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Guest editor for this issue: Dan Ben-Amos

Introduction
Dan Ben-Amos 223

A note on orthography 224

Composing time and space in Yoruba art
Margaret Thompson Drewal and Henry John Drewal 225

Verbal and visual metaphors: mythical allusions in Yoruba ritualistic art of Ori
Rowland Abiodun 252

Nyamakalaw: the Mande bards and blacksmiths
Patrick R. McNaughton 271

Asante gold-weights: images and words
M. D. McLeod 287

Animals in Èdó visual and verbal arts
Dan Ben-Amos 296

International Association of Word & Image Studies 304
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Verbal and visual metaphors: mythical allusions in Yoruba ritualistic art of *Orí*

ROWLAND ABOIDUN

The verbal and visual arts in Africa are interdependent, supporting each other through mutual references and allusions. Both have a distinct, albeit intertwined, position in traditional Yoruba thought as illustrated by *Orí-Inú* (literally ‘inner head’). My exploration of the dynamic relationship between the visual and verbal components in Orí-Inú is founded on three propositions. The first is that verbal and visual metaphors appear to share a common mythical origin, and fulfil similar artistic functions even though their modes and manifestation may be different. Second, it can be argued that, in at least one role, as transformer-carrier functioning between the spiritual and material planes of existence, both the visual and verbal arts provide valuable insights into the Yoruba metaphysical system, myths, lore and complex traditional religious thought and notions; and these affect and relate to the physical realm. Finally, it would be difficult to understand Yoruba art without familiarity with Yoruba literature, particularly the *Ifá* literary corpus. In the same way, the study of Yoruba oral tradition is greatly enhanced by the study of the visual art in which the literary concepts are concretized.

**Họ̀rọ̀ or Ọ̀rọ̀**

In Yoruba traditional thought, the verbal and visual arts are, more often than not, considered as metaphors. As such, they embody a purer and more active essence called Ọ̀rọ̀. It is important to point out that this Ọ̀rọ̀ is not the same as the ‘spoken word’, its more common meaning. Rather, it means ‘a matter, that is, something that is the subject of discussion, concern, or action’. So, it is in this sense that Ọ̀rọ̀ will be used in this paper.

An *Ifá* poem throws some light on the nature of this still relatively unexplored but important esoteric term:

Ọ̀rọ̀ gbẹ̀nú àgbà kan,  
Ọ̀ ró kù  
Ọ̀ ró kè  
Ọ̀ ró gi.  
Ọ̀rọ̀ wọ́já nínú àgbà,  
Ọ̀ tóbi bí àgbè.  
Ọ̀rọ̀ tó já nínú àgbà  
Ókún àgbè  
A d’ifá fun ọ̀rọ̀-ọ̀rọ̀-ọ̀rọ̀,  
Nígbà un ọ̀rí ẹnikà bàsọ́rọ̀,  
Mo bá ń gbín.1

---

Orọ, the cause of great concern for the wise and experienced elders.
It sounds kù (making the heart miss a beat)
Kê (as a ponderous object hitting the ground).
Gbî (making the last sound before silence).
The òrọ that drops from the elderly
Is stupendous.
It was divined for Òrọ-ùrọ-ùrọ
Who did not have anyone to communicate with.
And started groaning.

Also in Ifá literature is found a hint of Oro’s mythical origin. It is narrated how Oloodumare, the Lord creator made Hòp, comprised of ìgbọn (wisdom) ìmọ (knowledge), and ọye (understanding), which are among the most important forceful elements of creation. But it was not, however, until the descent of Hòp to become Hòp-rọ or Òrọ and with the indispensable aid of the deity Òlùà, that the highly energy-charged heavenly constituents of Òrọ could be digested and applied to human needs. The following Ifá verse from Òsa-Gudá graphically captures the state of suspense which accompanied the descent of Hòp at creation:

Ó dá Kẹ se, kése
Awọ ilé ayé,
Ó rọ dèdè - dèdè - dèdè
Kò bá - ilè,
Awọ ọdè-ọrun
Ó-ri-fanran yán-fanran yán
Agbadagúdú
Nná àn ní Awo Àfónúójí
A dífá ún aye ón ìrún
Nígbá tí ayé ón ìrún ìbẹ
tí wọn kò ni olùgbẹ
Agbadagúdú mé jì rè,
kò ní ọṣẹ ńtì ọmọ ọmọ
Tí úgbẹ ńbẹ
Otùmàrè nikan ló dá’ra rè
T’ó dá díde
L’á fi ńpe Òtùmàrè
Ní Anikan dágbön
Anikàn dágbön ilé-ayé
Òrun ní ò ọmọ
Anikan dágbön ọdè-ọrun
Iwọ lo ìrú ẹyẹn
Nígbáti òdù ní ìñikejí
Èmì l’o dágbön sí i
Ní jògbön ọ bí mó wọn lówò
L’awọn nikan
Anikàn ọdè ìrún
Láé pé Otùmàrè
Wọn ní Anikan-dágbön
Omọ mó ń se unun o
Anikan dágbön
Iwọ lo mó mó sè èrèn.
Láìgbá tì énìkejí
O dái, ó yanju wánrán.2

There were no living things
was the priest on earth.
That – which – was – suspended
But – did – not – descend,
Was the priest in heaven
All – was – just – empty – space
With – no – substance,
Was the priest of Mid-air
It was divined for Earth and Heaven
When they both existed,
With no inhabitants
In the two empty shells,
There were neither birds nor spirits
Living in them
Ọdùmàrè³ then created himself,
Being the Primal cause,
Which is the reason we call Ọdùmàrè
The only wise one on earth,
He is the only cause in creation,
The only wise one in heaven,
Who created humans.
When He had no companion,
He applied wisdom to the situation
To avert any disaster.
You, alone,
The only one in Heaven
Is the name of Ọdùmàrè
The only wise one,
We give you thanks,
The only-knowing-mind,
You created man.
Listening to one side of an argument,
You judge, and all are pleased.

Ọdùmàrè sat back and thought about how to create more things in his universe. For this purpose, he realized he needed an intermediary force, since he was too charged with energy to come into direct contact with any living thing and have it survive. Therefore, he created Ògbón (wisdom), held it in his palm and thought where it could live. After a while, Ọdùmàrè released Ògbón to fly away and look for a suitable place to lodge. When Ògbón could not find a suitable abode, it flew back, humming like a bee, to Ọdùmàrè who took Ògbón and swallowed it. Similarly imọ, and ọye, which were also created, returned for lack of suitable abodes, and were swallowed for the same reason.

Ọdùmàrè then “slept”, but not in the human sense of the word:

Sísùn bì aísùn
Sísùn bì aísùn,
Èléyé ọ iye jù un lọju
Mo ni kí mọ ọṣé?
Ọdùmàrè kì sùn.
Seemingly asleep but awake,
Seemingly dormant but alive
Ecôje (the witches) swished
their wings against my face
I asked what my offence was,
Odumãrè never slumbers.

After several ‘thousand’ years during which Odumãrè was disturbed by
the incessant humming of Ogôjô, Èmô and Ôye, he decided to get rid of
them in order to have some peace.

So he ordered Ogôjô, Èmô and Ôye to descend (eò) making the sound Hôô.
Thus the three heavenly bodies now known as Hôô-ry or Ôrô, were
evacuated, and set for their descent to earth. Since they were heavily
charged lifeforces from heaven, their descent was accompanied by
lightning and thunder. All solid matter melted and became jelly-like. For
a while, Ôrô was suspended in mid-air like an egg and did not melt, but
then it dropped to earth and split (là).

In Ôrô’s new state it is identified with Èlà, the deity which functions in
the Ifa divination complex and is regarded by the Yorùbá as the
embodiment of wisdom, knowledge and understanding in all their verbal
and visual forms.

The names Ôrùnmílå and Èlà are sometimes used interchangeably,
even though Èlà is probably a separate deity in its own right within the Ifa
divination system. Be that as it may, Èlà became the first recognized
authoritative source of communication and explanation of the nature of
Odumãrè and all his creation. Hence Ifa confirms:

Ta ló kò wí?
Èlà ló kò wí
Ta ló kò sò?
Èlà ló kò sò
Ta ní a ti ċ ọpè ní Èlà?
Hôô tó rọ naà
Ní à ọpè ní Èlà.

Who was the first to speak?
Èlà was the first to speak
Who was the first to communicate?
Èlà was the first to communicate?
Who is this Èlà?
It was the Hôô which descended
That we call Èlà.

It is in recognition of this crucial role of Èlà in making Ôrô communicable
that the Yorùbá have the axiom, ‘Èlà l’ôrô’, which underscores the fact
that ‘Èlà relieves Ôrô of its mystical and enigmatic character’.

Èlà utteres through Ôwe literally ‘proverbs’, but which in broad usage
can metaphorically apply to the communicative properties of sculpture,
dance, drama, song, chant, poetry, incantations like ọfô, Ogèdè,
ayápì, ẹpè, odu, ẹsà and many others which make heavy and esoteric use of
metaphors in ritual contexts. Except when otherwise stated, it is in this
wider sense that Ôwe has been employed in this paper. The following
Yoruba saying throws some light on its place and function:
5 - The Yoruba believe that reality is made up of both *Ará Ajé*, 'people here on earth'; and *Ará Òrun*, 'beings in heaven'. Unusual events and happenings on important market days, and festivals, are often attributed to *Ará Òrun* who have come to participate in activities here on earth. See also Lawal (1977: 50–61); see bibliography at end for full references.

6 - Adenji, personal communication, 15 February 1975.

7 - Òrò: This is a Yoruba spirit-deity which is usually identified by its 'bull-roaring' noise at night. It remains in a bush in its grove cleared for it and is never seen except by male initiates of the Òrò cult. When it comes out at night, initiates, women, and children are forbidden to see it. A Yoruba myth attributes Òrò’s nakedness to his wife, ‘a spendthrift who could not resist the attractions of food and trifles’. By contrast, *Egungun*, Òrò’s full brother, has ‘a very thrifty and able wife who bought clothes for her husband’. See Idowu (1962: 191–192).
unchanged. This, in fact, is what happens in the worship of Òrisà where sculpture, mime, dance, drama, and poetry of an appropriate character combine to raise consciousness above and beyond the physical into the spiritual realm for the vivid realization of an abstract idea.\textsuperscript{8}

\textbf{Órì iñù}

In Africa, where most communities are traditionally non-literate, the continuity of Òṣe as a form of oral literature makes it immensely useful in gaining new insights into traditional religious and social patterns, as well as artistic concepts. To illustrate this point, I will examine the Yoruba concept of Órì or Órì-ìñù (Inner Head, ‘Destiny’) through the visual statement of its symbol and its correlate in oral literature.

Órì-ìñù’s counterpart in the Yoruba pantheon is Órì-ìṣẹ̀ (Head – the Designator), also known as Órì-Oorù (Head-at-dawn). Órì Àkókó (the first head), Órì Àpèrè (Head-the-ruler) or simply Órì (Head), is believed to be the first and the most important Órìsà in heaven, Òrun. And because of its primal place, Órì Ìṣẹ̀ has jurisdiction over Órì-ìñù, which is essentially a prototype of Órì-ìṣẹ̀, and the spiritual and personal head or divinity possessed by each and every man and Órìsà. Thus, the Órì-ìñù of each being, thing or Órìsà determines its immediate destiny, while Órì Ìṣẹ̀ rules supreme over all individual and personal Órì in heaven.

Each person and Órìsà, before coming to earth, must visit Ajàlā the maker of Heads (òrì) in heaven. Ajàlā, who is sometimes forgetful, produces some orì that are defective. If one has the bad luck to choose a less than perfect orì, his life (destiny) on earth will be severely affected.\textsuperscript{9}

A person’s Órì-ìñù is so crucial to a successful life that it is propitiated frequently, and its support and guidance is sought before undertaking any new task. For this reason, personal Órì shrines are indispensable and are present in most homes, irrespective of sex, religious belief, or cult affiliation. And in the performance of virtually all sacrifices, ancestral worship and major and minor festivals, Órì features prominently, since it determines their favourable outcome.

The object symbolizing Órì does not look like its human counterpart. To make this object, the owner commissions a leather-craftsman to sew a strong, thick piece of leather into a conical shape whose height is about five inches, and base diameter about four inches (see figures 2 and 3). Into this conical form an Ifa divination priest pours fine dry sand on which he has pressed the Ifa formula for Ofun-Birete (the Òdù-Ifá praising Órì). Next, the Ifa priest offers specific prayers for the prospective devotee while close relatives, usually the elderly ones, recite more incantations to obtain the favour of a good Órì. This completed, the leather cone is sewn and sealed. Its decoration is made with 41 cowries arranged in four rows of ten each, equally spaced out on the side of the cone, with one cowrie to mark the face.

Yoruba do not consider the Órì symbol really complete without an accompanying container to house, honour and beautify it. Often from the same leather-craftsman, an Órì devotee, as soon as he can afford it, orders a bigger crown-like structure called Ilé-Órì, literally ‘house of Órì’ (see figure 1) to house the small conical object symbolizing Órì. The decoration of Ilé-Órì is very elaborate, and time-consuming. In all, about
12,000 tiny cowries called *Ogwó/Éřó* (meaning 'propitiation fee') embellish this impressive structure. This is the most costly act of honour that an individual can do to any *Órísá*, hence the saying:

Pánsíkí - pánṣíkí là ń́sinwó Órí.
Wójó-wójó là á sìkúń ọlá.¹⁰

*Abimbola, personal communication, 10 May 1979.*
Figure 2. Ile-Ori (House of the Head), uncovered with the Ori symbol just visible in the cylindrical base of Ile-Ori.

Figure 3. The Ori symbol (centre) is displayed between the top and the base of Ile Ori. Ori symbol, conical in shape, is made of hide, cloth and cowrie shells, ht 10cm (Collection of Professor and Mrs Wande Abimbola).

Tightly packed and plentiful is money
used in making Ori’s house,
But loose and free are the beads of the wealthy.

It is hard to imagine a more fitting residence of Ori, the cause and essence of one’s being.

Ibóri, as the Yoruba call the Ori-symbol, remains in its Ile-Ori except during consultation or propitiation. On such occasions, the devotee will
place Òrǐ on a well-swept and polished floor which has been covered with a very expensive cloth, usually white in colour. Through it, the devotee offers to his Òrǐ standard items of sacrifice like kolanut and cool water, and he is free to add other items of his choice. Depending on the nature of the request, a correspondingly symbolic sacrifice is made. Thus, coconut water as ọ̀rọ̀, ‘softner’, softens Òrǐ, that is, makes it work more in favour of the owner, where that Òrǐ is found to be ‘hard’, ẹ̀ (that is, unlucky, or doing the opposite).

Snails are offered to ask Òrǐ to avert an impending disaster; sugarcane, to pray for happiness, or joy; while ǎádùn (ground roasted corn) and honey are alternative offerings for the same request. Through ìfá divination an Òrǐ might demand a particular sacrifice, for example, a billy-goat, a cock or a duck, each being symbolic of specific needs to be met.

In sum, we can put all the sacrifices an Òrǐ devotee makes to his Òrǐ into four main categories, as I have attempted to show in table 1.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SACRIFICE</th>
<th>FUNCTIONS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| A Kolanut (Ogb) | To ward off evil.  
Also used to perform simple divination which would reveal Òrǐ's special demands. |
| B Water (Omi tútù) Snails (Igbìn) Coco-nut (Agbon) | These are all ọ̀rọ̀ ‘softners’ which act on Òrǐ whose main problem is hardness.  
They avert disasters. |
| C Sugar Cane (Ìrèkè) Ground roasted Corn (Àádùn) | To attract good-fortune and bring happiness. |
| D Cock (Àkìkì) Duck (Ìpìpìye), etc. | To gain the favour of one’s community, and pacify those who harbor grievances against the devotee without his knowing it. Yoruba describe them as ẹ̀jè,11 ‘the wicked ones’, because they have a great potential for negative activity. |

Section D of the table is not only important but can be very expensive. Abímíbálá12 has identified this type of sacrifice as Òlùbọ́bọ́tìbọ́, baba ọgbẹ́, meaning ‘peoples’ mouths’.

The Òrǐ devotee, his relations and well-wishers, who may include ìfá divination priests, gather and render numerous songs and chants in praise of Òrǐ during its worship. Invariably they end with some prayer for its devotee. The following example is typical in ìfá:

Orí ló ŋá ēnì.
Èsí ọ̀ndayé
Orísà ló ŋá pa’ni i dà
Ọ̀n on pa orísà á dà:
Orísà ọ̀gbẹ́ pa ni i dà
Bí ọ̀su oń sun.
Aýé má pa ọmí dà
Kí orí mí má se orí hēhē
e Kí o má gbàẹbọdè.13

11 - Ẹjè: powerful and unseen powers of the world, usually wicked in intention; one's unknown enemies.


13 - The verse was recited by a client of ìfá at a short religious rite for his Òrǐ in Ìle-Ife on 12 December 1976.
Orí is the creator of being
Before the world began
It is the Òrísà (supreme being) who can
change being.
No one changes Òrísà (supreme being).
It is Òrísà who changes one, like a yam being
roasted. Ayé (powerful worldly forces) please
do not interfere with my destiny
My Orí, let me not become a laughing stock,
Do not allow evil-doers to spoil my lot.

Upon the death of a devotee, an elderly next-of-kin takes out the
deceased’s Ìbòrí and places it sideways instead of in its normal upright
position. This action informs the Orí that its owner has ‘slept’ (yín). This
same next-of-kin then puts a whole kolanut into a container of cold water,
and places it besides the Ìbòrí. On this occasion, the kolanut is called obì ìtu
Orí ṭòójì (the kolanut with which death is announced). While arrange-
ments are being made for the deceased’s burial, the Ilé-Orí is placed
beside the head of the corpse, where all and sundry can view and
appreciate it.

When, later on, the corpse is paraded round the town, as is the case in
most parts of Yoruba country, the Ilé-Orí forms a prominent part of the
procession. If the Ilé-Orí has been well-made and lavishly decorated with
cowries, favourable remarks welcome it, while those in the procession
proudly sing ‘Ẹ wá wo ohun ọwọ se o, ọwọ’ (Come and see what money can
do, money).

If the deceased has been socially and financially successful others pray
to Orí-Ápèrè in heaven through this successful Orí to be blessed with one
similar to it.

Èmi Olú ló ni o bẹbẹ dé mi o o,
Orí, Oúníse bẹbẹ dé mi o o.

I, Olú, am asking you to mediate on my behalf in
heaven.
Orí, the Primal cause, please be my advocate.

After the interment of the corpse, the Ilé-Orí is ripped apart and its pieces
scattered on the grave of its owner. Three days later, the deceased’s eldest
son takes some red earth from the grave site called Ilèpá, along with bits of
the torn Ilé-Orí, and drops them on the ground at the back of his father’s
house, sobbing:

Orí kí í se ohun tí àá kó dànnú,
A kí í wá aye ìlá ikú,
Ikú lí o ba ilé-órí je.

The house of Orí should not waste;
But man is not immortal,
Death has caused Ilé-Orí to waste.

The power and authority enjoyed by Orí in the Yoruba pantheon is
born out of the belief that Orí-ìyá is the creator of all the gods and that on
his order they have been launched into their various locations, where they
became venerated. The following verse from Śfún-Bírẹ̀ in Ìṣà literature
narrates how it happened:14

14 – Adeniji: personal communication,
September 1974.
1. Weríweá: the praise-name of Ori meaning the 'Great-cleaner-of-spiritual-Heads'.

2. Wón wá setán
Wón de Ita Aṣéda,
Aṣéda ni kò Ṣogbón gbé obí síle
Gbogbo Irúnmọ̀lẹ̀ pa’bi, wón kò le le pa á,
Ori níkan ló pà obí náa.
Ori wáá da obí,
Ó yán kerekere
Ariwo réré
Igbé ta láarin èrún,
Ori dí Òba fún gbogbo wón.
Àárin gbúngbún wá di ilité Ori.
Ori lọ̀ rẹ̀ jọ́kọ́,
Inu wón ru,
Wón fẹ̀ hí Ori faga-gbága!

3. Òrisá ló kọ̀ ba Ori dimú
Ori da á, ó dá sì Itá Ajálámó
Níta Ajálámó ni Òrisá gbé di finaìfiná.
Ori dá Ifá, Ifá di Òkinróòkín
Ori dá Àmákisi, ó le sí Ìlà-Ogbún.
Níbè ni Amákisi tó ti ati iná aaró síle ayé.
Ó dá kálu kó wón sì ibi tí a gbé níbò wón gbogbo.

2. After this,
They went to God, the Creator-in-chief,
Who asked Ṣogbón to present the Kolanu of authority.
All tried but failed to split it,
Only Ori succeeded.
And when with the split Kola-nut, he divined
The outcome was favourable.
A loud ovation followed,
There was excitement everywhere,
And great jubilation in heaven.
The highest and central place then belonged to Ori
As Ori took his seat,
The other Òrisá envied him,
And conspired to dethrone him.

15 – Weríweá: a praise-name of Ori
16 – Ifé: this is the name for the 16 sacred palm-kernel nuts which Ifa priests use for divination.
17 – Àmákisi: this is a Yoruba Òrisá whose duty is to light the world from the east.
This *Odù-Ijá* tells how *Ọgbọn* (wisdom) had suggested to all the *Ọrìṣà* to wake up early in the morning and pay homage to God, the creator and owner of the universe, and request from him power and authority. Only *Ọrì* woke up at the specified time, prostrated himself and rolled on his side in homage to *Ọlórún*. Because of his obedience, *Ọrì* succeeded in splitting *Obi-ásọ*, the sacred kolanu of creation and authority, an act which the remaining four hundred *Ọrìṣà* struggled to do but could not accomplish.

*Ọgbọn* cast *Obi-ásọ* for divination and the *Ọrìṣà* saw that *Ọrì* is the favoured leader and head of them all. The highest place, the apical position of authority called *àpère*, became *Ọrì*’s throne. From there, he reigns and sends the other *Ọrìṣà* on errands.

This situation did not please the other *ọrisà* who planned to defy his authority. *Ọrì*, however, won by rolling on the ground and paying homage to *Ọlórún*, as he always did. This manner of communicating with *Ọlórún* earned *Ọrì* the following rude comment from the other *Ọrìṣà*: *Ẹ kò wọ kótopó kelebe bi ọ ti ń fi ara ń po ọ, ti ń si fi ara ń ikeuru. ‘Look at kótopó-kelebe’ (‘Little-conical-form’) rolling and dirtying himself in dust!’ It can be inferred that *Kótopó-Kelebe* was the nickname of *Ọrì* before he became the head of all *Ọrìṣà*. Specifically, *Ọrì-Àpère* would indicate his victory over the other gods, and *Ọrì*’s ascension to the apex of the cone of existence that is the source of being.

To know how *Ọrì* dealt with all threats of opposition from his rivals and dictated their destinies, it is pertinent to point out the double meaning conveyed by the verb *dá* (‘to defeat or overpower’ and ‘to create’) used in the *Odù* on *Ọrì*. It conveys the notion that in order to be anything or create something, one has to overcome some opposition or defeat someone. Thus, we read in the *Odù Ijá* that *Ọrì* ‘defeated’ (ILLED) *Ọrìṣànlá* in the duel which ensued consequent upon *Ọrì*’s elevation to the position of supreme authority over his peers. *Ọrì* went further to prove his superiority over *Ọrìṣànlá* by ‘assigning’ him to a permanent place called *Ọkê-Alámọgbẹkẹ* in *Ode irànje*, and a specific occupation at *Ajálámọ*, both under the control of *Ọrì*. Similarly, *Ọrì* ‘floored’ (ILED) *Ijá* and ‘made’ (ILED) him the divination expert at *Ibóromú-Iwásẹ* in *Ijilámèrè*. Another *Ọrìṣà*, *Ámàkísì*, he also ‘felled’ (ILED) and ‘stationed’ (ILED) him at *Iwomán* in *Irá-Oórù*, whence the morning light shines. In this manner all the remaining *Ọrìṣà* were defeated and *Ọrì*’s authority permanently established over them.

Because of the circumstances of their creation, all *Ọrìṣà* have to pay homage to *Ọrì*. Similarly, all cult heads and devotees have to touch the earth with their forehead as an act of symbolic respect for the first *Ọrì*, *Ọrì-Àpère* *Ọrì* ẹjẹ or *Ọrì-Ájọkọ* in heaven, who in turn will roll from side to side in reverence to *Ọlórún* on behalf of the appellant on earth.

As I have already pointed out, *Ọrì-Àpère* rules over all *Ọrì-inú*, which in turn control the destinies of all beings, including the *Ọrìṣà* in their
terrestrial and celestial activities. To fully appreciate this seemingly complex religious issue, I will dwell on how the Yoruba themselves explain it through ‘visual and verbal metaphors’ (Ọwe) which constitute the bulk of Orí rituals.

In most rituals relating to Orí worship and propitiation, the Yoruba use analogies to simplify and concretize in a devotee’s mind abstract and spiritual concepts or ideas (jọrù) which make up Orí. A divine symbol like Ògbórí is explained and made meaningful through visual and verbal references which link its physical characteristics with the attributes of Orí.

Often the physical, human self—most especially the head—becomes ritually pivotal because of its similarity to Orí-inú in function, control and indispensability. Thus the Yoruba acknowledge the physical head, Orí-Ọde (literally, ‘Outer head’) also as a symbol of Orí-inú (literally, the inner spiritual head) and so revere it like Ògbórí. That at birth, the physical head comes out first, while the rest of the body follows, further increases its similarity to Orí-inú, which is also the first creation and the sole determinant of man’s destiny on earth. For this reason, the physical head is treated with much respect and propitiated like Orí-Inú, its spiritual counterpart, with the result that the former often serves as a medium for communication with the latter.

The following praise-names of Orí demonstrate how the attributes of the physical head are used to highlight the image of the spiritual one:

Orí, Oníṣe, Àdaáyé
Orí, Àpéré, Àṣ̀ákáàrámọ̀-tàà lójà Èjígíbómòkùn.
Àti láìsù mí pàdà lèhin èni
Orí báá (ọkọ) ohun gbogbo
Orí l’ábákí,
Gbogbo ara kò jé ìnkankan
Bí ori bá kúrò lí ara,
Ọkùtù ló kù,
Kùkù́rákú ara kò rẹ̀rù.
Orí jòwò dákun;
Ma pàdà lèhin mí,
Orí ọkọ ohun gbogbo.¹⁹

Orí, cause and creator
Orí Aporé, who makes bean-cakes but never
sells them at Ejigbomekun²⁰ market.
(Orí) the Great Companion who never deserts one.
Orí, the master of all.
It is the Orí we should praise.
The rest of the body comes to naught.
When Orí is missing from the body,
What remains is useless.
What remains is incapable of carrying any load.
It is the Orí which bears the load.
Orí, I pray you.
Do not desert me,
You, the lord of all things.

Here, the indispensability of Ori is stressed, while he is also called ọkọ, ‘husband’, meaning ‘master’, implying Orí’s invincibility and absolute

¹⁹ – This praise for Orí is known and recited by most Ifá priests I interviewed in Òṣù State, Nigeria.
²⁰ – Èjígíbómèkùn: a mythical Yoruba market.
power to control any situation (except the Asẹ of Olorun). Thus, it is believed that all creatures use their Orí to master their environment, and overcome the difficulties peculiar to them. In other words, Orí provides the Asẹ (Authority) to make all accomplishments possible, as can be observed in this incantation:

Orí Ajá ni Ajá fí ni la igate
Orí ni Òpódùrì fí ni ọ̀ròkò,
Orí ni ọ̀gbónin Ògbónin fí ni la iwo
Orí ẹ́já ló ń ba Òjá ń lá iṣẹ́ú
Orí Akaàsà ló ń ba Akaàsà ló odo
Orí l'owáwá wá fí ni la ipèrè, ẹ̀kùkù
Orí ẹ́ni ni isájú ẹ̀kù
Oun naa ni isámọ̀nà ẹ̀kù
Orí ẹ́ni ni iba ni 'gbèrè ohun re.\textsuperscript{21}

The Dog’s Orí helps it to cut through the bush.
Thunder uses Orí to split the Iroko tree.
Every Deer grows a pair of horns through Orí.
With its Orí, Fish swims without mishap in water.
Ówàwà, Rat’s Orí helps it to go through caves.
Orí precedes man,
It also guides him,
Orí plans good things for its owner.

Although in that incantation the Yoruba use the same word ‘Orí to refer to both Orí-inú and Orí-Ôde, they make a clear distinction between the two in the visual arts. In this connection, I have pointed out elsewhere the occurrence of Orí motifs in Ìròkè (figure 4), the divining tapper, used in gently striking the tray during divination.\textsuperscript{22}

Ivory, a much prized material most commonly used for Ìròkè, reflects the value Yoruba people attach to this object. Indeed, there is evidence from the Ifá literary corpus\textsuperscript{23} that Ìròkè was valued at not less than 1,400 cowries in the distant past; this gives us an idea of the expense of building Ilé-Orí.

The Ìròkè has a very important role in Ifá divination. The diviner uses it to greet Ọrùnmìlà and to invoke his spirit to reveal the destiny (that is, Orí) of the supplicant. The striking of the Ìròkè against the Ifá tray represents a contact with the spiritual level enabling divination to start.

On the Ìròkè, Orí-Inú is symbolized by the topmost or pointed segment whose conical shape brings to mind the Ìborí. It sits on top of the human head in the middle segment, as if Orí-Inú is asserting power and supremacy over Orí-Ôde. This arrangement brings out, in clear visual terms, the hierarchy in Orí symbolism as well as the distinction between Orí-inú, whose symbol is an abstract, geometricized cone, and Orí-ode, which has a naturalistic human head for its own.

For the visual configuration I have described above, wherein Orí-Inú sits firmly on top of Orí-Ôde in the Ìròkè, there would appear to be a verbal correlative in Orí’s orìkì. This is Ayánná, meaning literally ‘that which is affixed to one’, one of the several praise names of Orí. Ayánná hints at the Yoruba belief that Orí, once chosen in heaven, becomes completely a part of the individual that chose it.
Literally and metaphorically, Orí is served and revered by those over whom it reigns. Thus, the parts of the human body, hands, neck, legs, arms and all, take care of the head (Orí-Ôde) and run errands for it. Similarly, Orí-Ôde serves and honours Orí-inka who in turn pays its own respect to Orí-ise in heaven. Orí-ise, who has as a praise name Àkátàgbirígbirígbiri,24 literally ‘The one-with-the-umbrella-shaped-body-that-rolls-freely-on-its-side’, then pays homage to Olódúmarè, the supreme being, who is asked to plead on behalf of humanity in his characteristic manner.

The task of choosing a good Orí in heaven is not easy since all are conical in shape and look exactly alike. The Yoruba solution to this dilemma is the kneeling nude female figure holding her breasts in Ìrókè. Sometimes the design is abbreviated and just a head is represented. The female intervenes on behalf of humanity to ensure the selection of good Orí, which must be chosen and ‘received kneeling down’ (Àkúnlègaba). A man’s kneeling is not as potent and as sacred as that of a woman. Here is Ìkúnle-àbiyàmo, the-kneeling-of-the-pains-at-childbirth. Linked to the greatest act of reverence that man can give to the ìrìsà are the special qualities and position of women as those through whom all have come into the world.25 But, perhaps, a more specific symbolic value here of the kneeling woman is that she represents the very moment the selection of Orí occurs.

The bottom segment of the Ìrókè has no definite subject-matter, but most have themes of victory and success as typified in the representation of horsemen, music-makers, and the like. Whereas in the topmost and middle segments, man is utilizing all energy within his reach to influence the choice of a good Orí, the third segment represents ìdáyéhá, the fulfillment of this desire in a visible form, thereby making a strong reference to Orí as the source of all good things. Conversely, it is also over Orí that we should give thanks for everything we have received. This notion is clearly stated in the following Ìjà verse:

Orí níkan
Lò tó Aláson bá ròkun
Bí mo bá lòwò lòwò
Orí ní ì ó rò fún
Bí mo bá bímo láyé
Orí mí ní ì ó rò fún.
Ire gogbo tó mo bá ní láyé
Orí ní ì ó rò fún.
Orí mi, Iwò ni.
It is Orí alone
Who can accompany his devotee to any place
Without turning back
If I have money,
It is my Orí I will praise
My Orí, it is you
If I have children on earth,
It is my Orí to whom I will give praise
My Orí, it is you
All good things I have on earth,
It is Orí, I will praise
My Orí, it is you.26

23 – Wándé Abímbólá (1968: 26).
25 – See also Drewal and Drewal (1989), Drewal (1977) and Òdugbésìn (1969).
As the only ever-present partner, the Yoruba person is with his *Orí* in all situations, whether favourable or not; there is virtually no limit to the amount an individual can spend on propitiating his *Orí*.

In conclusion, I shall examine the symbolism of the cone in *Orí*. The apex of the cone, *Ibi sónso*, is the place for *Orí-Apéré* which stays by itself on the highest throne, with no competition from any force or divinity (*Olórun* excluded, of course). By virtue of his position, all requests must be sanctioned by *Orí*, before any other power, force, or divinity can act on them, favourably or otherwise. This would mean that *Orí* is the channel of communication between man on earth and the *Oríṣà* whose help he solicits. This is probably why *Orí* is praised thus:

*Kò sòòsà tì í dà níi gbè*  
Léhin orí ẹnì  
*Orí pèlè,*  
Aṣètè níran  
Aṣètè gbéni kòòsà  
Kò sòòsà tì í dà níi gbè  
Léhin orí ẹnì  
*Orí pèlè,*  
*Orí àbíyè*  
Eni Orí bá gbe bọ̀ọ̀ rẹ̀  
*Ko yọ sè̀ṣè*  

No god shall offer protection  
Without sanction from *Orí*  
*Orí*, we salute (you)  
Whose protection precedes that of other *oríṣà*  
Without sanction from *Orí*  
*Orí*, we salute (you)  
*Orí* that is destined to live  
Whosesoever sacrifice *Orí* chooses to accept,  
Let him rejoice.

Consequently, the Yoruba with his concept of *Orí*, is always conscious of the duality of his being, namely, the material mortal self, and the spiritual one. This duality is aptly reflected in *Irúkẹ*, where *Orí-Óde*, the human head, is abstract and symbolic. In the abstract form of *Orí-inú*, the material body with its attendant limited mortal senses is dropped in favour of a geometricized abstract symbol, the cone.

In actual life experience, the spiritual *Orí’s* qualities such as immortality, ever-presence and insuperable power are employed where human efforts fail or appear inadequate. Thus in extreme conditions of bad or good health, fortune or misfortune, the Yoruba resort to *Orí* for rectification or gratification. Similarly, on request, a person’s *Orí* can guide his offspring, no matter how physically distant. A child may also summon his deceased parent’s *Orí* to fortify his own if the need arises.

The concept of *Orí* in its religio-artistic manifestations has become important in the overall Yorùbá definition of man, most especially his spiritual essence and predestination, affecting his goals and achievements on earth. In figural sculpture, for example, the head, *Orí*, irrespective of its favoured mode of representation, constitutes the essence and identity of the subject, be it an *oríṣà* or human being. Consequently, the head is rendered unusually large in size, and its technical execution is often
elaborate. It is given appropriate marks, features, and carries fitting objects in order to facilitate its identification.

Details such as ears, nose, mouth, and especially eyes draw attention to Ori-Ôde's communicative and governing properties. And for the devotee who believes that 'the face is important in communication' (Oju in òrò wa), a properly executed face invariably heightens his religious concentration and makes supplication more effective. On the whole, the de-emphasis of other parts of the human figure in most Yoruba religious art, through artistic devices such as proportion, detail and other acceptable technical processes of execution, would appear to strengthen Ori's claim to supremacy in the physical and spiritual realms.

That Ori demands this much artistic activity makes it the natural focus of much artistic criticism and aesthetic judgement, while for the religious devotee it is the tangible focus of address for all supplications and the point of contact with the spiritual self.

In Yoruba traditional thought, Ori is the source, as well as the most active ingredient, of the psychological and philosophical identity of man. The graphic reduction of Ori-iná to the cone is not just symbolically appropriate but perfectly reflects the mythical allusions characterising the whole concept of the spiritual Ori. Rising from a round broad base and ending in a point at the apex, the conically shaped ìborí appears to describe the ascent of Ori-iṣẹ to the position of authority and power. Apéré, the seat of Ori at the apex of the cone provides a visual explanation of the vantage point from which Ori-iṣẹ must have 'floored', 'defeated' or 'felled' his rivals.

If the base circle of this symbolic cone graphically suggests where all defeated ìrógà may have been located after Ori-iṣẹ had assigned them their respective duties, it would make sense to assume that from the tip or top point the first spiritual Ori controlled the destinies of all beings and òrìṣà.

Oral tradition strongly supports the notion that the tip of the cone symbolizes the location of Ori-iná's ìṣẹ, the authority and power which enables it to accomplish necessary and difficult tasks. The tip (or top of the head in the case of Ori-Ôde) leads and designates the way. One incantation already cited in this essay narrates how Ori helps to '... cut through the bush', '... split the Òkò tree', '... grow a pair of horns', '... swim without mishap in water', '... go through the caves', '... precedes', '... guides', '... [and] plans good things [for its owner].'

The symbol of Ori-iná does not need to have facial features like Ori-Ôde to facilitate its recognition as spiritual head. In many ways the conical ìborí reminds us of the Yorùbá Òba, 'divine king', with a veil to conceal his identity, and more importantly, to give that aura of divine presence. An excellent example of this is the celebrated Òrè crown of the Òpíni of Ìfè, which is worn only once in a year during the Òljójó festival (see figure 5). Indeed, the Òba who is also Olorí (a ruler and head) happens to rule with ìṣẹ like Ori-iná.

With the exception of a single, free standing cowrie shell usually sewn on the side of ìborí to mark the face and provide a focus for the devotee, no other attempt is made to describe the face. Like the Yoruba crown, Adé, the ìborí is ritually potent and aesthetically pleasing from all sides.
The Yorùbá preference for an abstract form such as the cone to symbolize Ṣẹ̀rẹ̀-Ènú suggests their awareness of the need to distinguish the spiritual Ṣẹ̀rẹ̀ from its human counterpart, Ṣẹ̀rẹ̀-Ọ̀dè. The complex concept of the conical form, however, remains to be explained and understood through visual parallels like Ọdè, and corroborative oral literature as in the Òdù describing Ṣẹ̀rẹ̀.

Ilé-Ṣẹ̀rẹ̀, which houses ìbòrì, also reminds us of the honour accorded the Yoruba Ọ̀ba. As a most expensive ‘mini-palace’, it hints at a possible origin of today’s elaborate Yorùbá crown complex, and perhaps, also the idea of Ọ̀afin (the palace), both of which call for a community’s most substantial economic and artistic resources. It is my contention that ancient Yoruba crowns were once made of cowrie shells instead of beads,
a possibility that could lend support to the still relatively unexplored relationship between Òlọrọ and the adé. Indeed, a good number of Yorùbá crowns are still hailed with the acclamation, adé-ówó, meaning ‘crown made of cowries’.

In this essay, I have shown how Òwe as visual and verbal forms constitutes a means or egin (horse), by which Òrí as Òrọ can descend to the human level, and humans make a spiritual ascent to Òrí. This two-way communication through Òwe is mutually beneficial to both Òrísà who is in the spiritual plane and man who is on the material plane of existence. On the one hand, Òrọ, being overly-energetic and restless, yearns to be expressed in, and to communicate with something, the main reason for its eviction by Òdùmàrè; and on the other hand, man needs to communicate with his spiritual Òrí, and on the other Òrísà which are classifiable as Òrọ, for assistance, inspiration and illumination in solving human problems.

The necessity for free communication makes it possible for the definitions of Òwe to extend much beyond the one discussed in this paper. Ordinary items and objects, be they verbal or visual, which are not normally intended to be Òwe can acquire the function, when or if the situation calls for it. This phenomenon is supported by the saying: Òjú ló dë l’orí n d’òwe, ‘it is because people are quarrelling that a song innocently sung becomes an Òwe’.

Functioning as art, and existing as an independent entity, Òwe lends itself to almost an unlimited range of interpretation and application. Òwe also functions among the Yoruba as an important pedagogic tool in traditional education. They use it in settling disputes and finding solutions to hard problems. And, not infrequently, Òwe is used to concretize abstract and religious concepts in traditional belief.

Quite appropriately, the Yoruba describe Òwe as egin Òrọ, literally, ‘horse of word’, which they send to find a ‘lost’ solution. In other words, they employ Òwe in its verbal, visual and performing modes to bring an idea to greater effect. Òwe hints at the Yoruba creative genius, their deep esoteric knowledge of things and events around them, as well as their intellectual power of vivid expression.

Understandably, the society holds in high esteem those who can skillfully and effectively use Òwe. Rulers, diviners, artists and elders all endeavour to master Òwe in its explicatory and aesthetic dimensions to win the respect of their subject, audience or client. Yet the recognition and understanding of Òwe in any form is not automatic. It is systematically acquired through alertness, intellect, and a conscious study of Yorùbá oral tradition as the Yorùbá themselves affirm: bí Òwe, bí Òwe ní à n lu ilà Ògídígbó. Ògídígbón ní í jọ ọ. Ómọran ní í sì àmọ ọ. ‘The rhythm of Ògídígbo drumming is proverbial. Only the wise can dance to it and, only the discerning are able to understand and interpret it.’

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