

# HISTORY OF RELIGIONS

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A CLUSTER OF  
SACRED SYMBOLS:  
ORIṢA WORSHIP  
AMONG THE  
IGBOMINA YORUBA  
OF ILA-ORANGUN

The Yoruba of southwestern Nigeria, Dahomey, and Togoland number 10–12 million people. Divided as they are by the artificial boundaries created by European colonial powers and by their own history of innertribal conflict, their cultural bond is expressed in a remarkably rich and complex religious heritage. Only now is the oral tradition—a tradition incorporating myths and delightful folktales, the complex poetry of Ijala chanting, the *oriki*, the praise names of gods and humans, and above all in importance the Odu of Ifa—being recorded on tape and in text. In the thousands of Ifa verses the diviner-priests have preserved the wisdom of the Yoruba and provided a principal means of transmitting Yoruba values from one generation to another. Music, dance, and masquerade are all richly informative of the choreography of Yoruba experience in both its sacred and profane aspects.

This paper was presented at a plenary session of the American Academy of Religion in October 1975. I am grateful to my Amherst College colleagues Professors Lawrence A. Babb of the Department of Anthropology and David Wills of the Department of Religion, and to Professors Robert F. Thompson of the Department of the History of Art at Yale University and Benjamin Ray of the Religion Department of Princeton University for helpful critical reading of earlier drafts of the essay. The research for this paper has been pursued over the past five years and supported by a cross-disciplinary grant from the Society for Values in Higher Education, a summer faculty research grant from the Ford Foundation, and a

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The Yoruba live in towns and cities even though 80 percent of the people are engaged in some aspect of agricultural production. They are remarkable among African peoples for their urban lifestyle and their tradition of government by kings or *obas*, who in turn are supported by administrative hierarchies of palace officials, chiefs, and elders. Viewed from one of its many hilltops, the city of Ibadan is a sea of rusty rooftops covering one- and two-story mud brick buildings and housing close to a million people. It is the largest black city in Africa and is situated on the edge of the rain forest and the savanna 100 miles from the port city of Lagos.

Ibadan has long been famous for its seven markets. Its continuing importance for Nigeria's commerce is manifest in the changing skyline with the appearance of Barclay's Bank and the twenty-two-story glass and steel Cocoa House on the edge of the ancient Dugbe market. There can be no doubt about the social change that is taking place among the Yoruba in modern Nigeria, change fashioned by a decade and a half of political independence, the tragedy of the Biafran war, the exporting of rich cocoa crops and oil resources, the increase of university education, and a host of other factors.

And yet, amid the change, traditional Yoruba ways of life and modes of thought have been maintained by the majority of people. The cultural tradition—the fabric of meaning—which has never been static, always undergoing some response to changing social and political circumstances and to the entrance of “foreign” religions, continues to be richly informative for their lives. One simply steps from the shadow of the Cocoa House into the passageways of the ancient compounds of Ibadan and there is traditional Yorubaland. Or one can drive 100 miles northeast to the town of Ila-Orangun and again one enters, not the past, for that is not what tradition means, but a world of experience deeply and richly informed by the ways of the ancestors and of the gods. Electricity has not yet reached this small Igbomina Yoruba town

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grant from the Social Science Research Council. The study of Yoruba religion began with extended visits to the Institute of African Studies, University of Ibadan, Nigeria, in 1971 and 1972, which included investigations in Oyo and Iwo, and residence in Ila-Orangun throughout June and July of 1972 and 1974. I wish to acknowledge the support of Dr. Robert G. Armstrong, director of the Institute of African Studies at Ibadan, for making available the services of Robert Awujoola, who translated the Ifa recitations of babalawo Ifatoogun and who checked my translations of the praise songs and prayers for the *oriṣa*. I am most grateful to His Highness, the Orangun of Ila, for his support of my research in Ila-Orangun. The patient and sensitive assistance of Mr. D. G. Taiwo as interpreter of my inquiries in Ila-Orangun was indispensable, as were the discussions with Bisi Kòmólafé of Ilo-Igbo.



(pop. 45,000). Transistor radios, a Shell petrol station, mosques and churches have arrived. Even so it is the ways of the fathers which continue to shape the quality and style of its life.

In traditional Yorubaland one lives within the *ile*, the "house" or compound. Kinship is defined in terms of one's father. Sons remain within the house of their father and share in the common property of the lineage, participate in the craft or farming by which the *ile* is supported, and bring wives from the lineages of other towns and villages. Life in the compound is regulated by a strict hierarchy of seniority, the authority shifting among the clans within the compound with the eldest male member known as the *bale*, the "father of the house." All others are known as the "sons" or "daughters of the house." The larger social unit of the compound, therefore, transcends in importance all smaller clan and family units. The compound is thus the essential space in terms of which one understands himself and his relation to other persons, groups, and the world.

In the courtyard or in the roads outside the compound walls young boys play soccer with a plastic bottle, sending up shouts and clouds of dust from the parched red laterite earth. Their sisters sit with their mothers or grandmothers in the shade of the veranda, repeating each move at the upright loom or copying the designs their older sisters draw with feathers and cassava starch on sheets of white poplin laid flat on the earthen floor creating the designs on the *adirẹ ẹlẹkọ* cloths. Others work beneath thatched shelters, preparing indigo dye and learning the technique of dipping cloths to achieve the rich blue shades of the wrappers worn by women in the markets. On days when they are not tending their farms or forge, the men gather on the veranda of the chief or in the room of an elder to sip palm wine and engage in hours of conversation. They talk about their crops, or share a story that has been passed on from the palace or traveled from a neighboring town on market day and debate at length, with aphorism and proverbial statement, whatever issues it raises. Within the dark, cool inner chambers of the compound children are born, the elderly find refuge, and parents will be buried. There too one finds the shrines of the gods.

### I

The Yoruba world abounds with gods, known in Yoruba as *oriṣa*. A month does not pass that the annual festival of one or more *oriṣa* is not celebrated; and since these festivals usually last for

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two or more weeks, scarcely a day passes that drumming for an orisha is not heard in one or more compounds. Even if one is not participating in the ritual one cannot deny the sound of the drums, their persistent, penetrating rhythms, or avoid the fact that daily life is shaped by and understood in terms of the power and presence of the orisha. Add to this the Egungun and Eḷeḷḷon festivals for the ancestors and heroes, the Oro and Igbefa festivals marking the new year, and one becomes aware of the fullness of Yoruba ritual life. The Yoruba put the matter quite succinctly: "There are 401 orisha." A longer version, cited by Idowu, asserts:

Worship to the 400 divinities of the right hand;  
Worship to the 200 divinities of the left hand;  
Worship to the 460 divinities  
Who actually line up the road to heaven.<sup>1</sup>

At the entrance of almost every compound of Ila-Orangun there will be a small laterite rock protruding from the base of the wall on the right of the passageway. It may have a bit of yam flour on it or kola or have recently been moistened with palm oil. It is the entrance shrine for Eṣu, who is often called the Yoruba "trickster" god, but more appropriately referred to as the "messenger." Within the compound, and depending upon the degree of puritanism of its Islamic or Christian members, there will be numerous orisha shrines. Some, as at Olorionisango's compound, are shrines of importance for the entire community, places where the annual festival is celebrated. Other shrines are tucked away in the recesses of an inner room, reflecting the sacred world of an individual worshiper. In Q̄bajoko's compound there is a shrine for Q̄sanyin, orisha of medicinal herbs, another for orisha Oko, god of the farm, and another in the open courtyard for Ogun, which, once the annual rites for the god of iron have been performed, is left to weather. As you leave Q̄bajoko's compound and pass through the market, a single piece of laterite rock will receive occasional offerings to Eṣu and another pile of rocks will have added to it each year a rock dripping with the blood of a dog sacrificed to Ogun. Beyond the market is Oloriowo's compound where the annual festival for orisha Q̄batala is held. Q̄batala is the creator and fashioner of men's bodies. The doorway of a house in a neighboring compound will have palm leaves hanging above it. It is the dwelling of *babalawo* Aṣola, head of the Ifa diviner-priests, who worship orisha Orunmila. The blacksmith's shed will have a shrine to Ogun.

<sup>1</sup> E. Bọlaji Idowu, *Olodumare: God in Yoruba Belief* (London, 1962), p. 67.

Other compounds will house shrines to Oṣun, the oriṣa of waters, to Aro, the deity who aids the mothers of *abiku*, children born to die, to Ṣopanna, the dreaded deity of smallpox; the number 401 begins to seem reasonable rather than facetious.

No two shrines are ever alike. Some are a remarkable assemblage of ritual artifacts and offering receptacles for several oriṣa. On the shrine of the chief priestess of Eṣu in Eḷemukan's compound there is the "calabash of Eṣu" seated upon a pedestal. It is framed by red and white cloths in front of which hang a number of Eṣu carvings, one of which is a dance vestment with long strands of cowrie shells hanging from the base of four small carvings. Below the calabash of Eṣu are "oriṣa pots." Some receive offerings to Oya and Oṣun. Others contain the medicines of the forest and the stream. At the back of the shrine is a fragment of an Oṣanyin staff, and on the wall hang the dance bracelets of Aro. On the Olorioniṣango shrine, in addition to the ritual artifacts for the thunder god, there are the artifacts and offering pots of Oya, Oṣun, Ogun, and Eṣu. And there are *ibeji*, propitiating the spirits of deceased twins, who enjoy Ṣango's special protection.

One could continue to compound an already complex situation with references to the multiple names for each of the oriṣa and the abundance of myths that recite their friendships, intrigues, marriages, and conflicts. But the problem for the inquirer into oriṣa worship in traditional Yoruba religion is by now obvious. Is it possible to discern an underlying structure of meaning which may help make intelligible to us the cluster of sacred symbols that constitute a particular shrine, and hopefully, the whole Yoruba pantheon as expressed in the cult life of oriṣa worship in a particular town, such as Ila-Oṣangun? By "structure of meaning" I have in mind Clifford Geertz's suggestion that sacred symbols provide a vision of reality in its positive and negative aspects and assert that the good for man is to live realistically.<sup>2</sup>

Others have attempted to discern the structure of meaning in Yoruba oriṣa symbolism. I am especially indebted to three studies. The social anthropologist, William Bascom, has written perceptively on "The Sociological Role of the Yoruba Cult-Group."<sup>3</sup> His argument is that oriṣa worship is closely associated with lineage. One worships the oriṣa of one's parents and, in the case of married women, adopts the worship of the oriṣa of the husband

<sup>2</sup> Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York, 1973), p. 130.

<sup>3</sup> William Bascom, "The Sociological Role of the Yoruba Cult-Group," *Memoirs of the American Anthropological Society*, no. 63 (January 1944).



into whose compound she has moved. This was certainly the case in Ila and helps account for the number, as well as the particular configuration, of oriṣa symbols on individual shrines. However, as Bascom recognizes, oriṣa worship is not always related to kinship lines. A deity not associated with either of one's parents may "struggle with" a person in dreams or speak through divination, requiring the person to be a devotee. Or a god with whom there is no lineage association may in response to a request for a child or wealth or protection against witches ask for an annual offering.

E. B. Idowu, former Yoruba Professor of Religion at the University of Ibadan, has argued that there are a relatively small number of principal oriṣa (of which the host of others are local variations) and that, according to Yoruba myth, the oriṣa, having been brought forth by Olodumare, the High God, "are the ministers of Olodumare." The oriṣa look after "the affairs of His universe and (act) as intermediaries between Him and the world of men. To each of them is assigned a department over which he is ruler and governor." In addition, Idowu asserts that the oriṣa manifest the High God's various "attributes" to men. Thus, Ṣango and Ogun are "the wrath" of Olodumare. Orunmila is "the wisdom" of the High God. And other oriṣa, such as Ọbatala and Oduduwa, body forth his creative capacities.<sup>4</sup>

Idowu's study of the High God tradition in Yoruba thought is an important corrective to the observations of many Western (and missionary educated) students of Yoruba traditional religion. In earlier accounts either the importance of the High God tradition was diminished or denied in favor of the oriṣa and other spirits, who seemed far more important in the ongoing experience of the people and somehow incompatible with the idea of a High God. Or the idea of the High God was interpreted as indicating a shift in the cosmological mode of expression which reflected a development in the historical sojourn of the Yoruba; a development, it was thought, marking the inevitable end of oriṣa worship.

E. E. Evans-Pritchard, in his study of the religion of the Nuer, pointed out that it was quite possible to hold within a single world view, and without contradiction, the copresence of a supreme being and a multitude of lesser spirits. As he put it: "It is a question of the level, or situation, of thought rather than of exclusive types of thought."<sup>5</sup> Idowu would have better served his subject if he had heeded more closely Evans-Pritchard's observa-

<sup>4</sup> Idowu, pp. 57 ff.

<sup>5</sup> E. E. Evans-Pritchard, *The Nuer* (Oxford, 1940), p. 316.

tion. One has the impression, when reading *Olodumare: God in Yoruba Belief*, that the analysis of the High God tradition has been developed along the lines of an ethical monotheism. Such an approach requires that either the lesser spirits, the *oriṣa*, be denied or subsumed within the definition of the High God, which, one might argue, is another form of denial.

Another approach to the structuring of *oriṣa* cult organization and ritual symbolism is that of the British anthropologist Peter Morton-Williams. His thesis is that in their myths and rituals the cults express the Yoruba view of the universe and the place of man in it:

We must . . . imagine the cosmos as made up of Sky and Earth unfolding an island-like world. Beyond the limits of World, Sky and Earth may be thought of as touching, since it is believed that certain spirits pass freely between them. We are at once reminded of the dual relationship of the God of Heaven and the Goddess of Earth symbolized by the two halves of the whitened closed calabash among the south-western Yoruba, where they are called *Obatala* and *Oduduwa*. . . .

This model of the cosmos has, typically of Yoruba religious conceptions, some relativity of scale in its application. It allows us to think of the whole world of mankind as *aiye* (the habitable world) lying between Earth and Sky; or to think of each Yoruba kingdom separately as *aiye*, its limits the edges of its cultivated land, which in turn are surrounded by unfarmed land merging into the domain *ile* (Earth). . . . We are dealing with the idea of the state and of the cosmic order. . . .<sup>6</sup>

This model of the cosmos, which parallels "the idea of the state and of the cosmic order," Morton-Williams observes, may in fact be "typical . . . of Yoruba religious conceptions." In some myths the *oriṣa* "appear as royal children of the Supreme God, and in others as his creations who stand to him rather as vassal kings stand to their suzerain, the *Alafin* of Oyo in this world. They, rather than . . . (Olodumare), control, or interfere with, relations between Sky and World, and what goes on in the World, although . . . (Olodumare) is the ultimate source of their powers."<sup>7</sup> Thus, according to Morton-Williams, it would appear that religious system follows social structure.

While indebted to the studies of Bascom, Idowu, and Morton-Williams, the approach to Yoruba *oriṣa* symbolism that I shall pursue is closer to the structuralist analyses of Claude Lévi-Strauss, Edmund Leach, and Victor Turner.<sup>8</sup> For it appears to me that

<sup>6</sup> Peter Morton-Williams, "An Outline of the Cosmology and Cult Organization of the Oyo Yoruba," *Africa* 34, no. 3 (1964): 244.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 245.

<sup>8</sup> In his seminal essay, "The Structural Study of Myth," Claude Lévi-Strauss argued that when one considers the universalist aspect of primitive mythology



mythical thought and ritual activity are essentially shaped by a people's quest for meaning in the face of oppositions—of unwelcomed contradictions—and that ritual proceeds to a resolution of the emotional, intellectual, and moral tensions born of the oppositions in much the same way as myth. Hence, my concern in this paper is with the mediating significance of religious language, and in particular its capacity to make tolerable the tensions in human experience. My thesis is that, while the orisa in the diversity and individuality of their persons and attributes may be understood as providing an explanatory system and a means for coping with human suffering in one of its specific modes, it is when one considers the pantheon as a whole, as a total system, that one discerns that the total assemblage of the gods, known through their festivals and shrines, expresses *in its totality* a world view. And it is in the reality of this world view that Yoruba experience is given coherence and meaning and the tensions and dilemmas of life are surmounted.

## II

There is a Yoruba creation myth that provides a useful point of departure for our analysis.

When Olodumare decided that earth should be created, he commissioned orisa Obatala to take a chain, a calabash of sand, and a five-toed cock and descend with the aid of the chain to the primordial waters and pour out the sand upon the waters. Then he was to place the cock upon the sand and as the cock scratched the sand, sending it flying, the continents of earth would take shape. While on his way to fulfill his commission, Obatala accepted the invitation of some other gods to join them in drinking palm wine. Having overindulged, he fell asleep. Oduduwa knew about

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there is the discovery of a hidden message within all the variations and contradictions of a people's myths. And, when one examines closely the hidden message, there is the additional discovery that the hidden message is concerned with the resolution of unwelcomed contradictions. Hence, according to Lévi-Strauss, "mythical thought always progresses from the awareness of oppositions toward their resolution," and the movement is accomplished by a mediating structure of images (*Structural Anthropology*, trans. Claire Jacobson and Brooke G. Schoepf [New York, 1958], p. 221). Victor Turner has repeatedly shown in his studies of Ndembu ritual symbolism that myth and ritual are "dialectically interdependent institutions" and that one's basic unit for investigation must be "the total 'myth-rite complex'" (*Forms of Symbolic Action* [Seattle, 1969], p. 20). Edmund Leach, following Lévi-Strauss and Turner, has shown how "symbols occur in sets and that the meaning of particular symbols is to be found in the contrast with other symbols rather than in the symbols as such" (*Culture and Communication* [London, 1976], p. 59).

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Olodumare's commission to Ọbatala and, seeing Ọbatala asleep, took the calabash of sand, the cock, and the chain and proceeded to fulfill the High God's wishes. The place of creation was Ile Ife. When Ọbatala awoke, he discovered what Oduduwa had done and was enraged at Oduduwa's claim of having authority over the earth. A great struggle ensued, and finally Olodumare intervened and granted to Oduduwa the authority of being the first king of the Yoruba, the founder of political power. To Ọbatala he gave the power of fashioning men's bodies.

In this distinction of creative powers a fundamental division in human experience finds expression. Ọbatala expresses somatic man, man as creature, as participant in the world of field, forest, and stream. Oduduwa refers to moral man; man in his need and capacity for polity, man as social being. So deeply felt is the disparity between nature and polity that it may fairly be claimed (and I shall try to support the claim) that it is one of the two fundamental oppositions determining the structure of the orisha ritual system. The other, as we shall see, is the equally basic life/death contradiction. Together the nature/culture and life/death polarities provide the principal axes in terms of which orisha ritual symbolism and cult organization can be understood as a mediating structure of meaning; as a way of surmounting, at conscious and unconscious levels, the contradictions and conflicts born of these oppositions; as providing a means for the integration of experience, corporate and personal, into a meaningful whole. To this end I want to examine some of the myths, rites and artifacts of the orisha cults in Ila-Orangun (see fig. 1).

| Nature   | Life  | Polity                           |
|--|-------|----------------------------------|
| Ọbatala (fashioner of bodies)<br>Oṣun (doity of waters)<br>Oṣanyin (doity of medicine) |       | Oduduwa (founder of kingship)    |
| -----  |       | -----                            |
| Oko (doity of the farm)  |       | Ṣango (doity of political power) |
| -----  |       | -----                            |
| Ogun (doity of the hunt)   |       | Ogun (doity of craftsmen)        |
| -----  |       | -----                            |
| Ṣopanna (doity of smallpox)  |       | Ogun (doity of warriors)         |
|  | Death |                                  |

FIG. 1.—A "mapping" of the pantheon of the orisha

At the annual festival for Ọbatala in mid- or late July, Oyewole Akande, priest of Ọbatala in Ila, will be dressed in a white cloth

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and a crown of white beads. The area of the eyes will be painted white with a red circle drawn around each eye. His hair will be freshly plaited in the fashion of a woman. He will put white beads around his neck and a silver bracelet on his left wrist. To the sound of the Qbatala drums on the evening of the first day of the festival he will sing the oriki of Qbatala:

Qbatala, the white Qba.

He is the father of deep laughter.

He is as white as the harmattan.

Qbatala changes blood into a child.

The gentle God who causes deformity in children when he is angry.

Qbatala, like Olodumare, can kill a person.

Qbatala, Qbatase, one with authority.

Qbatala, do not give me a hunchbacked child.

Give me healthy children.

During the night young male and female goats will be sacrificed to Qbatala, along with snails and kola. The devotees will feast, but without the aid of palm wine, and they will dance to the *igbin* drums throughout the night. On the second day, after sunset, the priest will meet the Qba of Ila outside the palace gates and together they will roast fresh yam, which will be placed in a bowl and mixed with salt and palm oil. The priest will then carry the food offering to the town gates, the market, and other important places in the town, leaving at each spot a portion of the food and offering prayers for the town. This yam will be the first that the priest has seen, even though his compound is across from the king's market where the new yams have been sold for at least two months. On the fourth day of the festival he will again go to the palace to dance before the Qrangun and receive a gift of money from his highness. Throughout all the rites he will carry in his left hand a bow and arrow sacred to Qbatala for the warding off of evil.

The shrine of Qbatala is never entered except at the time of the annual festival. The walls are decorated with pictures of spotted animals, one identified by the priest as a leopard (*ekun*), a few dwarfish human figures, and a design identified as an *oba's* crown. There is something playful, perhaps idyllic, about the scene, as man and beast exist in the presence of the white orisha. In front of the drawings hang large gourds covered with a netting of cowrie shells. These are the *şere*, the dance rattles, of Qbatala. A large white cloth frames this portion of the wall. On the floor bits of food, snail shells, leaves, and bowls of cool water, drawn very early in the morning from a spring, are placed at the foot of Qbatala's iron staff which leans against the wall, the top cradled in a white



cloth. The day before the festival a young girl, who has not yet experienced menstruation, will enter the shrine and scrub the floor with *yunyun* grass and fresh water. The remnants of the offerings of the year will be heaped upon those of previous years in a loft above the shrine.

Note that in this description of rite and artifact there is an emphasis on things white. *Ọbatala* is one of a group of *oriṣa* called *oriṣa funfun*, "the *oriṣa* of the white cloth." The priest's robes are entirely white. On the occasion of the annual festival the sacred drums of *Ọbatala* are rubbed with a heavy coating of white chalk (*efun*). The offerings largely entail white substances: the water of snails, yam, kola, shea butter, white pigeons and guinea fowls. The goat, a herbivorous animal, must also be white.

In addition to the taboo on palm wine, an intoxicant that heats the body, the devotee of *Ọbatala* is forbidden to eat the flesh of the black rat (*emọn*) and the leaves of a vegetable that has small black berries (*efo-odu*). Blood has not yet issued from the young girl who prepares the shrine. The only heat or color that intrudes into the scene is in the roasted fresh yam cooked by the priest and the *Ọba*, which is seasoned and "cooled" (*tutu*) with salt and palm oil, and the red circle drawn around the priest's eyes at the time of the annual festival and the red parrot feather worn when he makes the weekly offering. These touches of heat and color may be accounted for by remembering that *Ọbatala* is the power giving birth and shape to men's bodies; and children, according to the Yoruba, are born of the commingling of white semen with the red blood of the vagina. Yet more than this is being expressed. As we shall see, in Yoruba ritual symbolism there is an equivalence between white and cool, red and heat; and these physical attributes have moral connotations. For the present let me suggest that in *Ọbatala* the dilemma of compromised creativity is portrayed. There is an irrational element in our nature to which we yield which compromises our responsible acts or simply overwhelms our intentions. All of the *oriṣa* were once humans and in their divinity continue to experience the destruction or distortion that can happen in the creative act. Even the faithful and gentle *Ọbatala* cannot always resist temptation or suppress anger.

The drums for *Ọbatala*, through whose unchanging rhythms the white *oriṣa*'s presence will be felt at the annual festival, are of the *ibgin* or upright type and are richly carved. The largest drum, *iya nla*, is divided into two carved basreliefs, separated by a snake biting its tail, a Yoruba image for eternity. In the top band there

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is an *oba* with his crown and ceremonial staff. Behind the *oba*'s crown is a snail's shell, the offering most valued by *Obatala*. It is clear that the royal figure is to be associated with *Obatala*, even though it is not a depiction of the *oriṣa*. In front of the king is a wife carrying a cock for sacrifice. From behind another wife cools him with a fan. Also in the procession is a warrior on horseback and another figure who appears to be a hunter who has caught and bound together his wife and her adulterous lover in the act of intercourse. On the lower relief a priestess carrying a calabash on her head and a priest holding a bow and arrow are followed in procession by a warrior with a prisoner. Among the other figures is a hunchbacked man. A tortoise completes the iconography of *iyá nlá*.

The second drum depicts a tall, slender figure dancing with a ceremonial sword and two other dancing figures. On the opposite side there is a carving of a highly stylized lizard. The third drum repeats the *oba* figure of *iyá nlá*, although this time it is the royal figure who holds the bow and arrow in his left hand and an offering of a kola nut in his right hand. Behind the king a woman holds the *ṣeṣe*, the sacred rattles of *Obatala*. On the opposite side there is a hunting scene with a hunter shooting a wild pig and a dog leaping upon a hare.

As in the myths, the carvings on the drums portray *oriṣa Obatala* in his authority and power but also in his weakness in the figure of the hunchback. On occasion the shaper of bodies will fail in his task. His gentleness will be overcome by anger, his craftsmanship overcome by wine; and he will fashion hunchbacks, albinos, and the blind. Forbidding wine to his worshipers, the penitent *Obatala* takes the crippled as his special concern and responsibility.<sup>9</sup> Thus, the world depicted on the drums, while fruitful, is not a paradise. Women carry infants on their backs. But as the beast leaps upon the weaker animal, so man kills the beast, conquers his enemy, and returns home to discover his wife in an adulterous relationship. Life has its opposition in death, beauty of form in distortion and ugliness, human concord in conflict.

There are three other *oriṣa*, which, along with *Obatala*, are called "oriṣa of the white cloth." They are *Oṣun*, *Ọsanyin*, and *Oko*. The

<sup>9</sup> In a private communication (August 24, 1976) Professor Barry Hallen notes that in *Ekiti* district priests of *Obatala* on occasion interpret the destructive acts of the *oriṣa* as signs of power, as reminders that such things will happen if the *oriṣa* is not properly propitiated. The infirmity of some worshipers of *Obatala* is taken as a sign of divine distinction.



priests and priestesses of Oṣun and Ọsanyin also wear the white cloth and present food offerings of light-colored grains, roots, vegetables, bowls of cool water from streams, and the sacrifice of only herbivorous animals. Taboo are animals killed by accident in the forest or on the road, for these deities do not like the taste of wanton destruction. (The Yoruba word is *ṣako*, which means flesh that has been slashed, ripped, slaughtered.) As in the rites for Ọbatala, the rites of the annual festivals for Oṣun and Ọsanyin include an exchange of gifts between the devotees and the Ọba and chiefs and the placing of portions of the offerings for Ọsun on the shrines for Ogun and Eṣu in the marketplace.

Oriṣa Oko, along with Ọbatala, Oṣun, and Ọsanyin, shares the title "Oriṣa of the white cloth." His emblem is the shining metal staff standing in a whitened calabash. The top of the staff always rests against a folded white cloth. There are seven compounds in Ila with shrines housing an *opa oriṣa Oko*. And when one adds to the list the numerous shrines of the Alarere cult, a version of Oko worship, which includes men among the devotees, the importance of oriṣa Oko in the cult life of Ila is impressive.

At the weekly rite, as well as at the annual festivals of the god of the farm, his priestess will sing:

Oriṣa Oko, the hunter who became a farmer.  
Oriṣa Oko, giver of wealth, bestower of children.  
Oriṣa Oko, whose home is Irawo;  
The place where the stars fell,  
The place of judgment.<sup>10</sup>

Oriṣa Oko is not only the deity of the priestesses. He is also their lord and husband, for they wear his red and white marks upon their foreheads. As with the other oriṣa funfun, things white, or of the field, or herbivorous animals—including the antelope and the ram as well as the goat—are preferred as offerings and sacrifices. The snake, always a threat to the farmer, the dog, which is a beast of prey, and flesh slaughtered for reasons other than sacrifice to the oriṣa, are forbidden.

As I have noted, the oriki and myths speak of oriṣa Oko as the hunter who became a farmer. One would therefore expect to find associations between oriṣa Oko and the oriṣa of the hunters, oriṣa Ogun. In Ila there is an interesting division of opinion on this matter. The priestesses of the shining staff claimed that Oko's closest friend was oriṣa Ṣango. But the male members of the Alarere cult claimed that oriṣa Oko was still essentially a hunter

<sup>10</sup> Efunwumi, priestess of oriṣa Oko, Ọbajoko's compound, Ila-Orangun.

whom oriṣa Ogun appointed to care for his farms. A story from the Odu of Ifa told to me by the Ifa priest Ifatoogun of Ilobu tells of Ogun's seduction of one of oriṣa Oko's wives while Oko was out of town. Upon his return Oko discovered the treachery. Rather than the titanic struggle expected by all the other oriṣa, Oko gave his wife to Ogun, saying that there was no law against Ogun's actions. However, henceforth there would be a law against the seduction of a wife of oriṣa Oko. If anyone is caught in such an act, he shall be killed like a dog for sacrifice.

These myths of alliance and antagonism between Oko and Ogun are important. They refer to a marginal area in human experience, the area in which one moves from the creative to the destructive, from the sustaining of life to the taking of life, from the domestic ordered existence of town and field to the pathless dangers of the forest. At times the sustaining of life depends upon the taking of life. Not only does the herbalist seek his healing medicines in the forest, the hunter risks the terrors of the forest and willfully takes the life of an animal to feed himself and his family. As he moves away from town and farm he becomes a beast of prey, living on the blood of others.

The disagreement between the priestesses of oriṣa Oko and the male members of the Alarere cult over the relative importance of Oko and Ogun reflects their different involvement in the marginal world of agriculture and hunting, town and forest, as well as the role of the women in the farming and marketing of crops and that of the men in their association with the hunt as well as the farm. There are other reasons why the men would identify more with Ogun; but we shall touch on those matters later. It need only be noted now that in contrast to the oriṣa of the white cloth the favorite sacrifice of Ogun is the dog, a carnivorous beast, and his offerings include hot foods, such as alligator pepper, roasted snails, and roasted plantain.

It is in Ṣopanna, the oriṣa of smallpox and all other diseases that fall upon a person with violence and destructive power, that we have the antithesis of Ọbatala. Ṣopanna's power is wanton destruction. His is the only cult whose devotees do not carry gifts to the Ọba and chiefs or send offerings to the market shrines of Ogun and Eṣu. For he is a deity whose power is antithetical to civilized life.

On the shrine to Ṣopanna at Ọbasinkin's compound there is a remarkable assemblage of oriṣa emblems. In the far right corner the iron staff of Ọbatala leans against the wall and a whitish

calabash containing snail's shells rests at its foot. Immediately to the left is a large terra-cotta pot on top of which is a calabash for Oṣun. At the foot of the four central pots of Şopanna are fragments of an Oṣanyin staff. The presence of the deities of the white cloth should not now surprise us. Their cooling power is needed with this god.

As in the festivals for other oriṣa, the first act is the preparing of the sacred emblem. Water is brought from a nearby stream and the leaves of six medicinal plants are crushed in it. It is used to wash the surface of the pots of Şopanna, then rubbed upon the bodies of the members of the household, and the remainder cast upon the floors while the devotees pray:

Şopanna, protect us from the hot disease.  
Do not spoil our life.  
Protect our children.  
Bless us with money.  
Keep us safe that we may serve you next year.  
Bless us with health.  
Increase our children.<sup>11</sup>

Cold sand is brought from a stream bed and placed outside the doors of the house. Yams will be brought from the farm, as will plantain, beans, and corn for roasting, portions of which are given as offerings since Şopanna likes hot food offerings. Roasted goat's flesh delights this deity. Palm wine will be poured into cups at the foot of the emblems. Only the juice of snails will be poured over the glowing, fiery image to cool the heat of the oriṣa. Such offerings and libations can be effective, since Şopanna is not "evil" in an ontological sense. As antithetical as he may be to the person and work of Oḃatala, Şopanna can also give children to the barren, protect against witches, and stay the powers of illness and death.

Our study has been moving along the life/death axis of oriṣa symbolism as it pertains to man's experience of nature. And in this sector of the pantheon the antithesis is clearly displayed in the sharply contrasting figures of Oḃatala and Şopanna. Of considerable importance is the fact that the link between the oriṣa who gives shape to life and the one who destroys is provided, not by a single figure, but rather by two interacting figures: oriṣa Oko, god of the farm, and oriṣa Ogun, god of the hunt. The interaction of Oko and Ogun is expressed not only in the myths of alliance and antagonism but also in what might be described as a mirroring relationship of the imagery associated with each deity; and this

<sup>11</sup> Bello Binyo, Oḃasinkin's compound, Ila-Oḃrangun.



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conjunction seems to say something about the nature of culture itself. Hunting and farming are acts of cultural achievement. As a hunter, Ogun destroys flesh, but not with the violence of wanton destruction (*şako*). Like the farmer, the hunter masters the destructive act to his own advantage. He kills selectively and purposefully in order to live. The nature of the dog, the sacrifice for Ogun, symbolizes this; for the dog is the carnivorous animal which is domesticated. Orisa Oko is the hunter who became the farmer. Here the food quest is bloodless. Oko is one of the orisa of the white cloth. But his link with hunting is a reminder that agriculture, like hunting, requires a relentless, but not wanton, intervention into nature. Oko's sacrifice, the ram, is a herbivorous animal, yet belligerent. In his horns the ram wears his teeth upon his head. This juxtaposition or mirroring of images associated with Oko and Ogun is illustrative of the means by which the orisa worshiper's experience is made coherent. That is, the "logic" of the pantheon is conveyed by a number of continua—light and dark, cool and hot, herbivorous and carnivorous—in terms of which the orisa are located with respect to one another.

Furthermore, in the interaction of the imagery for orisa Oko and orisa Ogun the dichotomy of life and death is mediated, that is, the opposition is surmounted or, better, made morally acceptable. The figures of Oko and Ogun suggest that death is essential for life; and more, that this relationship is established when culture is imposed on nature. Thus what appears as an intolerable opposition in the contrasting figures of Obatala and Şopanna is "softened," made understandable, by the roles of Oko and Ogun. Both orisa are associated with food gathering; and food gathering is one of the two main arenas wherein man experiences the meeting of life and death and masters it to his own advantage. The hunter kills and the farmer harvests in order to live. Thus, the reality of the life/death contradiction is not hidden. Rather, in the imagery of Oko and Ogun the contradiction is articulated and "resolved" in terms of an equation: To live is to be engaged daily with death.

The other arena where life and death meet is that of polity. There is peace and there is war, citizenship and slavery. Again, in order to make such dichotomous experience intelligible and tolerable a mediating structure is provided in the myth-ritual complex. In the political arena three orisa are important: Odu-duwa, Şango, and, again, Ogun.

Oduduwa has no shrine in Ila. Nevertheless, he is present and prominent, for his face appears on the beaded crown of the Oba.

Recall that it was Oduduwa who created the earth while Ọbatala was sleeping from overindulgence. And it was Oduduwa whom Olodumare empowered to rule over the earth. Thus, each year, at Ile Ife, the place of creation and the home of all Yoruba, an ox is sacrificed to Oduduwa, the first king of the Yoruba and the father of all Yoruba ọbas. In Ila-Ọrangun it is the Oro festival that marks the entrance of the new year. For six nights before the festival and on its first and last days, the drummers drum the names and oriki of Oduduwa and of all other ọbas in the succession of kings of Ila to the present Ọrangun. A widely accepted tradition refers to the Ọrangun of Ila as the fourth of the direct sons of Oduduwa. Rather than an ox another herbivorous animal, the male goat is sacrificed by the Ọba and by every senior chief, with prayers for peace and prosperity being offered by the Ọrangun as each of the animals is killed.

War and its destruction of the political order essential to civilized life is the antithesis of all that Oduduwa represents. It is here that we meet Ogun, oriša of iron. The oriki are revealing:

Silence! Silence!

Let no one talk; let no household utensil touch another.

We are here, let no one pound anything at home.

Let no one grind anything.

Do not allow me to hear children crying.

Let everyone breastfeed her child.

On the day Ogun arrived from the mountain top, he wore glittering dress and a cloth of blood.<sup>12</sup>

Ogun is a fierce warrior.

Ogun makes a great noise when he fights, his cudgels and knives are so abundant.

On the day he fights the heat is intense, the heavens shake, people are terrified and cry out.<sup>13</sup>

He was taken to Ponga; he destroyed Ponga.

He was taken to Ako-Ire; he ruined Ako-Ire. . . .

Ogun of Ogboro eats dogs and we give him dogs.<sup>14</sup>

Like Ọpanna, Ogun brings destruction, havoc, and terror into the lives of men. And yet there is an important difference between them. The destructive work of Ogun is culturally legitimated. To be sure, warfare can involve acts of wanton destruction. There are stories of Ogun's intoxication with the taste of blood in battle. Such is his thirst that on occasion he kills his own followers as well as the enemy. Nevertheless, war can also be the means for estab-

<sup>12</sup> George E. Simpson, "Selected Yoruba Rituals: 1964," *Nigerian Journal of Economic and Social Studies* 7, no. 3 (1965): 319.

<sup>13</sup> Chief Elekahan, Elekahan's compound, Ila-Ọrangun.

<sup>14</sup> Simpson, p. 319.



lishing political power and securing the stability and peace of town or empire:

Rich-laden is his home, yet decked in palm fronds  
He ventures forth, refuge of the down-trodden,  
To rescue slaves he unleashed the judgment of war.  
Because of the blind, plunged into forests  
Of creative herbs, Bountiful One  
Who stands bulwark to offsprings of the dead of heaven  
Salutations, O lone being, who swims in rivers of blood.<sup>15</sup>

It is in this context that we must understand the importance of the Ogun festival in Ila, for it is rivaled only by the Egungun festival of the ancestors in importance and extent of public involvement.

The Ogun festival begins with the warrior chiefs (*Ologun*), carrying swords and cudgels tied with palm fronds, processing to the neighboring town of Yara. There a dog is sacrificed by being ripped apart. A rock on which the blood of the sacrifice has been poured is given to the warrior chiefs by the Ogun priests of Yara for the Ogun market shrine in Ila. On their return, the Oba of Ila sacrifices a dog in the same fashion at the shrine to Ogun opposite the palace gates. Again note the contrast with Şopanna. The devotees of Şopanna do not go to the market or to the palace. But these centers of civic life are precisely where the principal shrines of Ogun are located in Ila.

There is another dimension to Ogun's significance for the people of Ila-Orangun:

The owner of all iron metals.  
He caused many a man to burn his penis.  
He caused many a woman to slash open her vagina.  
Ogun, who controls those who circumcize, feeds on snails.  
Ogun, who controls razors, feeds on hair.  
Ogun, who controls carvers, feeds on wood.<sup>16</sup>

Cultural existence has its price, and Ogun is present where the marks of communal identity are incised. Circumcision, facial marks, haircutting are acts of violence against the person. And yet these acts, bordering on death, are the acts of life, the marks of culture, of social differentiation. The hoes and axes made by blacksmiths for the farmers to clear the land and till the soil and the adzes and chisels made for carvers to shape trays for the

<sup>15</sup> Wole Şoyinka, "The Fourth Stage," in *The Morality of Art*, ed. D. W. Jefferson (New York, 1969), p. 120.

<sup>16</sup> Simpson, p. 319. I suspect that the word "burn" should read "cut" in the second line, referring to the act of circumcision of the male, paralleling the reference in the third line to the circumcision of the female. Professor Henry Drewal called my attention to the fact that the Yoruba word "da" can mean either "cut" or "burn," depending upon whether it is pronounced with a high or middle tone.

marketplace and to sculpture veranda posts and doors for the house and ritual artifacts for the shrine are the work of Ogun. It is orisa Ogun who forges the instruments of culture, of civilized, ordered existence. Thus, each year at the Ogun festival, Bello of Oro's compound, even though he is a Muslim, sends his carving tools to a shrine to Ogun and has them rubbed with the blood of the dog that has been sacrificed.

There can be little doubt about the importance of Ogun worship in expressing what is meaningful in the experience of the people of Ila. Ogun links past and present. It was his power that brought the first settlers to Ila and it is he who has repeatedly aided the obas of Ila in the defense of the town. More importantly, in Ogun worship the interrelationship of nature and culture is expressed and the interdependence of hunter, farmer, and craftsman is affirmed. The worlds of the forest, the farm, and the town are brought together in the myth-rite symbolism of the Ogun festival, and the people of Ila are enabled to see a continuity, a meaningful wholeness in their corporate life. It is this that is expressed in the oriki: "Ogun is the orisa to whom all other orisa bow."

And yet Ogun cannot alone mediate the life/death dichotomy experienced in the body politic. There is another orisa who with Ogun provides the mediating imagery.

The worship of orisa Şango was and is largely limited to that portion of the Yoruba people whose towns were once part of the old Oyo empire. Nevertheless, such is the fascination and power of Şango that he is by far the best known of all Yoruba deities outside of Yorubaland. Within the context of the cult life and ritual symbolism of Ila-Ogun there is no mistaking the importance of Şango worship. His shrines are numerous, and his emblems are found on many of the shrines dedicated to other orisa. However, in Ila he does not have the central position of importance that he has in Oyo:

Shango, I prostrate to you every morning,  
Before I set out to do anything.

The dog stays in the house of its master  
But it does not know his intentions.

The sheep does not know the intentions  
Of the man who feeds it.

We ourselves follow Shango

Although we do not know his intentions.

It is not easy to live in Shango's company.

Rain beats the Egungun mask, because he cannot find shelter.

He cries: 'Help me, dead people in heaven, help me!'

But the rain cannot beat Shango.



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They say that fire kills water.

He rides fire like a horse.

Lightning—with what kind of cloth do you cover your body?

With the cloth of death.

Shango is the death that drips to, to, to,

Like indigo dye dripping from a cloth.<sup>17</sup>

In the oriki Şango is portrayed as unpredictable, capricious, self-serving, as one who “rides fire like a horse,” who “takes by force,” who “does as he pleases,” “who is the death that drips to, to, to.” He is also the giver of children, the one who imparts his beauty to the woman with whom he sleeps. He is a source of medicine. He wrinkles his nose at liars, reverses the fortunes of the rich, strikes the one who is stupid. Lightning, the leopard, the gorilla image his power, his energy, his potency.

Şango is the legendary fourth king of Oyo. He reigned for seven turbulent years. His powers as a military and political leader were widely acclaimed. But he was fascinated with magical powers as well. On one occasion he inadvertently caused a thunderstorm to be raised and lightning to strike his own palace. Many of Şango's wives and children perished in the catastrophe. In sorrow and repentance the king abdicated his throne, left his kingdom, and in his despair hanged himself at Koso. His enemies cast scorn and shame upon his name. But when a rash of storms destroyed parts of the city of Oyo, Şango's former followers claimed that the storms were the wrath of the king for the indignities to his name. Sacrifices were made to Şango and his followers cried “*Oba ko so!*” “The king did not hang!”

Like the praise names, all of the stories concerning the deified king turn on the theme of power: power as legitimate authority, the capricious use of power, procreative power, destructive power, magical power, medicinal power, and moral power.

The shrines for Şango are always impressive. The “place of power” (*aşe*) is the bowl containing the thunderbolts of Şango collected by the priests at houses struck by lightning and brought to the shrine in the *laba* bags which hang on the wall at the back of the shrine. In Ila the *arugba Şango*, the “bowl carrier of Şango,” is the carving most often found in the houses of Şango worshipers. In the bowl are thunderbolts, bits of kola nut from weekly offerings, and the dried blood of the ram from the sacrifice at the annual festival.

The *arugba* is an extraordinary image. The thunderbolts, like lightning, clearly convey the sudden, overwhelming, and seemingly

<sup>17</sup> H. Ullie Boier and B. Bgdamosi, *Yoruba Poetry* (Ibadan, 1959), p. 16.

capricious power of Şango. Oriki sung at Olorionişango's compound in Ila attest to this sense of dread and uncertainty about Şango's power:

Şango kills without warning.  
After eating with the elder of the compound  
Şango kills his child at the gate.  
Şango is a troubled god, like a cloud full of rain.<sup>18</sup>

The sexual imagery of the thunderbolts, the suggestion of unrestrained libidinal power, has been noted by a number of commentators. And certainly the female figure balancing Şango's power upon her head invites an analysis in terms of both the caprice and the creative experienced in human sexuality. Robert Thompson and Pierre Verger call attention to an initiation rite in the Şango cult in which the initiate must dance with a flaming pot balanced on his head.<sup>19</sup> Balancing an object on one's head, even a flaming pot, is not an extraordinary feat among the Yoruba. Nonetheless, the act of balancing as "a dramatic metaphor of the assuagement of a dangerous force," as Thompson suggests, is present in the arugba Şango. The power of Şango is a dangerous force, just as the libidinal drive may prove dangerous to the possibilities of creative sexual relationships or the arrogant use of power to political leadership.

There is a well-known story about Şango's imprisonment of Ọbatala. The white orişa, weary from his travels and not knowing that a magnificent horse he had come upon belonged to Şango, mounted the animal and rode into town. Furious that anyone would ride his steed, Şango imprisoned Ọbatala without listening to the white orişa's account and apologies. Drought parched the fields. Barrenness came upon the women. Children cried for food. Hearing at last the pleas of his people, Şango released Ọbatala. The white orişa resumed his journey and fertility returned to the land. If in Ọbatala's patient suffering we discern the "aesthetics of the saint," as Wọle Şoyinka has aptly phrased it,<sup>20</sup> then in the figure of Şango we have an image of the hubris which is present in political power. The power of Şango must be carried with great care. Indeed, the carrying of such a power upon one's head is where the metaphor is to be located. *Ori* is the Yoruba word for head and for one's personal destiny. It is one's ori, one's destiny,

<sup>18</sup> Bamibi Ojo, Olorionişango's compound, Ila-Orangun.

<sup>19</sup> Pierre Verger, *Notes sur le culte des Orisa et Vodun* (Dakar, 1957), p. 305; Robert F. Thompson, *Black Gods and Kings* (Los Angeles, 1971), p. 12/3; and *African Art in Motion* (Los Angeles, 1974), pp. 84, 96.

<sup>20</sup> Şoyinka, p. 121.

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as a worshiper of Şango, to carry, to bear the burden of Şango's great power, a power that can create empires but which constantly suffers the temptation to exceed its proper limits. And when it does so, it destroys that which it has created.

The color symbolism of the ritual artifacts for Şango must be noted. I cannot engage in a detailed analysis of color classification in the ritual symbolism of the Yoruba, although by now my comments should have begun to suggest the possibilities in such a study. The polychrome patterning of white on red of most Şango artifacts is not a matter of artistic whim, I am sure. It is too uniform and too universal.

There is a story that on one occasion Ogun had taken a beautiful woman as his prize in battle. Oduduwa demanded that Ogun surrender the woman to him. Before doing so Ogun had intercourse with her. Later, after sharing Oduduwa's mat, the woman gave birth to Oranyan, whose body was half white and half dark or reddish in color. According to Bascom, at the annual festival for orişa Oranyan in Ile Ife his followers paint one side of their faces and bodies with chalk and the other with red camwood powder,<sup>21</sup> Oranyan was the father of Şango. Like his father, Şango prefers the ram as the sacrifice to be offered to him.

Once again we begin to see the mediatorial function of orişa imagery within the ritual symbolism of the total cult life of Ila. As the fourth Ọba of Ọyo, Şango is in the line of ọbas descending from Oduduwa. He is one with those who bring political order. With Ogun, Şango is remembered for his military valor and his delight in the battle and the extension of the empire. The ram, Şango's food, is a herbivorous animal like the ox or goat given to Oduduwa. The ram is also a beast that delights in the fight, like the dog of Ogun; yet it is not a carnivorous beast of prey. Furthermore, white, the cool color, is associated with Oduduwa, and red, the hot color, with Ogun. Şango's colors are the patterning of white on a red background. As in the imagery of Oko and Ogun, so too in the ritual symbolism of Şango and Ogun there is a mirroring effect, a sharing of the qualities of the other, an interdependence through which the life/death opposition is softened, made acceptable, domesticated. Ogun, as a warrior, a killer of men, aids in the establishment of political order. And yet he cannot stand alone. Another deity completes Ogun's identity here, just as orişa Oko complemented Ogun in the context of the human quest for food.

<sup>21</sup> William Bascom, *The Yoruba of Southwestern Nigeria* (New York, 1969), p. 83.



Although the gods would have elected him to be king over them, for his machete had cleared the way to earth for them, Ogun could not provide political leadership. The mountaintop and the forest, not the palace, were his dwelling places. His hammers, knives, and fire forge the instruments of culture; but another must use them. In the realm of polity that is the task of Şango. To live is to exist in an ordered relationship with others. Man is a social being. Yet without Ogun, Şango is helpless. For to live under a political order means that blood must be shed and men must die. Once again, the equation emerges: Death is essential to life. And, once again, the deities establish a cultural matrix in which this is true.<sup>22</sup>

### III

The difficulty with any analysis of religious language, including the present analysis of the structure of religious symbols, is that it reifies and renders static that which is essentially active and dra-

<sup>22</sup> A slightly different mapping of the pantheon of the orisa in Qyo, once the center of a great Yoruba empire, of which Ila-Qrangun was an important border town, suggests the extent to which the pantheon establishes a cultural matrix related to particular political and social circumstances. This is made clear in a comparison of the role of the Şango cult in Qyo and in Ila-Qrangun as shown in figure 2. Şango was the fourth king of Qyo and subsequently became the principal

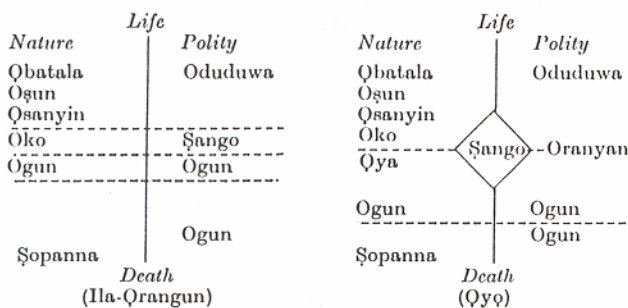


FIG. 2

orisa of the kings of Qyo. His is the only orisa shrine in the king's palace. For Qyo, Şango, the deified king, takes into himself all the elements of the culture, not only the mediating of the opposition of Oduduwa, political order, and Ogun, socially legitimated destruction. On the nature side of the schema the myths include Oşun among Şango's wives, and, like Oşun, he too can bless women with children, especially ibeji, who enjoy his protection. Another, and favorite, wife of Şango is Qya, the goddess of the hunt and once wife to Ogun. It is she who is felt in the fierce winds that precede the thunder and lightning storms in which Şango displays his power. Furthermore, Şango's fascination with magic powers can bring to the earth havoc and ruin similar to the wanton destruction of Şopanna. Other associations could be developed. The point is that in the ritual symbolism for Şango the play of forces that shape the Qyo Yoruba social system is expressed, just as Ogun symbolism provides the appropriate focus for the life-style of the Yoruba of Ila-Qrangun.

matic. The phrase "mediating structures of images," which I used at the outset of this discussion, places the emphasis upon the logical system rather than on the psychological reality of ritual symbolism. Meaningful experience depends upon ordering principles, upon some logical construction. But reflection on such matters is not where most people live. And even the few who do engage in such reflection do not do so all of the time. As the word "mediating" suggests, ritual symbolism is an activity, an engagement of the worshiper with "reality." In the ritual action his experience of the world, and of himself and his relationships to the world, is refashioned and reoriented, and his life is given meaning. Yet even this statement of the matter is too passive. In the ritual process one receives only by doing; meaning is known only as one performs the effective action. In orisha worship sacrifice is the essential, the effecting act. Sacrifice is the mediating activity, and as such it is the enactment of the mediating structure of images that constitutes orisha ritual symbolism. That is, it is the enactment of the death which is essential to life.

There is a Yoruba saying: "Though the offering is difficult, it is not worse than death."<sup>23</sup> And, as Bascom notes, in the Ifa corpus "the greatest number of verses are concerned with death, either directly or by implication."<sup>24</sup> Sacrifice, *ẹbọ*, has to do with death, the avoidance of death, and with experiences associated with death, such as loss, disease, famine, sterility, isolation, poverty:

Ifa says that Death is now ready to kill  
the person; but if he can make plenty of  
sacrifice, he will wriggle out of danger.  
. . . "Exchange, exchange" the Ifa priest  
Of the household of Ẹlẹpẹ  
Cast Ifa for Ẹlẹpẹ.  
He was told to exchange an animal  
For his life on account of Death.<sup>25</sup>

As Lienhardt noted in his study of Dinka sacrificial rites, sacrifice is essentially the conversion of a situation of death, or potential death in any of its manifestations, into a situation of life.<sup>26</sup> Hence the underlying desire in every sacrificial rite is the desire for life, whether expressed as health, children, wealth, wives, or social status. Every sacrifice is an anticipation of the

<sup>23</sup> R. C. Abraham, *Dictionary of Modern Yoruba* (London, 1958), p. 172.

<sup>24</sup> William Bascom, *Ifa Divination* (Bloomington, Ind., 1969), p. 73.

<sup>25</sup> Wọle Abimbola, "An Exposition of Ifa Literary Corpus" (Ph.D. diss., University of Lagos, 1970).

<sup>26</sup> Godfrey Lienhardt, *Divinity and Experience: The Religion of the Dinka* (Oxford, 1961), pp. 296-97.

death to come and an affirmation of the value of life. As such it is an expression of man's temporal condition, his existence in the midst of the interrelated contraries of life and death. But every sacrifice is also the conversion or reversal of the situation of death into life.

Among the orisha it is Eṣu, the messenger of the gods and the bearer of sacrifice, whose special power it is to effect the transformation of the death of the sacrificial victim into life for the sacrificer.<sup>27</sup> For the Yoruba the sexual metaphor is expressive of this power. A story in the Odu of Ifa tells of the chaos and death that threatened the affairs of men when the jealousy of Oṣun, the leader of the ancestral mothers, rendered the sixteen male orisha impotent because they had excluded her from their assembly. Orunmila cast Ifa and discerned in the figure Odu Oṣetua the necessity of taking sacrifices to Olodumare, the High God. To all but one the door of heaven was closed. Only to the child Eṣu, once born of Oṣun and the male orisha, was the door of heaven open. When he carried the sacrifices,

Aṣe spread and expanded on earth;  
Semen became child,  
Men on sick beds got up,  
All the world became pleasant.  
It became powerful.  
Fresh crops were brought from farm.  
Yam developed.  
Maize matured.  
Rain was falling.  
All the rivers were flooded.  
Everybody was happy.<sup>28</sup>

Sexual vitality, while making male and female aware of their radical difference, is the mediating power which overcomes the opposition. It is a gracious power which cannot be presumed upon. The man must give of his semen, the woman of herself in childbirth; each must die in a very "real" sense, if life is to be sustained. Those who do not honor such a power will know it in all its mischievous, libidinal energy. Desires will be frustrated and fortunes reversed. But to those who acknowledge its affecting presence the gifts of life will be given. Such is the power of Eṣu, of sacrifice, of the ritual process. It is the effective action which gives aṣe, creative power, to mankind.

<sup>27</sup> John Pemberton III, "Eshu Elogba: The Yoruba Trickster God," *African Arts* 9, no. 1 (October 1975): 20-27, 66-70, 90-91.

<sup>28</sup> Babalawo Ifatoogun, quoted in Juana E. and Descorides M. dos Santos, "Eṣu Bara Laroyo" (unpublished monograph, Institute of African Studies, University of Ibadan, 1971), p. 80.

One never experiences such power in a general way. It is always through the orisha. And, as we have noted, the tastes, the demands, and the powers of the gods are as individualized as their personalities. Obatala desires the snail, Şango the ram, Ogun the dog. When the devotee offers the sacrificial animal, he will touch his head with the object, make the sacrifice, and sprinkle the juice or the blood, the life substance, of the victim on the emblem of the orisha. Thus, in the sacrificial act the personal destiny (ori) of the worshiper is linked to the power of the orisha in all its creative and problematic potentiality. To know Ogun's power is to know the strength of the warrior, or the skill of the hunter and the craftsman, but at the risk of being intoxicated by the taste of blood, of knowing destruction in the act of creation. In the "humanity of the gods"<sup>29</sup> the cosmic struggle is brought to earth, shaping man's understanding of himself.

Rarely is it only one orisha who makes claims upon a person. Ogun or Şango or Oşun may dominate one's life, shape one's perception of self and world, but other orisha will have their artifacts on the shrine, their claims and influence upon one's life. As the Yoruba dancer must respond to the multiple rhythms of the drums, so the soul attentive to the powers of the orisha must somehow respond to their diverse claims. The complexity of response may overwhelm one. But as in the ability of the dancer to be conscious of and respond to every instrument of the orchestra, so in sacrificing to all the orisha who call, the worshiper (*olusin*, "he who serves") can know the richness of life amid its complexity and can achieve balance, "superior poise," "coolness" amid the contrarities of life.<sup>30</sup>

#### IV

I began this essay with references to "modern" Nigeria but moved quickly to the ancient tradition of orisha worship as it continues to shape the lives of many Yoruba, certainly the world view of the people of Ila-Orangun. As a concluding postscript, I want to return to modern Nigeria and address briefly the following question. Can orisha ritual symbolism continue to provide the social and psychological solidarity in a situation of advances in technology, increasing division of labor, and the extension of an organic solidarity provided by nation, corporation, university, trade union, and other Western forms of social organization?

<sup>29</sup> Şoyinka, p. 122.

<sup>30</sup> Thompson, *African Art in Motion*, p. 84.



In a perceptive essay entitled "The Fourth Stage," Wole Soyinka, the Yoruba playwright and social critic, refers to Ogun as—"the first actor, . . . first suffering deity, first creative energy, the first darer and conqueror of transition."<sup>31</sup> For Soyinka the cosmic image is the "abyss," the "gulf," which describes reality for the Yoruba:

On the arena of the living when man is stripped of excrescences, when disasters and conflicts (the material of drama) have crushed and robbed him of self-consciousness and pretensions, he stands in present reality at the spiritual edge of this gulf, he has nothing left in physical existence which successfully impresses upon his spiritual and psychic perception—it is at such moments that transitional memory takes over and intimations rack him of that intense parallel of his progress through the gulf of transition, of the dissolutions of his self and his struggle and triumph over subsumation through the agency of will. It is this experience that the modern tragic dramatist recreates through the medium of physical contemporary action, reflecting emotions of the first active battle of the will through the abyss of dissolution. Ogun is the first actor in that battle, and Yoruba tragic drama is the re-enactment of the cosmic conflict.<sup>32</sup>

To be sure, Soyinka has found in Ogun, "the first actor," "the revolutionary spirit,"<sup>33</sup> a warrant for his work and life. But he has acutely discerned the motifs of Ogun worship: conflict, struggle, the exercise of will, creativeness paying the price of destructiveness. And as a dramatist, he comes close to discerning the significance of ritual as enactment. "Acting," he writes, "is . . . a contradiction of the tragic spirit, yet it is also its natural complement. To act, the Promethean instinct of rebellion, channels anguish into creative purpose which releases man from a totally destructive despair. . . ."<sup>34</sup> The votary, the possessed priest of Ogun, reaching "out beyond the realm of nothingness," in spite of "ritualistic earthing," is the "tragic victim," according to Soyinka.<sup>35</sup>

People have always recast the religious symbols of their heritage in accordance with the experience of their own day and age. Soyinka's world is larger than Ila-Orangun. The cosmic calabash is broken. An abyss confronts him. The medicinal herbs of Qsanyin, the harvest of Oko, even the political order of Oduduwa, speak less to Soyinka than to the people of Ila. Forest, farm, and traditional political structures no longer shape Soyinka's experience. Obatala's suffering is of more interest to him than the white

<sup>31</sup> Soyinka, p. 123.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 126.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 128.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 123.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*

## *Cluster of Sacred Symbols*

oriṣa's power to fashion bodies. And Olodumare, the giver of personal destiny, seems totally absent. Only Ogun remains with the power to shape the religious imagination. Without Olodumare and the other oriṣa Ogun takes on a new visage and so do man's enactments of the life of the god and, hence, man's understanding of himself. A tragic vision takes the place of an ordered universe. The alienated self replaces the self as a participant, and the votary is disengaged from the ritually defined space and time of the festival. Theater replaces ritual, acting replaces enactment.

We have not moved as far from our subject as might appear to be the case. Ogun, Ọbatala, and Ẓango are a cluster of sacred symbols that in some measure still inform Ẓoyinka's world of experience as the artifacts of the oriṣa on the shrines of Ila shape the perception of reality of their devotees. The "sacredness" of the oriṣa symbols for both the university playwright and the traditional devotee is in their power to give a meaningful form to Yoruba experience; for they both belong to a social and moral world. And so the myths and rituals of Ogun grow; for, the contradiction of life and death being real, the myth-rite complex can never finally overcome the contradiction. And it will continue to grow, as Lévi-Strauss observes, "until the intellectual impulse which has produced it is exhausted."<sup>36</sup> To be sure, Lévi-Strauss is giving a cerebral answer to the problem of the nature of myth and ritual. It is an important answer. But I have tried to suggest that in the myth and ritual response of the traditional Yoruba to the fundamental contradiction of life and death there is both an acknowledgment of the contradiction and an affirmation of courage, not resignation, in the face of the contradiction. Sacrifice, ẹbọ, is at once the enactment and the surmounting of the contradiction. Life and death are discerned in their equivalence, that is, in their relationship as opposites and in their essential interaction.

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<sup>36</sup> Lévi-Strauss, *Structural Anthropology*, p. 229.