


Authority and Discourse in the *Orin Ọ̀dún Ọ̀ṣun*

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This essay explores the cosmological and socio-cultural idiom of authority and its discourse in the *orin ọ̀dún Ọ̀ṣun*, that is, the festival songs of the Yorùbá deity Ọ̀ṣun. It examines the historical and contemporary themes and inspirations located within the sacred and secular liturgy of Yorùbá orature (oral literature). It also illustrates how this culturally-bound cosmic premise authorizes the position of women politically, socially, and economically within the Yorùbá worldview and social praxis. It should be noted here that the central feature of this cosmic authority is its validation of complex human interactions which explore the notion of gender dichotomy in the form of gender functionality. By gender functionality, I refer to the linguistic and cultural deference to social role rather than biological gender as the primary determinant in social function. Indeed, the traditional oral record and the Yoruba language itself are at odds with the ideological tools of Western colonialism, cultural, and religious hegemony that are used to critique it. Symptomatic of the protracted struggle against foreign cultural dominance, it is necessary to discuss Yorùbá women's authority as an element of distinction within Yorùbá studies discourse. Four of the festival songs that I have chosen confirm women's source of authority and autonomy within the *orin ọ̀dún Ọ̀ṣun*. Two other songs reflect contemporary themes in Yorùbá social discourse. I will briefly discuss the scope of meaning of power and destiny, and how the Yorùbá definition of power and destiny provide the foundation for understanding these festival songs and their contemporary themes.

The Source Àṣẹ (Power) and Àyànmọ́ (Destiny)

Most human organizations validate their socio-cultural mandates and behaviors with some theological or cosmological premise. Collective historical experiences and memories interwoven between divine revelation and human need often create the ontological nexus of authority in which human groups validate

their social discourse. The Yorùbá people of western Nigeria, from pre-colonial, pre-Islamic, and pre-Christian times, reveal their own sources and nexus of authority in diverse oral genres. Woven among the rich layers of verbal virtuosity are the golden threads of an extensive Yorùbá epistemology which includes *Ifá* (divination poetry), *orin* (songs), *oríkì* (praise names and poetry), *itan* (stories), and *ijálá* (hunters' poetry for Ogun), among others. Images and themes that allude to the spectrum of power and authority underscore the existence of a cornucopia of literary, material, and artistic culture, in short, a treasure trove of knowledge and a worldview of acknowledged distinction. Scholars such as Wande Abimbola, Rowland Abiodun, Sandra Barnes, Joseph Murphy, Jacob Olupona, and Robert Farris Thompson attest to the fortitude as well as historical and cultural dynamism of Yorùbá culture and its global offspring.¹

To fully appreciate the meaning of these Ọ̀ṣun songs, one must acknowledge that for the Yorùbá, nothing exceeds life itself. The orature, the annual festivals, the panoply of ceremonies and rituals that mark the diverse phases of life are life's insurance policy against short and purposeless living. Life for the Yorùbá is defined by an infinite continuum intertwined through ancestral life, earthly life, and unborn life, all actualized within and through the womb. As a matrix of mystery and awe, the womb is the source and point of departure for the vagaries of life, its potentialities, and its destinies. Longevity is achieved not only through long life on earth, but also long life in the memory of one's descendants. Likewise, to become an ancestor, one must be born and then remembered by those born after one's death. In both cases, women are the conduit through which all life flows. Giving and nurturing life is one aspect of the source of and validation for women's authority generally. As the owner of the beaded comb, *Olóyà-iyùn*, which she uses to part the pathways of human life, Ọ̀ṣun's authority, and validation specifically, lies within this complex ontological nexus (Abiodun 1989: 3; Bádéjò 1996a: 7–10).

The other source of authority and destiny lies in the power of the metaphysical (Barnes 1989: 1–26). In Yorùbá thought, like most theological or cosmological ordinances, authority evolves from Deity (Supreme Creator) known as *Olódùmarè*, the source of quintessential power (*àṣẹ*) and destiny (*àyànmọ́*). The union formed by these concepts, *àṣẹ* and *àyànmọ́*, prescribes balance and a unity of opposites among and within the eclectic forces of divinity, humanity, and nature alike. *Obinrin* (woman) and *okunrin* (man) are the quintessence of balance between life and death on the one hand, and the manifestation of creativity found in the unity of opposites on the other. In Yorùbá thought, *àṣẹ* and *àyànmọ́* are found in both *obinrin* and *okunrin*, each with the potential to negate and empower the other.

This cosmic charge is found among both women and men, each deriving *àṣẹ*, that is, creative power or energy, from *Olódùmarè*. In this cultural worldview, the ability to create as well as to destroy derive from the same *àṣẹ* or power (Abiodun 1994: 72; Bádéjò 1996a: 175–76; Barnes 1989: 14–18). From a Yorùbá per-

spective, female authority and male authority evolve from the same divine source, each with its own quintessential deified power and attendant social prescriptions and manifestations (Bádéjò 1996b: 49–60). From a Yorùbá perspective, the human *beingness* of woman and of man is best knowable in terms of the unity of the one with the other. Numerous Ifá narratives reveal this unity of opposites which emphasize that part of the responsibility of female àṣẹ is to maintain the cycle of life, while part of the male àṣẹ is to penetrate the unfathomable in order to reveal its mysteries. I am not suggesting dichotomous relationships between female and male orisa but rather a unity of opposites which demonstrate unending potentiality. For example, Ogun, one of the most biologically charged male orisa, destroys, or cuts through, matter, in order to create, while Obatala uses his creative talents to shape human beings both perfectly and imperfectly. Only Olódùmarè possesses the life-breath, however. Ọṣun, on the other hand, who stores children and swords within her body, uses both constructive and destructive energies with equal aplomb.

With motherhood as her central motif, her image creates a balance between birth and death, while symbolizing a watery, ever-flowing connection between physical life and ancestral life. With longevity as a focal cultural goal, the biologically charged female symbolizes both a sensual and maternal conduit for such balance. In the cosmological scheme of things, Ọṣun symbolizes spiritual triumph over finite and fragile human existence. As the leader of the àjé, or powerful beings, she also protects the covenants of both positive and negative energies and beings. Her wealth, femininity, and fecundity are currency in both spiritual and earthly terms. As the seventeenth òrìṣà among the original Irúnmọ̀lẹ̀ and the only woman present at creation (Abiodun 1989: 5), Ọṣun and her followers occupy a critical position in both the pantheon and the society. As one of the *orin ọ̀dún* presented here illustrates, the combination of divine prerogative and its well-articulated jurisdiction in human affairs further authenticates the assemblage of female and male Ọṣun worshipers. Group solidarity follows such authentication, and her followers vocalize their own specific prerogatives in accordance with the tenets of the Ifá corpus and, in this case, with Ọṣun religious practice.

Orin ọ̀dún and the Authoritative Voice of Women

What does it mean to be an Ọṣun worshiper? What concepts of Ọṣun worship are important to her followers, what sense of authority do they gather from the method of her worship, and what confirmation do they receive from her divine position within the Yorùbá pantheon? Like the flow of the river Ọṣun itself, the cosmic authority given by Olódùmarè to the Irúnmọ̀lẹ̀, the sixteen-plus-one òrìṣà who were present at creation (*èdà*), flows from each òrìṣà to her or his worshipers (Abiodun 1989: 1–7). Ọṣun, as one aspect of this polythetic flow (Barnes 1989: 12), is the agency through which priestesses, priests, and initiates employ àṣẹ in

order to facilitate the pursuit of their individual share of destiny (*àyànmó*). Ọ̀ṣun is Yèyè, the Good Mother, who gives and sustains life. By definition, this motherhood is active, is central to female destiny and empowerment, and is expansive in both meaning and application. Priestesses, devotees, and supplicants use their *àṣẹ* as artists, entrepreneurs, healers, educators, political power brokers, and social agents of change. Yorùbá women organize collectively and wield the power of their collective voices in diverse arenas.

In cosmological and sociological terms, women who embrace the principles of Ọ̀ṣun worship, individually and collectively become *àjẹ*, powerful beings who activate their *àṣẹ* to help others who consult them. When such people are recognized as *àjẹ*, they accrue to themselves social prowess and awe within their communities. They become catalysts who move the dialogue between the corridors of humanity and divinity. As *àjẹ*, the *olórìṣà* Ọ̀ṣun operate literally between these two domains and, in turn, are answerable to the deity Ọ̀ṣun and to the source of *àṣẹ* ultimately. Women, therefore, *must* perform as both sacred and secular agents (Bádéjọ 1996a: 73–80; 175–185). In this spiritually energized secular environment, the acceptance of female authority is tantamount to the successful operation of day-to-day human affairs including marriage, career, travel, birth, health, wealth, death, enemies, and immortality. As the following *orin ọ̀ḍún* indicates, the definition of female power, as well as the ability to identify with and to be empowered by it, constructs a major form of socio-political and cultural-historical authority.

Orin ọ̀ḍún Ọ̀ṣun 1

Mo j'ogún 'nú egbé ò ee!

I carry an inheritance in the group ò ee!

Mo j'ogún 'nú egbé o àà!

I carry an inheritance in the group o àà!

Olórìṣà l'ó j'ogún òjé

The Ọ̀rìṣà priest(ess) is responsible for lead (brass)²

Mo j'ogún 'nú egbé! (Repeat twice)

I carry an inheritance in the group! (Repeat twice) 5

Mo r'ogún sí t'egbé ò ee!

I find a legacy in that of the group ò ee!

Mo r'ogún sí t'egbé o àà!

I find a legacy in that of the group o àà!

Mo romo l'awon oniṢàngó

I find children is what Ṣàngó worshipers say

Mo r'ogún sí t'egbé! (Repeat twice)

I find a legacy in that of the group! (Repeat twice) 10

The annual Ọ̀ṣun festival provides the context for oral literary recitation, performance, and social renewal. Over its sixteen-day enactment, Ọ̀ṣogbo township and its well-wishers revisit the pact between humanity and divinity under the auspices of its patroness (Bádéjọ 1996a: 103–130). The festival becomes a forum for historical and contemporary discourse which is a major part of its agenda. Songs such as the one cited above clearly remind devotees and visitors alike what it means to be an Ọ̀ṣun worshiper. For worshipers, it suggests that belonging to the group carries not only a sense of identity but also a sense of destiny, inheri-

tance, and responsibility as illustrated by the first line of the first stanza, *Mo j'ogún 'nu egbé o ee!*, that is, "I carry (responsibility for) an inheritance in the group o ee!" In this song, "ogun" refers to an inheritance and the phrase *j'ogun 'nu egbé* refers to collectively carrying responsibility for the inheritance of Ọṣun's legacy. Further, the word *egbé*, refers to both women and men who form the organization of Ọṣun worshipers. For Ọṣun worshipers, this group identity is coded by the "priest(ess)" who carries "lead," that is brass, the iconographic symbol of Ọṣun herself indicated by line three, *Olórìṣà l'ó j'ogún òjé* (The Ọrìṣà priest[ess] is responsible for lead). The authority and pride bolstered by the language and performance of the poem confirms and, is confirmed by, its larger social responsibility and the non-devotees who, nonetheless, seek their accord. The song inscribes solidarity and social responsibility as an expression of the deity herself. In this manner, the olórìṣà accomplish a metaphoric unification of the forty or more manifestations of Ọṣun under the common symbol, brass.

Ọṣun priestesses and priests, as the inheritors of this manifested Ọṣun, activate the principles which she represents through their personal and collective use of *àṣẹ*. Both òrìṣà (deities) and olórìṣà (owners of the òrìṣà) are themselves indicative of the multifaceted aspects of human and divine existence. Her devotees inherit the legacy and responsibility carried by Ọṣun. That inheritance elevates them by protecting the covenants of powerful beings (*àjé*), giving life and nurturing children (*abiyamọ*), healing and maintaining health especially in the case of women (*alaafia*), accessing wealth (*iyáloḍe*), and assuming defensive positions when necessary (*Ọṣun balogún*). The efficacious performance of these roles supports the authoritative position of Ọṣun worshipers in a universal social context.

Of these, healing is the most efficacious role among Ọṣun worshipers. Health is intrinsically tied to the continuous cycle of life signified by the word, *àkú*, meaning without death or longevity. Eldership and seniority become the hallmarks of life, and similarly, the intertwining life-cycle marked by the phases of ancestry, living, and unborn which can be nullified by a short, unproductive life. One achieves longevity (*àkú*) through good health procured in part by wealth, and most especially through children. These interlocking phases of life are achievable through the awesome biological power of women who menstruate every twenty-eight days without death, and who stop doing so in order to bring forth new life. This strictly female ability is tantamount to being *àjé* (powerful beings). This *àjé* of women unifies the contradictions of life within the core of the womb, itself *the* source of *àyànmọ* or *ipín* (destiny), its earthly manifestation which begins with *abiyamọ* (childbirth).

The following *orin odún* Ọṣun speaks to both the spiritual essence and confidence garnered by Ọṣun worshipers:

Orin ọ̀dún Ọ̀ṣun 2

Şẹ̀lẹ̀rú àgbò,

Owner of sacrifice (who) expels medicinal waters,

Agbára àbò,

Powerful healing waters³ (flowing gently like eroding water),

L'Ọ̀ṣun fì ní w'ọ̀mọ̀ rẹ̀.

This (sacrificial birth water) is what Ọ̀ṣun 5 uses when the child is coming.

Kí dókítà ó tóó dé,

Before the doctor finally arrives,

Abímọ̀-mọ̀-ḍá'na' lé,

The newborn (arrives safely) without warming the house.

Ọ̀ṣun l'á ní pè léégún.

Ọ̀ṣun is one we call spiritual being (ancestor). 10

Within these six lines we find the consummate source for spiritual and social authority which Ọ̀ṣun and her devotees (*iyáloṣà Ọ̀ṣun*) use. The reference to *àgbò* (healing waters), *abímọ̀* (childbirth), and *erú* (sacrifice) allude to the powerful waters of Ọ̀ṣun as *élẹ̀rú àgbò*, the owner of the sacrificial healing waters. Efficacious use of these healing waters underscores the central life-giving and life-saving roles of the *olórìṣà Ọ̀ṣun*, Ọ̀ṣun priestesses and priests. It subtly acknowledges the inherent risks to women during the birthing process (*şẹ̀ . . . àgbò*) while praising the inherent power of midwives and birthing mothers to usher in new life successfully even without a doctor's attention (*kí dókítà ó tóó dé*). This *orin ọ̀dún Ọ̀ṣun* articulates the confidence with which Ọ̀ṣun priestesses midwife humanity. It unifies the cycle of life by vocalizing the bond between birthing (*abímọ̀*) and ancestry (*éégún*). Ọ̀ṣun, as ancestress and midwife who is imitated by her devotees, establishes the precedence and tone for women's authority in spiritual and social affairs. The *olórìṣà Ọ̀ṣun*, we may surmise, form a powerful group whose authority flows from *Olódùmarè* through the agency of the *òrìṣà Ọ̀ṣun* to them. As the agents of new life and the couriers of its survival, these women speak with unquestioned authority.

Orin ọ̀dún Ọ̀ṣun 3

Egbé olówó l'egbéé wa

The group of the owners of wealth is our group.

Egbé olómọ̀ l'egbéé wa

The group of the owners of children is our group.

Egbé Ọ̀ròkí ì ş'egbé olẹ̀.

The Ọ̀ròkí group is not a group of thieves. 5

Àjẹ olómọ̀ l'ájẹ áwa

Powerful beings (who are) the owners of children are our powerful beings.

E tẹ̀lé mi ka'lọ̀

You [pl.] can follow along with me,

E lẹ̀ r'ómọ̀ gbé jọ.

(so that) You can carry children and dance (joyfully). 10

Although men are also members of the *egbé Ọ̀ṣun*,⁴ the women who chant this *orin* are its major thematic focus as confirmed by the last line of the poem, "You can carry children and dance (joyfully)," an activity of women. The specific allusion to women is also intimated by the symbolic relationship between Ọ̀ṣun, as an owner of wealth and of children (Bádéjọ 1996a: 1–14), and women as

members of this special sisterhood. The declaration of the *egbé olórìṣà* Ọṣun (membership of Ọṣun devotees) elevates the status particularly of women who are both wealthy and mothers. According to this *orin ọdún*, this women's collective states that their power (*àṣẹ*) lies in owning wealth and children. The former refers to their external roles in the traditional market economies (*iyálódẹ*) and the latter refers to their internal roles as givers of life (*abíyamo*). This particular *orin ọdún* also demonstrates the relationship between giving birth to children and providing for those lives through the agency of the traditional market economy. Unlike many in the Western world, the Yorùbá affirm that women's attainment of material and monetary wealth is inextricably tied to producing children, also considered wealth, which ensures both the continuity of life and the activation of one's *àṣẹ* (God-given power) and *àyànmọ* (God-given destiny).

Central to women's authority, peopling and nurturing humanity carries the added responsibility of maintaining an environment in which human beings survive eternally. For Yorùbá women, social criticism and decision-making are the mechanisms through which those responsibilities are voiced. This suggests that part of the legacy of the *egbé* is its engagement with whatever contemporary issues may arise. The integrity, security, and efficacy of the group are central to its survival and ability to pass its legacy of authority and social activism along to subsequent generations. In modern times as in the past, the survival of the *egbé*, its authorship and its membership require the vigilance of those women who are its caretakers. However, challenges to its survival and theirs do surface as indicated by the subject of the last two *orin ọdún* Ọṣun.

Orin ọdún Ọṣun 4

Níbi l'ò ní n gbé Yèyè mí sí o?

Where did he say that I should leave my
Mother (Yèyè)?

Níbi l'ò ní n gbé Yèyè mí sí o?

Where did he say that I should leave my
Mother (Yèyè)?

Onílàwànt-òsì, ní nṣe 'mòle!

The owner of the horrible turban (who) said
(I should) embrace Islam.

Níbi l'ò ní n gbé Yèyè mí sí o? (Repeat twice)

Where did he say that I should leave my
Mother (Yèyè)? (Repeat twice)

The complex relationship between foreign-source religious traditions and traditional African religions has been well articulated by many scholars⁵ (Ajayi, Asare, Achebe, Olupona, Salamone). During my documentation of the 1982 festival where this song was collected, the tension between the Ọṣun worshipers and the local Muslim community intensified. This was a particularly intense period in national politics which, in part, took on a distinctly religious overtone. In Ọṣogbo, a town which celebrated its compassion for migrating populations and embracing of diverse traditions, the Ọṣun practitioners were particularly miffed at the disdain and disrespect shown to the deity who, according to oral tradition, welcomed well-behaved strangers. This *orin ọdún* Ọṣun marks an indigenous re-



10.1 The Àtáǫja of Ọ̀ṣogbo at a press conference during the Ọ̀ṣun festival, Ọ̀ṣogbo.

Photo by Diedre Bádeǫ.

sponse to the phenomena. In terse poetic form, the song questions the purpose of substituting Ọ̀ṣun òrìṣà worship, that is, “leaving” Yèyè, the Good Mother Ọ̀ṣun, for another religious tradition which, from their perspective, does not carry the efficacy of Ọ̀ṣun worship. As with Christianity, the tensions are historical in nature and contemporary in their persistence (Opoku 1978). In Ọ̀ṣogbo, this long-standing issue is captured by the present-day Atáǫja (traditional ruler of Ọ̀ṣogbo) who *must*, by history and custom, participate in the Ọ̀ṣun festival despite the fact that the man who occupies that position today is himself Muslim. For the olórìṣà Ọ̀ṣun, the fact that the co-ruler of Ọ̀ṣogbo is a practicing Muslim is less troubling than it is for the Muslims themselves. Indeed, for many olórìṣà Ọ̀ṣun, their roles as agents of life and its sustenance amasses greater authority than that of a secular ruler who can be dethroned (Bádeǫ 1996a: 104–111). From the perspective of these practitioners, the primordial, divine authority of òrìṣà Ọ̀ṣun exceeds that of any form of human authority. This is especially true since the Atáǫja represents the position of immigrant rulers who settled in Ọ̀ṣogbo during an earlier historical period rather than primordial, indigenous rulers represented by Iya Ọ̀ṣun (Bádeǫ 1996a: 155–174). Consequently, this song serves as a demonstration of both religious autonomy and as a reminder of the social solvency of an indigenous group (Bádeǫ 1996a: 97–98, 104–109). This reminder is reiterated in the following *orin ọ̀dún Ọ̀ṣun*:

*Orin oḍún Ọṣun 5**Bàbá onírungbọn, jẹ́ á ẹ̀ẹ̀bọ́ wa,*

Elder (father) bearded one, let us do our festival.

Bàbá onírungbọn, jẹ́ á ẹ̀ẹ̀bọ́ ti wa,

Elder (father) bearded one, let us do our own festival.

Àwà è mò pé ẹ̀ mọ̀mọ̀ kirun l'ójúmọ̀

We don't say that you should not pray daily,

Bàbá onírungbọn, jẹ́ á ẹ̀ẹ̀bọ́ ti wa. (Repeat twice)

Elder (father) bearded one, let us do our festival. (Repeat twice)

In this *orin oḍún*, the olórinṣà Ọṣun call for a truce between Ọṣun worshipers and Muslims. The Ọṣun worshipers view daily Moslem prayer (*ikírun l'ójúmọ̀*) and Ọṣun festival (*oḍún Ọṣun*) in terms of their respective spiritual relevancy. They stress a mutual autonomy of worship stating that they don't tell Muslims not to pray daily, so Muslims shouldn't tell them not to perform their festival. Thematically, this song implies more than a local religious confrontation. At a more visceral level for Ọṣun worshipers and followers, it illuminates a fundamental challenge to the substance of women's authority vested in the cultural historical worship of the goddess Ọṣun. Clearly, the breadth and depth of authority articulated in the *orin* and *oríkì Ọṣun* from sacred to secular matters from birth to ancestry lies beyond the scope of similar roles for women outside of the òrìṣà traditions. Indeed, the position taken by the olórinṣà Ọṣun protects the autonomy of worship for both women and men Ọṣun worshipers as well as the autonomy of women's active social, political, economic, and religious roles.

This final song cited below reaffirms, as stated earlier, that the core objective of Ọṣun worship is successful living in our complex world. Sung in a call-and-response mode, this *orin oḍún Ọṣun* in both form and meaning indicates that group autonomy and solidarity provide the security for living a successful life and defeating life's enemies.

*Orin oḍún Ọṣun 6**Gbé mi lé'kè, jẹ́ n jù'kà lọ!*

Put me on top, let me rise above wickedness!

Gbé mi lé'kè, jẹ́ n jù'kà lọ!

Put me on top, let me rise above wickedness!

5 *Ọṣun, gbé mi lé'kè, jẹ́ n jù'kà lọ!*

Ọṣun, put me on top, let me rise above wickedness!

Gbé mi lé'kè, jẹ́ n jù'kà lọ!

Ọṣun, put me on top, let me rise above wickedness!

Ọ́tá mì n bọ̀, bá mì lẹ̀'kò mọ̀!

My enemy is coming, help me to hurl stones at him/her!

10 *Ọ́tá mì n bọ̀, bá mì lẹ̀'kò mọ̀!*

My enemy is coming, help me to hurl stones at him/her!

Ọ́tá mì n bọ̀, bá mì lẹ̀'kò mọ̀!

My enemy is coming, help me to hurl stones at him/her!

15 *Ọṣun Ọṣogbo, bá mì ẹ̀ tẹ̀mì*

Ọṣun Ọṣogbo, my enemy is coming, help me to hurl stones at him/her!

Ọṣun Ọṣogbo, bá mì ẹ̀ tẹ̀mì

Ọṣun Ọṣogbo, help me accomplish mine (successful living)!

Ọ̀ṣun Ọ̀ṣogbo, bá mi ẹ̀ tẹ̀mi	Ọ̀ṣun Ọ̀ṣogbo, help me accomplish mine (successful living)!	
Ọ̀ṣun Ọ̀ṣogbo, bá mi ẹ̀ tẹ̀mi.	Ọ̀ṣun Ọ̀ṣogbo, help me accomplish mine (successful living)!	20

Here, the struggle between good (*gbé mi lé'kè*) and evil (*jé n jù'kà lọ*) is explicit. Good which is synonymous with successful living and evil which refers to a spectrum of possible misfortunes fundamentally illustrate the day-to-day context in which worshipers, practitioners, and clients view their complex human environment. The metaphor of “hurling stones,” implied by the context of the festival and meaning of Ọ̀ṣun worship, empowers olóriṣà Ọ̀ṣun and their clients to use their spiritual and physical power to defeat enemies (*òtá*).

Ayè (*The World*), Àjé (*Power*), and Àìkù (*Longevity*)

Ọ̀ṣun Sẹ̀ẹ̀gẹ̀sì Olóòya-iyún is the òriṣà who, as “hair expert,” as confidante of fate who watches over the covenant of the àjé, and as owner of the beaded comb used to part the pathways of human existence (Abiodun 1989: 3), envelops worldliness, powerful beings, and longevity in her literary and ritual knowledge. As Sẹ̀ẹ̀gẹ̀sì Olóòya-iyún, she parts the pathways of human destiny suggesting that she, nevertheless, does not choose the pathway, but can be implored to influence the path one takes. As a confidante of fate, Ọ̀ṣun knows the offenses and sacrifices necessary to appease the àjé. In the larger cosmological scheme of things, this particular epithet also suggests that she plays an intriguing role in her relationship to both Orúnmilà, her husband, who is also the deity of wisdom and knowledge, and Èṣù, the guardian of the crossroads who is sometimes referred to as Oṣetura, the firstborn of Ọ̀ṣun and Orúnmilà (Ibid.: 3–7), and the name of a very important odu Ifá. Ọ̀ṣun is positioned between both Orúnmilà and Èṣù, her husband and her offspring, sharing in their knowledge of human frailties and the vagaries of human life.

This cosmic role, coupled with her divine assignment as leader of the àjé, authorizes Ọ̀ṣun and her devotees to negotiate the vagaries of life. Her articulation of power and its application in social discourse designates the nuclear role of women in both sacred and secular environments. For the olóriṣà Ọ̀ṣun, her beingness, defense of the *egbé* (collective group of individuals), and her symbiotic flow between divinity and humanity, between heaven and earth, between life and ancestry, between children and wealth, between woman and man, legitimizes their own active social responsibility. Group membership confirms solidarity among Ọ̀ṣun worshipers themselves and this, in turn, helps them to execute their social obligations. Thus, “I carry a responsibility within the group,” is both internal (self) and external (collective), and their domain is global. That intra-group responsibility includes care-taking of Ọ̀ṣun’s paraphernalia, especially brass, symbolizing the responsibility of caring for the òriṣà herself. By meta-

phoric representation and literary interpretation, taking care of brass also symbolizes the acquisition of wealth intimated by the title *iyálojà*, mother of the market, and the title *iyálóde*, mother of the outside, both of which are praise-names and titles for Òṣun. Collectively, these material, literary, and social references demonstrate that the domain of Yorùbá women is expansive. For them, motherhood, power-brokering, and market economies form the practical aspects of successful living and underscore their authority in it. For many modern Yorùbá women, the Òṣun legacy, as demonstrated in an earlier *orin oḍún*, specifies their license not only to earn a living, but also to enjoy a fruitful maternal life. For contemporary women, the legacy of female empowerment lies in the undeniable relationship between Òṣun, her divine authority, and her secular manifestation. The presence of that legacy is confirmed by the need to address daily challenges to living successful lives, and the assistance rendered by the *olórìṣà* in its manifestation. For non-devotees, the inheritance of such a divine legacy by her worshipers, specifically her priestesses, ensures their own ability to access similar autonomy despite structural paternalism and its challenges.

Because of their training in various healing arts, the *olórìṣà* Òṣun are revered for their ability to assist with fertility problems and childhood diseases. Their specialty is obstetrics and gynecology referenced by the term *àgbò*, the healing waters. The mind-body-spirit connection which has revolutionized Western attitudes toward alternative healing is standard procedure for most *òrìṣà* practitioners, especially the *olórìṣà* Òṣun. As giver of life, she bridges the river of life as a primordial ancestress unifying the ancestors, the living, and the unborn. In the Yorùbá worldview, women who can heal and give life are truly the great ones worthy of ancestry. Demonstrable social responsibility activated by one's personal power (*àṣẹ*) is the legacy of Òṣun. It is what makes her a great ancestor worthy of remembrance. Such ancestry is the cornerstone of *àìkú*, longevity.

Ipari (*Conclusion*)

As long as Yorùbá women continue to bear children, the power of Òṣun and her devotees will enable them to act on their own behalf as well as that of the male and female children they bear. Womanhood carries a "legacy" of successful reproduction, business acumen, and social responsibility. The most awesome aspect of that legacy is the continuity of human life. And since humanity's domain is extensive, the purview of women is equally extensive by direct or indirect participation. As the Òṣun festival songs demonstrate, Òṣun worshipers, secure in their practice and performance of its rituals, exercise the right and have the responsibility to execute certain activities within the social body politic. The reality of enemies and religious conflict as well as the ongoing human desire to procreate and enjoy the fruits of one's labor are very contemporary indeed. Certainly, we can concur that as these women continue to exercise their authority in diverse

arenas of life, they also continue to sway public opinion and gather together followers in her name.

Finally, Yorùbá women's authority derives primarily from those culturally defined cosmological sources which form the only basis of and justification for human authority generally, and female authority specifically, in social discourse and cosmic interaction. Women as individuals and groups of individuals must activate those cosmic sources through the pursuit and employment of their own *àṣẹ*. There is no passivity here. The notion of deity is a pragmatic one which carries a mutual expectation of deity itself to perform in the mundane sphere, that is, to "put me/us on top" or become extinct through social abandonment. The power of the deities rests upon their ability to serve the needs of humanity, and women as a major part of humanity have dominion over its continuity, symbolically ebbing and flowing between human survival and the efficacy of divinity. Consequently, without the sacred and secular correspondence found in Yorùbá cosmological thought, non-Yorùbá religions remain unattractive to women whose positions of authority and social engagement are upheld by the Yorùbá pantheon. Truly, the womb embodies the ontological nexus which indicates humanity's cornucopia of possibilities and experiences. As the owners of the womb and caretakers of the "healing waters," women's voices must be heard in concert with as well as apart from men's voices if the passageway between birth and ancestry is to remain eternally well-traveled.

Notes

1. Writings of Wande Abimbola, Rowland Abiodun, Sandra Barnes, and Robert Farris Thompson, along with such classic studies as William Bascom's, demonstrate the diversity of Yorùbá studies both in Nigeria and in the African diaspora. Newer works, including Oyèrónkẹ̀ Oyèwùmi's *The Invention of Women: Making an African Sense of Western Gender Discourses*, contribute to the growing scholarly interest in Yorùbá culture and ideology.

2. According to the *Encyclopædia Britannica* (Chicago, 1997), a 10 percent combination of zinc and lead added to 90 percent copper produce brass, Ọ̀ṣun's associative element. Clearly, the lexical meaning for the Yorùbá words *òjé* and *ide* are closely related not only as elemental minerals but also as compounds that comprise the makeup of brass, bronze, lead, and copper. While brass is the known symbol of Ọ̀ṣun, the phrase *ogún òjé*, "(to) inherit lead," is neither symbolic nor poetic. Poetically speaking, we can however deduce that the phrase, *ogún òjé*, and the term, *òjé*, refer to the fundamental strength of inheriting the symbols of Ọ̀ṣun, and possibly inheriting access to or control of its metallurgic site and its usage. As the encyclopedia points out, the third group of brass is corrosive-resistant and is known as lead brass. It is more easily machined or sculpted and its color can be more readily modified. The translation of the term, *òjé*, reinforces the poetic rather than prosodic context and meaning of both the word and the poem.

3. *Agbára àgbò* can be transliterated as powerful water that flows gently causing erosion, an obvious allusion to the power of Ọ̀ṣun's medicinal waters.

4. Yorùbá is a contextual language, that is, it is difficult to discern meaning out of context. *Egbé*, for example, simply means some type of organization. However, it is most fre-

quently used in association with women, although it is not exclusively female in meaning. What type of *egbé* is referenced depends upon the context in which it is used and the surrounding symbols and images.

5. Both historical and religious scholarship on the Yorùbá discuss the stresses, strains, and compromises that underscore the tenuous relationships among traditional and non-traditional religious practices. As Ajayi and others point out, economic and political motivations as well as religious factors more often than not underscore how these competing religious interests eventually co-exist. Since women play a significant role in the economic, political, and religious spheres, their views and attitudes weigh heavily upon the outcome of such practices or multiplicity thereof.

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