

## AFRICAN ART AND LITERATURE

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*Cover:* Plaque with figure of a serpent (seventeenth century). Benin, Nigeria, Guinea Coast, Africa. Bronze; 39.5 cm H × 19.5 cm W. Gift of Alan Wurtzburger, by exchange BMA 1958.58. (Reproduced by permission of The Baltimore Museum of Art, Baltimore, Maryland 21218, USA.)

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# Verbal and visual metaphors: mythical allusions in Yoruba ritualistic art of *Orí*

ROWLAND ABIODUN

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.

## *Hòḡ-Rò* OR *ÒRò*

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 *òrò*. It is important to point out that this *òrò* 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 *òrò* will be used in this paper.

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

Òrò gbé'nú àgbà kìn,  
Ó ró kù  
Ó ró kẹ  
Ó ró gì.  
Òrò tó'já nínú àgbà,  
Ó tóbi bí agbè.  
Òrò tó já nínú àgbà  
Ókún agbè  
A d'í fá fún òrò-òrò-òrò,  
Nígbà un ò rí ẹnìkan básòrò,  
Mo bá ń gbin.<sup>1</sup>

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1 – D. Adeniji, author, and keen student of Yoruba oral literature, at present a Research Assistant, Institute of African Studies, University of Ibadan, Ibadan. Personal communication, 15 March 1976.

Ọ̀rọ̀, the cause of great concern for the wise and experienced elders.  
 It sounds *kù* (making the heart miss a beat)  
*Kẹ̀* (as a ponderous object hitting the ground).  
*Gì* (making the last sound before silence).  
 The ọ̀rọ̀ that drops from the elderly  
 Is stupendous.  
 It was divined for Ọ̀rọ̀-ọ̀rọ̀-ọ̀rọ̀  
 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 *Olodumare*, the Lord creator made *Họ́ọ́*, comprised of *ọ́gbón* (wisdom) *ìmọ́* (knowledge), and *òye* (understanding), which are among the most important forceful elements of creation. But it was not, however, until the descent of *Họ́ọ́* to become *Họ́ọ́-rọ́* or *Ọ̀rọ̀* and with the indispensable aid of the deity *Èlà*, that the highly energy-charged heavenly constituents of *Ọ̀rọ̀* could be digested and applied to human needs. The following *Ifá* verse from *Ọ̀sa-Gudá* graphically captures the state of suspense which accompanied the descent of *Họ́ọ́* at creation:

Ó dá Ké se, kése  
 Awó ilé ayé,  
 Ó rọ́ dẹ̀dẹ̀ – dẹ̀dẹ̀ – dẹ̀dẹ̀  
 Kò bá – 'lẹ̀,  
 Awó òde-ọ̀run 5  
 Ó-rí-fanranyán-fanranyán  
 Agbadagúdú  
 Nná àn ni Awo Àfonífojí  
 A dífá fún aye òun ọ̀run  
 Nígbatí ayé òun ọ̀run ńbẹ̀ 10  
 Tí wọ̀n kò ni olùgbé  
 Agbadagúdú mé jì rẹ̀,  
 Kò ní ẹ̀yẹ̀ àti màlẹ̀kù  
 Tí ńgbẹ̀ ibẹ̀  
 Ọ̀dùmàrè nìkan ló dá'ra rẹ̀ 15  
 T'ó dá dide  
 L'a fi ńpe Ọ̀dùmàrè  
 Ní Anìkan dágbon  
 Anìkan dágbon ilé-ayé  
 Ọ̀un ni ó ẹ̀un 20  
 Ànìkan dágbon òde-ọ̀run  
 Ìwọ lo ẹ̀ ẹ̀yàn  
 Nígbatí o'ò ni ẹ̀nìkejí  
 Èmi l'ò dágbon sí í  
 Ní jọgbón ó yí mọ wọ̀n lẹ̀wọ́ 25  
 L'awọ̀n nìkan  
 Ànìkan òdé ọ̀run  
 Làé pé Ọ̀dùmàrè  
 Wọ̀n ní Anìkan-dagbón  
 Ọ̀mọ̀ mọ̀ sẹ̀ unun o 30  
 Anìkan dágbon  
 Iwọ lo mọ̀ mọ̀ sẹ̀ ẹ̀yàn.  
 Làìgbọ̀ ti enìkejì  
 O dájó, ó yanjú wánrán.<sup>2</sup>

There-were-no-living-things  
 was the priest on earth.  
 That – which – was – suspended  
 But – did – not – descend,  
 Was the priest in heaven 5  
 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, 10  
 With no inhabitants  
 In the two empty shells,  
 There were neither birds nor spirits  
 Living in them  
 Òdùmàrè<sup>3</sup> then created himself, 15  
 Being the Primal cause,  
 Which is the reason we call Òdùmàrè  
 The only wise one on earth,  
 He is the only cause in creation, 20  
 The only wise one in heaven,  
 Who created humans.  
 When He had no companion,  
 He applied wisdom to the situation  
 To avert any disaster. 25  
 You, alone,  
 The only one in Heaven  
 Is the name of Òdùmàrè  
 The only wise one,  
 We give you thanks, 30  
 The only-knowing-mind,  
 You created man.  
 Listening to one side of an argument,  
 You judge, and all are pleased.

3 – Òdùmàrè: this is the same as Olódùmàrè.

Òdùmàrè 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 *Qgbón* (wisdom), held it in his palm and thought where it could live. After a while, Òdùmàrè released *Qgbón* to fly away and look for a suitable place to lodge. When *Qgbón* could not find a suitable abode, it flew back, humming like a bee, to Òdùmàrè who took *Qgbón* and swallowed it. Similarly *ìmò*, and *òye*, which were also created, returned for lack of suitable abodes, and were swallowed for the same reason.

Òdùmàrè then ‘slept’, but not in the human sense of the word:

Sísùn bí àìsùn  
 Sísùn bí àìsùn,  
 Èlẹyẹ fi ìye jù un lóju  
 Mo ní kìnì mo ẹe?  
 Òdùmàrè kù sùn.

Seemingly asleep but awake,  
 Seemingly dormant but alive  
 Èlẹ̀yẹ̀ (the witches) swished  
 their wings against my face  
 I asked what my offence was,  
 Òdùmàrè never slumbers.

After several ‘thousand’ years during which Òdùmàrè was disturbed by the incessant humming of *Qgbón*, *Ìmò* and *Òye*, he decided to get rid of them in order to have some peace.

So he ordered *Qgbón*, *Ìmò* and *Òye* to descend (*eò*) making the sound *hòò*. Thus the three heavenly bodies now known as *Hòò-rò* or *Òrò*, 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, *Òrò* was suspended in mid-air like an egg and did not melt, but then it dropped to earth and split (*là*).

In *Òrò*’s new state it is identified with Èlà, the deity which functions in the Ifá 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 *Órúnmilà* and Èlà are sometimes used interchangeably, even though Èlà is probably a separate deity in its own right within the Ifá divination system. Be that as it may, Èlà became the first recognized authoritative source of communication and explanation of the nature of Òdùmàrè and all his creation. Hence Ifá confirms:

Ta ló kọ wí?  
 Èlà ló kọ wí  
 Ta ló kọ sọ?  
 Èlà ló kọ sọ  
 Ta ní a ti è ñpè ní Èlà?  
 Hòò tó rọ naà  
 Nì à ñpè 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 *Hòò* which descended  
 That we call Èlà.

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

Èlà utters through *Òwe* literally ‘proverbs’, but which in broad usage can metaphorically apply to the communicative properties of sculpture, *àròkò*,<sup>4</sup> dance, drama, song, chant, poetry, incantations like *qfò*, *Ògèdè*, *àyájó*, *èpè*, *odú*, *èṣà* 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 *Òwe* has been employed in this paper. The following Yoruba saying throws some light on its place and function:

4 – *Àròkò*: a gift. It can also refer to a collection of items or objects put together in particular order by one person to convey a message to another.

Òwe l'ẹsin ọ̀rọ̀  
Tí ọ̀rọ̀ bá sọ̀nù  
Òwe la fiíwáa.

Òwe is the horse of Ọ̀rọ̀  
If Ọ̀rọ̀ gets lost  
Òwe is employed to find (uncover) it.

Òwe operates between Ọ̀rọ̀ on the spiritual plane and the earth-level where Ọ̀rọ̀ can be understood, assimilated and utilized by humans. Similarly, communication with the Ọ̀rìsà, ancestors, and invisible bodies in heaven<sup>5</sup> is made possible through the channel of Òwe.

In ordinary day-to-day communication, it is possible to employ Òwe where subtlety or indirectness is required. In this context, however, Ọ̀rọ̀ would mean an abstract, and not necessarily a religious, concept. Essentially, therefore, Òwe serves to illuminate and elucidate Ọ̀rọ̀ at all levels of its meaning, to the extent that Ọ̀rọ̀ ceases to be enigmatic. Thus, Yoruba deities like Èṣu, Sàngó, Ọya, Ogún become closer and more approachable to worshippers through their sculptural forms, songs, incantations, dances, etc. In their divination session Ifá priests call on Èlà to be present in order to provide explanations for the multifarious problems brought by supplicants:

Ifá rọ̀ wá o,  
Èlà rọ̀ wá o o,  
Bí ò ní bẹ̀ lápa òkun,  
Kó rọ̀ mọ̀ wá  
Bí ò ní bẹ̀ ní Wánrán oojumọ̀  
N bi ojú tí mọ̀ ọ̀ wá,  
Tètè ni ko rọ̀ mọ̀ wa, Èlà?

Ifá please descend,  
Èlà, please be present.  
If you are in the ocean,  
Please come.  
If you are in mid-lagoon,  
Please come.  
Even if you are at 'Wánrán' in the East  
Where the sun rises,  
Come urgently, Èlà.

With the aid of Èlà, Ọ̀rọ̀ is made manifest, and it is beautifully 'clothed' in poetry, maxims and wise sayings, all of which are Òwe.<sup>6</sup> For as the saying goes, *Kolombo ni Ọ̀rọ̀ nírìn*, 'Ọ̀rọ̀ moves around naked' and it is forbidden to see it in that state. It is much feared, like the Yoruba Orò<sup>7</sup> (bull roarer) spirit whose nocturnal appearance (usually to counter and ward off epidemics and strange disasters) causes streets to become deserted and people to stay in their own homes. This would imply that although Òwe is basically communicative, it often acquires aesthetic properties and may delineate artistic processes in order to be effective in the fulfilment of its function.

And, because Òwe possesses a multiplicity of metaphorical meanings, one manifestation complements another as long as the concept remains

5 – The Yoruba believe that reality is made up of both *Ará Ayé*, 'people here on earth'; and *Ará Ọ̀run*, 'beings in heaven'. Unusual events and happenings on important market days, and festivals, are often attributed to *Ará Ọ̀run* 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 – Orò: 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 Orò cult. When it comes out at night, non-initiates, women and children are forbidden to see it. A Yoruba myth attributes Orò's nakedness to his wife, 'a spendthrift who could not resist the attractions of food and trifles'. By contrast, *Egungun*, Orò'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 *Òrìsà* 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.<sup>8</sup>

8 – See Ojo-Cole (1931).

#### ORÍ INÚ

In Africa, where most communities are traditionally non-literate, the continuity of *òwe* 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 *Orí* or *Orí-Inú* (Inner Head, ‘Destiny’) through the visual statement of its symbol and its correlative in oral literature.

*Orí-inu*’s counterpart in the Yoruba pantheon is *Orí-isese* (Head – the Designator), also known as *Orí-Oorò* (*Head-at-dawn*). *Orí Àkókó* (the first head), *Orí Àpèrè* (Head-the-ruler) or simply *Orí* (Head), is believed to be the first and the most important *Òrìsà* in heaven, *Ọrun*. And because of its primal place, *Orí isèse* has jurisdiction over *Orí-Inú*, which is essentially a prototype of *Orí-isèse*, and the spiritual and personal head or divinity possessed by each and every man and *Òrìsà*. Thus, the *Orí-inú* of each being, thing or *Òrìsà* determines its immediate destiny, while *Orí Isèse* rules supremely over all individual and personal *Orí* in heaven.

Each person and *Òrìsà*, before coming to earth, must visit *Àjàlá* the maker of Heads (*orí*) in heaven. *Àjàlá*, who is sometimes forgetful, produces some *orí* that are defective. If one has the bad luck to choose a less than perfect *orí*, his life (destiny) on earth will be severely affected.<sup>9</sup>

9 – See Abimbólá (1976: 113–149).

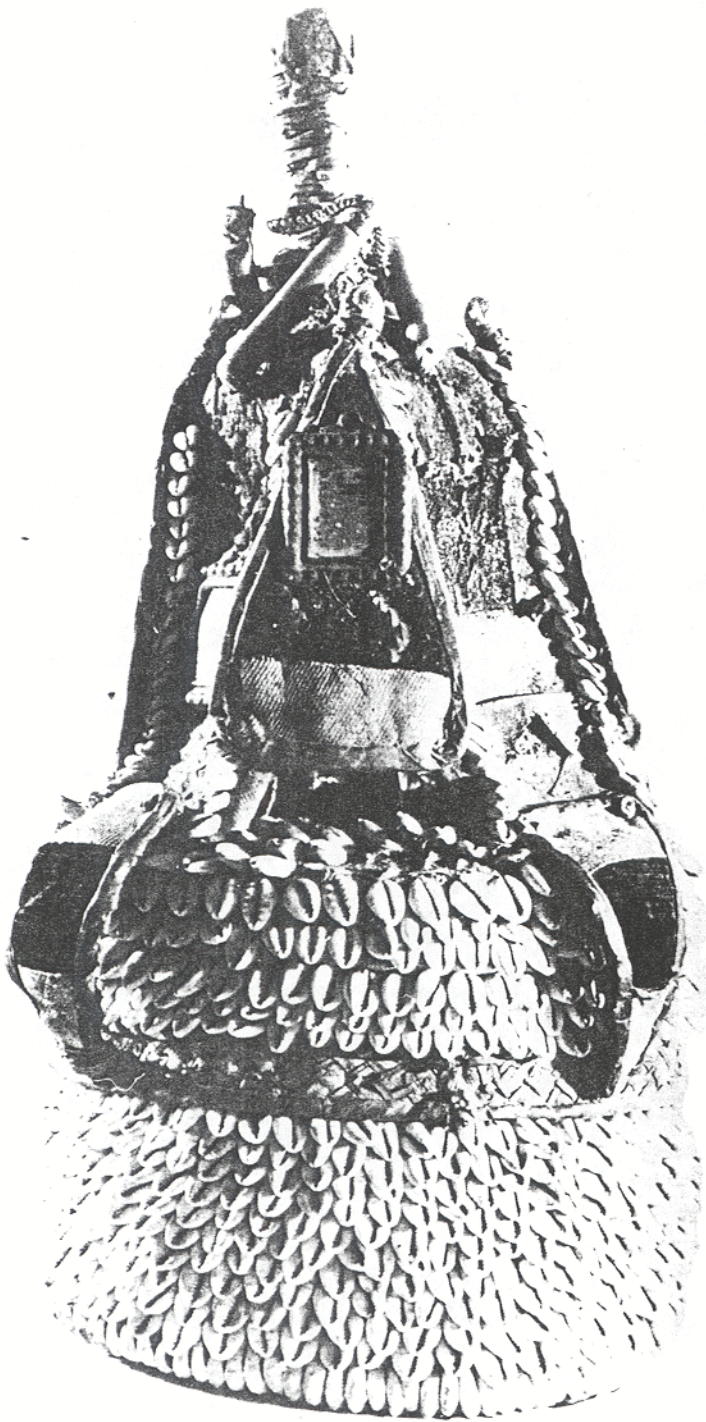
A person’s *Orí-inu* is so crucial to a successful life that it is propitiated frequently, and its support and guidance is sought before undertaking any new task. For this reason, personal *Orí* shrines are indispensable and are present in most homes, irrespective of sex, religious belief, or cult affiliation.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

The object symbolizing *Orí* 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 *Odù-Ifá* praising *Orí*). 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 *Orí*. 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 *Orí* symbol really complete without an accompanying container to house, honour and beautify it. Often from the same leather-craftsman, an *Orí* devotee, as soon as he can afford it, orders a bigger crown-like structure called *Ilé-Orí*, literally ‘house of *Orí*’ (see figure 1) to house the small conical object symbolizing *Orí*. The decoration of *Ilé-Orí* is very elaborate, and time-consuming. In all, about



Figure 1. *Ilé Orí* (House of the Head), hide, cloth, beads, cowrie shells and glass, ht 35cm (Collection of Dr and Mrs Richard Taylor).



12,000 tiny cowries called *Qwó/Érọ́* (meaning 'propitiation fee') embellish this impressive structure. This is the most costly act of honour that an individual can do to any *Òrìsà*, hence the saying:

Pansiki – pànsiki là òsínwó Orí,  
Wòjò-wòjò là á síkùn ọlà.<sup>10</sup>

10 – Abimbólá, personal communication, 10 May 1979.

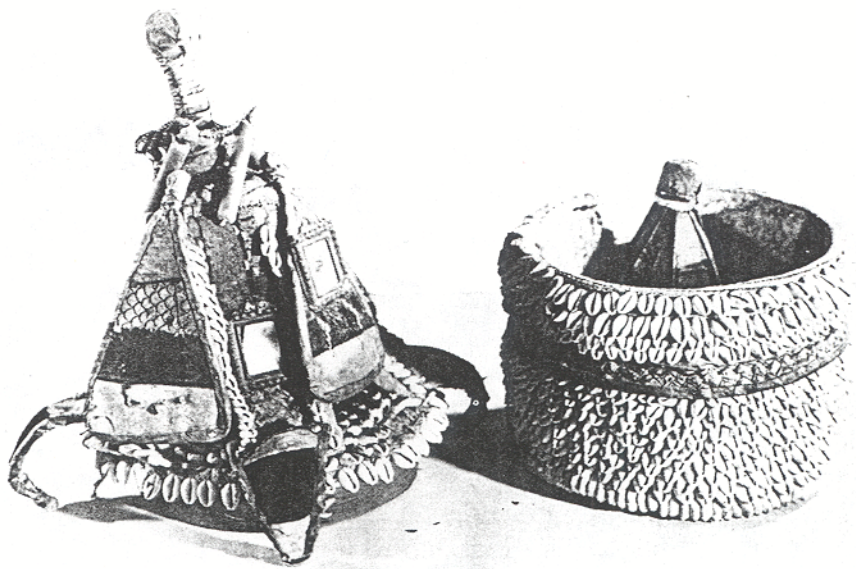


Figure 2. *Ile-Orí* (House of the Head), uncovered with the *Orí* symbol just visible in the cylindrical base of *Ile-Orí*.



Figure 3. The *Orí* symbol (centre) is displayed between the top and the base of *Ile-Orí*. *Orí* 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 *Orí*'s house,  
 But loose and free are the beads of the wealthy.

It is hard to imagine a more fitting residence of *Orí*, the cause and essence of one's being.

*Ìbọrí*, as the Yoruba call the *Orí*-symbol, remains in its *Ile-Orí* except during consultation or propitiation. On such occasions, the devotee will

place *Ìbọ̀rí* 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 *Orí* 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 *ẹ̀rọ̀*, 'softner', softens *Orí*, that is, makes it work more in favour of the owner, where that *Orí* is found to be 'hard', *le* (that is, unlucky, or doing the opposite).

Snails are offered to ask *Orí* to avert an impending disaster; sugarcane, to pray for happiness, or joy; while *àádùn* (ground roasted corn) and honey are alternative offerings for the same request. Through *Ifá* divination an *Orí* 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 *Orí* devotee makes to his *Orí* into four main categories, as I have attempted to show in table 1.

Table 1. *Orí* categories.

SACRIFICE	FUNCTIONS
A Kolanut ( <i>Obi</i> )	To ward off evil. Also used to perform simple divination which would reveal <i>Orí</i> 's special demands.
B Water ( <i>Omi tútú</i> ) Snails ( <i>Igbín</i> ) Coco-nut ( <i>Àgbon</i> )	These are all <i>ẹ̀rọ̀</i> 'softners' which act on <i>Orí</i> whose main problem is hardness. They avert disasters.
C Sugar Cane ( <i>Ìrèké</i> ) Ground roasted Corn ( <i>Àádùn</i> )	To attract good-fortune and bring happiness.
D Cock ( <i>Àkùko</i> ) Duck ( <i>Èpéyẹ</i> ), 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 <i>Aye</i> , <sup>11</sup> 'the wicked ones', because they have a great potential for negative activity.

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

Section D of the table is not only important but can be very expensive. Abimbola<sup>12</sup> has identified this type of sacrifice as *Olúbòbòtírìbò*, *baba ẹ̀bọ̀*, meaning 'peoples' mouths'.

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

Orí ló ní dá ẹ̀ni.  
Èsì ondayé  
Orisà ló ní pa'ni í dà  
Ọ̀n on pa orisà á dà:  
Orisà ló pa ní í dà  
Bí ọ̀sun sun.  
Ayé má pa tẹ̀mi dà  
Kí orí mi má ẹ̀ orí hẹ̀hẹ̀  
Kí o má gbà' bọ̀dè.<sup>13</sup>

12 – Abimbólá (1976: 37, 39–40).

13 – The verse was recited by a client of *Ifá* at a short religious rite for his *Orí* in *Ile-Ife* on 12 December 1976.

Orí is the creator of being  
 Before the world began  
 It is the Orisa (supreme being) who can  
 change being.  
 No one changes Orisa (supreme being).  
 It is *Òrisà* 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 *Ìbọrí* and places it sideways instead of in its normal upright position. This action informs the *Orí* that its owner has 'slept' (*sùn*). This same next-of-kin then puts a whole kolanut into a container of cold water, and places it besides the *ibọrí*. On this occasion, the kolanut is called *obì ìtu Orí I'òfọ* (the kolanut with which death is announced). While arrangements 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 '*E wá wo ohun owó se o, owó*' (Come and see what money can do, money).

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

Èmi Olú ló ni o bẹ̀bẹ̀ dé mi o o,  
 Orí, Oníse bẹ̀bẹ̀ de 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 *Ilẹ̀pa*, along with bits of the torn *Ilé-Orí*, and drops them on the ground at the back of his father's house, sobbing:

Orí kì í se ohun tí àá kó dǎnú,  
 A kì í wà aye ìla ìkú,  
 Ikú li o ba ilé-orí 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-ìyẹ̀sẹ* 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 *Qfún-Biretẹ* in *Ifá* literature narrates how it happened:<sup>14</sup>

1. *Weríwerí* òde òrun  
 Ọwẹ̀wẹ̀ tí wẹ̀ ọ̀sìí nu kí ó le mó  
 ̀sákásáká  
 A dá fún Orí kan soṣo,  
 A bú fún Okànlénírinwó Irúnmọ̀lẹ̀,  
 Tí wọn nílọ sí ita Ọlórún Èdá  
 Tí wọn lẹ̀ rẹ̀e pa obì Àṣẹ  
 Ọgbón ní kí wọn ó rúbọ  
 Irínwó irúnmọ̀lẹ̀ kọ, wọn kò rún  
 Orí nikan ní ó rúbọ-àrudá  
 Èmi ní wọn ní kí wọn ó ẹ?  
 Wọn ní kí wọn ó jí ní àkùkọ̀ fẹ̀èrẹ̀fẹ̀  
 Kí wọn kí ó f'oribalẹ̀ fún Elédá  
 Gbogbo Irúnmọ̀lẹ̀ sùn à̀sùnjù,  
 Orí nikan ní ó sun à̀sùnjù,  
 Tí ó fi ara polẹ̀ F'Ọlórún.

2. Wọn wá ẹ̀tán  
 Wọn de Ita Aṣẹ̀dà,  
 Aṣẹ̀dà ní kí Ọgbón gbé obì sílẹ̀  
 Gbogbo Irúnmọ̀lẹ̀ pa'bi, wọn kò lèè pa  
 á,  
 Orí nikan ló pá obì nàà.  
 Orí wáá da obì,  
 Ó yàn kerekere  
 Ariwo réré  
 Igbe ta láàrín òrun,  
 Orí dí Oba fún gbogbo wọn.  
 Àárin gbùngbùn wá di ilẹ̀ Orí.  
 Orí lẹ̀ rẹ̀ 'jókò,  
 Inu wọn ru,  
 Wọn fẹ́ bá Orí faga-gbága!

3. Ọ̀rìsà ló kọ̀ ba Orí òmú  
 Orí da á, ó dá sí itá àjàlámọ̀  
 Nita Àjàlámọ̀ ní Ọ̀rìsà gbé di fínáfiná.  
 Orí dá Ifá, Ifá di Rọ̀kinrọ̀kin  
 Orí dá Àmàkìsì, ó lẹ̀ sí Ilà-Oòrùn.  
 Nibẹ̀ ní Àmàkìsì tí ń tan iná àarọ̀ sílẹ̀  
 ayé.  
 Ó dá kálukú wọn sí ibi tí a gbé ń bọ  
 wọn gbogbo.

1. *Weríwerí*<sup>15</sup> in heaven  
 Ọwẹ̀wẹ̀, who washes away poverty with  
 perfection.  
 It was divined for only one *Orí*,  
 And also for four hundred and one  
 heavenly divinities,  
 Who were going to Ọlórún the Creator-  
 in-chief  
 To attempt to split the kolanut of Àṣẹ  
 Ọgbón (wisdom) directed them to make  
 a sacrifice.  
 Four hundred divinities defied his  
 order.  
 Only *Orí* complied, and his sacrifice  
 was accepted.  
 What was Ọgbón's directive?  
 They were to wake up at the crack of  
 dawn  
 And pay homage to the supreme crea-  
 tor,  
 All the Ọ̀rìsà overslept,  
 Only *Orí* woke up,  
 Rolled himself on the ground in  
 homage to Ọlórún

2. After this,  
 They went to God, the Creator-in-  
 chief,  
 Who asked Ọgbón to present the Kol-  
 anut of authority.  
 All tried but failed to split it,  
 Only *Orí* 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 *Orí*  
 As *Orí* took his seat,  
 The other Ọ̀rìsà envied him,  
 And conspired to dethrone him.

3. Ọ̀rìsà (Ọ̀rìsàálá) was the first to defy  
 his authority.  
 Orí floored him and put him in Àj-  
 àlámọ̀  
 Where destinies are moulded.  
 At Àjàlámọ̀, Ọ̀rìsàílá became the firing  
 Expert of moulded destinies.  
 Next, Orí created Ifá, where Ifá  
 became the  
 Expert on Ikin<sup>16</sup>  
 Next, Orí created Àmàkìsì<sup>17</sup> in the  
 East,  
 Whence shines the morning light on  
 earth.  
 Orí overcame all the Ọ̀rìsà and created  
 them where, today, they are revered.

15 – *Weríwerí*: a praise-name of *Orí*  
 meaning the  
 'Great-cleaner-of-spiritual-Heads'.

16 – *Ikin*: this is the name for the 16  
 sacred palm-kernel nuts which Ifa priests  
 use for divination.

17 – *Àmàkìsì*: this is a Yorùbá Ọ̀rìsà whose  
 duty is to light the world from the east.

4. Èmi mà jí lónì o o,  
 Mo fi orí balẹ̀ f'Ọlórún,  
 Ire gbogbo maá wá bá mi,  
 Orí, mi dá mi da Iye  
 Ng ò kú mọ́  
 Ire gbogbo ni t'èmi  
 Ìmọ́lẹ̀ ni ti Àmàkìsì.

4. Now that I am waking up,  
 I pay homage to Ọlórún.  
 Let all good things come to me.  
 My Orí (Spiritual head) give me life,  
 Empower me to overcome mortality.  
 I shall not die.  
 Let all good things belong to me  
 As light belongs to Àmàkìsì.

This *Odù-Ifá* tells how *Ọgbón* (wisdom) had suggested to all the *Òrìṣà* 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 *Orí* woke up at the specified time, prostrated himself and rolled on his side in homage to *Ọlórún*. Because of his obedience, *Orí* succeeded in splitting *Obì-àṣẹ*, the sacred kolanut of creation and authority, an act which the remaining four hundred *Òrìṣà* struggled to do but could not accomplish.

*Ọgbón* cast *Obì-àṣẹ* for divination and the *Òrìṣà* saw that *Orí* is the favoured leader and head of them all. The highest place, the apical position of authority called *àpèrè*, became *Orí's* throne. From there, he reigns and sends the other *Òrìṣà* on errands.

This situation did not please the other *òrìṣà* who planned to defy his authority. *Orí*, however, won by rolling on the ground and paying homage to *Ọlórún*, as he always did. This manner of communicating with *Ọlórún* earned *Orí* the following rude comment from the other *Òrìṣà*: *Ẹ kò wo kótópó kelebe bí ó tí n fí ara á polẹ̀, tí ó sì fí ara yí ekuru*: 'Look at *kótópó-kelebe*' ('Little-conical-form') rolling and dirtying himself in dust!' It can be inferred that *Kótópó-Kelebe* was the nickname of *Orí* before he became the head of all *Òrìṣà*.<sup>18</sup> Specifically, *Orí-Àpèrè* would indicate his victory over the other gods, and *Orí's* ascension to the apex of the cone of existence that is the source of being.

To know how *Orí* 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 *Orí*. 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 Ifá* that *Orí* 'defeated' (*dá*) *Òrìṣànlá* in the duel which ensued consequent upon *Orí's* elevation to the position of supreme authority over his peers. *Orí* went further to prove his superiority over *Òrìṣànlá* by 'assigning' him to a permanent place called *Òkè-Alámólékè in Òde irànjẹ*, and a specific occupation at *Àjàlámọ̀*, both under the control of *Orí*. Similarly, *Orí* 'floored' (*dá*) *Ifá* and 'made' (*dá*) him the divination expert at *Ìdòròmù-Ìwásẹ̀* in *Ìjilámèrè*. Another *Òrìṣà*, *Àmàkìsì*, he also 'felled' (*dá*) and 'stationed' (*dá*) him at *Ìwọ̀nrán* in *Ìlá-Oórùn*, whence the morning light shines. In this manner all the remaining *Òrìṣà* were defeated and *Orí's* authority permanently established over them.

Because of the circumstances of their creation, all *Òrìṣà* have to pay homage to *Orí*. Similarly, all cult heads and devotees have to touch the earth with their forehead as an act of symbolic respect for the first *Orí*, *Orí-Àpèrè Orí isẹ̀sẹ* or *Orí-Àkọ́kọ́* 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, *Orí-Àpèrè* rules over all *Orí-inú*, which in turn control the destinies of all beings, including the *Òrìṣà* in their

18 – Abimbólá: personal communication, 10 May 1979. The little name or nickname *Kótópó-kelebe* would appear to be used here in a derogatory sense to refer to *Orí's* original status and was perhaps given before his elevation. We can assume that this is an indication of the initial refusal of the remaining *Òrìṣà* to accept *Kótópó-kelebe* as *Orí* (which literally means 'Head' or 'Ruler'). This assumption supports the suggestion that *Orí* is a title rather than a personal name.

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' (Òwe) 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' (*òrò*) which make up *Orí*. A divine symbol like *Ìbqrí* 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-Òde* (literally, 'Outer head') also as a symbol of *Orí-inú* (literally, the inner spiritual head) and so revere it like *Ìbqrí*. 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-Inù*, 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, Àpèré, Aṣ'àkàrà-mó-tàá lójà Èjìgbòmékùn.  
 Atèléní mọ padà lẹhìn ẹnì  
 Orí bàbá (ọkọ) ohun gbogbo  
 Orí l'ábákí,  
 Gbogbo ara kò jẹ ñkankan  
 Bí orí bá kúrò lí ara,  
 Òkùtù ló kù,  
 Kùkùràkù ara kò rẹrù.  
 Orí jòwọ dákun;  
 Ma padà lẹhìn mí,  
 Orí ọkọ ohun gbogbo.<sup>19</sup>

*Orí*, cause and creator  
*Orí-Àpèré*, who makes bean-cakes but never  
 sells them at Ejjigbomekun<sup>20</sup> 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.

19 – This praise for *Orí* is known and recited by most Ifá priests I interviewed in Òyó State, Nigeria.

20 – Èjìgbòmékùn: a mythical Yorùbá market.

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

21 – This verse was recited by the *Aborí* *Ọ̀ḣni* (Priestess) who carries out rites and makes sacrifices on behalf of the *Ọ̀ḣni* to his *Orí*. Personal communication, June 1976.

power to control any situation (except the *Àṣṣé* of *Ọ̀lórún*). 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 *Àṣṣé* (Authority) to make all accomplishments possible, as can be observed in this incantation:

Orí Ajá ni Ajá fi ní la igbó  
 Orí ni Àpáàrà fi ní la Íròkò,  
 Orí ni ọ̀tọ̀tọ̀tọ̀ Àgbọ̀nrín fi ní la ìwo  
 Orí ẹ̀ja ló ní ba Ẹ̀ja á la ibú  
 Orí Àkàsà ló ní ba Àkàsà la odò  
 Orí l'òwàawa fi ní la ipèrèé,  
 Orí ẹ̀ni ni ísájú ẹ̀ni,  
 Ọ̀un naá ní ísámòṅà ẹ̀ni  
 Orí ẹ̀ni ní íba ni 'gbèrò ohun rere.<sup>21</sup>

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.  
 Ọ̀wàwà, 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-Òde*, 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 *Ìròkẹ́* (figure 4), the divining tapper, used in gently striking the tray during divination.<sup>22</sup>

Ivory, a much prized material most commonly used for *Ìròkẹ́*, reflects the value Yoruba people attach to this object. Indeed, there is evidence from the Ifa literary corpus<sup>23</sup> that *Ìròkẹ́* 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 *Ìròkẹ́* has a very important role in Ifa divination. The diviner uses it to greet *Ọ̀rúnmilá* and to invoke his spirit to reveal the destiny (that is, *Orí*) of the supplicant. The striking of the *Ìròkẹ́* against the *Ifá* tray represents a contact with the spiritual level enabling divination to start.

On the *Ìròkẹ́*, *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-Òde*. 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-Òde* in the *Ìròkẹ́*, there would appear to be a verbal correlative in *Orí's oríkì*. This is *Àyànmọ́*, meaning literally 'that which is affixed to one', one of the several praise names of *Orí*. *Àyànmọ́* hints at the Yoruba belief that *Orí*, once chosen in heaven, becomes completely a part of the individual that chose it.

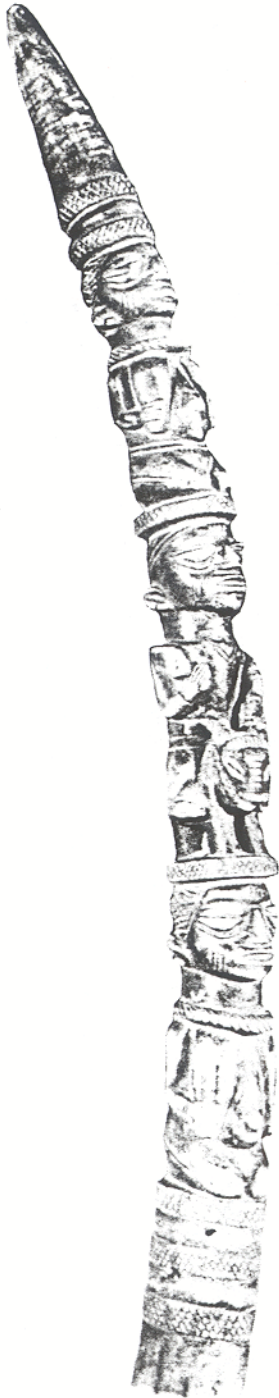


Figure 4. *Ìròkẹ́*, divination tapper, ivory, ht 60cm (Institute of African Studies Museum, University of Ife, Nigeria).



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-Òde*) and run errands for it. Similarly, *Orí-Òde* serves and honours *Orí-Inú* who in turn pays its own respect to *Orí-ìṣṣẹ* in heaven. *Orí-ìṣṣẹ*, who has as a praise name *Àkàtàgbirigbirìgbiri*,<sup>24</sup> literally 'The one-with-the-umbrella-shaped-body-that-rolls-freely-on-its-side', then pays homage to *Olódùmarè*, 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 *Ìròkẹ*. 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' (*Àkúnlẹgba*). A man's kneeling is not as potent and as sacred as that of a woman. Here is *Ìkúnlẹ-abiyamo*, the-kneeling-of-the-pains-at-childbirth. Linked to the greatest act of reverence that man can give to the *òrìsà* are the special qualities and position of women as those through whom all have come into the world.<sup>25</sup> 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 *Ìròkẹ* 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 *àdáyé bá*, 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 *Ifá* verse:

Orí nìkan  
 Ló tó Alásan bá ròkun  
 Bí mo bá lówó lówó  
 Orí ni ní ó rò fún  
 Bí mo bá bímọ láyé  
 Orí mí ni ní ó rò fún.  
 Ire gogbo tí mo bá ní láyé  
 Orí ni ní ó rò fún.  
 Orí mi, Iwọ 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.<sup>26</sup>

22 – Abíòdún (1975: 421–469).

23 – Wándé Abímbólá (1968: 26).

24 – See Olufemi Morakinyo and Akinsólá Akiwọwọ (1981: 23).

25 – See also Drewal and Drewal (1983), Drewal (1977) and Odugbesan (1969).

26 – Wándé Abímbólá (1976: 133–134).

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 sónsò*, is the place for *Orí-Àpéré* 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 *Òrìsà* whose help he solicits. This is probably why *Orí* is praised thus:

Kò sóòsà tí í dá ní gbè  
 Léhìn orí ẹnì  
 Orí pèlẹ́,  
 Àtèté niran  
 Àtèté gbéni kòòsà  
 Kò sóòsà tí í dá ní gbè  
 Léyìn orí ẹnì  
 Orí pèlẹ́,  
 Orí àbiyè  
 Eni Orí bá gbe bọọ rẹ  
 Ko yò sẹ̀sẹ̀<sup>27</sup>

No god shall offer protection  
 Without sanction from *Orí*  
*Orí*, we salute (you)  
 Whose protection precedes that of other *òrìsà*  
 Without sanction from *Orí*  
*Orí*, we salute (you)  
*Orí* that is destined to live  
 Whosoever 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 *Ìrọ̀kẹ́*, where *Orí-Òde*, the human head, is abstract and symbolic. In the abstract form of *Orí-inú*, the material body with its attendant limited mortal senses is fropped 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 *òrìsà* 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 *Orí-Òde'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 *Orí's* claim to supremacy in the physical and spiritual realms.

That *Orí* 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, *Orí* is the source, as well as the most active ingredient, of the psychological and philosophical identity of man. The graphic reduction of *Orí-inú* to the cone is not just symbolically appropriate but perfectly reflects the mythical allusions characterising the whole concept of the spiritual *Orí*. 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-ìṣṣẹ* to the position of authority and power. *Àpéré*, the seat of *Orí* at the apex of the cone provides a visual explanation of the vantage point from which *Ori-ìṣṣẹ* must have 'floored', 'defeated' or 'felled' his rivals.

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

Oral tradition strongly supports the notion that the tip of the cone symbolizes the location of *Orí-inú's* *àsẹ*, the authority and power which enables it to accomplish necessary and difficult tasks. The tip (or top of the head in the case of *Orí-Òde*) leads and designates the way. One incantation already cited in this essay narrates how *Orí* helps to '... cut through the bush', '... split the *Ìrókò* tree', '... grow a pair of horns', '... swim without mishap in water', '... go through the caves', '... precedes', '... guides', '... [and] plans good things [for its owner]'.<sup>7</sup>

The symbol of *Orí-inú* does not need to have facial features like *Orí-Òde* to facilitate its recognition as spiritual head. In many ways the conical *Ìborí* reminds us of the Yorùbá *Ọba*, '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 *Arè* crown of the *Ọṣoni* of Ife, which is worn only once in a year during the *Ọlójó* festival (see figure 5). Indeed, the *Ọba* who is also *Olorí* (a ruler and head) happens to rule with *àsẹ* like *Orí-inú*.

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.



Figure 5. *Arè* Crown with veil of the *Ọ̀ṣ̣ni* of Ife, beads, cowries, medicinal attachments, feathers, ht (without veil) c. 45cm; *Ọ̀ṣ̣ni*'s palace.

The Yorùbá preference for an abstract form such as the cone to symbolize *Orí-Inú* suggests their awareness of the need to distinguish the spiritual *Orí* from its human counterpart, *Orí-Òde*. The complex concept of the conical form, however, remains to be explained and understood through visual parallels like *adé*, and corroborative oral literature as in the *Odù* describing *Orí*.

*Ilé-Orí*, which houses *ìbqrí*, also reminds us of the honour accorded the Yoruba *Ọba*. 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 *ààfìn* (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 *Ilé-Orí* and the *adé*. Indeed, a good number of Yorùbá crowns are still hailed with the acclamation, *adé-owó*, meaning 'crown made of cowries'.

In this essay, I have shown how *Òwe* in visual and verbal forms constitutes a means or *ẹsin* (horse), by which *Orí* as *Òròp* can descend to the human level, and humans make a spiritual ascent to *Orí*. This two-way communication through *Òwe* is mutually beneficial to both *òrìsà* who is in the spiritual plane and man who is on the material plane of existence. On the one hand, *Òròp*, 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 *Orí*, and on the other *Òrìsà* which are classifiable as *Òròp*, 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: *Ìjà ló dé l'orín 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 *ẹsin òròp*, 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 ilù Ògìdìgbó. Ọlógbón ni í jọ ó. Ọmọràn ni í si ì mọ ọ*. 'The rhythm of *Ògìdìgbó*<sup>28</sup> drumming is proverbial. Only the wise can dance to it and, only the discerning are able to understand and interpret it.'

28 – *Ògìdìgbó*: An important traditional Yorùbá drum. It is 'a block of wood about three-feet long, hollowed out and beaten with a rod: it is said to be beaten when the Aláàfin and Basorun dance on annual festivals . . .' (Abraham 1970: 454).

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