part this is a function of the lesser role played by the Orixás in Umbanda ritual. In many (though not all) Umbanda centers, the Orixás seldom or possibly never possess mediums. They are invoked in song, but not provoked by the drums to descend into the heads of their devotees and take center stage in the danced, costumed performances typical of Candomblé. Instead, Umbanda ritual is mainly concerned with spiritual beings that take the form of old slaves, Indians, Gypsies, streetwalkers, cowboys, Turkish kings, and myriad other personages drawn from models found in Brazilian folklore, literature, and history. These spirits of deceased persons are featured because the immediate business of Umbanda is dealing with the pressing personal problems of everyday people; these spirits, unlike the Orixás, speak in human language and have lived through mundane struggles, and are thus ideally suited to "consult" with and "perform charity"[3] toward the multitudes who come to Umbanda centers in their times of need. In contrast to the rich mythology surrounding the Orixás in Candomblé, or the pungent tales told of (and by) the Umbanda spirits, much of the Umbanda discourse concerning Orixás is couched in the dry, esoteric language of Spiritualist metaphysics. At one Umbanda center I underwent an elaborate ritual meant to cleanse and reinforce my spiritual "body"; part of the preparation involved attending a lecture, at which an Umbanda leader depicted the Orixás as being pure energy, each vibrating at its own frequency, each associated with specific colors, metals, crystals, and tones. While this discourse would seem to thoroughly de-personify the Orixás, I suspect that most Umbanda imaginations—even those most taken with esoteric formulations—nonetheless picture Oxum as the sweet and weeping mother whenever the moment calls for something more emotionally moving than abstract notions of vibrations and frequencies.

However salient the Orixás may be in the Umbanda emotional imagination, many of my informants speak of them as sublimely evolved entities who rarely, if ever, intervene in worldly matters. That is for their underlings, the spirits of Indians (known as *caboclos*) and old slaves and so forth. One of my informants, Dona Rosa, alluded to this one day as she mused about the future of one of her spirits, Jurema. She told me that her Jurema was spiritually evolving at a rapid rate and would someday become an Orixá. When that happened, Dona Rosa continued, Jurema will no longer come to us, because these worldly matters of ours will no longer be her concern.

And yet Oxum (as well as other Orixás) is tremendously important in Umbanda theology and ethno-psychology, and is present, albeit less directly, in ritual performance. I begin with the latter. Even in those centers where they do not possess mediums, the characters of the Orixás are reflected in the spirits of deceased human beings. Spirits, like living people, are children of particular Orixás, whose traits can be discerned to a lesser or greater degree in their spiritual offspring. Principles of affinity said to be at work in the spiritual realm draw spirits

toward mediums who share something of their spiritual heritage. Dona Marta, a wonderfully calm woman who leads a small *terreiro* in one of Rio's hillside *favelas*, or slums, has as her main *caboclo* spirit an Indian princess called Tupinambá, a name familiar to readers of the nineteenth-century romantic novels of José de Alencar. Tupinambá, like Dona Marta, is a child of Oxum. Umbanda spirits such as Tupinambá are said to "work" in the "line" of particular Orixás; Tupinambá, for example, is seen as a servant and emissary of Oxum. It is through these spirits, interlaced by webs of affinity and spiritual hierarchy, that the archetypal Oxum appears refracted in human guise so all can see and hear and feel her presence through a medium's performances. Another Indian princess will serve as a concrete example. When the songs in praise of Oxum are sung, Dona Rosa (the woman who muses that someday her Jurema will be an Orixá) embodies a child known only as *a menininha* ("the little girl") who kneels by a waterfall only she can see, laughing gently as tears run down, performing a graceful, swaying dance of her arms and upper body while grasping two sticks wrapped in baby blue and white ribbon that represent Oxum in her Umbanda style. Dona Rosa's friend Elsa, who seemed to know all of Dona Rosa's spirits in the way that a true fan might know all the characters played by a favorite actress, says that the Jurema's tears are happy ones. No matter how troubled you are, she said, the *menininha* makes you feel light and full of energy and happiness. Another woman, a daughter of Oxum, receives an old slave spirit by the name of Plump Maria. Maria typifies Oxum's love of luxury and talent for wealth as well as her seductiveness, sweetness, and sentimentality. Plump Maria lived a comfortable life in the Plantation House where her good fortune was due to the infatuation of the men of the manor. She is the very picture of kindness and docility; and inevitably, during consultations, her tears come down to wet the faces of those who come for her charity as she holds them in a motherly embrace. Oxum may not descend as the deity herself in these ritual moments, but the gentle, healing compassion crystallized in her tears are present in the gestures and bearing and speech of her spiritual emissaries.

## *Disparate Spirits: History, Contestation, Sexuality, and Race in the Construction of Oxum*

Oxum is also reflected in songs, dances, and styles of movement, costumes, offerings, and decorations. Here we reach a point where we must confront the striking variability of Umbanda. In my field research in Rio de Janeiro, I have visited more than a dozen Umbanda centers and worked extensively, over several years, with four, representing wide ranges of socioeconomic status and ethnic identity. Oxum is in all of these places, and yet she appears rather differently from one place to another. In several, including two that I worked with on a weekly basis in 1990–91, incarnations of Oxum herself—not just the spirits who work in her line—are called down by drums and evoked in lyrics sung vibrantly

in Nagô and Congo languages. These Oxums and lesser spirits in her line dance with a rolling, sensual step suffused with a frank, feminine sexuality. Her children wear tiny, round, yellow-gold colored beads and when possessed by the deity herself are girded in yellow gold cloth. At these strongly Afro-Brazilian centers, the annual festival devoted to Oxum—celebrated on the Catholic feast day for Our Lady of the Conception—is an all-night affair in which flows prodigious amounts of energy, sweat (the dancing goes on through the whole December, summer night), and a fair amount of sacrificial blood, while an abundance of fish, eggs, black-eyed peas, honey, and champagne are offered to Oxum. I call those two places and others like them Afro-Brazilian Umbanda, because their style and practice more closely resembles more traditional Afro-Brazilian religions, such as Candomblé, and because participants emphasize their connection to African roots. But not all Umbandistas invoke Africa; many Umbanda centers, for reasons deeply imbedded in the history of Brazilian racial ideology, present a strikingly different aesthetic and ritual practice. At one such center where I worked for over a year, and which I will refer to as a place of white Umbanda, Oxum herself would never appear, not even on her feast day. Her songs are sung in Portuguese rather than Nagô and are pretty and melodic instead of full-voiced. They are accompanied by a restrained, mincing step, barely suggestive of the seductive and frankly sexual motion of those other Oxums, and with nothing of their vigorous (though graceful) physicality. There, her children don large, polyhedral, translucent baby-blue beads; on her special day, there are no offerings of food, certainly no shedding of blood, and a special centerpiece representing both Oxum and the sentiments of her children is an arrangement of blue and white candles, white roses, baby's breath, gladioluses, and white, Styrofoam hearts pierced with cupid arrows feathered in curly blue ribbons (fig. 15.1). The aesthetic contrast is stark,[4] and not only to the ethnographer's sensibility; Umbandistas are keenly aware of stylistic differences and many are quick to relate these to African orientations and their opposites. Nonetheless, continuity coexists with difference. At both ends of the spectrum, Oxum is still the perfect mother, patient, calm, and generous; and she is in both the embodiment of fertility and sexual appeal, albeit within very different aesthetic and moral systems. To begin to understand Oxum in Umbanda (or to understand Umbanda, period), we must have some rough understanding of what is at play in these strikingly different styles. Let me sketch what I think is a useful way of thinking about the social meaning of Umbanda variation before turning to Oxum as she lives in and guides the hearts and souls of Umbandistas.

Umbanda began in the early decades of this century as an ambivalent response to the stigmatization of Afro-Brazilian culture. Diana Brown (1994) and Renato Ortiz (1978) both present compelling histories of how the founders of Umbanda sought to systematically strip the Afro-Brazilian religious traditions found in turn-of-the-century Rio de Janeiro of those elements—such as blood sacrifice, "lewd" dancing, consumption of alcohol, "black magic," and sexual

15.1 Umbanda altar for Oxum, Rio de Janeiro.
*Photo by Lindsay Hale.*

exploitation—offensive to bourgeois sensibilities. At the same time they introduced Spiritualist doctrines and practices and a fastidious and even puritanical ethos that would make Umbanda inoffensive to the authorities and appealing to those members of a burgeoning urban working class seeking middle-class status and legitimacy. Ortiz refers to this as "whitening" and eloquently titled his book *The White Death of the Black Sorcerer.* Surely this whitening reflected not only the conscious agendas of the founders, but more importantly, the hegemonic internalization, even at an unconscious level, of the values of the dominant white culture. Implicit in this process was a deep embarrassment over racial identity; though the founders of Umbanda might verbally acknowledge the African roots of the religion and even rail against the injustices of slavery and racism, the fact is that those practices that recalled Africa were suppressed. Some Umbandistas went further, denying any significant connection of their religion to Africa, attributing "true" Umbanda instead to the Aztec, or the Inca, or, rather commonly, to ancient Egypt—or even from the further reaches of the galaxy. Etched forever in my memory, for instance, is a lengthy story told me by an "old slave"[5] spirit at the white Umbanda center described above: According to this old slave, whose medium is a sentimental, middle-aged son of Oxum with rounded figure and gentle disposition, Umbanda came from outer space, by way of Atlantis; when the lost continent exploded (due to unwise experiments with nuclear power), a few survivors washed up on African shores, and taught what they could to the ignorant natives. It is our duty as philosophers and scientists of Umbanda, he told me in grave tones, to purify the religion of the mumbo jumbo bequeathed it by

the Africans and rediscover the primordial truths. Those truths, I cannot help but suspect, were those of a white, patriarchal, sanitized culture where the sensuality of Oxum would be kept under close supervision.

Whitening was one force shaping Umbanda, but there were others pulling it in rather different directions. Not all the early Umbandistas were embarrassed about Africa; in fact, such figures as Tancredo da Silva Pinto proudly proclaimed the African roots of Umbanda, and celebrated the religious integrity of Afro-Brazilians, even under conditions of slavery.[6] Where those who would "whiten" Umbanda would claim, for example, that the first syllable of the word comes from the Sanskrit "om," while "banda" is a Portuguese word that can mean "side" or "group," exponents of Afro-Brazilian Umbanda interpret the linguistic evidence as proof of Umbanda's African-ness—the word surely, they would maintain, comes from the Congo language. Far from stigmatizing, marks of Africa and Afro-Brazil were for them signs of legitimacy, tradition. Those very practices that white Umbanda suppressed as barbaric, this current of Umbanda embraced as ritually powerful, authentic, and true. For example, Dona Marta, the medium who receives Tupinambá in her *terreiro* in the *favela*, is said to have a gift, or "hand," for preparing food offerings; the plate she makes for Oxum, *omolocum*, a mash of black-eyed peas and a sauce of dried shrimp, green onions, cilantro, and parsley, and that quintessential culinary sign of Afro-Brazil, red palm oil; with boiled eggs arranged on top, and sprinkled with olive oil, served in a clay bowl and accompanied by roses and ribbons, is acclaimed and admired by her followers for its authenticity. This, they say is "truly African." She is truly African as well in that her followers include those who have suffered body and soul the pains visited upon those disenfranchised by a patriarchal system: specifically, a man said to be gay and a woman said to be lesbian, some women beaten and ill-supported by the fathers of their children, another woman dogged by men on account of her beauty; persons who, as the song has it, are sheltered by Oxum because they have nowhere else to go. At another site of African Umbanda, the Center of Father João, the leader—a son of Oxum—proudly proclaims the African-ness of his Umbanda practice. Not only are symbolic markers of Africa such as food and blood offerings, drums, and Nagô lyrics foregrounded, but an origin myth explicitly connects his center to Africa. According to the story, some centuries ago a Congo man who would later be known as João was captured by slave traders. In his possession were certain objects embodying the fundamentals of his religion. These he would plant in Brazil, on the very spot that would later become the center bearing his name. The myth, presented as factual and as a metaphor of the way in which the spirit of João guides the *terreiro*, stands in poignant contrast to that tale of Atlantis told me by that old slave in the center of white Umbanda.

Umbanda, thus, is pushed and pulled between opposing poles of pride and shame over Afro-Brazilian identity; exuberant sensuality and modest constraint; patriarchal values and the succor of its victims; a moralizing tone and an embrac-

ing acceptance of human frailty and transgression (which I found everywhere in Umbanda), and between embodied and disembodied conceptions of spirituality. I emphasize the pushed and pulled, the conflicting, unsettled, ambivalent character of any given position along the Umbanda continuum. Oxum is not immune to this tension; it is part and parcel of her constitution within Umbanda. Table 15.1 gives a schematic summary of this tug-of-war as it is reflected in various attributes of Oxum. While these attributes and functions serve as rough markers, or symptoms, of where practitioners stand vis-à-vis Afro-Brazilian identity, they also in part constitute Oxum as a sensual, lived experience: at one end, a fully embodied sexuality danced in voluptuous moves, a richly golden feel of luxury and wealth robing the costumed dancers, fecundity and sweetness suffused in special foods; at the other, the themes of fertility and love and passion are played out in restrained steps and weepy sentimentality. I will return to the

TABLE 15.1

| | *White Umbanda* | *Afro-Brazilian Umbanda* |
|---|---|---|
| **Colors** | light blue | yellow-gold |
| **Beads** | single strand of light blue spherical polyhedrons of glass, somewhat larger than a pea | multiple strands of very small yellow-gold glass or ceramic spheres, cylinders, or doughnuts (*miçangas*) |
| **Clothing, Accoutrements** | no special dress; standard white Umbanda uniform (white dress and top for women; white pants and shirt for men) | long yellow-gold dress, white blouse, gold scarf around the chest, tin crown with yellow gold *miçangas* |
| **Offerings** | gladioluses, roses (white); blue and white candles and cloth; water from a spring or waterfall; mirrors, combs, cosmetics; handicraft items, e.g., Styrofoam hearts, miniature bows and arrows. No food offerings or blood offerings. | gladioluses and roses in yellow and white; yellow and white candles; spring or waterfall water; champagne; mirrors, combs, cosmetics. *Food offerings: xim-xim* (a chicken dish), *adum* (mashed corn with honey and palm oil), eggs, black-eyed peas, honey, *omolocum*. *Blood sacrifice:* chicken, goat. |
| **Dance** | restrained | exuberant |
| **Relative presence** | minor; rarely possesses mediums, annual celebration is not a major production. | major; frequently invoked, annual celebration a major, all-night festival that coincides with initiations, as in Candomblé. |

implications of these profoundly different reflections/experiences of Oxum; for now, I turn to another experiential aspect of Oxum: the Orixá as model of, and for, the self.

## *Ethno-psychology: Oxum and Umbanda Conceptions of the Self*

The implications of Oxum as model for the self became especially poignant for me when, in the course of my field research, I was identified everywhere I went as a child of Ogum and Oxum. Ogum is the multifaceted, contradictory, passionate god of war and agriculture and iron.[7] Ogum's explosive mix of courage and self-destruction stands in marked contrast to Oxum's calm, nurturing, steady sweetness. To understand myself from an Umbanda point of view, therefore, I would need to come to some understanding of the Ogum and the Oxum that were said to be inside me.

Umbanda ethno-psychology, like so much else in the religion, is an eclectic mix of disparate theories and knowledge that varies from center to center, person to person, moment to moment. It is best approached as a loose system of models and metaphors that Umbandistas creatively deploy in dealing with the mysteries of personality and behavior. The Orixás, as models or archetypes of human possibility, play an important role in this repertoire, but they are only a part of the larger psychology. Persons, as both mundane and spiritual beings, are products of many factors. Umbandistas believe in karma; they believe in past lives, the triumphs and tragedies of which leave their mark in the existential dramas of present incarnations. They believe persons possess astral bodies that can be contaminated by negative energy or attacked by obsessing spirits, leading to various forms of mental and physical affliction — indeed, this lies at the core of Umbanda healing. Most importantly, though, they believe that part and parcel of every person is a spiritual essence, dynamic and yet, in some fundamental sense, immutable and beyond human control. This essence is talked about in various ways — quite commonly as a "vibration," replete with a corresponding color and energy level — but its highest emotional and poetic salience emerges when it is discussed in terms of one's relationship to Orixás such as Oxum.

Umbandistas draw and elaborate freely upon a model of the self rooted in many African religions in the New World. The model, variously characterized by Umbandistas as literally and/or metaphorically true, casts the person as a metaphorical "child" of two Orixás. One, the *Orixá de frente*, or lead Orixá, has a dominant influence on the individual's character; the other, the *Orixá segundo*, or second Orixá, has a lesser but still crucial role in determining character.[8] Usually one is male and the other female, the lead Orixá being of the same sex as the individual, but there are exceptions — numerous exceptions — and these can result in "deviations" from the heterosexual norms of gender identity and behavior (see Birman 1988). Many Umbandistas (as well as followers of Candomblé; see Goldman 1984) go on to include several other Orixás in descending order of

importance, along with a number of human spirits as constituting the individual's *caroa*, or crown, but the lead and second Orixá, often explicitly cast as spiritual parents, are of greatest concern. It is these archetypes whose mythical character emerges in the unique personalities of given individuals.

Though less than a dozen Orixás are current in Umbanda compared to hundreds in West Africa, and the archetypes are broadly drawn, they contribute to a highly nuanced ethno-psychology. The characteristics of the two main Orixás, like the traits of one's biological parents, combine and merge in myriad and sometimes surprising ways. The vagaries of karma and the baggage of previous lives, as well as the spiritual dangers of everyday life, complicate the picture. An Orixá may appear at one level a stereotype, but it is a stereotype layered with a rich complement of traits, a complexity that emerges especially in the discourses through which Umbandistas relate and speculate about the Orixá. The stereotype becomes a multifaceted personality when lived by Umbandistas. And, an Orixá like Oxum is not singular but plural, emerging in many different forms—indeed, each is a unique entity whose essence emerges, reflected, refracted, in the individual character of her child. For example, my Oxum, the second Orixá who tempers my Ogum and constitutes the feminine side of my personality in this model, largely fits the popular stereotype—my informants advance her as explanation for my emotional stability, gentleness, and nurturing qualities, and, less positively, a certain vanity, indecisiveness, and non-assertiveness.

My Oxum is not a mainspring for action and has not conferred on me her fabled skill at attaining wealth. She would seem to be rather different from the Oxum in Dona Marta's crown.[9] Dona Marta is the leader of the group whose members are like Oxum's children, with nowhere else to go, who makes the rich offerings of food in her *favela terreiro*. A woman in her fifties who migrated to Rio from the hardscrabble backcountry of northeast Brazil, Marta is a survivor. Her Oxum makes Marta gentle, but tough. As one of her children, Rosa, put it, "Dona Marta is sweetness itself, but she is fire, a bar of steel." Marta once told me that things are hard for her sometimes, but she must be strong for her children. Oxum, she said, and Tupinambá give her the strength she needs. Marta embodies Oxum's qualities as the endlessly patient, forgiving mother. The seductive Oxum shines through in Marta's grace and beauty, but Marta is strikingly independent and self-possessed in dealing with men. Marta enjoys fine things but is not enamored of luxury; Oxum's talent for wealth is perhaps reflected not in her modest lifestyle, but rather in the fact that from her earnings as a seamstress and prudent investments in *favela* real estate she has amassed the material wherewithal to live in dignity and raise daughters who enjoy some upward mobility. Marta's is a warrior Oxum,[10] a figure whose tears are tempered with resolve, sweetness with hard strength. This is the Oxum who fights at the side of Ogum, who sheds blood for lover and children. It would seem difficult to reconcile the vision of Oxum reflected in the passion and courage of Marta with the domesticated, traditional feminine model prevalent in white Umbanda, but perhaps the

differences make sense when we consider that Oxum, as a symbol of female sexuality, is constructed within the ambivalent, contested contexts of gendered ideology. Marta's Oxum, passionate, independent, both fertile *and* potent, sweet and steely, with tears and blood, resists a bourgeois, patriarchal ideology that domesticates women and tames their sexuality to an ethos of hearts and flowers and ribbons and Cupid's bows.[11]

## *Oxum and the Bicha*

Umbanda emerged from the shadows of sexual scandal—part real, part no doubt grossly exaggerated—surrounding Afro-Brazilian religion. In his 1869 novella *Pai Royal-Feiticeiro* ("Father Royal, Sorcerer"), João Manoel de Macedo, hardly an unbiased observer but certainly representative of establishment opinion of his day, conjures up the specters of lewd dancing, depraved imaginations, and squalid practices:

> The dance, now spreading, comes again to a boil; the obscene Negress and her partner move lewdly. Interrupting their violent dance, they carry to each and all the vase or gourd containing the beverage, telling them to "drink *pemba*" and each one takes a swig of the dangerous and filthy pemba. Those who are sick from sorcery, the candidates to the office of sorcerer, those who use sorcery for good or bad ends subject themselves to the most absurd, repulsive and indecent ordeals, and to the most squalid of practices.
>
> The bacchanal is complete; with the cure of the bewitched, with the torments of the initiations, with the concession of remedies and the secrets of sorcery are mixed the firewater, and in the delirium of all, in the infernal flames of depraved imaginations, are evidenced, almost always shamelessly, an unchecked, ferocious, and torpid lewdness.
>
> All this is hideous and horrible, but that is how it is.
>
> (Macedo 1869: 127–129. Translation mine.)

At mid-twentieth century, even such an objective and indeed sympathetic researcher as Roger Bastide, the French sociologist and Candomblé initiate, paints a disturbing picture of sexual impropriety in the *macumba* from which Umbanda departed. He tells of one sorcerer who manipulates women into exchanging sexual favors for magical protection. Another "much against his will," takes up with a young, beautiful woman and abandons his wife, following orders from the spirits. A leader of a *macumba* who dresses as the devil brings a new woman into the home he and his pregnant common-law wife have shared for eleven years. She leaves him, but comes back for an abortion induced by black magic. And yet another forces his common-law wife to share their bed with two or three other women, besides deflowering virgins and giving medicines to induce abortion (Bastide 1983: 235–239). Most damning of all, given the strongly homophobic sexual ideology of "respectable" society, it was commonly believed (and was in fact, true) that a large number of the male initiates were homosexual. Dancing

in the *gira*,[12] especially as one possessed by a female Orixá, may have afforded these men the opportunity to act out fantasies of feminized sexual identity (Ribeiro 1982; see also Fry 1982), while, not coincidentally, placing them in an accepting environment where homosexual liaisons could be readily contracted. All of this was common knowledge; exaggerated, distorted by racist and homophobic biases—but "common knowledge" nonetheless.

It is against this backdrop of scandalized public opinion that a puritanical strain developed in Umbanda discourse and practice. Among some of the more obvious markers: segregated seating by sex; signs, prominently displayed, forbidding short skirts, low necklines, bermudas, and other revealing clothing; and verbal injunctions against flirting. The prim steps that celebrate Oxum at the white Umbanda center represent the de-sexualization of the Orixá; the styrofoam hearts and Cupid's arrows suggest the lengths to which her sexual passion has been domesticated, rendered harmless and little more than a romantic cliché in white Umbanda.

Even in those centers that proclaim African roots, where Oxum is danced sensually and passionately, there is much concern with decorum, with not overstepping the bounds beyond which lies salacious display. Most revealing are the repeated assertions that many other Afro-Brazilian centers, especially those identified as Candomblé, are places rife with improprieties. The accusations were not very different from what we read in Bastide—leaders taking advantage of their positions to seduce followers, men claiming that the Orixás sanctioned their numerous affairs, along with more prosaic assertions that the all-night festivals are often occasions for flirting and hustling and that some dancers are more concerned with displaying their bodies than serving the Orixás. My informants characterized these and similar abuses as *bagunça*—literally, disorder, confusion, impropriety—but in their usage, misbehavior of a lascivious nature.

Mostly, though, I heard accusations of rampant homosexual activity. For all the respect shown it as authentic African tradition, Candomblé is, I was told, a *coisa de bicha*, "a gay thing" (my rendering of "bicha" as gay is not quite right; "bicha" is actually a nastily derogatory term, closer to the English "faggot." Also, "bicha," unlike "gay," refers only to the receptive, passive participant, comparable to the *cochón* as discussed in Lancaster 1994). Echoing the findings of Rene Ribeiro and Peter Fry, these informants opined that men in Candomblé are most often gays enjoying the opportunity to dress and act as females and attract new lovers. Not surprisingly, given her image as the epitome of feminine sensuality, it was most often Oxum who was mentioned as the deity these men would portray.

The depths of these anxieties and ambivalence emerged in a particularly dramatic incident involving Oxum. I was invited along with the personnel of the Spiritual Center of Father João to attend a ritual of the fourteenth anniversary of a friend's sister's initiation at a Candomblé *terreiro* in the far suburbs. Despite the disparaging remarks I had heard about *bagunça* and *coisa de bicha*, my friends were excited, eager to compare their "line" with that of a Candomblé house.

Candomblé, one told me, is a serious thing, possessing much force. The three-hour bus journey was full of good cheer and anticipation. We were warmly received, and at first the meeting seemed to go very well. But then things went steadily downhill. The first strained chord sounded when the ritual assistants who tend to the possessed dancers appeared in tight, short, and very thin dresses with high-heeled shoes and abundant makeup. Several members of our group were visibly embarrassed. During a break in the proceedings, the "shameless" appearance of these women was roundly condemned, as was the "obvious" (though not to me) fact that a lot of flirting and hustling was going on in the audience. Was this thing serious, or *bagunça*? The break over, we returned to the *terreiro*. Things seemed to get better for a while; the drummers called down some of the male Orixás, and their incorporations by both male and female dancers were favorably judged. And then Oxum was called. Several dancers received her; as at the Spiritual Center of Father João, her movements were sensual and strong and sweet. Again, it was well received, even though two men were among those receiving Oxum, a practice strictly proscribed in the ritual at Father João's, but, "that is the way in Candomblé" and everyone was willing to be open-minded. But then it happened. One of the men became more and more sexual in his dance; the roll of his hips, the seduction in his face—this was stepping over the line. Other men joined in as drumbeats summoning other female Orixás were played. The portrayals grew ever more sensual, sexual, frank, and intense. There were men dancing as female Orixás everywhere. I was fascinated, but my companions were becoming increasingly uncomfortable; this was *bagunça*, clearly a gay thing. Soon we all left. My friends were silent, clearly bothered as we walked the mile or so to the bus stop in the pre-dawn chill. And then Marisa, the irreverent, irrepressible wife of a male medium, Orlando, skipped out in front, laughing and dancing a parody of the dance of Oxum that had set off the *bagunça*. Our leader called out the greeting for Oxum, as several others made cutting jokes about gays and Candomblé and *bagunça*. I felt bad. These were my friends, people I admire and love, who are participants in an Umbanda center that celebrated Afro-Brazilian culture and in so many other ways countered the whitening trend in Umbanda. They represented to me a powerful fusion of liberation with religious conviction, spirituality combined with an exuberant sensuality. But it seemed that they too could play the game of denigrating the denigrated, choosing not to look past stereotypes to make common cause against a racist and homophobic vision. Perhaps some of Oxum's children still have no place else to go but to her comforting tears.

But there is an epilogue. Tensions had been building at the center of Father João for some time, and finally they came to a head several weeks after our uncomfortable visit. A closed meeting, which I attended, was held to clear the air, to get the bottled-up anger and grievances out in the open. One issue germane to this discussion came out. Orlando, who had been so cutting and cleverly cruel in his disparaging remarks that evening of the Candomblé, complained bitterly

that people were gossiping because he occasionally received a female Orixá, Iansã. "Laugh, make jokes, call me a *bicha*, but I serve the Orixá and she comes to me, that is the way it is and everyone can just go to hell if they don't like it." The leader of the center then said that he too received a female Orixá, Oxum—but not publicly, unless she insisted, because that could lead to *bagunça*.

It seemed a very small step, but when I returned a year later, the sea had changed. In the seclusion chamber was a young man preparing for initiation. I would see him come out, publicly, as Oxum. During that night-long celebration, several other male mediums received Oxum, Iemanjá, and Iansã. No one was uncomfortable or offended. There was no talk of *bagunça*. One of my informants, who had previously been so adamant about *bichas*, matter-of-factly pointed out that João, one of the men receiving Oxum, was gay—"100%"—but, he went on, so what, that is the way the Orixás made him. João is an optimal person, and there, he said as he pointed, is a beautiful Oxum.

## *Conclusion*

Like any ethnographic writing, this essay gives a one-sided account at many points. To begin with, I am sure the reader detects that I am strongly biased in favor of what I have called Afro-Brazilian Umbanda. In part this reflects my political commitments—I cannot help but identify with an Umbanda that cherishes its Afro-Brazilian heritage, that gives strength to those who suffer the brutal inequalities of wealth and power and the bitter hurt of racial and gender prejudices in Brazil, that celebrates the sensuality and strength of this symbol of woman. Another way of saying this is that I prefer the company in an Oxum's palace that shelters those who have nowhere else to go. And in part my bias reflects my own aesthetic preferences, as if what sings to our soul is ever isolated from our politics. Afro-Brazilian Umbanda moved me, very deeply, and white Umbanda did not. That said, the followers of white Umbanda that I know are just as sincere, just as moved by Oxum's beauty, just as musical in their religion, and every bit as generous.

My account is one-sided also in that I focus on the ends of a continuum; the stark contrasts I draw are far less clear in that vast middle where most Umbanda is practiced. The Spiritual Center of Father João, the little *terreiro* where Dona Marta's tough but tender Tupinambá shelters her "children," stand as ideal types, as does that place where an old slave tells tales of Atlantis. They are like the two teams at each end of this tug-of-war that shapes Umbanda, and with it, Oxum. It is easy to forget that the two are joined together by a rope of shared meanings and common symbols—shared and common, albeit contested. This is clearly the case with Oxum; strikingly different though she may be in some aspects from one pole to the other, in all Umbanda that I saw she embodied underlying themes of sweetness, maternal love, seductiveness, emotion, vulnerability, and gentle strength. Oxum, like the other Orixás, constituted a powerful metaphor

within Umbanda ethno-psychology. And everywhere, for her children this metaphor, whatever its outward form, was both a great source of self-understanding and a support against the painful struggles of living. If I focus on the differences in this essay, it is because I see reflected in the mirrors of these various Oxums the currents of historical and contemporary struggles and ambivalences that churn and foam like the waters beside which Oxum gathers her lilies.

My discussion of Oxum in Umbanda has focused far less on what this Orixá is—her traits, the rich mythology surrounding her, the plurality of visions she reflects as a root metaphor of femininity—and much more on certain processes in which she is implicated. This is because what Oxum is, in Umbanda, is a symbol in process, an unfinished complex of meanings, images, and experiences reflecting the unsettled, contested questions of race, gender, and sexuality. Though not explicitly stated, running through my discussion has been a common thread: whether we look at Oxum as part of Umbanda ethno-psychology, as a marker in the tug-of-war between Afro-Brazilian and white Umbanda, or a mirror for sexual ideology, we are really talking about identity. In constructing their Oxums, Umbandistas are exploring their selves, carving out a place in the shifting fields of ethnic and gender ideology, expressing and working out aspects of their sexuality. That, I think, is what we can look for in Oxum's mirror, just as her children seek strength and comfort, sweetness and love in her tearful embrace.

## Notes

1. Part of the field research on which this paper is based was funded by a Fulbright Hays Doctoral Dissertation Grant.

2. A *terreiro* is an Afro-Brazilian ritual site; the name comes from the clearings in which Afro-Brazilians practiced their religion at night during slavery.

3. "Charity" is the *raison d'être* of Umbanda; it is what mediums do when they use their gifts to help those in need, usually by way of physical, emotional, or spiritual healing. Various aspects of charity and healing emerge in the studies of Brown (1994); Hale (1987, 1990, 1992, 1994); and Pressel (1973, 1974).

4. I must point out that the contrast I am describing appears especially pronounced because I am drawing my sketch from Umbanda centers that are located very near the ends of a stylistic spectrum. Most Umbanda centers are located somewhere in between, but the pull between these "ideal types" is in all cases present, and usually one is rather clearly dominant over the other.

5. The old slave spirits (*pretos velhos*, literally "old blacks") are the spirits of Afro-Brazilian slaves, usually plantation workers, though some I know are miners and maids. These spirits are usually (though not always; see Hale 1997) portrayed as elderly, physically decrepit, patient, humble, and generous, and are especially skilled at dealing with relationship problems and healing.

6. The Brazilian journalist Reginaldo Prandi presents compelling evidence that Candomblé is enjoying a strong resurgence in popularity, largely due to a growing appreciation of its "authenticity" in comparison to white Umbanda. My own sense is that the Afri-

can symbols and practices are becoming increasingly valorized in Umbanda. In both cases, the root cause may well be a fundamental and positive re-evaluation of Afro-Brazilian culture within the larger Brazilian milieu.

7. A collection edited by Sandra T. Barnes, *Africa's Ogun: Old World and New* (1989), gives numerous and varied insights not only into the characteristics of and devotions to Ogum, but also the social and historical processes surrounding his construction in the New World.

8. Monique Augras presents both a detailed outline of Afro-Brazilian ethnopsychological theory in this regard along with fascinating case studies in her 1983 *O Duplo e a Metamorfose* (The Double and the Metamorphosis). While somewhat hampered by a Jungian theoretical framework, her book is an important contribution that suggests that further research on the relationship of followers of Afro-Brazilian religion and their personal Orixás could be extremely fruitful.

9. Here and elsewhere, names and identifying details have been changed in the interest of privacy.

10. Pierre Verger, the venerable student of Candomblé, identifies a number of warrior Oxums in Africa, and reminds us that Oxum, for all her sweetness, possesses a strong will and great ambition (1981: 174–176). Sangirardi Jr. (1988: 139) in his collection of myths and descriptions of the Orixás in Umbanda and Candomblé, meanwhile, characterizes Oxum as an intrepid warrior and unyielding fighter, and recounts a myth in which Oxum defeats an invading army by infusing *abarás* (small cakes of mashed black-eyed peas, onion, palm oil, salt, and shrimp, wrapped in banana leaves) with divine force, which they eat with lethal consequences.

11. Drawing on Marcuse's conception of counterculture as a liberating manifestation of Eros, the French sociologist Georges LaPassade and the Brazilian scholar Marco Aurélio Luz (Luz and LaPassade 1972) draw an apposite contrast: between white Umbanda, symptomatic of a de-sexualized, de-politicized, alienated, capitalist ethos; as opposed to what they call *macumba* and what I would call an African Umbanda, embodying the revolutionary sensuality of Afro-Brazil and collective memories of Black resistance. Their formulation is suggestive and has certainly influenced my thinking; I would extend the model by applying it not only to ideology and resistance relating to race but also to gender.

12. The *gira* is the circle of dancers in Afro-Brazilian Umbanda. It is also, by extension, the Umbanda ritual session.

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CHAPTER SIXTEEN

# An Oxum Shelters Children in São Paulo

*Tânia Cypriano*

"Oxum is a goddess linked to the mastery of fresh waters, in particular the rivers. There is a river in Nigeria which bears her name. Oxum carries a fan, a golden crown, and a sword. Yellow is her favorite color, and she loves perfume and dolls. She is beauty, elegance, and affection. She is the symbol of womanhood, love, and procreation. Without her, men and women can neither mate nor enjoy one another."[1]

The above is the narration I used to introduce the story of High Priest Laércio Zaniquelli in my video "Odô Yá! Life with AIDS." The video is a documentary that records the grassroots organizing in Candomblé communities in Brazil to promote AIDS education and to care for and support people living with AIDS and the HIV virus. *Odô Yá!* is the name of a comic book created by Candomblé devotees to teach about AIDS from a Candomblé perspective: spiritual, life-loving, and sex-positive. The comic contains stories of the Orixá, including Oxum. Pai Laércio, as he is known, is a priest of Oxum and the head of a Candomblé house of worship in São Paulo.

For two years I had heard of Pai Laércio and his work with children with AIDS. During a visit to São Paulo to work on the documentary, I called Pai Laércio's assistant and asked to meet with the priest. Immediately, I was invited to participate in and videotape Pai Laércio's annual party for Oxum in his house. I was surprised because up until that time I had been unable to videotape any Candomblé ceremonies because of scheduling problems or because people were hesitant to let an outsider videotape such important and intimate events. I truly believe that Pai knew I was coming and that Oxum did the work of bringing us together. I was honored because Oxum is one of my orixá and a very dear one. I felt that Oxum's party was a present that she was giving to me and to the people who would see my video. The party was one of the most beautiful I have ever seen.

The party at Pai Laércio's house on the outskirts of São Paulo began about 11

p.m., but it wasn't until at least 2 a.m. that Oxum came out, in the person of Pai Laércio in possession trance. First she dressed in white "to please Oxalá," Pai Laércio told me later. Then she arrived a second time, dressed in her own colors of yellow and gold, all beautiful and powerful.

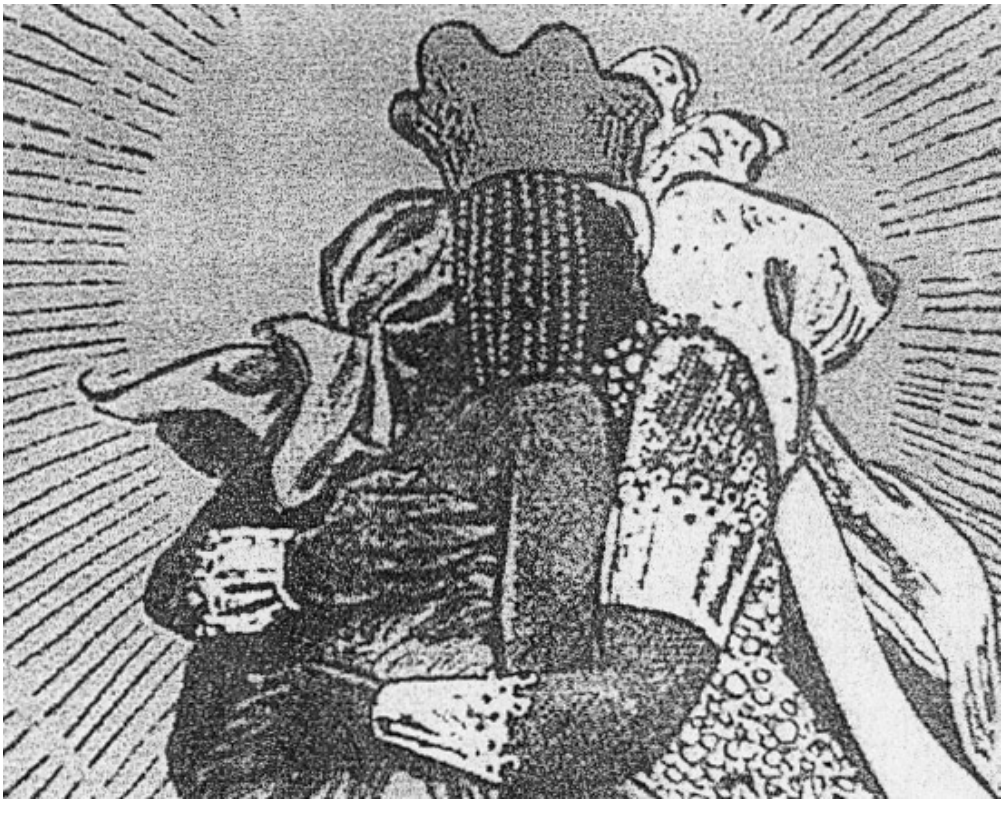
Oxum danced with her sword and her fan, wearing the beaded crown that radiates her royal power. She saluted the drums as all orixá do in ceremonies, honoring their power to draw down the orixá into the world of human beings. Then she saluted the camera I was using to videotape the ceremony! In doing so, she gave her approval to the video shooting, and let it be known that the video, like the drums, was a channel to bring her presence to many people. She fed everyone present with the food that had been offered to her. And then she danced with the people who had come, and with Pai Laércio's children, her children.

I interviewed Pai Laércio several days later in the same house. It was as it is every day of the year but the day of the festival, a home for thirty-two children who are HIV positive or who are living with AIDS, called CCI, Infant Center Children of Oxum. Pai Laércio told me that the festival I attended is the only ceremony that takes place in his house in order that the children and their sleep not be disturbed. The space is Oxum's, he said, and the work is hers as well. Pai Laércio said:

"Oxum—people here say she stands for wealth alone. That she is a waterfall of sweet water. She's not only that, I think. Oxum is procreation, the one who procreates, and who gives shelter, and the one who soothes. That's why I like children so much. I protect the children. I actually think it is not me, but her, you know, because she is so much of who I am."

## Notes

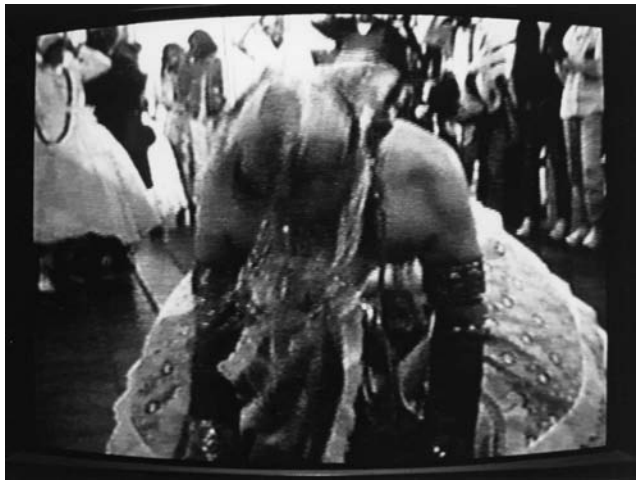
1. Statement given to me by Antonio Agnelo Pereira, Casa Branca do Engenho Velho, Salavador.



Oxum embraces those who need her.
From the AIDS education comic book: *Odô Yá!*

Oxum, manifesting through Pai Laércio Zaniquelli,
dances for her children in São Paulo, Brazil.

Oxum dispenses her favorite foods.



Oxum salutes the camera.

Pai Laércio and the children of Oxum.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

# Living Water

## Ọ̀ṣun, Mami Wata, and Olókùn in the Lives of Four Contemporary Nigerian Christian Women

*Mei-Mei Sanford*

This essay is concerned with the lives of four Nigerian Christian women for whom the water deities Ọ̀ṣun, Mami Wata, and Olókùn are part of religious experience at its deepest level: Yetunde, a Yoruba professor from Lagos; Iya Aladura, a Yoruba Independent Church elder; Chief Victoria Abebe, an Edo midwife; and Grace, a professor from the Niger Delta. These women claim a connection to their deities by lineage, by a revelation of divination early in life, or by a conscious choice made later in life. This water deity relationship is a source of spiritual authority that is central to these women's identities, and that they, as Christians, manifest in their church lives. The two women with lineage connections to deities of water have searched for and found new ways to carry on their family religious responsibilities—through Western science and the institutions of the church.

This study developed as a result of changes in the way I do religious ethnographic research. I began my studies of Yoruba and other Nigerian religious experience by looking past people's Christianities and Islams, assuming that some "pure" indigenous religion existed apart from these. I didn't pursue conversations about religion with people who told me they were Christian or Muslim.

In the next phase of my work, I listened through people's relating of their Christian and Islamic experiences, waiting to hear about the indigenous deities behind them. Often I found that they talked eventually about indigenous deities in the context of their families, their lineages, or a healing crisis. This process assumed that the object of my study was something hidden and that the surface of a person's religious life was not as real as what lay beneath the surface.

I have come to feel that both of these methods were impertinent and forced.

In both cases I strained not to experience what people were presenting to me, and as a result did not recognize the significance of Christianity in the lives of many of the people I know and work with. Listening as fully as possible to people describe and formulate their own religious experience in Christian and indigenous religious language has led me to an increasing awareness of the ways that Christianity and indigenous religion co-exist, affect, and suffuse each other in people's lives. The evidence of the women's lives described in this paper suggest a model of multiple religious practice, sometimes called syncretism, that is not mechanistic, in which each religion is engaged not just strategically, but religiously. Also evident is the women's agency in their lives, their religious lives, and in the religious identities they form.

The Christian women with whom this essay is concerned each have a deep sense of connection with a deity of water. For some the precipitating factor was a call, a spiritual event, and for one, a deep sense of identification with a grandmother who was a priestess. The women, all between the ages of 40 and 70, had grandmothers who were indigenous religionists and healers. They all have parents who were first-generation Christians and who raised them as Christians. I am interested in how these four women continue to be Christians and integrate their relationship with the deity of water and the spiritual authority emanating from it into their lives in individual and complex ways. This essay is an exploration on an individual level, rather than an institutional one, of the interlacings of Christianities and older indigenous religions, particularly religions of the water.

The research in this essay grew out of friendships I have with these four women. While these women have come to comfort and joy in their connections with the deities of the water, they do not speak about them often in their church or professional lives. Iya Aladura told me that if I had been a stranger coming into her church to ask about Ọ̀ṣun, she would have told me nothing. For the two women who are college professors, academia has added another layer of risk to owning "non-standard" religious experiences. For these reasons, "Grace" and "Yetunde" are pseudonyms and I refer to one woman by one of her titles, Iya Aladura. Chief Victoria Abebe offered me the use of her name and her photographs.

## *Water*

Water deities are ubiquitous and vitally important in southern Nigeria. Among these deities are Ọ̀ṣun in the Yoruba southwest, Olókùn in Bini and Edo southeast, and Mami Wata in the Niger delta. In this essay, Ọ̀ṣun, Mami Wata, and Olókùn appear in the particularity of the four women's experiences of them, and in the fluidity of multiple contexts. In Grace's experience, Mami Wata is worshiped in a nearby river and travels from the river Niger when called. Furthermore, Grace recognizes the Mami Wata of her experience in Sir Victor Uwaifo's popular high-life song recorded circa 1960 which begins: "If you see

Mami Wata-o! Never you run away." While Chief Victoria Abebe knows Olókùn as the center of the royal court religion of Benin City, she experiences the deity most intimately at the spring on her family land in nearby Ekpoma and in Ekpoma's religious traditions.

Charles Gore's and Joseph Nevadomsky's comments on this complexity in the case of Mami Wata are illuminating. They state that the term "Mammy Wata" is used widely in West African pidgin to describe "water spirits that bestow good fortune or wreak personal disaster in return for some kind of relationship, usually framed as a sexual attraction" (Gore and Nevadomsky 1997: 60–69). Strikingly, "Mammy Wata" is also used to describe locally named water deities to outsiders, and often, within local languages themselves, to refer to these same local deities. They insist that Mammy Wata practices are "extensive, contingent, and fragmented" and thus must be studied at local rivers and with individual practitioners (1997: 62).

The Yoruba òrìṣà (deity) Ọ̀ṣun is identified, not only with the great river which bears her name, but with many streams, pools, and springs. In every place where she is worshiped, her priestesses and priests find her healing and transforming presence in local flowing water. The etymology of the name Ọ̀ṣun explains this ubiquity. A probable root of Ọ̀ṣun's name is *orîsùn* (source) (Abiodun 1989: 7). Abraham defines orísùn as both "source of a river" and "original ancestor"—source of a people (Abraham 1958: 600). Olupona identifies orísùn also as the "original town" or place of origin of a people (Olupona 1991: 25). Sun in orísùn means "flow" or "seep" or "drip" or "move as water does" (Abraham 1958: 600). When a person comes upon a body of water and determines that it is moving, flowing—not stagnant—and therefore potable, she or he says of it, *Ó sun!*, "It is flowing!"[1] Flowing water is precious, as Ọ̀ṣun herself is frequently described, because it sustains life. Oyo priestesses and priests of Ọ̀ṣun have described this meta-functioning at work. When a stream or spring that embodies a deity other than Ọ̀ṣun dries up and then bursts forth anew, it has become Ọ̀ṣun; newly flowing water that is, by definition, Ọ̀ṣun.

Iya Aladura, one of the four women whose experience is described in this essay, draws healing water at Bar Beach when she is in Lagos, and at Coney Island when she is in New York. Yetunde studies fish and the qualities of "living" and life-sustaining water in West Africa and in the United States.

The deities in this essay appear together because of the resonances and commonalities I have found in the stories of the four women. There are many similarities in the ways these deities are described and worshiped, as well. Indeed, they are occasionally identified with each other. Rufus Ajayi, a Bendelite at Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife, went so far as to say: "We in Bendel say Olókùn, but people in East say Mami Wata, and the Yoruba say Ọ̀ṣun."[2] Nevertheless, the particularities of these traditions are of utmost importance, and within them the particularities of individual human beings' experience of these spirits of the water.

## *Churches*

In southern Nigeria there is a long history of African independent churches, indigenous churches, among the most well-known of which are the Serafu ati Kerubu (Seraphim and Cherubim) Church, the C.A.C. (the Christ Apostolic Church), and the C.C.C. (the Christ Celestial Church). These churches, also known as Aladura churches (churches of the praying people), can be distinguished from the mainline churches, Catholic, Baptist, Anglican, and others, founded by foreign missionaries. The indigenous churches share with older indigenous religions commonalities of worldview, similar ideas of the nature of power and the ways human beings access it, and the nature of problematic forces in the world. They also share techniques of invocation and prayer and technologies for inducing spiritual power in water and other substances. Water, particularly the flowing water of rivers, wells, springs, and the ocean, is especially important to both groups. Much healing and prayer take place at the waterside.

When I talked with priestesses of Ọ̀ṣun, I heard stories that indicated an explicit recognition by certain churches, notably the Yoruba Kerubu ati Serafu Church, of Ọ̀ṣun's continuing importance to members of lineages connected to her. One example is the story told me by the Yeye Ọ̀ṣun, the chief priestess of Ọ̀ṣun in Lagos. Her grandmother had been an ọlọ́ṣun (a priestess of Ọ̀ṣun) but she herself was not. She had made a successful life as a trader when her business began to fail. Then her legs became paralyzed. She visited an elder of a Kerubu ati Serafu church in Ibadan to be healed and released from her bad fortune. The elder inquired as to her lineage and told her to make an offering to Ọ̀ṣun. She did so, and was healed and delivered from her bad situation. Later she became initiated as a priestess herself. It was a classic story of being called by the deity to devotion, and it was identified as such by the church elder.

I witnessed similar advice being given in a consultation between a founder of a branch of the Kerabu ati Seraphu Church and a sick woman. He inquired as to whether there were *òrìṣà* (Yoruba deities) in her family. When she answered that a family member was a priestess of Ọ̀ṣun, the elder told her that in order to be healed she must make a feast for Ọ̀ṣun and invite people.

This elder, or Baba Aladura as he is called, offered the following explanation of Ọ̀ṣun's relationship to Christianity: In the beginning, Ọlọ́run, the High God, created water and divided it in two, and the òrìṣà Yẹmọja (another deity of water) and Ọ̀ṣun came into being. Ọ̀ṣun, the Baba Aladura said, is the same as Òrìṣànlá, the chief of the òrìṣà funfun, the cooling white deities. The Baba Aladura went on to equate Òrìṣànlá, and thereby Ọ̀ṣun, with Olódùmarè, which is a name of God. It was only after Baba Mose Orimolade, the founder of Kerabu ati Serafu, pleaded with Ọlọ́run for forty years that Ọlọ́run (the High God) changed Òrìṣàńlá/Ọ̀ṣun into Kerabu ati Serafu. The Iya Aladura (woman elder) who is one of the four women whose stories are told in this essay is a close associate of Baba

and she explains Baba's statement in the following way: The change from Òrìṣàńlá/Ọ̀ṣun to Kerabu ati Serafu, from traditional religion to Aladura Christianity, is "a refinement, a refinement of the name."[3] In both traditions the names of the deities are extremely important. Knowing these names is the basis of understanding the deities and of invoking them. In the Baba's statement, the *òrìṣà* are permuted into the particular Christianity of Kerabu and Serafu.[4] In the new revelation there is supersession, new revelation, but also powerful continuity.

## *The Call*

Iya Aladura is the child of Yoruba Christian parents in Osogbo. Shortly after her birth, her grandparents, who were indigenous religionists, consulted a babaláwo (an Ifá diviner) about their granddaughter's destiny. They learned that she was an "ọmọ Ọ̀ṣun," which can be either a child chosen by Ọ̀ṣun, or a child Ọ̀ṣun gives to those who have begged her for a child. Perhaps her birth was the result of her grandparents' prayers to Ọ̀ṣun, and perhaps it was they who gave her her Ọ̀ṣun name, one of several names she is known by. "Of course," she said, she "followed [her] parents to church." The church was the Kerabu ati Serafu Church and her parents were devout members. During the same period, she went to the Ọ̀ṣun festival in Osogbo every year, and her parents freely gave her money to buy white cloth and offerings to Ọ̀ṣun. The white cloth is another indication of her status as "ọmọ Ọ̀ṣun," "Ọ̀ṣun's child."

Iya Aladura also remembers an event when she was ten in which she witnessed the spiritual healing power of the Kerabu ati Serafu Church. Significantly, it was the result of her testing that power. In the church, people entered trance and healed, and it was the custom of the church to test the authenticity of people's trance states by pouring wax on them or sticking them with pins. She went to Station Road near a busy roundabout in Osogbo where beggars congregate. She gathered a group of blind and handicapped beggars, put them in a taxi and took them to church. A prophet in the church knew by spiritual means that they were coming, although no one had told him. As they entered the church, he healed them. Iya Aladura emphasized that the beggars had real handicaps, not fake ones, and they were Northerners, neither Christian nor Yoruba, and therefore, they had no investment in the church. They became and remained church members. Iya Aladura became a prophetess and a healer in the Kerabu ati Serafu, and continues to associate with the prophet who healed the beggars that day.

Grace grew up in eastern Nigeria, the daughter of a minister. Her maternal grandmother was a healer and a strong church member whose money built the church she belonged to. Her mother did not learn to heal from her mother and could not pass it on to Grace. As a young, married woman, Grace tried repeatedly, without success, to have children. She began to go to herbalists, away from

the area where she lived so that her father would not know. A friend took her to a woman healer, a priestess of Mami Wata of the river Niger. As in Iya Aladura's story, the desire for a child is one of the most frequent reasons for seeking the help of an indigenous deity. The healer challenged Grace, telling her she could do nothing for her if she didn't believe. Grace answered, "Do you think I'd be here if I didn't believe?" Grace became the woman's helper and, eventually, a Mami Wata initiate.

She describes going to the river and singing to the spirit in the water. Soon the surface began to change: it roiled and rippled and looked as if something was pushing it up from underneath. They put offerings into the river, including kola nut and Fanta orange soda, and returned to the healer's home to make a feast and place offerings on Mami Wata's shrine. Grace helped many women conceive and give birth, although she was not able to do so herself. In Grace's case, the call was her inability to give birth, and she answered it classically, with initiation. Deities in the Yoruba/Mami Wata regions most frequently call those within lineages already dedicated to them, but they can call anyone, and anyone can approach them with requests.

Yetunde, a Yoruba from Lagos, is connected to Ọ̀ṣun by her lineage. Her grandmother was an *ọlọ́ṣun*, a priestess of Ọ̀ṣun, and Yetunde was very close to her. She watched her grandmother heal and learned about healing plants from her. Yetunde said to me: "As a Christian, I have chosen the easier path. I watched the work my grandmother did, the great responsibility she assumed. She had to be a mediator for people. Christ is my mediator. Being an *ọlọ́ṣun* is the harder path. Therefore we Christians must respect it."

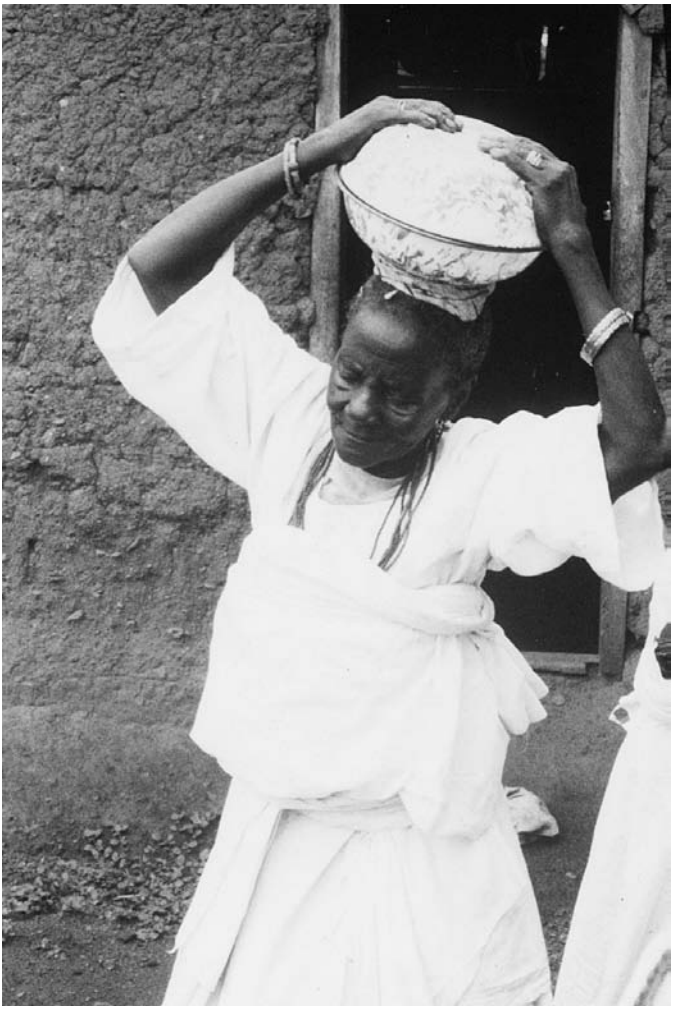
Yetunde's spiritual authority is evident when she prays. On occasion, in my house, when she has closed her eyes and prayed for me and for others, she has spoken simply, but I have had the clear sense of her entering another state, and of her returning from it with effort at the end of her prayer.

Chief Victoria Abebe's connection to the water deity Olókùn is also hereditary. The Chief is Edo, from Ekpoma, close to Benin City. She was brought up Catholic in a well-to-do family. On her family's land is a spring that is the source and home of the deity Olókùn. There are many close similarities between Edo or Bini and Yoruba religion, and the deity Olókùn is a common element. Olókùn is at the center of the Benin royal court religion and controls rivers and oceans. The name, if translated as a Yoruba word, means "owner of the ocean." Chief, as she is called, told me that sons of Ekpoma do not fear the sea when they take jobs as fishers in the coastal waters off Badagry. If they fall in the water, the ocean picks them up, bounces them from wave-top to wave-top, and deposits them safely on land. Such is the power of Olókùn for the people who live at its Ekpoma source. It is a power that Chief experienced and that she talked about often in our conversations.

Chief's grandmother was the senior priestess of Olókùn at Olókùn's source on the family land. When Chief was a young girl, she witnessed her grandmother

and the other priestesses coming from the spring. They carried pots on their heads filled with water from the spring that had been ritually infused with Olókùn's presence. When devotees place the deity's presence on their heads in this way, they frequently enter trance. The deity descends into their heads, and the bodies of the devotees tilt and reel. An example of this gesture can be seen in a photograph of the Iyáalásè Ọ̀ṣun, the senior priestess of Ọ̀ṣun in Iragbiji. In a ritual that is a part of Ori Oke, the annual town festival, the Iyáalásè dances carrying a metal calabash (fig. 17.1).

When Chief encountered the priestesses, she received the spirit of Olókùn



17.1 Iyáalásè Ọ̀ṣun, the senior priestess of Ọ̀ṣun in Iragbiji. In a ritual that is a part of Ori Oke, the annual town festival, the Iyáalásè dances carrying a metal calabash, 1992.
*Photo by Mei-Mei Sanford.*

and began to stagger. Her grandmother quickly reached her and brought her out of trance. Then she sent Chief home, saying, "Your father wants you to be brought up as a Christian. You must not come near us again when we are worshiping." Chief's receiving of Olókùn was a call and the normal precursor of initiation. Her grandmother's response confirmed this, even as it prohibited Chief's further participation.

## *Struggle*

For Grace, remaining childless was difficult, even as an initiate of Mami Wata and even as she helped other women conceive. She began to be uncomfortable about being both a Christian and a devotee of Mami Wata, and she went to many people to rid herself of the deity. At last, she went to a Christ Apostolic Church prophet. He told her: "Spirits don't die. So how is this spirit going to leave you? You will always have the spirit and you will have to learn to live with it." Grace told me that she had had to learn to live with Mami Wata and Christianity together. She said, "My life is unusual. I have always had to balance things in unusual ways." When Grace prays, she uses water and candles, techniques she learned from both Christians and Mami Wata devotees.

As a young woman, Chief was selected by her town to attend a midwifery school established by European Christians far to the east of Benin City. She never married, telling her father that she had a religious vocation that precluded marriage. He agreed to it.

Chief returned home, established a maternity hospital on her family land and ran it for many, many years. When I visited her in Ekpoma in 1992, most of the people we met in the town had been born at her hospital under her care. Most of the water deities and their human representatives are renowned as Mothers and the givers of children. Chief, descendant of Olókùn's priestess and keeper of the spring, was clearly an Olókùn embodiment, the Mother of pregnancies and the Mother of births, having worked through the media of science and European midwifery. A picture she gave me of herself and some of the expectant mothers under her care reminds me of her story of meeting her grandmother and the priestesses of Olókùn (fig. 17.2). The expectant mothers have just drawn water, perhaps at Olókùn's spring, and they stand straight and proud beneath their water pots, wearing wrappers of local cloth. Chief, their Mother, carries no pot, and stands alone at the front of the photograph, wearing a European shirt and skirt and eyeglasses, smiling at the camera (a European conventional gesture at that time). And as she smiles, she tilts her body into the frame, echoing another time she tilted before another line of women carrying water from the spring.

Chief received many honors for her work in Ekpoma. She was given a seat on the Customary Court, that peculiar British colonial institution that supplanted local juridical systems and substituted what was largely British custom. She was also given a chieftaincy title for her accomplishments on behalf of the town

17.2 Chief Victoria Abebe with expectant mothers under her care, Ekpoma.
*Photo courtesy of Chief Victoria Abebe, photographer unknown.*

(fig. 17.3). She accepted the chieftaincy with great pleasure, but broke precedent by insisting that she be installed inside the Catholic Church rather than in the place where chiefs were traditionally installed. The other chiefs mounted a great opposition, but capitulated at last. Again, Chief had defined the terms of her office herself, and combined within it Christian, European, and indigenous elements. She saw herself as unusual, as did Grace, and enjoyed her victory. She enjoyed the respect and friendship of the *ọba* (sovereign) of Benin City as well. But I also sensed the cost in loneliness of her religious vocation and of her remaining true to her integrity as a Catholic. Her closest friend in Ekpoma was another singular religious figure, a prophet of the White Fan, a religion of healing that began in eastern Nigeria in the early part of this century as an indigenous response to Christianity, and which bears some resemblances to the worship of white, cooling Yoruba deities, including Ọ̀ṣun and other deities of water.

## *Resolutions*

Grace is a professor at an American university. She continues, in her words, to "balance" Mami Wata and Christianity in her life, and to balance them with the disciplines of the academy, as well. Two years ago, in a presentation about Mami Wata, she identified herself for the first time in a scholarly context as a Mami Wata initiate. She continues to search for a church home in both main line and African independent churches. She has a strong sense of spiritual vocation, and has evidence that others experience her spiritual strength as well. Sev-

17.3 Chief Victoria Abebe at her chieftancy installation.
*Photo courtesy of Chief Victoria Abebe, photographer unknown.*

eral years ago when she entered a local white Protestant church, the minister stopped his sermon and asked her to preach to the congregation.

Iya Aladura is currently of the most senior rank in the Kerubu ati Serafu Church. She is known as the Iya Aladura, but also as the Senior Prophetess Enirapada, a title which means "healer." She was one of seven people, and the only woman, who disinterred the body of Kerubu ati Serafu founder Moses Orimolade and accompanied it from Lagos to its final burial in his home village. She is also the only woman in a small group of senior Aladura who travel internation-

ally to oversee Kerabu ati Seraphu churches. She is a powerful healer, consecrating water and oil through prayer for healing use. She is comfortable with Ọ̀ṣun devotees and knowledgeable about Ọ̀ṣun practice. She has considerable spiritual strength and has needed to have it in the sometimes difficult position of being the only woman of her rank in the Church.

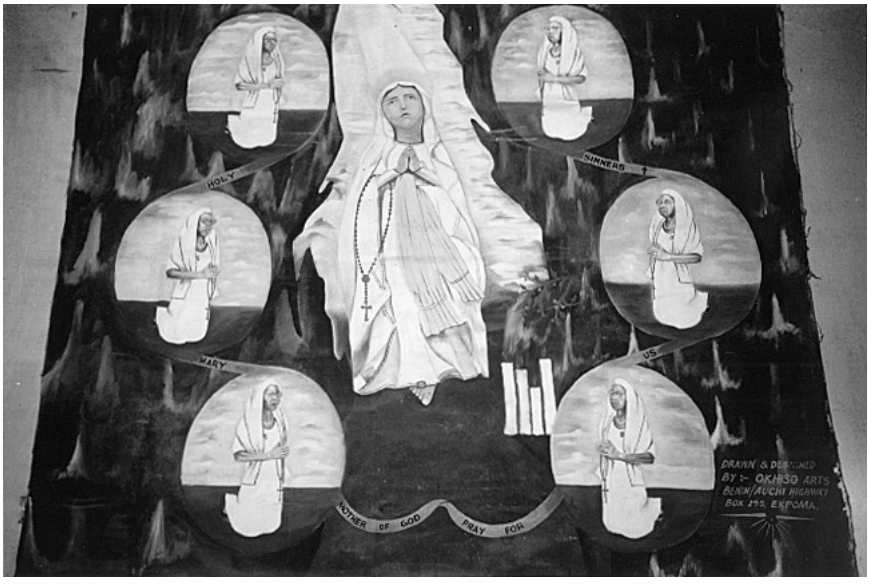
Both Yetunde and Chief have created new ways in which to embody the spiritual inheritance of their grandmothers, in the modes of science, religion, and service. Chief, as the founder of the maternity home, became a healer and a leader of women. As a chief she became a leader of the community at large.

In 1992, Chief began to make plans to create a grotto for the Virgin Mary at the Olókùn spring on her family land. In this way the spring would continue to be used as a source of spiritually potent, healing water, now under the auspices of Mary. In another act of devotion to the Blessed Mother, Chief commissioned a painting of Mary. Surrounding the central figure are multiple images of Chief herself kneeling in adoration (fig. 17.4).

Yetunde told me that, as a young woman, she set about to find a way to do what her grandmother had done as a priestess of Ọ̀ṣun in a new mode, a mode of science. She studied everything she could find about water and about fish. The fish, a water creature, is *ikọ̀*, Ọ̀ṣun's messenger, embodying her presence and bringing gifts of healing. Yetunde received advanced degrees in agricultural economics with a specialization in fisheries. She teaches and works with women's cooperatives to help them develop fish resources as an affordable and nutritious food source—desperately needed in the difficult economy of present-day Nigeria. With other women, she has also created an organization to gather women's groups to work together on issues of food production and availability. She sees this work as her grandmother's as well: working with women to promote health and well-being through the bounty of water and of fish.

In prayer, Yetunde also works with water, and sometimes with oil, consecrating them in solitary prayer or in the prayer vigils at her church. She particularly favors using a Nigerian-made coconut liqueur called Calypso. In indigenous Yoruba religion, alcoholic substances are important as libation and as efficacious substances that increase the power of prayer. Calypso is a crossover, used by devotees of Ọ̀ṣun and other *òrìṣà*, and by church people, who might not use schnapps, the gin that is ubiquitous in traditional ceremony. But there is an additional meaning in the use of Calypso. When I asked Yetunde about Calypso and about the importance of water in prayer, she quoted a Yoruba proverb: *Kòsí ẹni tí ó mọ bí omi ti ńwọ inú àgbọn à fi Olúwa*, "No one—only God—knows how the water got inside the coconut."

The lives of these four women are examples of multiple religious practice. Categories such as "Christian," "Muslim," and "Òrìṣà religionist" (or "traditionalist"), used exclusively and essentially, are inadequate to describe these women's experience, and most Nigerians' experience. Similar terms are probably inade-




17.4 Chief Victoria Abebe in adoration of the Blessed Virgin Mary, commissioned by Chief Abebe.
*Photo by Mei-Mei Sanford.*

quate to describe most human experience. A methodological implication of this work for religious studies is that identifying a person's or a group's religious location is not a matter of applying a category but of making a map. The resulting maps are fluid, particular, and dynamic, focusing on agency as well as on context and history.[5]

These stories are particularly stories of women, chosen and empowered by deities of the water, whose worship recognizes and depends upon a preponderantly female priesthood. All of the women bring the spiritual authority of their calling and their relationships with the deities into their daily lives, their work, and their churches, which, main line and independent, have made significantly less space for female leadership. Despite the fact that many of the independent churches were founded by women, and Kerabu ati Serafu was founded by Captain Christianah Abiodun and Moses Orimolade, church leadership from its second generation to the present has been almost entirely male.

A crucial aspect of these women's power is healing, help in childbirth, and protection of women's and children's lives, powers they draw from Ọ̀ṣun, Olókùn, and the Mami Wata of Grace's experience. Healing is a central part of independent and Pentecostal church life, and of the popular Catholicism of the grottoes like the one Chief is building. Their focus on the needs of daily life and the powers of religion to fill those needs resembles indigenous religions. Their focus on healing resembles religions of deities of the water.

The Christianities in which Iya, Chief, Grace, and Yetunde have found a more or less comfortable home are traditions in which people bless water, meet at the river, or visit the grotto. Where the gate of female leadership has been narrow, the gate of water has been wide. Devotees of Ọ̀ṣun praise her as the one who "heals with cool water where medicines have failed" (Verger 1959: 422). For them her water is an *ẹ̀rọ̀*, a cooling substance that has the capacity to nullify or negate all medicines or actions (Abiodun 1989). Aladura church members praise and use water as a primordial element, free of the taint of sorcery and of the limitations of human activity. Ibadan pastor J. Ade Aina wrote: "Consecrated water, which is in no sense a human product, but comes straight from God. To rely on this alone [rather than upon medicines or consecrated oil] reveals the highest faith in God" (Turner 1979: 228–229). Ibadan lay leader D. O. Abimbolu remarked that in the third chapter of Genesis, "God only cursed the soil because of Adam, but not water" (ibid.).

In this study, the women's agency and the integrity of their lives are clearly evident. The engagement of the women with water deities is not relegated to a religious sphere; it is evident in their work choices, marriage decisions, their child-bearing (or not), as well as in their ritual and church lives. These women's lives are truly engagements with living spirits of the water, and they continue to work out their religious callings in the individual complexities of their lives. Chief, Iya Aladura, and Yetunde are all second-generation Christians, deeply influenced by their traditionalist grandparents. Grace's grandmother was a Christian and a powerful healer. Will their children, patients, and students live in a world as religiously complex as theirs? Will the Aladura churches continue to transmit the deeply indigenous vision of Baba and Iya Aladura? David Ogungbile's photograph in this volume of the annual Ọ̀ṣun Festival at Osogbo shows crowds of young people gathered at Ọ̀ṣun's river. In Nigerian towns such as Iragbiji, Osogbo, Ode Remo, and Omo-Ekiti young people are being educated as priestesses and priests, diviners, and artists of the òrìṣà. How will Mami Wata, Olókùn, and Ọ̀ṣun call the next generation?

## Notes

1. Solomon Adebiyi, personal communication, New York, April 1995.
2. Rufus Ajayi, personal communication, Ile-Ife, May 1992.
3. Iya Aladura, personal communication, New York, July 1995.
4. It could also be said that in his theology the correspondences have always been there: Ọ̀ṣun and Yẹmọja are the upper and lower waters of Genesis.
5. While this essay is an example of this approach on an individual level, *The Spiritual Churches of New Orleans: Origins, Beliefs, and Rituals of an African-American Religion* by Claude F. Jacobs and Andrew J. Kaslow might be considered such an approach on an institutional level. It places the church movement, individual churches, and individuals on lines of continua between Catholicism and Pentecostalism, Christianity and Spiritualism and Vodu.

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CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

# Orchestrating Water and the Wind

## Oshun's Art in Atlantic Context

*Robert Farris Thompson*

### *Overture: Matters of Geography and Spirit*

The river Oshun begins in the hills near Igede, northeast of Ilesha, capital of the Ijesha Yoruba, in southern Nigeria. She then flows west, past the city of Oshogbo, famed for one of her major shrines, then south, to empty into the waters of the Lekki lagoon. There she mixes with the brine of the Atlantic. And then she falls off the map, spiritually to reappear in the Caribbean, on the islands of Cuba and Trinidad, and among the cities along the coast of Brazil.

The Ijesha Yoruba live in and around the upper reaches of Oshun River. Many were brought, in the infamous Atlantic Trade, to Cuba and Brazil. Despite this, the captives defiantly remembered their culture and their province with terms that changed only slightly over time, to *Yesa* in Cuba and *Jesha* in Brazil.

Oshun went with them. She is, without doubt, one of the most powerful spirits of the Yoruba pantheon. She is equal to the senior deities Orunmila, Ogun, Shango, and Obatala and worked with them at the founding of the world. Her strong presence was a blessing for followers subjected to enforced migration. As John Mason remarks, an Afro-Cuban song remembers Oshun bringing healing water to restore the vision of her devoted: "She helped her people survive the Middle Passage, to come out of the death ships and [taste] again the light of day." In the midst of circumstance, she keeps tradition flowing like the depths of the river in which she dwells:

| | |
|---|---|
| *Iya mi, ile oro* | Mother mine, house of tradition |
| *T'alade mo'ro gbogbo orisha.* | Sovereign woman who guards the traditions of all the gods. (Mason 1992: 366) |

Stephen S. Farrow, in his *Faith, Fancies, and Fetich*, writing of Oshun worship in 1926, made this observation: "curiously enough, although [the Oshun] river

is distant from Abeokuta, many of the Egbas [in that city] worship Oshun and may be seen wearing her distinctive necklaces of transparent amber-colored beads" (Farrow 1926: 65). Why the surprise? Because Farrow assumed Yoruba faith comprised no more than local "cults" when in fact it was already by that time a world religion, with shrines on three continents. So let us now review a number of the transatlantic attributes of this fabulous goddess of dazzling beauty.

## *Her Upheld Hands*

When Oshun comes down, in the body of a priestess among the Ijesha, she lifts up both hands as a "sign of gladness," fingers flaring from the palm. In this pose she stands in ecstasy. The blessing becomes truth, as she bubbles up from the depths, on a superb brass fan made in her honor by the remarkable brass smith, Ajirotitu of Ilesha, between 1900 and 1925. Ajirotitu depicts her eyes exorbitant, filled with spirit. He causes her hands to resemble fins, or some other underwater structure (fig. 18.1).

Her pose echoes across the Americas. One of the lovelier instances was the dancing of Mercedita Valdez, famed follower of the Yoruba deities in Cuba, miming Oshun in Havana, September 1948. With bracelets of brass coiled around her arms, and brass and copper-colored beads about her neck, she made the bangles of the goddess chime to the beat of the river. Meanwhile her body spiraled upward, like a porpoise in search of air. Her upheld hands communicated, in Afro-Cuban reprise, the overflowing happiness associated with the goddess of the river, for Oshun serves, as they chant in Nigeria, the very "witness of a person's ecstasy renewed."

## *Her Laugh*

Roland Abiodun shares, from his rich knowledge of the permutations of the divination god, the *odù ifá*, the following story: once when the seventeen odu came down from heaven, they comprised sixteen men plus a woman. Once on earth the men neglected the seventeenth who was Oshun. They snubbed her because she was a woman. And Oshun sat down, and watched them, and *laughed*. Instantly their luck turned. Instantly people shivered with a first attack of fever. Semen dried up and men became impotent. Things got worse and, not making the right conclusion, the sixteen odu returned to heaven to ask God's advice. "How many are you?" God asked. *Sixteen*. "How many were you when you left heaven?" *Seventeen*. "Well, then, you left someone behind and that is the source of the problem." Oshun's water was drowning their fire. The only solution was direct and immediate sacrifice to Oshun lest she destroy the world with her hidden power of the night. The sixteen odu begged and begged her, sacrificed and sacrificed, and finally she relented and the world began to move again. The men had learned the meaning of her laugh (personal communication 1997).

18.1 Brass fan for Oshun by Ajirotitu of Ileṣa, between 1900 and 1925.
*All photos in this chapter by Robert Farris Thompson.*

Cut to the Caribbean. When Oshun comes down, in Havana, Miami, or New York, that brassy laugh comes back and takes our measure. Men are haunted by that laugh. They hear it in their dreams. As well they might, because it warns them, in code, that what one gets in Oshun is strategy and strength beyond imagination.

In Cuba she confronts would-be *dominateurs* with feigned subservience, then leads them to surprising dénouements. And her laugh returns, as a leitmotiv. In a tale told by Lydia Cabrera, Oshun meets a randy old goat who begs her for the perfumes of attractiveness (in this animal, thinly disguised, we sense the profile

of a "dirty old man"). Oshun beguiles him with an outward yes: "Here, take my medicines, my powers-to-make-things-happen, my perfume, my coolness" — and, looking at him closely, dancing her shoulders and dancing her arms,

> She laughed that laugh. The laugh that people feared, that priestesses and priests of the Yoruba religion in Cuba knew all too well, the laugh that presaged punishment instead of giving and compassion.

And so it happened. She tricked the billy goat. The borrowed perfumes, at first lovely, darkened and combined into one stench. Henceforth, billy goat's odor becomes proverbial (Cabrera 1972).

So her laugh is a weapon, just as her famed sewing needles of brass, things for mending, can turn — when severely challenged — into lances, things that destroy. All the more reason to know how to honor her, with proper sacrifice, to gain her favor.

## *Five: Mystic Number of Oshun*

Ifa, the literature of Yoruba divination, tells us that Oshun is extraordinary. She is a creative warrior woman "working on the road of honor and sweetness" to bring us fortune, and "working in the womb" to bring us children. In one account, recorded in Ifa, she is "the fifth orisha." Only Ifa, Shango, Obaluaiye, and Olokun stand before her. The deities in other accounts vary but always there are only four before her. Numbers have changed, from seventeen outside sixteen, to five outside four, but the algebra of her central myth remains the same: ignore the odd woman out — Oshun the five behind the four — and see what happens.

Such credence returns in the lore of Yoruba herbalism. It is believed that, among other sacrifices, one obtains the favor of the goddess by bringing to her altar five yams, five white kola nuts, five pieces of alligator pepper, strong leaves, and a hen with five talons. Use of her number, mnemonic of her rank and potency, activates her positive attention while at the same time honoring her position among the gods.

Oshun herself works with five. Once when she was married to the prestigious hunter/healer, Erinle, things went badly. Whereupon Ifa advised her to sacrifice five roosters, five hens, and five calabashes. She did as she was told. Her luck changed immediately.

## *Orchestration of the Breeze: The Fans of Oshun*

In the early fifties there was a Tito Puente mambo hit in latino New York called *Abaniquito* (The Little Fan). This mambo had a hard-pounding piano *guajeo* (riff, repeated pattern) supporting four words in Spanish, repeated endlessly, in call-and-response fashion:

| | |
|---|---|
| *Abaniquito de a real, abaniquito de real.* | Small cardboard fan that you can buy for ten cents. |

Why spin a mambo around an inexpensive fan? Because, to begin with, of the way it links up with black Cuban working-class tradition. As the great Afro-Cuban drummer Julito Collazo once noted, while he and his friends were cooling themselves with cardboard fans on a hot September evening in 1960 in the Audobon Ballroom in Harlem, *No es criollo, chico, no es muy criollo esto* (Isn't this creole, kid, isn't this very creole), meaning that fanning oneself quietly in the company of friends is considered a delicacy of black Cuban cool. And at the pinnacle of that elegance reigns Oshun, apparently since the fifteenth century, for when we examine a bronze image of a most important woman from that era, with powerful headdress coming to a point to mark her powers of *ashe*, we find that she holds in her left hand—the ritual hand—a small fan in circular form (fig. 18.2). This remarkable image was found in Jebba, on the banks of the Niger, not far from the old imperial capital of the northern Yoruba, Oyo-Ile, the city of Shango. I assume this image was, in fact, cast in Oyo-Ile, perhaps in the fifteenth or sixteenth century, and that it represents one of the riverain wives of Shango: Oya, Oba, or Oshun. It is perhaps the latter, given her supremacy.

In any event, at Oyo-Ile and elsewhere in Yoruba antiquity, spirits of the river associate with small round fans: the cool of the water returns in the breeze. What is more, Abiodun reminds us that the word for "fan" in classical Yoruba, *abèbè*, puns on the verb "to beseech," *bè Abèbè*, the fan that begs, that tames and cools and reduces the anger and displeasure of a spirit.

The circularity of these instruments likely refers to an emblem of great feminine power, the calabash, as sign of the world, childbearing, and secret power. As we shall see, the circle of the calabash forms the very body of Oshun. Within this container she brings us a child or she brings us a bird, fortune, or doom, according to our character.

Circular fans for Oshun are remembered and made among the devotees of the goddess in Cuba and Brazil. In *Flash of the Spirit*, in 1983, I published a sampling. Since then the styles have changed. Clodomir Menezes da Silva of Bahia, who, in the late sixties, designed metal fans for Oshun with a flower floating on water conjured in concentric rings of scalloped patterning, had, by 1987, shifted to another style—a small mirror inserted in the middle of the metal circle with a surrounding frieze of flowers and leaves. One might recall a sacrificial yellow rose placed on the waters of the harbor in Bahia on New Year's Eve, that Oshun might cause one's life and family similarly to flower (fig. 18.3).

Eneida Assunção Sanches is an Afro-Bahian woman who has been making brass fans for Oshun since 1990. In one interpretation of the style of the eighties, she makes the mirror larger and the surrounding circle smaller. She fills the circle around the mirror with scalloped signs of water and sparkling interlace, like serpent messengers fighting underwater for Oshun (fig. 18.4).

Fans for Oshun in Cuba take the classical Yoruba term, *abèbè*. Among many honorific usages, priestesses cool the goddess when she manifests displeasure, fanning her sacred yellow stone upon her altar. *Abèbè/bè*, fanning to beseech. It

18.2 Bronze female figure with fan from Jebba, fifteenth or sixteenth century.

18.3 Fan for Oshun by Clodomir Menezes da Silva of Bahia, 1987.

18.4 Fan for Oshun by Eneida Assunção Sanches, Brazil, 1993.

demands, in such circumstances, that there be five priestesses blowing coolness on her stone.

Fans for Oshun in Bahia continue the Ilesha medium of brass, and so they appear on Afro-Cuban altars. But fans for Oshun in Cuba are also made from palm-leaf material sewn over with expensive cloth and adorned with cowries, beads, peacock feathers, and jingle bells. The beads, as already seen, reflect the color of Oshun's wealth in brass, yellow, gold, or amber. The plumes of peacocks broadcast the fact that Oshun is vain. This is one of the reasons why her Afro-Bahian fans often contain small mirrors. Finally, Afro-Cubans sew jingle bells

onto the fans of Oshun—five of them. This associates the tinkling sounds of rushing water to the action of her breeze. But these small bells, (called *shaworo* in Lucumí) are also believed to frighten death away while at the same time bringing in forces to enhance one's life: *traendo las cosas vivas*, as Felipe García Villamil, a leading olorisha of Matanzas, Cuba, has revealed (personal communication 1997).

## *Five Bracelets in Brass: Healing Onomatopoetic Jewelry*

This leads us to the famous bracelets of Oshun, famous because they flaunt her wealth like Fulani women wearing their bank account, as it were, in the gold of their enormous earrings. But it is not just wealth that they communicate. They also symbolize powers of healing. Among the Lucumí, the Yoruba of Cuba, according to Felipe García Villamil, wearing bracelets of brass for Oshun "clears the blood" (*limpia sange*) and protects the wearer from rheumatism and other ailments. Belief that her jewelry is a form of medicine gave rise to a certain line in the Nigerian poetry of Oshun:

| | |
|---|---|
| *Idẹ n sa mi lowo ewe agbo.* | Brass bracelets rustle, like healing herbs. |

The bangles also murmur like the potent water of Oshun, the water added to the leaves to make them digestible. Even Osanyin, lord of leaves and god of herbalism, cannot work without adding Oshun's water, and sometimes Oshun's honey, to the combination of herbs.

In Cuba her medicine bracelets are not, however, always made of brass. Fernando Ortiz documents one variant: leather bracelets for the goddess with five small jingle bells.

The bells on these bracelets, when activated in the dance, again mime the tinkling of the forest brook, the slap of water against the riverbank, and water itself as a remedy for fever. All this recalls her poetry of praise:

> The flash of brass in the fire of her eyes
> Water murmuring over stones is
> Oshun dancing with her jewels of brass.
> Only Oshun's children wear such copper bracelets.

If the river is her arm, and her tributaries form her fingers, as the Ataoja of Oshogo revealed many years ago, and her brass bangles are her stones, as we learn in Afro-Cuban lore, then the chiming of her bracelets, on her sinuously swaying arms, mimes stones in the river, causing flowing water to break and take on noise.

## Waran-waran-waran: *The Sheet Music of the River*

It is one of the marvels of the transatlantic worship of Oshun that shards of onomatopoeia in her poetry cross the ocean too and keep alive ironic contrasts in her style of dance:

| | |
|---|---|
| *waran-waran-waran* | restlessly, restlessly |
| *were-were* | gently, gently |

Thus Oshun dances, mixing restlessness with delicacy. But even if we did not know this, from the meaning of the adverbs, we could deduce this quality from the structure of the sounds alone. How so? Because in Yoruba, and other West African drum syllabic traditions, use of intervocalic *r* notates rapidity in execution — restlessness. In addition, choosing an initial "soft" consonant, like *w* — as opposed to an initial hard consonant like *g* — communicates tissues of gentleness in the execution of motion. Dancing to the idiophones, *waran-waran*, *were-were*, auditory codings are converted into action.

## *Courtesan Divine:* Pachanga

In Cuba the Lucumí sing of Oshun as *Oshun Panshage*, or variably, *Ochun Panchákara*. Translation: divine courtesan. Compare the original term, in classical Yoruba, *pánṣága*, "prostitute, adulteress, profligate man."

Lydia Cabrera (1972) reminds us that the lovers of Oshun, like the stars, cannot be counted. This hardly means we translate *panshanga* or *pachanga*, the later creole terms, as "prostitute." Better to say Oshun is licentious, Oshun who sleeps around, Oshun forever profligate. The legend of her restless motion, from husband to husband, Ifa to Ogun to Erinle to Shango, is the grain of sand about which Afro-Cuban *bochinche* (popular gossip) has spun a misshapen pearl.

In any event, as a little-known reflection of her power, Oshun's suggestive Afro-Cuban nickname, *panshanga*, creolized into *puchunga* and *pachanga*, and entered world music. First, circa 1948, Dámaso Pérez Prado composed in Havana a mambo, *Electricidad*, praising the Ochun-like sex appeal of a certain black woman:

| | |
|---|---|
| *mi puchunga prieta — tiene —* electricidad! | my young black darling — is loaded with — *electricity!* |

*Puchunga* was a verbal mask. Change the first two *u*'s to *a*'s and you get *pachanga*. Then, eleven years later, a young Cuban composer, Eduardo Davidson, in 1959, crossed the beat of Dominican merengue with Afro-Cuban phrasing and called the new blend *pachanga*. He added arm motions, as he remembers, miming one aspect of Oshun dancing (personal communication 1960). In 1960 *pachanga* became the toast of New York. At about the same time in Havana, Che Guevara said "we have in Cuba socialism with pachanga." So in 1960 Oshun was invisibly moving across the hemisphere, left and right, to a beat that bore her name.

## *Honey Is the Knife*

The late Charles Abramson, a gifted African-American artist, worshiped Oshun with a richly laden altar in Brooklyn. It became one of the wonders of the

New York Afro-Cuban world. In one of my last conversations with him he shared the secret of Oshun: *honey is the knife*, meaning she cuts with sweetness, where others defend themselves by meaner means (personal communication, 1983). Lucumí praise literature for Oshun parallels his point:

| | |
|---|---|
| *Yeye moro oyin, a be iwa oyin* | Mother knows the tradition of honey |
| *Oyin a bẹ̀.* | We beg (the goddess) with honey. |

Now *bẹ̀* with a low tone, meaning "beg" puns on *bẹ́* with a high tone, meaning "cut." So that we could also translate the last line above as follows:

| | |
|---|---|
| *Oyin a bẹ́.* | With honey we cut (through danger). |

Honey is indeed the knife. Its dark, wild taste touches the tongue as an immediate medicine over anger or predicament or fever.

> Oshun cures without fee, she gives the honeyed water to the child.

When honey "cuts" it can soften the mood of the toughest warrior, as in the case of Ogun, ultimate soldier and ultimate blacksmith. The latter lived in anger and in solitude until he "tasted honey"—i.e., tasted the body of Oshun. She cured him of his loneliness, calling him to love and pleasure in the wetness of her element, not unlike the aroused woman in Nathanael West's remarkable novel, *Miss Lonelyhearts:*

> She made sea sounds, something flapped like a sail; there was the creak of ropes; then he heard the wave-against-a-wharf smack of rubber on flesh. Her call for him to hurry was a sea-moan, and when he lay beside her she heaved, tidal, moon-driven . . . later he crawled out of bed like an exhausted swimmer, leaving the surf. (West 1933: 66–67)

Oshun's honey can also close or open roads:

> Once upon a time, when birds served as police informants, Oshun hid one of her lovers in a house which she caulked with lime. The birds discovered her lover and intended to betray him, but they got caught in her lime. Oshun would not let them go until they promised not to betray the presence of her lover. Then she poured honey on their talons. This released them from her snare. They flew back to heaven, reporting that they had seen nothing.

## *Envoi: Her Signs in Action*

The iconography of Oshun takes us far and wide. She is ecstasy, she is power, she is medicine, she is honey, she is love, she is multiple riches coded in brass. Because of her close association with small bells and chiming bracelets she comes almost to be known as a god of music: to such an extent that in Cuba her image as a goddess of love is honored with private, dreamy creole offerings of violin music. And while her famed coquettishness and feminine attractiveness

mitigate her many roles as determined warrior, they also somehow give them weight, or why else mix grace and restlessness and call it dance?

The Ilesha image of her holding a strand of her brass-colored beads above her head ecstatically communicates her power to bind her followers together. Her beads symbolize unity. When they are transparent, like water, they remind us of her underwater realm within the *ibú*, the depths in the river and the special Oshun spirits who live within them. When the initiating priestess ties such beads around our neck or attaches them to our wrist, she binds us to Oshun. This resonates with unity, as leitmotiv, in the iconography of Oshun.

Another theme is Oshun as grand progenitor and, at the same time, as queen among "nocturnal mothers," those who block the arrogant and the stubborn with mystic contracts of sterility and disease. Yoruba brass smith Ajirotitu of Ilesha notates both beliefs in a single image by transforming the body of Oshun into a massive calabash at the summit of the universe. The calabash is a womb. It is also a secret container for the bird of the mothers of the night.

This water woman, wreathed in honey, takes our mute desires and sets them free. And at the end, her moral strengths, curing without a fee, giving us the hands of infants to treasure in our palms, teach power through combining generosity with self-assertion. Meanwhile she compels all men to greet her women not only with passion but equal comprehension too. She is coming to Main Street in the twenty-first century, to love and kick ass.

## Notes

Dedicated to Diedre Badejo, Mei-Mei Sanford and Joseph Murphy, Rowland Abiodun, C. Daniel Dawson, Felipe García Villamil, John Mason, Clark Hood Thompson, Laura Watt, and Christopher Nunnelly. They made it happen. *E ṣeun gan!*

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# Index

*Italicized page numbers indicate illustrations.*

Iyawo at the waterside, Shrine of La Caridad del Cobre, Miami, 1997.
*Photo by Joseph M. Murphy.*