ORÍKI, WOMEN AND THE PROLIFERATION AND MERGING OF ORIŠA

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1. TWO FACES OF YORUBA RELIGION

The proliferation and overlapping of spiritual beings is a feature of many religions. Saints in popular Catholicism and Vishnu’s avatāras in Hinduism represent, in different ways, the possibility of spiritual beings that are simultaneously one and many, clusters or series of manifestations whose inner relationships are often not fully explained. Yoruba orisà are in good company. However, the way in which multiple aspects of gods are made and maintained clearly varies from one religious repertoire to another. I suggest that it is important to look at the means or medium by which fractions of gods are established, in order to understand how the relationships between them are conceived. Yoruba orisà can scarcely be apprehended without taking into account the specific textuality of the oral genres through which they are created, maintained and communicated with.

Yoruba religion has two faces. On one side, it can be seen as a teeming array of colourful, strongly distinctive spiritual personalities. They fall into recognisable categories: orisà (‘gods’), tiwín (‘spirits’), alásekú or ókú órun (‘ancestors’ or ‘the dead’, of which egúngún masquerades are one manifestation), ìjé (‘witches’), ilé (‘earth’) and personified forces such as Ikú (‘death’), Árun (‘disease’) and Òfò (‘loss’). Orisà, the subject of this discussion, can be a combination, in varying proportions, of deified human hero, force of nature, and a being of heavenly origin. Each one is assigned a definite personality. They are differentiated in exuberant and lavish detail—in terms of dress, food preferences, taboos, emblems, and special powers and fields of activity. But the other side of the coin is a pervasive indeterminacy about their identity. They appear to exist in multiple and reduplicated forms; to have numerous manifestations; to overlap to the point where, as Bascom puts it, ‘it becomes difficult to say whether one is speaking of separate deities or simply separate names or manifestations’ (Bascom, 1969a: 82). This multiplication is attended by marked inconsistency in the accounts given of the characters of the orisà, their relations to other orisà and even their gender. These inconsistencies are found within a single town and even within a single cult group. There are numerous cases of orisà said to be ‘the same’ and yet not quite the same; orisà said by one devotee to be parent and child, by another to be man and wife; orisà said to be siblings or to be married to each other and yet at the same time to be ‘no different from’ each other; orisà credited at one moment with one set of characteristics and at another with a different and apparently incompatible set.

In attempting to describe Yoruba religion, scholars have always had to contend with this problem of untidiness. The overlapping and inconsistency of Yoruba spiritual beings are so marked that few accounts have been able to ignore them completely; some, like Beier (1956) and Thompson (1969), have made them fully visible, though without attempting to account for the
strength of their presence. In most work, however, the prevailing tendency has been to emphasise the distinctive and individual side of Òrìṣà. Fragmentation, multiplication and inconsistency have usually been overlooked, tidied away or acknowledged only in passing: put down sometimes to error and sometimes to regional cultural differences. The ambition of scholarly accounts, with rare exceptions like Verger (1957) and McKenzie (1976), has been to construct an emic or an etic model representing a consensual Yoruba ‘cosmology’, a map of the spiritual world which assigns to spiritual beings determinate and permanent positions in a comprehensive scheme of things. The principles according to which this distribution is made include hierarchical ranking (Olodumare and his ‘ministers’ in order of seniority or importance, as described by Idowu (1962)), or the more complex and subtle structure of categories proposed by Morton-Williams (1964); networks of kinship and affinal relations among Òrìṣà (‘divine genealogies’, as Bascom puts it); classification in terms of the origins of spiritual beings (as in Awolalu, 1979) or their moral disposition towards humans (as in Abimbọla, 1976). In some cases, the attempt at schematic ordering gives way to mere list-making, as if in acknowledgement of the impossibility of the task.

The tendency to emphasise the orderly at the expense of the dynamic has been assisted by the almost universal use of itùn, narratives or myths, as the principal source of ideas about the Òrìṣà. The itùn lend themselves to the classificatory cosmology-building project: they can be read as representations of dramatic characters engaging in sequences of action, revealing their personalities in the process and entering into relationships with other Òrìṣà and spiritual beings of all kinds. Such characters can be conceived of—indeed are likely to be so conceived—as autonomous, distinctive entities, each representing clearly defined symbolic values in a cosmic drama. This makes it possible to envision a pantheon in which, ultimately, every character can be assigned its own distinctive role, however multiplex and difficult to unravel its relationships may be. Òrìkì Òrìṣà, the ‘praise poetry’ attributed to the gods, is cited, if at all, only as a supplement to the narrative. Quotations of Òrìkì are usually confined to a few phrases to make specific points already given in the narrative or in the visual symbolism of the Òrìṣà. These phrases are selected in such a way as to create the impression that each Òrìṣà has its own clearly defined corpus of distinctive Òrìkì which, used as an adjunct to itùn, may shed further light on the Òrìṣà’s personality. Credence is placed in this evidence because Òrìkì are regarded as ‘liturgies’ (Idowu’s word), sacred texts which have been carefully preserved down the ages. It is significant that Verger (1957) and McKenzie (1976), who give a more central place to Òrìkì, are the two scholars who arrive at the least hierarchically ordered and most dynamic and fluid picture of the relations between spiritual beings, though neither of them actually discusses any Òrìkì text in detail. In most studies, however, Òrìkì are treated as if they participate in and supplement the classificatory or explicatory project which is attributed to itùn.

In my view, the relationship between Òrìkì Òrìṣà and itùn Òrìṣà is the other way round. Òrìkì are the principal oral genre involved in the propitiation and characterisation of Òrìṣà, and itùn participate in the mode of Òrìkì. They should be treated as an adjunct to Òrìkì rather than the reverse. This makes it possible to understand characteristics of the itùn which have hitherto been
dismissed as anomalies, the result of error, forgetfulness or noetic under-development: for though each itan is usually internally coherent, a collection of itan, told by different people or even by the same person, soon reveals notable gaps, inconsistencies and contradictions. By considering itan orisã from the standpoint of the dominant genre, oriki, it becomes possible to see why this is so, and how itan do in fact make sense.

2. ORIKI IN THE PROPITIATION OF ÒRÌSÀ

Oriki can be described as attributions or appellations: epithets, elaborated or concise, which are addressed to a subject and which are equivalent to, or alternatives to, names. All entities in existence are said to have their own oriki. Oriki are felt to capture and evoke the essential characteristics of the subject: to have the most profound and intimate access to its inner nature. In utterance, therefore, they evoke the subject’s power, arouse it to action, and enhance its aura. They are always in the vocative case, and in utterance the performer always establishes an intense, one-to-one bond with the addressee as long as the utterance lasts.

Oriki are a labile and disjunctive textual form. Epithets are accumulated over time; they are composed by different people, on different occasions, and with reference to different experiences. Any subject’s corpus of oriki is therefore composed of a number of autonomous items. Furthermore, oriki are often obscure, their meaning carried in a separate, parallel explanatory tradition transmitted outside them. Each oriki gestures away from its location within the performed text to a hinterland of meaning outside the text. Not only this, but each may lead to its own hinterland by a different route. Some are literal, some ironical, some are specific historical references and some are generalised comments referring to a timeless or ideal state of affairs. An oriki chant is a shifting, fluctuating combination of fragments, which are linked only tenuously and variably in performance, and which may take on different meanings when differently combined.

Oriki are felt not only to encapsulate the essence of the subject, but also to augment its presence in the social and natural world. Towns, lineages, individual people, orisã, egungun and even animals are enhanced in relation to—sometimes almost at the expense of—other like entities through the performance of their oriki. Enhancement is construed in terms of profusion. The more oriki a subject acquires, the greater its standing. The more epithets a performer can find to heap on the subject’s head the better. Performers therefore raid the oriki corpuses of other subjects to find more material; they may even raid other genres, such as Ifá verses, proverbs and riddles. When an important man is being saluted, references to other people help to augment his status, as ‘father of’, ‘husband of’ or ‘child of’ a wide network of relatives. Genealogy is exploited to supply the performer with a source of names with which to expand the aura of her chosen subject. A profusion of people is attributed to the subject in a way that obscures and jumbles the actual pattern of kinship and affinal ties in question, but which builds him up by placing him at the centre of it.

Because the individual components of a corpus of oriki are autonomous and self-contained, borrowing from it and incorporating material into it are easily
accomplished. The oriki chant is fluid and without boundaries; the textual items in any performance are united not by permanent internal semantic links but by the fact of being applied to a single subject. The subject is the only centre of the chant. The performance builds up this subject by directing all available textual resources towards it. More units can be added by simple aggregation, and become united with existing ones through a relationship of equivalence. Thus, though oriki are felt to encapsulate the essence of the subject, they are often borrowed and shared. This results in a kind of floating and overlapping of identities. The result is paradoxical. The unique individual evoked by the intensely personal and intimate oriki is actually a composite, who participates in others' identities, subsuming them into his own but also lending (not consciously) parts of his own to others.

In Òkukù where the research for this study was done, as in other northern Yoruba towns, the main responsibility for the oriki tradition lies with women. Though there are male specialists who perform chants based on oriki, the principal and most ubiquitous tradition is the domestic one carried by the wives and daughters of compounds, who are not entertainers and who do not make money from their performances, but who are often recognised within their compounds, and sometimes beyond, as experts. The most skilled among them are called on at every household and town ceremonial to supply the vital component of oriki chanting.

In the propitiation of Òrisà, as in other ceremonial and ritual activities, oriki are indispensable. Oriki are performed at almost every ceremony concerning Òrisà. They are uttered in the privacy of early-morning propitiation at the devotee's own domestic shrine; in the regular weekly or monthly cult meetings; and in the cult's annual festival, which may involve a great set-piece, a theatrical event where the performance of oriki is a central feature. In all these contexts, oriki constitute a channel of communication between devotee and Òrisà through which reciprocal benefits flow. The communication is opened by the making of an offering, and this is usually supplemented by the utterance of prayers intended to direct a flow of blessings towards the devotee. But it is in oriki that the relationship is most fully realised as a living engagement between a speaker and a hearer. Like all oriki, the oriki of Òrisà are in the vocative case and presuppose a listening subject. The Òrisà cannot but be there when the speaker exhorts and appeals to it, extols it and insists on its attention in oriki. The devotee speaks her mind to the Òrisà, in the process constituting its personality and powers in their fullest form.

In present-day Òkukù, devotees, both male and female, often say they do not know any itàn about their Òrisà. The stories they do tell tend to be bald statements, lacking the detail and liveliness of those recorded as little as thirty years ago in other Yoruba towns. It seems likely that they have fallen victim to the dramatic decline of traditional religion in the Yoruba-speaking area during this period. But the oriki of Òrisà still flourish vigorously, in a vivid abundance that makes them some of the most exciting poetry in the Yoruba language. Devotees of Erinlè, who could say next to nothing of their Òrisà's 'life story', beyond that he was a hunter and also a river, honoured him with oriki of extraordinary vividness and profusion. In their performance, the qualities and powers of the Òrisà emerged with a force and detail quite lacking
in their narrative statements. Extraordinary performances of Sàngó pipè ('calling Sàngó'), Sòpònnón pipè ('calling Sòpònnón') and àgbò pipè ('calling the herbal infusions', i.e. river deities) were a common occurrence in Òkùkù.

It seems, then that the crucial and fundamental role of oríki is gradually being exposed to view as the religious practices are stripped down to their bones. In the process, the central role of women, the principal carriers of oríki, is thrown up to view. Though most cults contain prominent male devotees, and though their past is described in terms of powerful men as well as women, nowadays the responsibility for the continuation of the cults falls more and more on women. I shall argue that this is because women are the principal communicators, that they establish and create the òrìṣà through oríki, and that the fragmentation and merging of òrìṣà cannot be properly understood except through the specific disjunctive and labile textuality of oríki.

3. INCONSISTENCY, FRAGMENTATION AND MERGING

Inconsistency, fragmentation and merging of òrìṣà need to be treated not as accidental and regrettable untidiness, but as central features of Yoruba religious thought and practice. They are essential products of what I see as the core relationship in this thought and practice: the intense, personal and reciprocal bond between òrìṣà and devotee. Although a devotee may participate, with differing degrees of involvement, in the service of more than one òrìṣà, it is usual for him or her to have a special relationship with only one. While the larger civic and cultic organisation of religious practice is important, it is this essentially private one-to-one relationship which is the key to understanding òrìṣà.

In a previous publication (Barber, 1981) I described this relationship as being modelled on the relationship between the 'big man' and his supporter. Scholarship has overlooked the fluidity and dynamism of human social arrangements in Yorubaland as much as of spiritual ones. Big men were a long-standing and central feature of Yoruba social process. Men (and more rarely, women) made a place for themselves in society, operating within and between the interstices of chiefly hierarchy, by recruiting supporters. A supporter provides the big man with a following and thereby enhances his reputation and influence; his enhanced reputation and influence in turn enable the big man to protect and assist his supporters. The devotee, similarly, supports his or her òrìṣà with offerings, praises, feasts and lavish expenditure, thus enhancing its capacity as well as its propensity to bestow blessings and protection in return. If these are not forthcoming, the devotee may threaten to transfer his or her allegiance to another òrìṣà. By doing so, he or she deprives the first one of some of its glory, for it is only as powerful as its devotees make it. The relationship is summed up concisely in a phrase found in the oríki of many òrìṣà:

Ènì 'ò gbàni láá gbà

It's the person who helps us that we help in return

Big men are by definition in competition with each other, for one big man can
only increase his following at the expense of another. In the same way, the 
\(\text{oris\text{\'}}\) together with their cults may be seen as competing, each cult upholding
its own \(\text{oris\text{\'}}\)'s reputation at the expense of others'. As McKenzie noted, each
\(\text{oris\text{\'}}\) is the centre of its own devotee's world, and is not subordinated by them
to a scheme that includes all the other \(\text{oris\text{\'}}\).

Inconsistency, fragmentation and merging in the personalities of \(\text{oris\text{\'}}\) are
products of this situation. Inconsistency, because the cults are in competition
and each presents its own \(\text{oris\text{\'}}\) as the centre of its own world, ignoring others
or relegating them to subordinate positions. Fragmentation, because the intense
personal nature of the bond is enhanced if each devotee or small
group of devotees within a cult has its 'own' version of the \(\text{oris\text{\'}}\). Merging,
because the exclusive character of the relationship means that each \(\text{oris\text{\'}}\) has
to be all things to its own devotees. All \(\text{oris\text{\'}}\) have to be able to offer similar
benefits and therefore have to share similar qualities: beneficence, in order to
bestow children, wealth and long life; and ferocity, in order to empower,
protect the devotee and destroy his or her enemies.

But the discussion of these features can be taken further if the role of \(\text{oriki}\)
is brought into consideration. Not only the reciprocal \(\text{oris\text{\'}}\)–devotee relation-
ship itself but the inconsistency, fragmentation and merging which issue
from it depend on and are constituted through \(\text{oriki}\). Because of their lability
and disjunctiveness, \(\text{oriki}\) are able to bring certain intellectual operations to
fuller accomplishment than other discourses. \(\text{Oriki}\) are vehicles of transcenden-
tce. Their ability to float, to incorporate each other, to shift their shape
from performance to performance enable them to achieve a crossing of
boundaries, a simultaneous heightening and confluence of individual identi-
ties.

4. ESTABLISHMENT OF RECIPROCAL BONDS IN ORIKI

The utterance of \(\text{oriki}\) locks speaker and hearer in an exchange that is direct,
intimate and powerful. Even in the most public performances there is a sense
of a private communication between the performer and the \(\text{oris\text{\'}}\). Each
devotee speaks only of her own personal requests and her own relationship
with the \(\text{oris\text{\'}}\). She asks for blessings only for herself. Sometimes she makes
explicit the personal, confidential nature of the communication; she asks the
\(\text{oris\text{\'}}\) to attend to her most private problems, ones which she will not speak of
outside her own room, but which the \(\text{oris\text{\'}}\) is privy to:

\text{Bàbá àgbá iwin bá n gbó ti yáráá mi}
\text{Bàbá àgbá bá n ñé ẹyí tó ṣóro'bè}
\text{Ẹyí tó ṣóro lèmí ń wí.}

Venerable spirit, listen to the matters of my inner room
Venerable father, help me deal with the difficult ones among them
It's the difficult ones I'm talking about.

The relationship is conceived of as exclusive. Whatever the reality of multiple
inheritances and obligations, the devotee addresses the \(\text{oris\text{\'}}\) as if she had no
other object of worship. She will often stress her single-minded devotion to
one Òrîṣà. She may assert, more competitively, that her own Òrîṣà is the only spiritual force she can rely on, the benefits offered by others are inferior, and she may insist that her Òrîṣà’s beneficence should be reserved for an exclusive circle of devotees and not just made available to anyone who asks for them.

The Òrîki chant expresses most fully the reciprocal nature of the Òrîṣà-devotee bond because performing Òrîki is in itself the bestowal of a favour. When a praise-singer addresses Òrîki to a big man she both acknowledges and augments his reputation, which is an essential component of his power. He can be seen almost visibly swelling with gratification. The phrase used to describe this translated state, ‘Oríí mí wú’ (My head swelled) is the way that the effects of an encounter with the supernatural are described. Òrîki, that is, do not merely publicise a status achieved by other means; they are seen as an instrument through which change of state and status are effected. Spiritual beings are likewise enhanced by the performance of their Òrîki, and the devotee is highly conscious of her own role in swelling the Òrîṣà’s reputation. If she ceases to perform them, the Òrîṣà’s reputation declines.

But the empowering of spiritual beings through the performance of Òrîki is more dramatic than that of big men. During the biennial Egúngún festival, masquerades whose powers have become dormant are revived and galvanised into furious activity by intensive and prolonged chanting of Òrîki. The dead may be empowered to return to the community of the living by intensive performance of their Òrîki at the grave-shrine. In the Ònjó festival, intensive chanting of Òrîki arouses Ònjó and opens the way for him to enter the human community by possessing his principal priest, who is similarly translated from his normal state into a receptive trance by the steadily intensifying chant.

The reciprocity of the relationship is expressed as automatic and instantaneous. In the very act of praising the Òrîṣà, the devotee enhances its capacity to bless her. Conversely, it is said that because the maintenance and augmentation of the Òrîṣà’s name demands money and effort, therefore the Òrîṣà will bestow wealth and health on the devotee to enable her to perform these services. Asserting that an Òrîṣà has the power to give becomes tantamount to requesting a gift. The devotee makes an offering and demands in Òrîki that the Òrîṣà send a child-giver, a money-bringer, to collect it:

Olówó olómọ ni o yàn ’ó wáá gbọdún
Enímọjẹsí ni o yàn ’ó wáá gbà
Abiyamo tó yè gòsùn lówó ni o yàn kó wáá gbà
È yẹ gbọdọ rán gbarùngbákò aheràwò
Ọgédé enímọjẹsí ni o yàn ’ó wáá gbẹbọ lọ
Èsílé wáá gbẹbọ, Ògóko bàbá ité Òrèṣí

Choose a wealth-bearer, child-bringer to come and fetch the festival offering
Choose a mother of toddlers to come and collect it
Choose a mother whose hand is dipped in camwood to come and collect it
You mustn’t send a down-at-heel old palm-fruit gleaner
Choose only a mother of toddlers to come and take the offering away
Èsílé, come and take your offering, Ògóko father of Òrèṣí town.

Òrîki, then, constitute a channel between beings through which power and benefits flow both ways.
5. TRANSFERENCE AND SHARING OF QUALITIES AMONG ÒRÌSÀ

Since each devotee devotes her or himself to one Òrìṣà, each Òrìṣà has to deliver the full range of blessings and protection. The ascription to each Òrìṣà of the full range of attributes and powers is accomplished more comprehensively in Òrìkì than in any other medium. Since Òrìkì is aggregative, incorporative, disjunctive and boundary-less, they permit a seamless borrowing of attributions. Since utterance is focused exclusively and intensively on a single subject, who is the formal and emotional centre of the chant, there is no necessity for, or indeed possibility of, justification of such borrowing in narrative terms. Borrowing, adapting and recycling textual elements learnt in other contexts is part of the Òrìkì performer’s basic technique. On the one hand each Òrìṣà is hailed by its devotees as unique, extraordinary and distinctive, standing out amongst the others in its glory; on the other, there is an effect almost of a composite identity woven of multiple strands, in which each Òrìṣà participates.

The Òrìṣà are certainly differentiated in Òrìkì. Òpònnón, the god of smallpox, and Òṣàngó, the god of lightning, are evoked as gigantic and terrifying figures commanding cosmic forces of sun and fire, ruthless and implacable; while Òṣùn and Òtìn are evoked as predominantly mild, cool figures, associated with the child-giving and curative powers of water. What is less well known is that in Òrìkì Òpònnón and Òṣàngó are also praised for their curative powers and their ability to give children, while Òṣùn, Òtìn and Òsìlè are also represented as tough, ferocious and dangerous. Each Òrìṣà is credited with both sets of qualities, though in different proportions.

When devotees appeal to Òpònnón, the killer deity, for children, they do so in language that can also be found in Ògbọ pípè, Òrìkì addressed to the predominantly beneficent water deities:

*Erin a-tó-bá-jayé, iwo ni ò sàmòjútò ò mí*

Òrìṣà tó fún lènì n ọ̀̀ o wènì òṣòmọ

Elephant, one who is worthy to enjoy life with, it is you who are my guardian

The Òrìṣà who gave me something extra will protect the extra until it grows up into a child

*Ènì, the extra that a market woman adds to what she has sold someone, is here being used to suggest that Òpònnón gives even more children than expected—he adds something to what was originally asked for. Òṣàngó can be pictured, like Òtìn, Òṣùn and other maternal deities, as a mother carrying her devotee on her back, and can be begged, in the same words as are addressed to them, not to let the devotee slip:*

*Òjá ìgbàlà, a-jó-fòbó, tó ọ̀ fi gbé mi pòn mò mò tu*

The baby-sash of safety, ‘He who dances for the Europeans’, which you tie me to your back with, don’t undo it.

Conversely, Òṣùn and Òtìn, so often described as maternal, beautiful and amiable, are also praised in frightening animal images shared with Òṣàngó and Òpònnón. Òṣùn is

*Èégàn ǹghadagbà ti i gbé ti i jì fọn bì èrin*

*Ákekè òrìṣà, Ìjèṣà Òṣòré*
Mighty masquerade whose way it is to trumpet on awakening like the elephant
Scorpion orisà, Ìjèṣà from Òṣòrè

and her devotee, like the Sangó and Òṣòpònnón devotees, begs the orisà not to visit her ferocity on her:

Ìjèṣà mó fòsì nà mi, Òmọ Òrò Òṣòfòn
Ìjèṣà woman, don’t strike me with your left hand, child of Wealth at Òṣòfòn.

(The suggestion is that a blow from her left hand will be even more vicious than one from her right.)

Èsìlè, a ‘white’ deity linked with Òbatála, whose child-bringing and curative powers are symbolised in the white cloth, metal and beads used by his devotees, is none the less credited with a ferocity that is evoked in images of blood so characteristic of the oriki of Ògún the god of war, iron and hunting. He is

Oníbánte ëjè
One who wears trousers of blood
and

Òlómi-ínlé Òṣòjè-àkè-bójú, Òkùnnin tòkùnnin!
One who has water in the house but washes his face in the blood of a big she-goat, a man who really is a man!

It is not uncommon to find two or more orisà sharing quite extended passages of oriki. Òjútù, one of the manifestations of Èsìlè, is besought not to attack his devotee, who at the same time glories in his power to do harm. The evocation in this passage of the orisà storming off on warlike expeditions all over the country is found, in exactly the same words, in the oriki of Sangó.

Mó se mi, Òmọ elómi ni Ọ se
Òisà tí i tí bá ni jà ‘á mò
Òjútù òpinpinpin ní i sọmọ lára
Bi ò bá jà, dá yan lọ bí Òdè bí Òdè
Bi Èjìgbò bí Ògbómọsó
Bi Àkinmóórín
Bi Àáwé
Èsò èsò ni i fì i bá ni jà bí Òisà Òráwò
Baba mó bá n jà n tèmi
Ọ lènì bí ejò, Òkùnnin pòngbà bí ènì gbÉṣù kalè.

Don’t attack me, attack someone else
The orisà who never lets you know when he’s angry with you
Òjútù torments people remorselessly
If he’s going to fight, he storms off as far as Òdè
As far as Èjìgbò, as far as Ògbómọsó
As far as Àkinmóórín
As far as Àáwé
Little by little he fights with one, like the orisà of Òráwò
Father, don’t pick on me to fight with
You chase people like snakes, stout fellow like someone who could lift up Èshù and dump him down.

Attempts that have been made in the literature to discover links and polarities between the ọrìṣà, seen as a system, have not sufficiently taken into account the general tendency for oríki of ọrìṣà to be shared. Even when the oríki are distinct and ascribed to only one ọrìṣà, the idiom in which they are framed often turns out to be an allotropic variant of oríki attributed to other ọrìṣà. An example is the idiom which construes power as outrage. This is a highly characteristic idiom and many ọrìṣà are credited with some shocking act as demonstration of their capacity to transcend normal expectations and get away with it. Ọrìṣà Ògíyàn (another variant of Òbátlá) pokes his in-laws in the eye with a sharpened stick and then plunges them into boiling oil; Sàngó shows his ingratitude by cooking and eating the yam cuttings kindly given to him by a neighbour for replanting; Ọ̀pọ̀nnón not only steals a goat but compels its owner to grind the pepper to cook it in; and several of the manifestations of Erinlè, which are discussed in detail below, have their own outrages, from refusing to answer friendly greetings to bashing an elderly widow on the head. The vast, boundary-less reservoir of textual materials from which oríki are constructed permits an indefinite number of variations on a theme.

6. Constitution of Ọrìṣà Manifestations in Oríkì

The proliferation of ọrìṣà manifestations may be conceived in several ways and may come about through different processes, but in all, oríki are central and attention to the textual mode of oríki sheds light on the significance of these multiple personalities. Oríki, to simplify, constitute ọrìṣà manifestations in two ways: through the separate oríki of the devotees with whom each fragment is identified, and through the attribution to each fragment of its own, recognisable oríki—for although epithets can be borrowed, some do remain the distinctive property of particular beings.

In Òkúkù almost all ọrìṣà exist in more than one manifestation. In some cases the tendency to fragmentation is given formal expression in the mythology, where it is asserted, for example, that there are ‘seven Ògún’s’, each belonging to a different body of devotees; and where Qya’s oríki ‘Ìyánsán-án’ is explained with an account of how and why she split into nine parts. But in Òkúkù at least, the multiplication of ọrìṣà personalities is usually left unexplained and unenumerated. It is taken for granted that one person’s Qya is different from another’s. No fixed total of variants is given because their emergence is seen as part of a historical process. Some have been abandoned, new ones could still be created.

Sometimes the differentiation is exogenous: the variants have separate origins, having been brought into the community at different times and from different towns. Ọrìṣà Òko, the farm deity, for example, exists in two different forms, one represented by an iron staff and propitiated by eléfun, wearers of chalk markings, and the other known as Arère and represented by a crown of cowries. The first was brought to Òkúkù from Ìráwò by a barren woman who successfully solicited a child from the ọrìṣà, and the second was
brought from Saó, near Ilọrin, by a man who was afflicted by born-to-die children. It was explained that ‘Both are Òrisà Oko.’ Some said that Arère was Òrisà Oko’s ‘wife’, but the Ìyà Alárrère denied this, ‘Òrisà Oko kanná ni’ (‘It’s the same Òrisà Oko’). More often, however, the process of differentiation is motivated from within the cult. A strong devotee who makes his or her presence felt in the community may succeed in stamping the Òrisà with his or her identity. There is, for example, a Šàngó known as Šàngó Adégbitì (‘Adégbitì’s Šàngó’), and another known as Šàngó ti Šàngólọlá (‘the Šàngó belonging to Šàngólọlá’). Both Adégbitì and Šàngólọlá were formidably male priests of the cult, adọsù who were spectacularly possessed by the Òrisà at the annual festival, and who gave great feasts. It was their salience in the life of the town and of the cult which gave their Šàngós a distinctive identity. These two Šàngós were considered to be distinct in the same sense that Bányànni (‘Šàngó’s elder sister’) and Mógbà (‘the most senior of all the Šàngós’) are distinct. ‘All of them are Šàngó’, it would be said, ‘and all of us are Šàngó devotees’.

In other words, the exclusive and intensive relationship between Òrisà and devotee is expressed as mutual identification. The devotee identifies with the Òrisà and is identified by her devotion to it (a woman, for instance, may be known by no other name than Ìyà Šàngó); and Òrisà, in turn, is identified in terms of the devotee who boosts its reputation (as in the case of Šàngó Adégbitì and Šàngó ti Šàngólọlá). Each of the numerous Šàngós, Òyas and Òsunṣ is recognised by virtue of its relationship with a particular devotee or group of devotees. This identification is achieved above all through orikì.

The Erinlẹ cult illustrates how the process works. The multiple personalities of this river deity were conceived as ‘ibú’, pools in the river. At cult meetings and festivals, devotees would chant orikì which saluted and evoked the collectivity of ibú with the refrain:

\textit{Enibúmbù, olódò-odò, olómi-omi}  
All you pools, all you rivers, all you waters

and then the ibú would be named and saluted one by one. They included Alámọ (potter), Abátàn (swamp), Ágànà, Ìgbèrí, Àkànbí (a man’s name), Àánù (pity), Ìyà Mökìn (mother of Mökìn), Òjútù (peace of mind) and Òwáalá Ifón (Òwáalá of Ifón, a town). Some of these fractions are widely known outside Òkukú, but even so, they are regarded amongst the Òkukú devotees as having arisen through an internal process of mutual identification between Òrisà and devotee. Òjútù was one of the ibú known in Ègbádò by Thompson’s informants (Thompson, 1969), but this is how an Òkukú devotee explained its origin to me:

‘Òjútù began when Ògúnṣolá of ilé Olúọdẹ [grandfather of present generation of elders in this compound] got a child from Erinlẹ and said “Òjútù mí lójú” [i.e. my mind is set at rest]. ‘Òjútù’ [rest of mind] was a name already known to people, but he gave it to his own Erinlẹ when he got the long-desired child.’

She added:

‘We all worship Erinlẹ at the same spot when we go to the river. The ibú
[pools] don’t actually exist as physical locations. They are names. Everyone who worships Erinlẹ has a particular ibú. If you get your Erinlẹ from your father or mother, you take over the name of the ibú that they had.¹

These ‘names’ are used amongst cult members as a way of tightening the identification between each devotee and his or her orisá. The cult members address each other not by their own personal names but by the name of the ibú of each one. As one devotee put it:

‘The name of the ibú is an orúkọ fáàrí for the devotee [i.e., an honorary name used for self-display]. The names are a way of distinguishing the devotees.’

The orisá, in turn, is apprehended in the form of ibú which exist only by virtue of their association with small groups or individuals. The ‘name’, then, is the point of conjunction between the two. But naming only reaches its full potential in oriki, which are both equivalents to, and enormous elaborations of, personal names.

The devotee can be saluted through the oriki of the orisá, and the orisá through the oriki of the devotee. The inclusion of the devotee’s oriki in orisá pípè is one of the ways in which manifestations of orisá are differentiated from each other. Among the ibú of Erinlẹ, Ìyá Mọ́kín is saluted by the oriki orílẹ (lineage oriki) of Ikọyí, Òwáálá by those of ÒIfón, Ibú Àànú by those of Òpómúlíéró. In passages like the following one, the devotee makes it clear that she is transferring the oríkì orílẹ of a prominent devotee to his or her ibú, by reminding the listeners that ‘it’s Ibú Àänú I’m saluting like that’:

Àwọn nÌwàrè Òpó, Mojá-Álekàn
A-méru-relé
Ibú Àänú ni mo kí báun
A-méru-relé, Eníwà lÓyun
Ọmọ ará gbó mi láso
Ódù a-yi-kanlẹ-bì-òkè
Ọmọ òpò kọrọbitì
Ibú Àänú ni mo wà, n ò lọ
Ọmọ òpò kọrọbitì.

They are the Ìwàrè Òpó, Mojá-Álekàn
One who brings a slave home
It’s Àänú Pool I’m saluting like this
One who brings a slave home, Eníwà has Òyùn
Child of ‘My clothes are worn out’
Rotund fellow who rolls along mountainously
Child of the roly poly post
I’m still on Àänú Pool, I haven’t left it
Child of the roly poly post.

Òpó (post) is the emblem of the people claiming origin in Ìwàtá—in Òukùkù, members of the compound known as ìlé Òlọkọ—and the oríkì orílẹ revolve around this theme, functioning as an emblem of group identity. The principal devotee of ibú Àänú belonged to ìlé Òlọkọ and the oríkì were transferred to this fraction of the orisá. Conversely, the devotees are saluted
by the oriki of the oriṣa. As the Erinle devotees entered the cult meeting place on one occasion, one of them chanted:

Àgò enilé o, olojò ñbò o  
Olojò mìí kó, olojò ọmọ Elẹ ni.  
Bi enilé bá gá tó bá térin  
Émi àlejọ bí mo bá mọ bí ẹ̀lùrí  
Mo sebí enilé n ní ó ṣàlejọ ní 'Mọọ rọra'  
Enilé ṣe mí ẹ̀pẹ̀ Olojọ ń bọ  
Mo ribà ńwájú mo ribà lèyin  
Alárokú  
Éyibùnní  
Sàbà saba ọ̀gbọ̀ akéré okùn  
Ta ló lóri ọwọn wọńhun?  
Alámọ́ ló lóri ọwọn wọńhun  
Ako omi tí i jé gbáági  
Ajááráwà atèyín ọrùn geṣùn  
Fàáídáró ẹ̀sumí èlú  
Ó fàiẹpá ó ẹ̀sumí è ní sàgidi  
Abáláró baró wò káláró ó bún 'èkùn!  

Permission to enter, houseowner, a mighty person is on the way  
It's no other mighty person than the mighty child of Enle  
If the householder is as tall as an elephant  
If I the visitor am no bigger than a tiny mouse  
Still I think the householder will get up to welcome the visitor  
Houseowner, say I am welcome, the mighty person is on her way  
I pay homage to all  
Alárokú  
Éyibùnní  
Plentiful are the true sons of the ‘akéré okùn’ line  
Who is the owner of the Orí of these people?  
Alámọ́ [an ibú] is the owner of the Orí of these people  
Masterful water whose name is Gbáági [nickname for a bossy person]  
Dog of Eruwa who mounts a buffalo from the back of its neck  
One who shits indigo without being a dyer  
He shits showers of little round turds without eating groundnuts  
One who visits the dyer to look at the indigo and makes the dyer burst into tears! [because he helps himself]  

The singer announces herself, on arrival, as a ‘mighty person’—mighty because she is ‘the child of Erinle’. She goes on to salute two of the great Erinle devotees of the past, now dead, and having named them, she asks ‘Who is the owner of their Orí?’ i.e. who was in charge of apportioning to them the good things of life? The answer is Alámọ́, one of the ibú. She then chants the oriki of Alámọ́, the ‘masterful water’, associated with the deep blue of indigo dye and with extraordinary powers and energies and excessive behaviour. Those whose Orí he is in charge of participate in these powers and energies. They are enhanced through their association with him. The references to the ọrìṣà thus enhance the standing of the devotee.
As well as being saluted through its devotee’s oríki, then, each íbú has its own oríki. Each, in fact, has a personality that is expressed only in oríki, for there are no stories and no visual symbolism or rituals to suggest the differences. At the cult meeting already referred to, the performer saluted each íbú in turn and the oríki for each were subtly different. All dwelt on a certain cluster of characteristics associated with Erinle as a water and hunting deity. All emphasised his ‘toughness’, his outrageous acts, his capacity to torment or his propensity for dealing sudden, unsuspected attacks. All these are qualities which make him a good protector and ally for his devotees. But the emphasis differed from one íbú to another. The performance was like a shifting kaleidoscope of perspectives, in which distinct but consonant and equivalent repertoires of imagery came sequentially into view. Alámò, associated with indigo dye and inky blackness (‘My father looked at his own hair, it was jet black!’) is evoked entirely in terms of the river—the deep turbulent pools which make him ‘ako omi’ (‘virile water’). His outrageous act consists of beating up an old widow to whom he owes money for drink:

Sá pónpó topó
Fátári opó nápó
Ó wáá ró ti ọpó
Lá wín, èè san!

Stands over the widow with a cudgel
Knocks the widow’s head against the housepost
He went and bought drinks from a widow
On credit, he didn’t pay!

Ígbéí is linked with iron and Ògún, as befits a hunter deity, and his outrageous act is to cut up the blacksmith’s tools (or the warrior’s weapons) before his very eyes and eat them:

Ígbéí Ògún, akéléwòn jáfà
Ọko iyá mi akérin je lójú entrín!

Ígbéí Ògún, one who cuts the chain with a single stroke
My mother’s husband, one who cuts iron and eats it in front of the iron’s owner!

Ojútú is even more definitely a hunter:

Ọ-péyoló-ti-eyoló
Ará oddò ti i ró ájo igi láso
Ọ pésúó igbó tibí-íran
Ọko Fátúnnse
Ọ pèkúlù tolé-tolè
Ọ págbóñrin nípa ṣísín
Ojútú o ká tintin ẹye mórí igi

One who kills lynx after lynx
Native of the river who dresses the concourse of trees in cloth
He kills the red-flanked duiker in the forest, and all its family and line
Husband of Fátúnnse
He kills the crested duiker and its children yet unborn
He kills the antelope with laughable ease
Ojútú, you corner the little birds on top of the tree.

Íyá Mòkín is a female fraction of the male hunter deity. She is credited with medicinal and magical powers which give her control over both animals and humans:

Íyá Mòkín aláápaṣọn erè
A-rílè-yan-sí
Olóde òkúta
A-bókè-diè-soògùn
Erè ló tètè padiè Mòkín
Íyámòpó wàá perè díǹà oko
Ará oko ọ rónà wálé
Ará ilé ọ rónà roko
Èbè laa bẹ Mòkín kò tó bá a ńbérè ọ̀mà

Íyá Mòkín, one who kills a python instantly
One who has a house to swagger in
One whose forecourt is made of stone
One who takes a little earth from the hill to make medicine
The python quickly killed Mòkín’s hen
Íyámòpó went and killed the python and blocked the road to the farm with it
People coming from the farm couldn’t get past to their homes
People coming from home couldn’t get past to their farms
We had to beg Mòkín before she removed the python from the road for us.

Òwáááá Ìfón brings in a different range of concepts altogether. Although its last devotee is now dead, and there was no one to take it over, the ibú is still saluted at cult meetings along with the others. This manifestation seems to have some of the characteristics of Òrìṣà Olúfón, a variant of Òbátálá. Its name suggests they have a common origin in Ìfón. Whereas the other manifestations are described as indigo, black and red in appearance and in their clothing, Òwáááá Ìfón, like Òbátálá, is white. He has aspects of the creator deity, and like him is associated with cripples and albinos. His food, like that of other ‘white’ deities, is snails. Òwáááá Ìfón seems very different from all the other ibú: emphasising peaceable, creative and curative properties rather than dangerous ones. He is pictured as a benign provider of children. In this way a desirable balance within the cult as a whole is attained.

But, as with other ‘white’ deities, his beneficence has a dangerous side and, like the other ibú, he can use his powers for vicious purposes:

Òwáááá Ìfón, a-wẹmọ-bí-ọlójá
Dùrọsìgì-ọwù
Òwáááá ti í rọmọ lápáa jọ bí agogo
Òrìrí ìṣà ti í wùmọ lèèkè ọbàntù
Bába mó wùn n lèèkèè mí, ‘mọ a-tún–Ìfón-ṣe.

Òwáááá of Ìfón, one who gives us fine children as God does
One who stands upright like the cotton-bush
Òwáááá who forges children’s arms one after another like bells
Òrìrí Òrìṣà who swells a person’s cheeks up puffily [with illness]
Father don’t swell my cheeks up, child of one who brings prosperity to Ìfón.
Through *oriki*, then, the various manifestations of an *orisà* are evoked and filled out with attributes. The degree to which these manifestations are distinct varies from cult to cult. Among the *ibù* of Erinlè which I have used as an example, the *oriki* evoke with fine variations of imagery a series of fractions of a personality, all sharing certain characteristics but offering variant expressions of them. The different manifestations are not ranked, nor are their interrelationships theorised. Some manifestations, however, are said to be more ‘powerful’ than others; some are acknowledged as the ‘*olórí*’ or leader. If fractions or *orisà* are more powerful than each other, this is because their devotees have been able to make them so.

Thus *oriki* simultaneously differentiate personalities and dissolve the boundaries between them, and these two processes are interlocked. They differentiate each *orisà* and each *orisà* fraction by focusing exclusively on it and asserting its unique merits, and by infusing it with the *oriki* of its ‘owner’. But in building up one subject, dissolution of boundaries takes place when the *oriki* draw on images and themes that have been attributed to others, either by borrowing or by allotropic variation. Not only the boundaries between one *orisà* and another, but also the boundaries between *orisà* and devotee are dissolved in the transference of *oriki*. In looking at a single performance or single corpus, it is never possible to tell which epithets discriminate a being and which are shared with other beings, part of a larger, composite repertoire of shared attributes. Only a wider survey of *oriki* *orisà* reveals the interplay of differentiation and merging. However, to the devotee, focused on her own *orisà*, this does not present itself as an issue.

7. WOMEN AND THE CULTS

It is appropriate that *oriki* in Òkukù are primarily mastered and performed by women, for women are one of the principal sources both of social differentiation and of social linking in northern Yoruba towns. Within an *ilé* (lineage/compound), co-wives constitute the genealogical nodes according to which groups of men are divided for purposes of inheritance and political segmentation. They introduce heterogeneity into the patrilineage by giving each individual man a separate body of affines which can be called upon as a supplementary and alternative network of support. But on marriage women also link whole lineages, their fathers’ and their husbands’, breaching the boundaries set up by the ideology of lineage difference and autonomy. In *orisà* cults, women multiply the diversity of spiritual beings that are served in each lineage and in the town as a whole. On marriage, they often bring with them their own *orisà* which they have become attached to in their natal lineage or town. After their death, someone else must take it over, perpetuating its presence indefinitely. Since *orisà* themselves and a devotee’s ‘place’ in the cult have usually been passed down through women as well as men—often zigzagging from mother to son to son’s daughter—*orisà* and cult places have passed between compounds, ensuring that no *ilé* has a homogeneous religious composition.

Women themselves, then, effect both division and transcendence of division among social groups, just as *oriki* both dissolve and assert difference. My suggestion here is that women have been important in the cults at least
partly because it is they who control the vital channels of communication with the orisha through their mastery of oriki. Rather than being the subject of the ‘praise’ which puts big men in the limelight, they actually operate the ‘praising’ mechanism by which the flow of spiritual forces is directed and through which, ultimately, the multiple personalities of the orisha are constituted.

An Erinle chant corroborates the supposition that what is inherited in the cult is not so much title or a formal position defined in terms of rights and duties, as a capability. Ere-Ọṣun inherited what may be termed her Erinle from her mother’s mother Awóroká, whom she saluted in the following terms:

Awóroká ni n kí un
Ọrisá ti n bẹ lórí Awóroká ni n kí un
Olórí entimójẹsí
Awọn ló kó n lÉnlẹ nlẹ omi
Awọn ogá onìwọròdógún o o o
Awọn náà ló kó mi ní ọrókọto
Ọ wáá dénì
Ọ déji
Ọ déta
Ọgá onìwọròdógún ti n bẹ lOyè-mokò
Nléé Kọọkin
Ayábù lọ̀nà tèrò
Adébínpé
Alerííùúrú orí̀n lénu
Pààkáà bọtèbótè
Adébínpé alóntííùùríí orí̀n lénu
Awọn ló kó mi nìwọròdógún n ó ní i sìṣe
Mo kéré nínú onìwọròdógún o
Awọn náà ló rán n lóde n ó ní i sòde lọ.

Awóroká is the one I am saluting
It’s the orisha upon Awóroká’s head [i.e. that devolved upon her] that I am saluting
Head of all the lesser cult members
It was she who taught me about Erinle at the bottom of the water
She, the master of the praise-singers
It was she who imparted to me the gift of the gab
There was one
There were two
There were three
Masters of praise-singing at Oyè-mokò
In the town of Kọọkin
Where travellers stop to drink
Adébínpé
One who has all kinds of songs on her lips
Little masquerade that frays its lips with talking!
Adébínpé, one who has all kinds of songs on her lips
She was the one who taught me praise-singing, I will not make any mistakes
I am small among the praise-singers
It was they who sent me out, I will not make any mistakes in my outing.

Awóróká, a former devotee of the cult, now dead, is saluted in conjunction with her Erinlè which, it is explicitly stated, was 'on her head', i.e. devolved upon her from some even earlier member of the cult. Awóróká was keeping open a place in the cult, a place now occupied by someone else. It is not just a slot in the cult membership that Awóróká left behind to be filled, but a relationship with the spiritual world—a relationship which her successor has a duty to maintain. Awóróká is remembered, above all, for her gifts as a praise-singer. She is not just a matriarchal figure in the cult (olóri onímójèsi—literally the head of all the mothers of toddlers, i.e. other female cult members); she is also ṣé́gá onítwò́ròdò́gún, the master of the vocalists. Òrìṣà-Òṣùn acknowledges Awóróká as the one from whom she has inherited a place: a place defined by competence in the performance of oríkì. She pays tribute by saying that Awóróká taught her everything, and that she herself is a novice. It is only by the good will and protective beneficence of Awóróká and the other expert vocalists of former times (she prepares at one point to name two others, but does not do so) that she can carry out her assignment without mishap. It is common in oríkì performances for the performer briefly to acknowledge his or her teacher, but this text goes further than that. It suggests that the key figures in the cult are conceived of in terms of great chanter. The past of the Erinlè devotees, that is, is seen as the transmission not so much of title or office but of a capacity to communicate. The great devotees are those who can best cross boundaries between mortal beings and spiritual ones.

8. Ìtàn Ìrìṣà Reconsidered

The narratives about ìrìṣà, on which almost all accounts of Yoruba religion have been based, do not participate in the constitution of the intense, vocative relationship between devotee and ìrìṣà. They are not involved, therefore, in the actual constitution of ìrìṣà fragments. However, like the ìtàn existing in parallel with other kinds of oríkì, they supply an important and complementary gloss, a narrative framework without which the construction of ìrìṣà personalities might perhaps dissolve into complete liquidity. Inasmuch as narratives automatically invest personalities with definition as agents, and relate them in sequences of action to other agents, ìtàn ìrìṣà produce a larger pattern between spiritual entities, which oríkì do not: something that could be, and has been, construed as a cosmological map. This role of ìtàn is undeniably important, providing a set of parameters within which the construction of ìrìṣà identities take place.

What I want to suggest, however, is that in so far as ìtàn appear garbled and contradictory, this is to be understood in terms of the discursive forms of oríkì. In ìtàn ìrìṣà, devotees either ignore the other ìrìṣà, saying they are no concern of theirs, or they tell stories which attempt to enhance their own ìrìṣà through its associations with others. Thus each self-centric cult produces its own version of cosmological relationships, drawing on the same themes and narrative devices as others but producing markedly different effects. Here is
an example, Ṭsun, Ọya, Ōtin, Erinlè and Lóógun-ède are all river deities with cults in Òkùkù. Devotees of both Ọya and Ṭsun said that these two deities were the wives of Sàngó. The Ṭsun devotee said that Ṭsun was the younger and more beautiful of the two, and as junior wife stole all Sàngó’s affection. The Ọya devotee, however, said that Ṭsun was the senior wife, but Ọya was so much more strong-willed that she gained complete ascendancy over her and became Sàngó’s favourite. A devotee of Erinlè, the river-hunter deity, on the other hand, appropriated Ṭsun, together with Ōtin, as wives for Erinlè, thus annexing the prestige of the big cults of these two deities to the lesser-known and smaller Erinlè cult. Ōtin devotees did not agree that Ōtin was Erinlè’s wife. They told a story representing Ōtin as the wife of an Oba of Ṣtan, who betrayed her secret (that she had four breasts) thus driving her to turn into a river. In the context of the annual Ōtin festival, however, Ōtin devotees said Ōtin’s husband was Òtòmpòrò, one of the many masks brought out during the festival—a particularly fierce and masculine mask often described as an egúngún.

Inconsistencies in stories told even by members of a single cult suggest that the overriding concern is with providing the ṣòrisà with a set of auspicious relationships rather than with constructing a consensual explanatory cosmology. As long as the proposed relationships put the ṣòrisà in a favourable position, the details seem not to matter very much. The Baálé Sàngó, for instance, a senior male title-holder in the Sàngó cult, said that Yemoja was Sàngó’s mother, and added that his father was Àwóyó, a native of Òyó (but remarked at another point that his father was Òránníyàn); but the head of the Sàngó cult, Ònà Mógà, asserted that ‘Yemoja was Sàngó’s elder sister, Ọpọnnön was his younger brother, and his father was Òlórun.’ Both aligned Yemoja, a powerful and important deity, with Sàngó to surround him with a strong supporting cast: the details of her relationship to him were, however, open to a variety of rearrangements. The appropriation of Ọpọnnön, one of the most feared of all ṣòrisà, as a junior brother to Sàngó, similarly served the dual purpose of announcing the superiority and dominance of Sàngó even over this ṣòrisà (‘No one can fight with Ọpọnnön because they fear Sàngó’s wrath’), and annexing the prestige of Ọpọnnön to Sàngó. Kinship and marriage relations are supplemented by claims of friendship among the ṣòrisà. The custodians of the Oba’s egúngún Pájè say that ‘Ọpọnnön and Pájè walk together [i.e. are companions] because they are both very powerful and dangerous. If Ọpọnnön is threatening to kill the children of a certain family, Pájè can be sent to him to beg him to desist.’ Pájè enjoys an increase of reputation through his friendship with and influence over Ọpọnnön. A small cult can give its ṣòrisà a boost by claiming that it has the protection of a more powerful one. Thus Bànyánni, the deity of people born with dreadlocks, was described by one devotee as the elder sister of Sàngó: ‘Dáda [Bànyánni] cannot fight, but she has a younger brother who is very brave.’ Another devotee (Ònà Mógà again) said that Bànyánni was actually Sàngó’s senior wife, while Ọya was the junior. What was important was that Bànyánni should be linked to Sàngó in a way that put her under his protection.

As in ṣòrikì, itàn told in each cult seek to heighten the powers and qualities of the cult’s own ṣòrisà, attributing to them the full range from beneficence to ferocity. This leads to thematic differences between one cult’s characterisa-
tion and another’s. A devotee of Qya told a story which stressed the ferocity of Qya by contrasting it with the meekness of her co-wife Ôṣùn:

‘Ôṣùn was the senior wife, Qya the junior. Qya was very beautiful, given to dressing up and showing off. She didn’t do her share of the housework. She was lazy, bossy, violent and unco-operative, and just sat there beautifying herself while her senior wife did all the work. Ôṣùn was mild and peaceable; she turned the other cheek to every insult and advised everyone to leave Qya alone. Ôṣùn said if Qya couldn’t be bothered to grind the pepper, she would do it herself. If Qya said she wouldn’t draw water, Ôṣùn would run and do it. Ôṣùn would say, “Just sit down and rest.” Qya would sit there smirking and preening herself.’

Ôṣùn is here represented as mild, patient and kind-hearted, easily overborne by the more forceful character of her co-wife. This is a picture of Ôṣùn presented in many ìàm. But her own devotees tended to stress the opposite view of her personality. Baale Ôṣùn, the head of the Ôṣùn cult, told the following story to illustrate her powers:

‘In the ancient times all the ìrìsà made a plan to get wealthy. They prepared a certain medicine which, if planted in yam-heaps, would produce money, children and all the things they wanted in life. In those days Ôṣùn was the only woman, and all the big ìrìsà—Ôgùn, Ìfá, Ìṣòpòmò—decided, despite Ifá’s advice to the contrary, to keep her out of the plan. They held their meetings in secret. But Ôṣùn overheard them. She was furious, and decided to get her revenge. After they had dug the heaps and planted the medicine, she crept out at dead of night and sprinkled some of her river water on the heaps. The next day the other ìrìsà came out full of joyous anticipation to dig up all the good things from the heaps, but they found nothing there. They tried again the following day: again Ôṣùn neutralised their medicine. Finally they decided to take Ifá’s advice and invite Ôṣùn to join their scheme. They dig the heaps again, put in the medicine, and the next day they were all blessed with untold riches.’

Although Baale Ôṣùn is also an Ifá priest, as is evident from the positioning of Ifá as narrative fulcrum in this story (see Barber, 1990), and although Ifá priests, alone among traditional Yoruba worshippers, are committed to the exposition of an overall cosmological scheme, nevertheless he is distinctly partisan in his treatment of Ôṣùn. He concludes the story with the comment, ‘Ôṣùn is a woman like a man: no one can get away with provoking her.’

The Qya devotees take the aggrandisement of their own ìrìsà even further, boasting of her powers to the point of making her encroach on Ìfà’s personal domain, the control of lightning:

‘...if her husband was going anywhere, she’d tighten her sash like this—[Question: And follow him?] She’d go in front! She’d go rushing ahead. She was light-complexioned, she’d go in front, she’d be the one to burn up houses first, she’d cover the houses in flames, before her husband arrived! She’d throw her weight about. When her husband arrived she’d unleash sheets of flames.’
The discrepancies between different accounts of the ṣeṣa are not perceived as disagreement, for the devotees of different cults are not interested in comparing notes, let alone in synthesising disparate elements of narrative. Though creative imagination and intellectual ingenuity go into the construction of an itán ṣeṣa, its intent is not to map the universe but to enhance the standing of one subject. The narrative works like oriṣi in assembling around a central figure a cluster of names and qualities so as to reflect credit on it. The relationships that are put forward in itán as links between the ṣeṣa, whether of kinship, marriage or friendship, should not be regarded as the glue that holds together an enduring family pantheon. They are better seen as the lines along which fields of force are laid out. Each ṣeṣa is like a magnet which aligns cosmological elements, like iron filings, so that all point in its own direction. Some ṣeṣa are more powerful magnets than others; but all are of limited strength, so that large portions of the field, for every cult, are simply left out, unmentioned by the devotees of that ṣeṣa.

The variations in itán ṣeṣa, then, are not a mere garbling resulting from decline in the tradition—though it is certainly true that this decline may have removed constraints on certain Operations. Similar variation, contradiction and indeterminacy in itán is noted by late nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century sources. A. B. Ellis tries to unite a large proportion of the ṣeṣa under a single scheme, based on common, multiple birth from incestuously impregnated Yemoja. But he goes on to acknowledge that this scheme is not universally accepted in its entirety.

Shango, for example, is said by some to be of independent origin, like Ifa; and Odudua, the mother of Yemoja, according to the myth, is by others included in the number of those who sprang from Yemoja’s body. No general consensus of opinion has yet been arrived at. [Ellis, 1894: 88]

Dennett (1910: 124) quotes an Egba man to the effect that ‘The natives say that Oshowsi is Ogun’s wife, but this is not so, they were both the sons of one father’, and cites variant and incompatible stories about Sàngó. Farrow, more openly than most commentators, acknowledges his own synthesising role in the construction of a Yoruba pantheon, saying that he gathered his information from:

a very large number of native witnesses, very few of whom presented to me all the same ideas. Any one else, inquiring of other natives in other places, would not find, as held by every one of them, all that I have recorded, but parts of all these separate ideas will be found held by separate individuals everywhere. [Farrow 1926: 3]

His explanation for this diversity and inconsistency of opinion is the Yoruba tendency to subterfuge—added to the desire to please and the desire to mystify.

These views, expressed as they were in the language of ethnocentric condescension, and revealing careless ignorance of detail (in a single chapter, Ellis gets twelve out of seventeen purported etymological explanations wrong) added, for Yoruba scholars, a sharper incentive to the general anthropological commitment to the discovery of a unified belief system for every culture. Lucas, for instance, expresses indignation at Farrow’s account
of Yoruba inconsistency, and goes on simply to deny it (Lucas, 1948). Numerous conflicting hierarchies of ọrìṣà have since been set out; numerous ingenious resolutions have been proposed to questions that devotees would never ask. The devotees’ own approach is, in my view, both more complex and more subtle. I do not think, as Louis Brenner does (Brenner, 1989), that the variation and inconsistency in their accounts are the result of mere indifference to intellectual questions, resulting from the overriding importance of emotional or bodily expression of religious experience. Ifá, the most fully articulated Yoruba intellectual system, is inspired by precisely the same impulse as the other cults to concentrate its resources on the enhancement of its own ọrìṣà: it is just that Ifá is that much more successful and comprehensive.” In Yoruba cults, I do not think it is possible to separate emotion and intellect. Ọrìṣà devotees are highly ingenious at recruiting ideas, from a large and heterogeneous field of resources, to serve their own expressive and emotional purposes. In the process, they propose a sophisticated picture of how an individual personality is constituted out of multiple personalities of others, and how it in turn infuses new elements into the shared repertoire. They represent in paradigmatic form, in the vivid dyadic bond between performer of orïki and addressee, the dialogic constitution of human and spiritual worlds.

NOTES

1 Bascom is referring specifically to Obatálá and other ‘white’ deities, but his phrase is apt for most of the ọrìṣà that had cults in Òkukù where this study was based.
2 The latter is of course an important factor, but it cannot account for inconsistencies found within a single community. Lucas (1948) argues that his evidence demonstrated a single monolithic system derived from ancient Egypt. Abimbola (1976) tends to ignore discrepancies in the interests of constructing a single authoritative though flexible ‘belief system’, derived from the Ifá corpus. Idowu (1962) recognises inconsistencies as a ‘problem’ which has to be ‘resolved’ by adding evidence in favour of one version rather than another. Bascom (1969a; 1969b), Awolalu (1979) and—most strikingly—Simpson (1980) note discrepancies and alternative versions without comment.
3 Bascom, for instance, remarks ruefully of Osun that ‘her amorous adventures complicate the divine genealogies’, for she is an ọrìṣà who is credited in different contexts with innumerable liaisons and marriages (Bascom, 1969a: 90).
4 Pierre Verger’s book (1957) is an inexhaustible mine of information and insight, and the only study to contain extensive orïki texts. Verger suggests that each cult is virtually an independent theism, centred on its own ọrìṣà. He bases his account mainly on narratives, however, and he accounts for discrepancies in narratives and devotional practices by postulating the corruption of an earlier and more orderly state of unanimity. Though he translates the orïki texts, he does not provide the detailed exegesis which alone can get orïki to yield any meaning. McKenzie (1976) bases his very interesting and thoughtful discussion on an analysis of orïki texts, but without quoting from them or examining their textual properties. His conclusion—that the self-centric cults (which he describes as examples of ‘subjective theism’) produce both particularisation and reunification of ọrìṣà—is highly pertinent to my own argument.
5 Òkukù is a small town in the Oyo state of Nigeria, about twenty miles north of Osogbo. For a detailed account of the town and of the role of orïki performance in it, see Barber (forthcoming).
6 The devotion to more than one is probably largely a result of decline in numbers of devotees, for every ọrìṣà has to be taken over by someone on the death of its current owner. According to Ellis, writing in 1894, it was unusual for a devotee to have more than one god.
7 The only ones which do not are those that belong solely to a single household head, such as Esile of ile Arógun; to a single compound, such as Oor Okè of ile Òjómu; or to the town as a
collectivity, such as Olókù. In the first case there is only one principal devotee; in the last two cases the emphasis is on the unity of the devotees.

8 Adóṣì are initiates who are empowered by the application of herbal medicines into incisions in the scalp and who are thereafter able to be possessed by the oríṣà. In Òkùkù the Sàngò, Òya, and Sọpònnòn cults had adóṣì.

9 According to the fascinating account by Thompson (1969) the ibú recognised in Ègbádò include Álámọ̀ (written Álámọ̀ by Thompson), Àkànbi, Òṣèèrì, Ojùtù (written Ojùtù), and Ôtèn. He lists many others which are not recognised in Òkùkù, and there are some in Òkùkù which do not appear in his list. But there is enough overlap to suggest an external origin for at least some of the discriminations that are made. See also Verger (1957) and Beier (1956).

10 According to Beier (1956), in Ilóbúù each ibú of Erinlè did have its own riverside shrine. In some other cults in Òkùkù, also, oríṣà fragments have a material focus of devotion, a calabash or pot which is placed at the oríṣà’s shrine and which preserves the separate identities of oríṣà fractions in concrete and visible form. Some also have a distinctive taboo: the ‘seventeen’ Sọpònnòs said to exist in Òkùkù, for example, each has its own (Wariwarùn’s devotees must never be beaten, Ábáta’s must never hear the sound of a cooking pot being scraped, Adégbójó’s must never have water splashed on them, and so on).

11 Thompson’s explanation, that the ibú are Erinlè’s children and followers, was not mentioned in Òkùkù. As will be shown later, such ‘relationships’ should not be taken literally as depictions of a pantheon of figures linked by marriage and birth. To say they are Erinlè’s children is a metaphorical way of saying they are closely linked to him.

Discussion of the recruitment of devotees to Yoruba cults has tended to emphasise either the existence of family oríṣà, sometimes described as defied ancestor figures, belonging to one compound and served by all its members (e.g. Bascom, 1944), or the element of personal affinity and desire, often worked out through the agency of Ìfá, which assigns devotees to the oríṣà most suited to their personalities (e.g. Beier, 1959). But in Òkùkù, the most significant principle is a notion of ‘place’: a place in the community for each oríṣà and oríṣà fraction, which has to be maintained by a chain of devotees, and a place in the cult for each principal devotee which likewise has to be kept open through succession. In some cults men can take over an oríṣà formerly propitiated by a woman, and vice versa; in others, even though they contain both male and female devotees, women tend to pass on their oríṣà only to another woman. In the predominantly female cults, such as Òrìṣà Oko, women pass them to other women, while in the predominantly male cults, such as Ìfá, Ògùn and Egunùn, men pass them to other men. It is worth noting, in view of my argument about women’s power in cults, that the predominantly men’s cults are the only ones where a genre of oral art is actually practised by men: Ìfá kíkí in the Ìfá cult, ijádá in the Ògùn cult, and Ọjì in the egúnùn cult. In the egúnùn cult at least, however, it is nevertheless women who are primarily responsible for invoking the ancestors and praising the masquerade, giving them a key position not immediately evident from the distribution of cult titles, which are monopolised by men.

12 Some women, however, did attain positions of prominence in the town. Usually these ‘big women’ did not acquire substantial corpses of personal oríkì, but there were a few examples of women remembered for this. For a discussion of oríkì and women’s power see Barber (forthcoming).

13 The Ìfá priests are in many respects quite different from other oríṣà devotees, being specialist and professional masters of a divinatory system which operates precisely by bringing all the disparate cults and forces into relationship with each other and mediating between them. (For the ordinary non-specialist devotee, however, Ifá does not represent an intellectual or cosmological scheme but a source of recipes and models of action, elicited piecemeal according to need. The spiritual world centres on their own oríṣà and their own ancestors.) But the Ìfá cult does in one sense work like any other oríṣà cult writ large, for the effect of all synthesising Ìfá stories is ultimately to claim a unique and superior position in the cosmology for Ìfá: every divination verse in the vast Ìfá corpus reaffirms the sagacity of Ìfá and the effectuality of the Ìfá divination system, and many explicitly show other oríṣà at a disadvantage in comparison with Ìfá. For a discussion of the discursive techniques by which this position is maintained, see Barber (1990).
REFERENCES


Résumé

*Oríṣà, les femmes, la multiplication et la fusion d’*órisà

Le monde spirituel des Yoruba est densément peuplé par des divinités extrêmement différentes les unes des autres et fortement caractérisées, mais présentant aussi des aspects contradictoires et des tendances à la multiplication et à la fusion avec d’autres entités spirituelles. De telles variations sont compréhensibles dans le contexte de la structure sociale Yoruba qui accorde une place prédominante aux «hommes forts» capables d’acquérir une position de leader en recrutant compétitivement leurs
supporters. Les ôrîṣà, comme les hommes forts, forment le centre d’un groupe de fidèles dont l’objectif est de renforcer la réputation de leur patron plutôt que de l’intégrer à un schéma consensuel global. La «cosmologie» de chaque culte se centre sur son propre ôrîṣà et agence les autres entités spirituelles de façon à augmenter la présence de cet ôrîṣà. Le lien intime et réciproque entre les croyants et l’ôrîṣà favorise la multiplication de fragments d’ôrîṣà permettant à chaque croyant ou petit groupe de croyants de posséder sa «propre version» de l’être spirituel. Mais comme le centralisme de cette relation religieuse implique un engagement intégral et sans compromis, chaque ôrîṣà doit tout représenter pour ses fidèles, induisant ainsi le partage et la fusion des aspects spirituels de la divinité.

La problématique peut être portée plus avant si nous examinons le médium à travers lequel les multiples personnalités de l’ôrîṣà sont imaginées et évoquées. Bien que les études se soient exclusivement consacrées à l’îtàn (récit) pour caractériser l’ôrîṣà, le médium essential est en fait l’ôrîkì (éloge versifié). C’est en effet dans les ôrîkì que les fidèles nouent leur lien intime, intense et réciproque avec l’ôrîṣà. Dans les ôrîkì, la concrétisation de la personnalité de l’ôrîṣà est la plus complète et les divers fragments ou manifestations d’un ôrîṣà y trouvent leur expression la plus développée. Les ôrîkì sont fluides, éclectiques, incorporables; leur textualité permet d’accomplir pleinement les opérations intellectuelles nécessaires à la construction de l’univers religieux fluide. C’est seulement en considérant les îtàn comme des suppléments au mode de l’ôrîkì, plutôt que l’inverse, que les contradictions—remarquées par les études les plus anciennes du système religieux Yoruba—trouvent leur place en tant qu’accomplissements, et non pas comme des négligences malheureuses que l’érudit doit classifier dans l’espoir de découvrir un consensus global et unique. La cosmologie Yoruba n’est pas celle d’une unité, mais celle de la multiplicité des routes qui mènent à travers différents champs de ressources symboliques. Comme les femmes sont les principaux gardiens de la tradition ôrîkì, leur rôle en terme de communication et de dépassement des limites est un élément central du fonctionnement des cultes.