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## CHAPTER FOUR


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### Òrìsà Òṣun

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

*Jacob K. Oluṣona*

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#### Invocation

Aládékojù, I am calling on you  
Hail My Beloved Mother Aládékojù  
The Beloved one from the town of Èfòn Èkitì  
Hail the Powerful Mother Aládékojù,  
5 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 Òba of Èjìgbò)  
The one who dances with the jingling brass  
My wondrous Mother!  
10 Who owns plenty of brass ornaments in the town of Èfòn  
She moves majestically in the deep water  
Oh spirit! Mother from Ìjèsàland  
The land of the tough and brave people  
Men who would fight to secure their wives  
15 Even to the point of killing themselves  
Along with their wives if everything fails  
Hail the great Mother Òṣun  
Whose whole body is adorned with brass  
She joins the Owá (Ìjèsà Òba) to celebrate his festival  
20 She shares her holy day (Friday) with Šàngó  
My confidante  
She waits at home to assist barren women to bear children  
Òṣun has plenty of cool water to heal diseases  
Death to the Tapa (warriors from the North)  
25 Òṣun 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, Osun Osogbo  
 My mother, the marvelous cook 30  
 My Mother who makes succulent fried bean pattie (*akara*), bean  
 cake (*olele*), and corn cakes (*ekuru*) 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 Efon people 35  
 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 40  
 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  
 Aladekoju, my Olodumarè (supreme Goddess) 45  
 Who turns a bad destiny (*ori*) into a good one  
 Osun has plenty of brass ornaments in her storage  
 Orogun, Orogingumida,  
 The favorite wife of Orunmila (god of divination)  
 The owner of the indigo pigeon 50  
 In vivid colors of the rainbow,  
 Her image appears brightly dressed on the river bank  
 Aladekoju, the owner of the mortar made of brass  
 Osun fights for those she cares about  
 Human beings (*eniyàn*) do not want us to eat from a china plate 55  
 (*awo tãnganran*)  
 Ogbonmèlé, 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, Osun was plucking medicinal leaves 60  
 Osanyin (herbal god of medicine) was also plucking his own leaves  
 Before Osanyin turns around,  
 Osun had taken Osanyin's leaves from the grinding stone  
 Only Osun can mold my destiny (*ori*)  
 So that it becomes as strong as rock 65  
 Osun Osogbo, I greet you  
 Osogbo oròki emerges from afar off,  
 And the crowd in the market went wild with joy  
 The Oba's beloved water, do not forget me  
 Osun who stands on the hill 70  
 And beckons at the kolanut seller in the market to bring kolanut  
 Ladekoju 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

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.<sup>1</sup>

### *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 Òṣun city, located 170 kilometers from Lagos, as a case study to pursue two central themes. First, the myth, ritual, metaphor, and symbolism of Òrìṣà Òṣun, the most revered goddess in the Yorùbá pantheon, have evolved as the communal “glue” holding Òṣogbo together. The Òrìṣà Òṣun 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, Òṣun 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 Òṣun; her relevance to gender discourse; her associations in popular parlance with Òṣogbo’s economy and entrepreneurship; the links between the Òṣun tradition and Òṣogbo’s sacred kingship; and the Òṣun 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 Òṣun River and the powerful goddess inhabiting the river. According to this mythistory, Òṣogbo was founded by a prince of Ilẹ̀ṣà, a Yorùbá city-state about 20 kilometers from Òṣogbo. Prince Ọ̀lárooyẹ̀ (Lárooyẹ̀) had settled in a village called Ọ̀polé, near Ilẹ̀ṣà. As a result of a water shortage in Ọ̀polé, Ọ̀lárooyẹ̀ and Olútímẹ̀hìn (Timẹ̀hìn), 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 Òṣun. They went back to report to Ọ̀wátẹ̀, Ọ̀lárooyẹ̀’s father, and to invite Ọ̀wátẹ̀ to settle in the new place on the Òṣun riverbank. But before they left, they decided to make a mark on the riverbank where they discovered Òṣun. They felled a big tree that made a very loud noise on the river, whereupon they heard a loud booming voice say: *Wọ̀n tí wọ̀ ikòkò aró mi ò, èyìn Oṣó inú igbó ẹ̀ 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 Ọṣun appeared to Ọlároóyè and Tímẹhin asking them not to panic.

Ọwátẹ decided to remain in Ìpolé, but gave his blessing to his son Ọlároóyè's and Tímẹhin's mission to settle in the new land. With these revelations, Ọlároóyè and Olútímẹhin's party came back and settled by the riverbank.

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

By the next rainy season, the river flooded, probably as a result of the power of Ọṣun. Those who once lacked water now had an overabundance of floodwater that was of no use to anyone. Lároóyè's party consulted Ifá divination, as was the custom, and learned that the goddess Ọṣun was angry because the Ọṣogbo people were too close to her abode, the source of the floods. Sacrifices were offered to appease her; as a sign that Ọṣun was pleased with the offerings, the fish-goddess messenger, *Ikò*, surfaced to reveal herself to the people. The king stretched forth his arms to welcome the fish-deity, a gesture causing the Ọba of Ọṣogbo to be called *Átáọja* (one who spreads forth hands to welcome fish).<sup>2</sup> Ọba Adéulé 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 Ọṣogbo people may use for healing and other rituals. They therefore moved to their present abode in Ọṣogbo and settled a few kilometers from the Ọṣun 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 Ọṣun festival functions to propitiate the goddess Ọṣun and serves as the festival of the king, stemming from the mythology as an essential renewal of the life of the Ọṣogbo 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 Àjẹ* 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 Ọ̀ṣanyìn, 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 gbólòògùn, erulele gbólòògùn lẹ  
 Ó mà gbólòògùn, erulele gbólòògùn lẹ

Osun drowned the medicine man  
 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 Ọ̀ṣanyìn, the god of herbal medicine, and Lároóyè with Timẹhín, they defeated

Òsanyìn and wrested the sacred sixteen-pointed lamp (*àtùpà olójúmèrìndìnló-gún*) away from Òsanyìn.

The lamp now constitutes an important insignia of Òṣun. 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* Òṣun refers to a direct encounter between Òsanyìn and Òṣun:

*Òṣun ñjáwé, Òsanvìn ñjáwé, Agbèbù vanṣé, Òṣun ti kó t'òsanvìn lẹ̀ lójú ọ̀lọ.*

Once Òṣun and Òsanyìn were plucking medicinal leaves. Òṣun, who lives in the deep water, yet sends errands to the hinterland, removed Òsanyìn's leaves from Òsanyìn's grinding stone without his knowledge.

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

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

Just as these narratives of Òṣogbo ethnogenesis and her relationship to Òṣun are within the very traditional purview of the Yorùbá religious structure, a nineteenth-century narrative affirms Òṣun'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 Òyọ̀ empire, the Fulani Muslim Jihadists camped outside the gates of a city near the home of Òṣun, ready to overrun the remaining Òyọ̀ soldiers who took refuge in surrounding villages and towns. But the invaders met their "Waterloo" in Òṣogbo when Òṣun, who turned herself into a food-vendor, sold poisoned vegetables (*èfọ̀ Yánrín*) 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, Òṣun's victory over the Muslim forces continues to be recalled in Òṣun's festival, in which Òṣun's songs castigate fanatical forms of religious and secular tradition, especially those hostile and antagonistic toward Òṣun's moral authority.

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



*Olódumarè 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 Ọ̀ṣogbo 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 Ọ̀ṣogbo's deities (Ogungbile 1998a: 70). Among the shrines is the temple of Ọ̀gbóni, serving as the meeting place for Ifá diviners. Ọ̀ṣun provides shelter for the Orò grove that is used as the meeting assembly of Ọ̀gbóni members. The hunter's Epa grove is also located here in the Ọ̀ṣun compound. The first market stall in Ọ̀ṣogbo is named after the first Ọ̀ba, Lárò-óyè's, market (Ogungbile 1998a: 70); it was a center of trade and commerce in ancient times.

### Ọ̀ṣun and Ọ̀ṣogbo's Political Economy

The tradition of Ọ̀ṣun links the goddess with Ọ̀ṣogbo's prosperity and entrepreneurship. Centrally placed at the intersection of various Yorùbá cities, Ọ̀ṣogbo has emerged as a growing political and economic center of the region. As a major trading center and administrative headquarters in the colonial period, Ọ̀ṣogbo 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, Ọ̀ṣogbo also had an airport. Linked with Ọ̀ṣun, its traditional trade and commerce brought Ọ̀ṣogbo fame for its indigo dye, kolanut trade, and arts and crafts. The *oriki* Ọ̀ṣun, cited at the beginning of this paper, reflects these various economic interests.

*Oriki*, 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 (*òlẹ̀lẹ̀*). Ọ̀ṣun owns stables for trading in horses. The *oriki* 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 Ọ̀ṣogbo kingdom. Hence, the town is often referred to as *Ìhú aró* (the town of indigo dye). Ọ̀ṣun's encounter with the first settlers of Ọ̀ṣogbo occurred when Láròóyè and Tímehìn felled a big tree on the river Ọ̀ṣun. The goddess claimed it destroyed her pots of dye (*Ìkòkò aró*). Another *oriki* Ọ̀ṣun refers to the goddess as a strong woman owning a wealth of coral beads (*Ìlẹ̀kẹ̀*) and brass ornaments (*Idẹ*). She is described as *aripepe kóde 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 Ọ̀ṣogbo'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 Òṣogbo forms the basis of her popularity today. Òṣun's role in Òṣogbo's economic order is also reflected in the Òṣun ritual. On "outing day," as the Arugbá dances to the riverbank, market women exclaim that through Òṣun'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 Òṣun Festival and Ritual of Kingship*

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

In a comprehensive account of Òṣun's 1972 festival, J. O. Olagunju (1972: 2) helps us understand the changes in the Òṣun festival over the past two-and-a-half decades. Olagunju reports that in the evening of *Wíwá Òṣun*, the *Àtáoja* and the *Iya Òṣun* 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 Òṣogbo. From its very nature and name, *Wíwá Òṣun* is a multi-variant ceremony with complex symbolic meaning. To link the start of Òṣun with the new-yam ritual is a recognition of the fact that Òṣun nurtures the Òṣogbo people. The *Iya Òṣun* and the *Àtáoja* are intricately linked in the ritual washing of Òṣun — Òṣun is present everywhere in Òṣogbo's spatial and temporal life.

More importantly, by its very meaning and essence, *Wíwá Òṣun* represents a quest for the divine presence and power of the goddess Òṣun, 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 Òṣun festival. *Wíwá Òṣun* 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 Òṣogbo people, both individuals and lineages, forget all squabbles. One Òṣogbo inhabitant remarked, "We do this so that our prayers and requests will be answered by our Great Mother."

The last stage of *Wíwá Òṣun* appears to be a recent innovation in Òṣun festivals — never mentioned in previous descriptions of the festival: the Òṣun festival includes the visit of Òṣun priestesses, *Iyá Èwe* (mothers of the little ones), to the marketplace to solicit gifts from those buying and selling. Jingling the Òṣun 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 Ọ̀ṣogbo indigenes would bring gifts of farm produce to the Ọ̀ba 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 *Ìwọ̀ 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 ọ̀lá ó gùn* (May your prosperity last long) and *Kádé pé lóní, kí bàtà pé lésè* (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 *Ìwọ̀ 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.). *Ìwọ̀ Pópó* is, above all, a boundary rite similar to the ritual of *Omiabé* in Ondo’s kingship festival (Olupona 1991). In *Ìwọ̀ 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 Oñdó’s *Omiabé*, whose role was to clear the ancient Oñdó’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 *Ìwọ̀ Pópó* ceremony symbolically establishes Ọ̀ṣogbo’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 *Ìwọ̀ Pópó*. Here Ọ̀ṣun’s images are brought out from the inner shrine, washed, and adorned in readiness for her feasts. As Chief Ifayemí Eḷẹbuiḅon remarked, *Wón ní láti sọ àwọn ibọ̀ Ọ̀ṣun di ọ̀tun* (They

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

In the evenings of *Ikúnlẹ Ọṣun*, the sixteen-pointed lamp (*àtùpà Olójúmérind-ínlogún*) sacred to Ọsanyin is lit for the night vigil of the Ọṣun festival. This is the legendary magical lamp which the founding ancestors seized from Ọsanyin, the god of medicine. The lamp represents Ọṣun's superior power over sorcerers (*oṣó*) and medicine men (*olooṣun*), because, having seized the lamp, Ọṣun incorporates it into her paraphernalia. By doing so Ọṣun 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 Ọṣun and her protégé, the *Àtáọja*. The presence of the *babalawo* at the ritual may also be connected to the fact that Ọṣun was wife to Ọrúnmìlā. The diviners burn the oil lamp until early morning.

In this reenactment ritual, the cutlass chiefs, the *Arugbá* and *Iyá 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 Ọḡún shrine of *Olúfímẹhìn*, the first hunter and discoverer of the Ọṣun 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 Ọsanyin's medicinal power—the reality that the Ọṣogbo's indigenes and Ọṣun's devotees will continuously encounter, and wrestle with—the ritual ultimately reaffirms Ọṣun's domestication and appropriation of Ọsanyin's medicinal power. It affirms Ọṣun's skill in outmaneuvering controlling male forces of evil, symbolized by bad medicine (*oogun huburu*). 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 Ọsanyin's lamp before the return of the king from *Olúfímẹhìn's (Ọḡún)* shrine indicates the victory of the Ọṣun sacred power because “the moon must disappear before the day dawns” (*oṣọ ò kì n mọlẹ bá ọṣupá*).

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 *Ibọri* and *Ibọadé*, four days before Ọṣun'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 *Iároyè*, the first king.” The *Àtáọja* 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 *ọ̀tí àdùrà* (prayer liquor) to counteract any claim that a Muslim *Ọ̀ba* drinks alcohol. But we know that in Yorùbá society, no Christian or Muslim would refuse *ọ̀tí àdùrà*, with which schnapps is associated. The chanting and recitation of the names of the past and present kings from Olároóyè to Atáója Matanmi III, accompanied by the royal drum, brings the first part of the ceremony of *Ìbọ̀rí* and *Ìbọ̀adé* 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 Ọ̀ṣogbo’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 *Ìbọ̀rí* ceremony of Ila-Orangun’s kingship ceremony, discussed by Pemberton and Afọlayan (1996), the purpose of Atáója’s *Ìbọ̀rí* 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 *Ìbọ̀adé* 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 *Ìbọ̀adé* ceremony.

The main attraction of the Ọ̀ṣun festival is the ritual procession and pilgrimage of the king, the Arugbá, and the Ọ̀ṣogbo 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 Gbọ̀njubọ̀la Oye-wale 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 Ifá 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 Òṣun, the town of Òṣogbo would prosper and the Arugbá's own prospects would be accomplished (*Ire ilu Òṣogbo á dé; ire ti ẹ ná à dé*).

On the day of Òṣun, the Arugbá is escorted to the Òṣun 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 Òṣun 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 Òṣun River, conveys the community's prayerful wishes to the "Mother Òṣun." To prevent mishaps that may occur as the teeming crowd besieges her, young boys with whips (*atorin*) and other Òṣun 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 Òṣun grove, the Arugbá enters the Òṣun shrine where the brass *Igbá Òṣun* is removed from her head and carried into the inner shrine. The Òṣun 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 Òba waves his horse tail (*irunkere*) in acknowledgment of the greetings of his subjects.

One of the dancing groups that pay homage to the Òba 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 Ọ̀ṣogbo history. Having outnumbered the autochthonous group of Ìjẹ̀ṣà origin (of whom the king is an integral part), the Ọ̀yọ́-Ìjẹ̀ṣà conflict continues to be a matter of concern in contemporary Ọ̀ṣogbo. 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 Ìjẹ̀ṣà people in present-day Ọ̀ṣogbo. 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 Ìjẹ̀ṣà 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 Ọ̀ṣogbo'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 Ọ̀ṣogbo'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 Ọṣogbo. A staunch Muslim, a former Islamic teacher, and now a king, he recognizes the significance of Ọṣun in the kingship rituals. He, therefore, locates Ọṣun 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 Ọṣun in contemporary Ọṣogbo.

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

Sacrificial offerings to Ọṣun at the river ends this ceremony. The priests and priestess of Ọṣun, led by the *Iya Ọṣun*, place the sacrificial offerings of food presented by the king inside a big bowl (*Opón Ọṣun*) which is carried by a young man to the riverbank, where *Iya Ọṣun* will present it to Ọṣun. 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 Ọṣun priestesses claim that in the past this was the moment when Ọṣun would send her messenger (*Ikò*) 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 Ọṣun bowl to the palace where the bowl is kept. Five days later, in a ritual called *gbígbésè r'odò*, there is a joyful return to the Ọṣun shrine, though this is performed mainly by women and children. This is the occasion when those whose prayers have been answered by Ọṣun bring their pledges and offering of thanks to her. In a more relaxed atmosphere, the *Arugbá*, her friends, and the previous carriers of Ọṣun's sacrificial offerings interact and converse about their experiences as bearers of Ọṣogbo's gift to the great mother. A large portion of the gifts presented to Ọṣun 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 Ọṣun — they are thrown into the water.

The Ọṣun 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, Ọṣun probably developed from an agricultural new-yam festival into a festival commemorating the foundation of the city of Ọṣogbo. As Ọṣogbo 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 Ọ̀ṣogbo, Olútimẹ̀hìn and Olárooyè, for the purpose of bringing about human and agricultural fertility. Human fertility provides a popular and continued relevance in modern Ọ̀ṣogbo.

As the founding ritual of Ọ̀ṣogbo, 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.

Ọ̀ṣogbo civil religion emanates from the institution of sacred kingship which derives its source and energy from the traditions of Ọ̀rìṣà Ọ̀ṣun. This sacred kingship is also the focus of a multi-religious Ọ̀ṣogbo 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:

<i>Ìwọ́ l'ọ̀ba</i>	You are the King
<i>Ìwọ́ l'agbá</i>	You are the Elder
<i>Ìwọ́ l'ọ̀ba l'ọ̀ba l'ọ̀ba . . .</i>	You are the King, the real King

(Ogunbile 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, ofẹ́ o* (My lord, may the load be lighter), *Mọ́ọ́ rọ́ra ẹ́, ìyá Àtáọ́ja* (Walk gently, Àtáọ́ja’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 Òṣun 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 multi-various 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 Òṣogbo people claim descent from a common ancestral origin — Olároyè and Olútimehìn. Even though the Òṣogbo 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 Òṣun’s religious experience. Civil religion, then, is as Jonathan Woocher claims, “a religious meaning system which symbolically expresses and sustains the unity of [Òṣogbo] 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 Òṣun festival is a theatrical and visual rendition of, and statement about, Òṣun’s personality and essence and her role in the salvation history of Òṣogbo, as the one who provided an abode for the drought-stricken people of Ìpolé. More importantly, Òṣun plays a role in Òṣogbo’s modernity as the source of an invisible religion that heals potential social and religious cleavages within Òṣogbo society, and that provides the basis of Òṣogbo’s economic prosperity. I will pursue several of these themes, drawing from my analysis of Òṣun festivals presented above and other historical and oral sources, especially the *Oríkì Òṣun* 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 Ọ̀ṣogbo'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 Ọ̀ṣogbo's cosmology. Several verses of Ọ̀ṣun's *Oríkì* show this linkage. First, Ọ̀ṣun encompasses the Ọ̀ṣogbo universe of meanings. Ọ̀ṣun is addressed as my Olódùmarè (Supreme God), a symbolic reference to Ọ̀ṣun as the Ultimate Being and the source of Ọ̀ṣogbo's essence. Second, another Ọ̀ṣun song reads: *Ab'Owa s'odun, aba Sango s'ose* (One who celebrates the festival with Owa [the Ìjèsà Ọ̀ba] and also shares a holy day with Sango). The collective propitiation of Ọ̀ṣogbo's deities and cultural heroes by the king takes place in conjunction with Ọ̀ṣun's festival. As in the ritual of *arehokadi* (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 Ọ̀ṣogbo too, three major spiritual agents: *Ifá* (divination god), *Fẹ́gún* (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, Ọ̀ṣogbo Muslims and Christians acknowledge Àtáója's kingship and Ọ̀ṣun's role in their town's mythistory. But in modern Ọ̀ṣogbo, 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 Ọ̀ṣogbo's civil religion and because it has a special relationship to Ọ̀ṣogbo.

### *Islam, Ọ̀ṣun, and Uncivil Religion*

What is the importance of Islam to Ọ̀ṣun's festival? Muslims constitute about 70 percent of Ọ̀ṣogbo'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 Ọ̀ṣogbo 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 Ọ̀ṣogbo people's

protestations against Òṣun'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 Òyó Empire. As the Muslim forces took Ilorin, a Yorùbá city and gateway to Northern Nigeria, and sacked the Òyó 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 Òṣun's tradition, which claims that Òṣogbo's victory was achieved through the assistance rendered by the Great Mother when Òṣun 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, Òṣun 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 (*èṣin*). Whenever Islam, and to a lesser extent Christianity, and modern development present conflictual ideologies, the Òṣogbo people react in protest. An old popular Òṣun song states that for centuries before Western doctors arrived, people depended on the flowing water of Òṣun to raise their children (*Sélèrú àgbò, àgbàrà àgbò, lòṣun fí n wo 'mò rẹ́ kí dọkítà 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 Òṣun songs recorded by Badejo (1996) and Ogunbile (1998), are directed against Islam's "hegemonic ambitions" and sense of religious superiority. They strike at the very root of Òṣun's encounter with Islam:

(I) *Bàbá Onírughbòn*  
*Yéé gbó t'ẹ̀bọ́ wá*  
*Enikau ọ̀ mọ́ ní o mọ́ mọ́*  
*Kírún l'ojójímó*  
 (Ogunbile 1998b: 137)

You long-bearded Malam  
 Stop poking your nose into our rituals  
 No one disturbs you from performing  
 Your daily prayer (sallat)

(II) *Níbo lo ní n gbé Yèvé mí sí ó?*  
*Eniláwàáni òsì*  
*Tá ní n wá sè 'mòlẹ́*  
*Níbo lo ní n gbé Yèvé mí sí?*  
 (Badejo 1996: 150)

Where do you want me to cast My Great  
 Mother?  
 You with wretched turbans  
 Who want to convert me to Islam  
 Where do you want me to cast My Great  
 Mother?

This strong critique of exclusivist Islamic ideology is an attempt to protect Ọ̀ṣogbo'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:

Méjèjì Fá ó ma ṣe	We shall practice both together
Kò háájé o	It is not wrong
Ká s'átiwàlá	To perform ablution (a Muslim ritual)
Ka wá dọ́ Ọ̀mọ́	And to go to Ọ̀ṣun River to seek for children
Méjèjì Fá ó ma ṣe	We shall do both.

(Ogunbile 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 Ọ̀ṣogbo 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 (*ọ̀ba oní ghogbo èsìn*). Indeed, the rhetoric surrounding the Àtáọ́ja 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 Ọ̀ṣogbo 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 Àtáọ́ja Adenle, in my class at Ọ̀ṣogbo on a research expedition.

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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 Ọ̀sun*, meaning, “brass is collectively worshipped 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, *aginma*, and hair combs, *òdòyà*, 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 *Ọ̀sẹ̀ Tùrà*, the Ifa poem that narrates the position of Osun among the leading Yoruba deities, her peers gave her the appellation, *a rí pepẹ̀ kó idẹ s* (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 rẹ̀ 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 yin ihon 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 Osogbo 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 *Ìkà Èlẹ́ja* 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, *eta* or *ota*, 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: *Odó gbogbo l àgbò, nibo 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, *eta* or *ota omi*, in their own cases symbolize longevity as they may wear down but rarely break. *Òyígíyìgì, ota omi, òyígíyìgì, ota omi, àwá d'òyígíyìgì, a ò kú, òyígíyìgì, ota omi* (Òyígíyìgì, the water [river] pebbles, we have become òyígíyìgì, we will not die again, òyígíyìgì, 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 *ẹ̀rindìnlógún*, 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 *Òṣẹ́ Tùrú*, 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 pepe kó ide sí*, which is, “She that has a shelf to keep brass,” already mentioned, and *Íyá Ijùmú, òyéyé ní imò*, 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 *ẹ̀rindínlógún*, 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 *ẹ̀rindínlógún* 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 Ife 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 *abèbè*, the Yoruba word for fans, but rather *edan*, the Yoruba word for spiked brass figures of the *Ògbóni*, the secret cult of elders (Adeoye 1985: 209). As already indicated, a pair of *edan* 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 febrifuga*, 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, *Omọ l' okun, omọ n' ide*, "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:

<i>Mo forí ba 'lẹ, mo d'íwin o, mo forí ba 'lẹ, mo d'íwin</i>	I bowed my head to the ground (was humble), hence I have become a spirit.
<i>Mo forí ba 'lẹ, mo d'íwin o, mo forí ba 'lẹ, mo d'íwin</i>	I bowed my head to the ground (was humble), hence I have become a spirit.
<i>Íkán kí í mu 'dẹ, òròrò kí í r' òjé</i>	White ants never devour brass, worms do not eat lead. (both do not rust).
<i>Mo forí ba 'lẹ, mo d'íwin</i>	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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## The Bag of Wisdom

### Ọṣun 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 ọwó* (divination with the sacred divin- ing chain called *òpèlẹ̀*) and *ètítẹ̀-alẹ̀* (divination with the sacred palm nuts), *ẹ̀ẹ̀rìn- dínlógún* (divination with the sixteen cowries), *agbigba* (divination with a divin- ing chain slightly different from *òpèlẹ̀*), and *obi* (divination with kola nuts). The purpose of this essay is to examine the intimate connection of Ọṣun with Ifá divination both in her own right as a person, and through the instrumentality of Ọṣétùúrá, her son. We will start with the popular view of the involvement of Ọṣun in Ifá divination which states that she got to know about Ifá through Ọrún- mílà, her husband. We will then examine the importance of Ọṣétùúrá to Ifá divi- nation sacrifice. In the later pages of this essay, I will make the claim that Ọṣun has much more to do with the origins of Ifá divination than the *habalawo* (Ifá priests) are ready to admit. I will, indeed, put forward the hypothesis that the entire divination system of Ifa started from Ọṣun from whom it got to Ọrún- mílà 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 *ẹ̀ẹ̀rìndínlógún* is older than *dídá ọwó* and *ètítẹ̀-alẹ̀* which are probably later developments of Ifa divinations.

Let us begin with the popular view that Ọṣun was introduced to Ifá divination by Ọrún- mílà. Several verses of Ifá tell us about this. For example, a verse of Ogb- ẹ̀sá states that Ọrún- mílà created the sixteen-cowry divination system and gave it to Ọṣun as a reward for saving his life. In this particular verse, it was after Ọrún- mílà had created the sixteen-cowry system for Ọṣun 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 Ọṣun and Ọrúnmílà as contained in Ogbèsá, especially because it relates to the importance of *ẹ̀ẹ̀rindínlógún* in the Ifá divination system.

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

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

	<i>Báwù ní Ọrúnmílà òun Ọṣun há sun mó raa won.</i>	This was how Ọrúnmílà and Ọṣun became close.
	<i>Ọrúnmílà ní iri oore tó ẹ̀ ẹ̀ fún míjéló,</i>	Ọrúnmílà said that the good turn which she did for him
5	<i>Kò sírú oore kan tó tún le tó ẹ̀yíun mó.</i>	Was an exceptional one.
	<i>Kín ní òun ibá ẹ̀ ẹ̀ fúnwọ Ọṣun báwù o?</i>	He wondered what he should do in return.
	<i>Ífá eléyí pátáki ló mú kí Ọrúnmílà</i>	This was the most important reason why Ọrúnmílà
	<i>Ó dá ẹ̀ẹ̀rindínlógún sílẹ̀</i>	Created the sixteen cowries.
10	<i>Ló há kò o lẹ̀ Ọṣun lówó.</i>	He then handed them to Ọṣun.
	<i>Nínúu gboghò eborá òṣà tí í lo ẹ̀ẹ̀rindínlógún.</i>	Of all the Ọrìṣà who use sixteen cowries.
	<i>Kò sí ọ̀kan tó ní in saájú Ọṣun.</i>	There is none who had it before Ọṣun.
	<i>Ifá ló sí kò o fún Ọṣun</i>	It was Ifá who gave it to Ọṣun.
	<i>Pé kò máa dá a.</i>	And asked her to cast it
15	<i>Kòun náà ó máa fi ẹ̀wẹ̀wọ.</i>	And use it as another form of divination.
	<i>Èyí ní Ifá fi san oore lákòkò ná.</i>	This was what Ifá used to reward Ọṣun.
	<i>Báwù ló fi jẹ̀ pé Ifá pèhí Ọṣun</i>	That is why the relationship between Ifá and Ọṣun
	<i>Ènikan kò le mó àárin araa won</i>	Is such that nobody else can know
20	<i>Ní Ọrúnmílà há ẹ̀ Ọṣun níyáwó.</i>	What is between the two of them.
	<i>Nífá há dí ọ̀kọ Ọṣun</i>	Ọrúnmílà then got married to Ọṣun.
	<i>Nínúu gboghò àwẹ̀wọ̀ pátápátá.</i>	Of the several forms of divination.
	<i>Ẹ̀ẹ̀rindínlógún ló síkẹ̀jì Ifá.</i>	Ẹ̀ẹ̀rindínlógún is next in rank to Ifá.

According to this particular story in Ogbèsá, even though Ọrúnmílà was the one who created *ẹ̀ẹ̀rindínlógún*, this system of divination later received its own àṣẹ<sup>2</sup> from Olódùmarè. It happened as follows:

<i>Nìghà tó há sí dì ọ̀dún kẹ̀rindínlógún</i>	Every sixteen years
<i>kẹ̀rindínlógún</i>	
<i>Ní Olódùmarè, Olófin ọ̀run, máa á gbé</i>	Olódùmarè, Olófin of heaven, <sup>3</sup> used to

Àwọn tó bá n sàyèwò nílẹ̀ avé é yèwò Bó yá irò nì wọn n pa fàràvé	Subject diviners of earth to a test. To find out whether they were telling lies to the inhabitants of the earth	5
Bó yá oótó nì wọn n sọ fún wọn. Ìdánwò tí í máa á sẹ̀ fún wọn nì pé Kí wọn ó kẹ̀ sí Ọ̀rúnmílà wá o Ati gbogbo àwọn tó bá tún n yẹ̀ nńkan án wò fàràvé	Or whether they were telling the truth. This test involved Calling on Ọ̀rúnmílà and other diviners of the earth.	10
Pé oun fẹ́é rí wọn.  Níghà wọn bá dé, Olódùmarè á sẹ̀ àyèwò lódò araare. Ni Olódùmarè bá ní kí Ọ̀rúnmílà ó yẹ̀un wò	Olódùmarè would say that he wanted to see all of them. When they arrived, Olódùmarè would ask them to divine for him.	15
Ọ̀rúnmílà sẹ̀ àyèwò tán, Olódùmarè é ní ta ló tún kù o? Ọ̀rúnmílà nì àfi ẹ̀ni tó tún sikeji oun	When Ọ̀rúnmílà finished divining, Olódùmarè asked, "Who is next?" Ọ̀rúnmílà said that the next person was his partner	20
Tó jẹ̀ obinrin. Olódùmarè wáá dàhùn pé "Oun náà tún n sàyèwò?" Ọ̀rúnmílà ní, "Bẹ́ẹ̀ ní." Olódùmarè ní kò wáá yẹ̀un wò. Níghà tí Ọ̀sun ó yẹ̀ Olódùmarè wò, Ó já gbogbo ohun tó dáníwàn sí. Sùgbón kò sọ ó geere. Ó sọ kókó ọ̀rò nì, Sùgbón kò hù u léghò léghò bí i ti Ifá.	Who was a woman. Olódùmarè then answered, "Is she also a diviner?" To which Ọ̀rúnmílà replied, "That is true." Olódùmarè then asked her to divine for him. When Ọ̀sun examined Olódùmarè, She hit on all those things in his mind. But she did not say it in full. She mentioned the gist	25
Olódùmarè wáá bí Ọ̀rúnmílà pé "Èwo sí tún lẹ́yí?" Ló bá kó àlàyé, ló yẹ̀ Bó ti sẹ̀ fi nńkan yí dá á lólá.	But she did not tell the root of the matter like Ifá. Olódùmarè asked Ọ̀rúnmílà, "What is this one?" Ọ̀rúnmílà then explained to Olódùmarè How he honored Ọ̀sun with the sixteen cowries.	30
Olódùmarè é ní, ó dáá. Ó ní, "Ènuu bó ti sẹ̀ sọ ó mọ̀ yí,  Oun fi àsẹ̀ sí i. Láélélé Bó bá sọ ó báta, Bó bá sọ ó báta. Èni tó bá dá á lẹ́jáá, Kò sí máa sẹ̀ mọ̀ ọ̀n lára lẹ̀sẹ̀kẹ̀sẹ̀ Lẹ́jọ̀ náà; Kò ghòdò díjọ̀ kejì." Ídì nìyí tí ẹ̀rindínlógún fi máa N yára á sẹ̀. Àmọ̀ ohun tí wọn ó máa sọ kò nù Tààvàn lára.	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 ẹ̀rindínlógún 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 ẹ̀rindínlógún come to pass quickly	35 40 45
Bí ẹ̀rindínlógún sẹ̀ gba àsẹ̀ Lódò Olódùmarè nù un."	Even though the stories may not be impressive, That was how ẹ̀rindínlógún received àsẹ̀ Directly from Olódùmarè.	50

### Ọṣétùúrà and Ifá Divination Sacrifice

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

When the Ọrìṣà first came to the earth, they must have arrived in waves — not all the four hundred-and-one Ọrìṣà arrived at once. In any case, according to this myth from the Odù Ọṣétùúrà, there were only seventeen Ọrìṣà in the first party, and Ọṣun was the seventeenth. Olódùmarè gave instructions to the Ọrìṣà 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 Ọṣun 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:

	<i>Wọn délé avé,</i>	When they arrived on earth,
	<i>Wọn lagbó oró,</i>	They created a sacred forest for Oró. <sup>5</sup>
	<i>Wọn lagbó opa.</i>	They created a sacred forest for Opa. <sup>6</sup>
	<i>Wọn lanà gbóórò òtítifé wá.</i>	They made a small road leading to Ifé. <sup>7</sup>
5	<i>Wọn rán ni okun.</i>	They sent people to make okun beads. <sup>8</sup>
	<i>Wọn rán 'mí 'de.</i>	They sent people to make brass objects. <sup>9</sup>
	<i>Enikan ò kè sí Ọṣun.</i>	But nobody involved Ọṣun in anything.
	<i>Ọṣun nù sí í máa á tójúu wọn</i>	Whereas Ọṣun was the person taking care of them
10	<i>Lónjé, níwá, lẹyin.</i>	Giving them food and other things.
	<i>Ghogbo ohun tí wọn se, kò gún</i>	All the things which the Ọrìṣà were doing, none was successful.
	<i>Wọn pójò, ójò ò ró.</i>	They prayed for rain, but it did not rain.
	<i>Kíkan kikan gbané.</i>	Bitterness engulfed the earth.
15	<i>Ọjòjò ò gbòde.</i>	Restlessness took over the streets of the city.
	<i>Wọn ní hù! Olódùmarè é ha jé purò fawọn.</i>	They exclaimed "Did Olódùmarè tell us a lie?"
	<i>Irin kìn lèvi?</i>	What is this?
	<i>Bó se ní káwọn ò se é fawọn nì se é!</i>	We are doing everything according to his instructions."

The Ọrìṣà then decided to send Ọrúnmílà to Olódùmarè to find out what actually happened. When Ọrúnmílà 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 Ọrúnmílà replied that since she was a woman, they did not involve her. To which Olódùmarè replied as follows:

<i>Olódùmarè ní dandáni lóun,</i>	Olódùmarè said that he was a creator
<i>Ọun è é dún lẹmẹji</i>	But he would never create any person or thing twice.
<i>Ó ní ẹ padà sóhúnin.</i>	He told Ọrúnmílà to go back to his colleagues
<i>Ó ní ẹ rẹ̀ è bẹ̀ ẹ̀.</i>	And that all of them should go and beg Ọṣun

*Kó máa báa yín lówó sí ñkan.*

So that she could agree to be involved in their affairs.

*Ó ní ghogbo ñìkan yín ó sí maa gún. <sup>1</sup>*

He assured them that their affairs would then be good.

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

*È máa bẹ orí yín àtẹ̀lẹ̀daaa yín*

Begin to beg your *ori* and your creator

*Pẹ oxún tí nì bẹ nínú òun wí,*

So that the fetus which was in her womb

*Kóun ó bí ì lókúnrin.*

Would be delivered as a male child.

*Ó ní tí òun bá bí ì lókúnrin,*

She assured them that if it was a male child,

*Ñìkan yín ó ò gún.*

Their matters would from then on be straight.

*Àmó tóun bá bí ì lóbinrin,*

But if it was born as a female child,

*È kangun.<sup>17</sup>*

War would begin in earnest.<sup>17</sup>

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

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

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

*Ghogbo obinrin pátá pátá látòní ló,*

From today on, all women without any exception,

*Wón ò ghodọ́ moro,*

They must not know Orò,

*Wón ò sì ghodọ́ wolé Ègún*

And they must not enter the shrine of Ègún.<sup>16</sup>

*Pẹ kẹ́égún ó máa tojún wọn jáde.*

Ègún must not come out in their presence

*Ó dèewó.*

This must be observed as a taboo.

*Sùghón ghodo mkan yòowù tí ẹ́ bá nì se,*

But all other things you are doing,

*È ẹ́ ghodọ́ mó fi tí Òṣun se.*

You must involve Òṣun in them.

*Laxé bá gún rẹ́gí.*

Their lives then became smooth

*Wón ní bóniván bá nì gúnván.*

They said, "If someone is pounding yams

*Tí ò fi t'Òṣun se,*

Without the knowledge of Òṣun,

*Iván an wón a lẹ́mọ.*

His/her pounded yam will not be smooth.

*Bí outóká bá nì roká,*

If someone is preparing *oká* food

*Tí ò fi t'Òṣun se,*

Without involving Òṣun in it,

*Okáa rẹ́ a sì méré.*

His/her food will not come out fine.

*A fimọ́ jọ t'Òṣun o.*

We will involve Òṣun in whatever we do.

*A fimọ́ jọ t'Òṣun o.*

We will involve Òṣun in all our deliberations

*Iyec wa.*

Our great mother,

5

10

15

- 20 *A bá wọn pé nímò.*  
*A fímò jò t(Ọṣun.*  
*Agberegede àjùbà.*  
*Ajùbà agberegede*  
 25 *A difá fún Ọṣun sèngèsi.*  
*Olóoyàa yùn.*  
*Ó gbé kùkò.*  
*Ó ní hẹbọ irúnmolẹ é jẹ.*  
*Ta ní n ríhọ,*  
 30 *Ti ò ké sẹlẹbọ.*  
*Ọṣun, ẹwújí.*  
*A kúnlẹ,*  
*A hẹ ó.*  
*È wólẹ fobinrin.*  
 35 *Obinrin ló hí wa*  
*Ká tóó denyàn.<sup>17</sup>*
- Who must be present at every important  
 deliberation.  
 We will involve Ọṣun in all our deliberations.  
 Agberegede àjùbà.<sup>17</sup>  
 Ajùbà agberegede  
 Divined for Ọṣun Sèngèsi,  
 Owner of a hair comb decorated with *yim*.<sup>18</sup>  
 When she was in a secret place,  
 She spoiled the sacrifice of other divinities.  
 Who is performing a sacrifice  
 Without involving the owner of sacrifice?  
 Ọṣun, whose other name is Èwújí.  
 We are all on our knees.  
 We are all begging you.  
 Let us all kneel and prostrate before women.  
 We are all borne by women  
 Before we become recognized as human  
 beings.

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

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

- Ọlọghọn sodé, ó tí.*  
*Ìmòrán sodé, a dẹ.*  
*Èvàn tó bá fẹyin tọpẹ*  
*Ní ó sodé pé títi.*  
 5 *A difá fún Ọrúnmílà*  
*Ọun Ọṣun jọ ní wọgbón kiri.*  
  
*Olódùmarè ló ké sí irinwó molẹ,*  
 10 *Ighaa molẹ.*  
*Ó ní kí wọn ó wá sí èkítì isálórún.*  
*Wọ́n sì dẹbẹ.*  
*Ó ní òun ó ghée pagidari oghón àti aghára fún*  
*un yín.*  
 15 *Ó ní eni tí ó bá le rí nìkan yí*  
*Ní ó maa paşẹ lé e lórí.*  
  
*Oluwaarẹ ní ó sì gbón jù lọ láyé*
- A wise person tied *idẹ*,<sup>19</sup> but it disintegrated.  
 A sage tied *idẹ*, it became loose.  
 Only a person who leans his back on Ọpẹ  
 Will tie *idẹ* which will last for long.  
 Ifá divination was performed for Ọrúnmílà  
 When he and Ọṣun were searching for  
 wisdom  
 It was Olódùmarè who called the four  
 hundred divinities (of the right)  
 And the two hundred divinities (of the left).  
 Olódùmarè summoned them to heaven.  
 When they arrived there,  
 He told them that he wanted to give them  
 deep wisdom and power.  
 He told the Ọrìṣà that anybody who had  
 What he was planning to give them  
 Would be the source of wisdom,  
 And that person would be the wisest person  
 on earth.



<p>Ó ní tó bá dí ojú mọ̀kandínlógún òní,          Ọ̀un ó ńu àpò ogbón òhún silé avé.</p>	<p>He told them that nineteen days hence          He would throw down a bag of wisdom onto          the earth.</p>	20
<p>Igbó ni òun ó ńú ú sí          Ọ̀dàn ni o.          Odò ni o,          Ilú ni o,          Ọ̀jú ọ̀nà ni o,          Ọ̀un ò ní sọ ibikan.</p>	<p>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.</p>	25
<p>Olódùmarè é fi àpò ogbón náà hàn wọn.          Pé òun "Niyí o."          È wò ó dáádáá          Bó ti rí niyí o.          Níghà tí wọn délé avé tán,          Èlẹ̀bọ́ ń níbọ́.          Olóògún ń sà á.          Eléte ń dá          Pé "Kini yí, èmi ní ó rí sẹ́."</p>	<p>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."</p>	30
<p>Ọ̀rínmílà ọ̀un Ọ̀sun sì níyí, alájọsẹ́ ni wọn.          Tó sẹ́ pé wọn é é yaraa wọn.</p>	<p>Ọ̀rínmílà and Ọ̀sun used to do things          together.          They were always going about in company of          each other.</p>	40
<p>Láwọn méjèjì há méjì kẹ́ẹ́ta.          Wọn looko akómilógbón          Pé kí wọn ó yẹ àwọn wò</p>	<p>Both of them added two cowries to three,          And went to divine.          They asked the diviners to check both of          them out.</p>	45
<p>Nńkan tí ghogho inínmọ̀lẹ́ ń wá yí          Ó ha le jẹ́ pé owó àwọn ní ó bọ́ sí?          Wọn ní kí wọn ó yáa níbọ́.</p>	<p>"The thing which all the Ọ̀rísà are looking          for          Could both of them be the persons who          would find it?"          The diviners asked Ọ̀rínmílà and Ọ̀sun to          perform sacrifice</p>	50
<p>Wọn lẹ̀wú ọ̀rùn ẹ̀nikòòkan wọn lẹ̀bọ́.          Kí oníkálùkù ó sì lẹ́ lẹ́ é ní ewúré kan,          Kó sì rú eku kan soso.          Igba ọ̀kẹ́ àti wóró kan.</p>	<p>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<sup>2)</sup> for each person.</p>	55
<p>Ọ̀rínmílà ní iwọ́ Ọ̀sun,          "Jẹ́ káwọn ó lẹ́ rú ẹ̀bọ́ yí o."          Ọ̀sun ní, "È é jẹ́yàn ó sinmi,          Pẹ̀wú níbọ́.          Fi nńkan níbọ́ tí wáá jẹ́ níbi ọ̀un táwọn ń wá          yí!"</p>	<p>Ọ̀rínmílà counseled that they should make          the sacrifice.          But Ọ̀sun 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?"</p>	60
<p>Ọ̀sun kò, kò níbọ́.          Ọ̀rínmílà, Àjànà,          Ó yaa mú ẹ̀wúu rẹ́, ó fi níbọ́.</p>	<p>Ọ̀sun refused to perform sacrifice.          Ọ̀rínmílà, whose other name is Àjànà,          Took his own garment,          and surrendered it for sacrifice.</p>	65
<p>Ó sì fi eku kan àti owó náà níbọ́.</p>	<p>He also used a house rat and money for the          sacrifice.</p>	70

- Wọn wá àpò oghòṅ títí.  
 Wọn ò rí í.  
 Ghogbo àwọn irínmòlẹ̀ yókù náà,  
 75 Wọn ò rí í.  
 Wọn wá a dé ègbá ajá.  
 Wọn wá a dẹ̀sà adíẹ.  
 Èlòmú wá a dé Ìkọ̀ Àwíṣí.  
 Wọn wá a dé Ìdòròmú Àwíṣẹ.  
 80 Wọn wá a dé Iwónràn  
 Níhí tí ojúmọ̀ tí mọ̀ ọ̀n wá.  
 Wọn ò rí í.  
 Níghà tó díjọ̀ kan, ní ekù bá sì bó sibi éwú  
 Ọṣun tó fi kọ̀,  
 85 Ní ekù bá jẹ̀ àpò igbá àvàà rẹ̀ lábéni.  
 Ní ojọ̀ kejì, ní wọn bá tún múra.  
 Wọn tún bèrẹ̀ sí í wá àpò oghòṅ wí.  
  
 Ní Ọṣun bá rí í.  
 90 "Han-in! Àpò oghòṅ níwí!"  
 Jùà, ó gbé e jù àpò àyà èwúwù rẹ̀.  
  
 Ló bá fọ̀n ọ̀n.  
 95 Níhí tó gbé ń sàré è dá igi kojá.  
 Dátakùn kojá,  
 Pòrọ̀ ní àpò oghòṅ bó ọ̀ lẹ̀.  
 Ní ògangan ibi tẹ̀ku tí jẹ̀ àpò.  
  
 100 Ọṣun sí ń kẹ̀ é pé Ọrínmílà  
 Pé "Ọrínmílà, Àjànà,  
 Maà bọ̀ o, maà bọ̀,  
 Ọ̀nín tí rápò oghòṅ o."  
 105 Bì Ọrínmílà tí ń lọ,  
 Ló bá sì rí àpò oghòṅ un nílẹ̀.  
 Ló bá jù ú sínú àpò èwúwù tiẹ̀.  
  
 Níghà tí wọn dẹ̀lẹ̀,  
 110 Ọrínmílà ní, "Ọṣun, jẹ̀ kí n wo àpò ọ̀hún."  
 Ọṣun ní láyé wí kókúrín ọ̀ rí í.  
  
 Ènì tí ó báà sì rí í,  
 Yóó maa nígha eku,  
 115 Igha eja,  
 Igha eṣẹ,  
 Igha ẹ̀ran,  
 Ọ̀pòlọ̀pọ̀ owó.  
 Ọrínmílà bè ẹ̀ bè ẹ̀ bè ẹ̀.  
 120 Kó gbá.  
 Ló bá padà sínú iléè tiẹ̀.  
 I.Ọṣun bá ní kí ọ̀n ọ̀ tíẹ̀ ní wá àpò náà jáde  
 her pocket.

They looked for the bag of wisdom.  
 They did not see it.  
 All the other Ọrísà  
 Did not see it either.  
 They searched for it up to Ègbá ajá.<sup>27</sup>  
 They went as far as Èsà adíẹ.<sup>28</sup>  
 Some went as far as Ìkọ̀ Àwíṣí.  
 Others searched for it in Ìdòròmú Àwíṣẹ.  
 While some looked for it in Iwónràn  
 From where the day breaks.<sup>29</sup>  
 But they did not see it.  
 One day a house rat went to the garment  
 Which Ọṣun hung up in her house.  
 The rat ate up its chest pocket underneath.  
 The next day, they got themselves ready  
 And started to search for the bag of wisdom  
 once again  
 Then, Ọṣun found it.  
 She exclaimed, "Han-in! This is the bag of  
 wisdom!"  
 She threw it into the chest pocket of her  
 garment.  
 She started to go in a hurry.  
 As she was crossing dead woods  
 And scaling climbing stems,  
 Suddenly the bag of wisdom dropped down  
 From where the rat had eaten her garment's  
 pocket.  
 Ọṣun was calling on Ọrínmílà,  
 Saying, "Ọrínmílà, whose other name is  
 Àjànà,  
 Come quickly, come quickly.  
 I have seen the bag of wisdom."  
 As Ọrínmílà was going,  
 He saw the bag of wisdom on the ground.  
 He then put it inside the pocket of his own  
 garment.  
 When they arrived home,  
 Ọrínmílà said, "Ọṣun let me see the bag."  
 But Ọṣun said that she would never show it to  
 a man.  
 But if a man must see it,  
 He would give her two hundred rats,  
 Two hundred fishes,  
 Two hundred birds,  
 Two hundred animals,  
 And plenty of money.  
 Ọrínmílà begged her for long,  
 But she did not yield.  
 He then returned to his own house.  
 When Ọṣun tried to take out the bag from  
 her pocket.

<i>Kóun ó tún un wò lèkkan sí í.</i>	So that she could look at it once again,	
<i>Ìgbà tí yóó tí owó hẹ àpò.</i>	As she put her hands inside the pockets,	125
<i>Ó di ghùrà.</i>	Her hands entered into a hole,	
<i>Owó rẹẹ wọ síta lódi kejì.</i>	And came out on the bottom part of the pocket.	
<i>ÌỌsun bá lọ bá Ọrúnmílà níléé tiẹ lóhuin.</i>	So, Ọsun went to meet Ọrúnmílà in his own house.	130
<i>Ló bá hẹrẹ sí í bẹ é.</i>	She started to beg him.	
<i>Ló bá hẹrẹ sí í sàalọ.</i>	She started to please Ọrúnmílà (with good things).	
<i>Bí Ọsun se kó lọ sílé Ọrúnmílà nù un</i>	That was how Ọsun went to Ọrúnmílà's house	135
<i>Tó hẹrẹ sí í gbé lódò okọ rẹ</i>	To live there with her husband	
<i>Pé kó fi koun lógbón diẹ.</i>	So that he would teach her a little bit of the wisdom.	
<i>Nígbà wá sẹ hí wọn bá fẹ obinrin.</i>	In ancient times, when people got married,	
<i>Kó pọn dandan kó bẹkọ e lojé.</i>	It was not compulsory for the wife to go to her husband's home to live with him.	140
<i>Bí ó se di pé tokọ taya ní gbé pọ nu un.</i>	That was how couples started to live together.	
<i>Èwú tí Ọsun bó ó lẹ báyí.</i>	When Ọsun removed the big garment from her body,	
<i>Àsẹ ló fi banu.</i>	She put <i>ase</i> into her mouth,	145
<i>Ó ní láé láé, àtirandiran obinrin</i>	She said that from then on, no woman	
<i>Kó gbọdọ wẹwù agbádá mó.</i>	Must wear the agbada dress. <sup>25</sup>	
<i>Ló bá lọ lẹ é sọ èwú sígbò.</i>	She then went and threw the garment into the bush.	
<i>Nígbà tí èbẹ pò,</i>	After a lot of pleading from Ọsun,	150
<i>Ní Ọrúnmílà bá mú tínnín orí rẹ.</i>	Ọrúnmílà took a little bit of the wisdom	
<i>Ló wáá fún Ọsun.</i>	And gave it to Ọsun.	
<i>Oun náà ní eḡrindínlogún</i>	That is the <i>eḡrindínlogún</i>	
<i>Tí Ọsun ní dá un.</i>	Which Ọsun is casting.	
<i>Àpọ ogbón ojọ náà ní Odu Ifá.</i>	The bag of wisdom of that day is Odu Ifá.	155
<i>Avájó, oògùn, gbogdo ogbón ijìnlẹ Yoribá.<sup>26</sup></i>	Medicines and all other profound wisdom of the Yoribá people.	

In the Ifá verse quoted above, Ọsun was the first person to find the bag of wisdom, but when the bag slipped through the broken pocket of her big garment, Ọrúnmílà accidentally stumbled on it and kept it. One can speculate as to the morality of Ọrúnmílà keeping for himself what should belong to his wife. But we must remember that before she discovered that she had lost the bag, Ọsun 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 Ọsun 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 Ọsun? Did Ọrúnmílà 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 Òṣun and Ifá, especially in respect to the origin of Ifá as a bag of wisdom first found by Òṣun, it may not be far-fetched to say that the yellow powder has something to do with Òṣun.

The second issue which I would like to mention here is the simple fact that when one takes a look at the Odù of *ẹ̀ẹ̀rindínlógún* and those of Ifá, it would seem that the Odù of Ifá are based on those of *ẹ̀ẹ̀rindínlógún*, and not the other way round. *Ẹ̀ẹ̀rindínlógún* is based on sixteen single signs of Ifá such as Òdí, Ìrosùn, Òwónrín, 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 *omọ odù* (minor odù). It stands to reason to say that a single sign such as Òdí

I  
II  
II  
I

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

I	I
II	II
II	II
I	I

We can go further to speculate that the apparent simplicity of the signs of *ẹ̀ẹ̀rindínlógún* 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 *ẹ̀ẹ̀rindínlógún* 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, Olódìmarè, while giving *ase* to *ẹ̀ẹ̀rindínlógún* stated thus,

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

### Conclusion

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

*Ìyá abóbìnrin gbàtò.  
Ládékojú, abókùnrin gbàṣé.*<sup>28</sup>

Mother who helps women to collect semen  
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 Ọ̀ḍrọ̀<sup>29</sup> (now simply called Ọ̀ró) 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 Ọ̀ba 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 Ọ̀jìyàḍmẹ̀gùn; he had two apprentices: Ifon, Ifá priest of Ìdó, and Dùúrù, 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 Ọ̀jìyàḍmẹ̀gùn 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 Ọ̀jìyàḍmẹ̀gùn. When he did not arrive, she ordered her servants to dig a very deep pit inside which she carefully kept Ọ̀jìyàḍmẹ̀gùn'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

*Oore yèvé Ọ̀ṣun.*

*Ọ̀ wa yanrìn, wa yanrìn.*

*Kówó sí.<sup>30</sup>*

Hail the benevolent mother Ọ̀ṣun.

She who digs up sand, digs up sand,

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 Ọ̀rìṣà who first arrived on earth with Ọ̀ṣun as the seventeenth. She nourishes people with different kinds of vegetables, such as *yanrìn* and *tete* (special vegetables of Ọ̀ṣun) which are still her favorite foods today. She also likes different 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 Ọ̀gúndá Ìwòrì (Ọ̀gúndá aráà Dó) tells us how Ọ̀ṣun Àpara (otherwise known as Yemesé<sup>31</sup>) delivered the people of Ìdó<sup>32</sup> 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:

*Yemesé ilé Ìdó pagun ra o.*

*Ọ̀ṣun àpará pagun ra lónìí.*

*Ọ̀ pagun ra.<sup>33</sup>*

Yemesé of Ìdó annihilated war.

Ọ̀ṣun Àpara annihilated war today.

She annihilated war.

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

To understand this ancient Ọrìṣà 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, Ọṣun is the icon not only of women, but of all creation.

*Omi o!*

O! sacred water.

*Ota o!*

O! sacred stones.

*Eḍan o!*

O! sacred *eḍan* (symbol of Ọgbóni).

*E kòrè yévé Ọṣun o.*

All hail the benevolent mother.

## Notes

1. Collected from Babalọlá Ifátòògùn, Ìlobùú, near Ọṣogbo, Nigeria.
2. *Ase*. A spiritual and magical power with which Olódùmarè created the universe, and copies of which he gave to the Ọrìṣà. Human beings can also access *ase* through the right type of moral and spiritual connection.
3. Olofin of heaven. Another name for Olódùmarè. Odùduwà, the founder of Ilé-Ife, is Olofin ayé (Olofin of the earth which means law-giver of the earth).
4. Continuation of the same verse from Ọgbèsá chanted by Babalọlá Ifátòògùn.
5. Orò. An ancestral spirit who makes use of the bull roarer and precedes the arrival of Ègúngún 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 Ègúngún.
6. Ọpa. A secret society which originated from Ilé-Ife.
7. A small road which led to Ife. In ancient times small paths led to Ife from other parts of Yorùbaland since it was forbidden for ordinary people to visit Ilé-Ife unless they were summoned there for important rituals. This is why there were no broad caravan routes leading to Ife.
8. Okùn beads. A costly bead manufactured in Ife in the past. There is at least one family carrying on the tradition in Ilé-Ife today.
9. Brass object. Ilé-Ife was an important center for the production of brass objects in ancient times.
10. Collected from Ọníọṣun of Ìlobùú.
11. Part of the same excerpt chanted by Ọníọṣun.
12. Continuation of the same verse chanted by Ọníọṣun.
13. Perhaps Ọṣun said that war would begin in earnest if she had a baby girl because instead of one woman, the sixteen Ọrìṣà 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 Obatalá with which he sees the future and other hidden things.

15. *Adó àsúre* (sometimes also called *owo abá*) also belongs to Obatalá, and with it he generates ideas which his *owo aṣe* helps to bring to fruition. Obatalá holds *owo abá* (or *àsúre*) on the right, and *owo aṣe* 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 Amúsanán who can also know everything about Egúngún even without being initiated as *òṣè*.

17. *Agbèrègèḍe 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 Oniòsun of Ilòbù.

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

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

23. *Èsà adìe*. Another place frequently mentioned in Ifá verses.

24. *Ìkò Àwúsí*, *Ìdòròmù Àwúṣe*, and *Ìwónràn* from where the day breaks. Some Ifá priests think that the Americas correspond to *Ìkò Àwúsí*. *Ìdòròmù Àwúṣe* refers to Africa, and *Ìwónràn* 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 *Babalólá Ifátòògùn* of Ilòbù.

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

28. Chanted by Móládùn Ajítòní in Òyó, July 25, 1999.

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

30. This is part of an Ifá chant rendered by *Babalólá Ifátòògùn* of Ilòbù.

31. *Yemesé*. An *Òrìṣà* of *Ìdóo-Fábòrò* who is related to *Òṣun*.

32. *Ìdó*. There are many towns and villages known as *Ìdó* in Yorubaland. This verse, however, relates to *Ìdóo-Fábòrò* in Èkítì 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. *Òṣun* is believed to be one of the founders of the *Ògbóni* society. That is why she had her own *ẹ̀dan* (symbol of *Ògbóni*). Anybody who is protected by *Òṣun* cannot be judged by the *Ògbóni*. Other *Òrìṣà* who are intimately related to *Ògbóni* are Ifá and Obatalá.

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