

CHAPTER FOUR

Òrìṣà Ọṣun

Yoruba Sacred Kingship and Civil Religion in Ọṣogbo, Nigeria

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Invocation

Aládékojú, I am calling on you
Hail My Beloved Mother Aládékojú
The Beloved one from the town of Èfọn Èkítì
Hail the Powerful Mother Aládékojú,
5 The descendent of the one who uses the crown made of brass
We travel to the town of Èjìgbò
Where we visited the Ọgìyan (the Ọba of Èjìgbò)
The one who dances with the jingling brass
My wondrous Mother!
10 Who owns plenty of brass ornaments in the town of Èfọn
She moves majestically in the deep water
Oh spirit! Mother from Ìjẹṣàland
The land of the tough and brave people
Men who would fight to secure their wives
15 Even to the point of killing themselves
Along with their wives if everything fails
Hail the great Mother Ọṣun
Whose whole body is adorned with brass
She joins the Owá (Ìjẹṣà Ọba) to celebrate his festival
20 She shares her holy day (Friday) with Ṣàngó
My confidante
She waits at home to assist barren women to bear children
Ọṣun has plenty of cool water to heal diseases
Death to the Tapa (warriors from the North)
25 Ọṣun surrounds her whole body with Edan
With the shining brass as a Lantern at night,
She very quickly moves round the house

To fetch her sword, ready for battle
 Hail the Mother, Ọ̀ṣun Ọ̀ṣogbo
 My mother, the marvelous cook 30
 My Mother who makes succulent fried bean pattie (*àkàrà*), bean
 cake (*òlèlẹ̀*), and corn cakes (*èkuru*) as well
 Those who refuse to hail my Mother
 Will be denied tasteful bean cakes and corn cakes
 My mother who provides bean cake for the Èfòn people 35
 When my mother wakes up, she prepares food for her household
 My mother will then proceed to the kolanut stall
 As she trades in kolanut,
 She is also carrying her corn to the mill to grind
 At the same time she is also dying clothes (*adire*) by the sideway 40
 There is no task my mother cannot do
 She even keeps a stable for rearing horses
 My mother lives in the deep water
 And yet sends errands to the hinterland
 Aládékojú, my Olódùmarè (supreme Goddess) 45
 Who turns a bad destiny (*orí*) into a good one
 Ọ̀ṣun has plenty of brass ornaments in her storage
 Ọ̀rógùn, Ọ̀rógùngunndá,
 The favorite wife of Ọ̀rúnmilà (god of divination)
 The owner of the indigo pigeon 50
 In vivid colors of the rainbow,
 Her image appears brightly dressed on the river bank
 Aládékojú, the owner of the mortar made of brass
 Ọ̀ṣun fights for those she cares about
 Human beings (*ènìyàn*) do not want us to eat from a china plate 55
 (*àwo tánganran*)
 Ọ̀gbónmèlẹ̀, do not allow the evil world (*aye*) to change our good
 fortune into a bad one
 Do not let the wicked persons overcome us
 Once, Ọ̀ṣun was plucking medicinal leaves 60
 Ọ̀sanyìn (herbal god of medicine) was also plucking his own leaves
 Before Ọ̀sanyìn turns around,
 Ọ̀ṣun had taken Ọ̀sanyìn's leaves from the grinding stone
 Only Ọ̀ṣun can mold my destiny (*orí*)
 So that it becomes as strong as rock 65
 Ọ̀ṣun Ọ̀ṣogbo, I greet you
 Ọ̀ṣogbo oròkí emerges from afar off,
 And the crowd in the market went wild with joy
 The Ọ̀ba's beloved water, do not forget me
 Ọ̀ṣun who stands on the hill 70
 And beckons at the kolanut seller in the market to bring kolanut
 Ládékojú stands on the river bridge
 And calls the seller of honey in the market
 She beckons at the palm wine seller to bring her wine

75 The palm wine sells at an exorbitant price;
 But my mother does not buy overpriced goods
 The mighty water is rushing past
 It is flowing to eternity.¹

Introduction

In every Yorùbá city, there is a major Òrìṣà whose mythistory, ritual, and symbols are intricately linked to both ancient and modern-day core values, as well as to the political and cultural lives of the Yorùbá people of that particular city. In the same vogue, the ideology and rituals of sacred kingship derive from this particular tradition honoring this same Òrìṣà. The *Ọba* (king), on his ascent to the throne, adopts this Òrìṣà as his own. Political kingship exists by the very presence of the Òrìṣà religious tradition. In spite of the eighteenth-century conversion to Islam and the nineteenth-century conversion to Christianity, and in spite of the influences of modernity, under the Òrìṣà tradition, the *Ọba* continues to define the identity of the Yorùbá people. Surprisingly, this ancient paradigm has relevance to the contemporary study of Yorùbá religion because in the last ten years there has been a veritable upsurge of what might be called, in Gerald Lawson's terms, "community-ship" (1995: 286) within the local context of towns and cities, in contrast to "citizenship" in the larger context of the nation-state. The force of "community-ship" derives from ethnogenesis, mythic narratives, symbols, and rituals that forge an identity for the people of these towns and the ancient city-states in Yorùbá-speaking areas and indeed throughout Nigeria. As Lawson recently described modern India, "the claims of community-ship" are at least as strong and, in many contexts, are much stronger than the claim of "citizenship."

If "community-ship" describes a positive phenomenon (and I believe it does) that highlights an essence of modern Indian social reality and of modern India's commitment to the well-being of all its communities, "communalism," or the selfish and separatist efforts of a particular religious group to act in ways contrary to the larger community and the nation, can be seen as the negation or tragic distortion of "community-ship." "Communalism" can be seen therefore as uncivil religion, the opposite of India's community-based civil religion.

In line with Lawson's argument, I propose that the recent development of Yorùbá community-ship is anchored in ancient discourses of cultural identity and Òrìṣà traditions. Despite occasional disruptive moves arising from claims of competing traditions, such as certain forms of Islam and Christianity, this specific Òrìṣà discourse offers the most compelling and strongest support for the development and peaceful coexistence of traditions in modern Yorùbá societies. The Òrìṣà tradition presents "an understanding of the [Yorùbá] communities' experience in the light of ultimate and universal reality" (Rouner 1986: 71).

Ọ̀ṣogbo Identity and Community

In this essay, I use Ọ̀ṣogbo, the most significant Ọ̀ṣun city, located 170 kilometers from Lagos, as a case study to pursue two central themes. First, the myth, ritual, metaphor, and symbolism of Òrìṣà Ọ̀ṣun, the most revered goddess in the Yorùbá pantheon, have evolved as the communal “glue” holding Ọ̀ṣogbo together. The Òrìṣà Ọ̀ṣun tradition is the source of the Ọ̀ṣogbo core of spiritual, economic, and ethical values. These values, infused with transcendent meaning and significance, define the basic ideology of Ọ̀ṣogbo “identity and community” (Woocher 1990: 154).

Second, Ọ̀ṣun provides a shared religious system of meaning that predates and transcends the community’s “division of belief and practices” (ibid., 157). Such overarching transcendence and contextual meaning, which is also called Ọ̀ṣogbo’s civil religion, constitutes the sacred canopy of beliefs in Ọ̀ṣogbo’s pluralistic society. To develop these themes, I will explore the following topics: the narratives of Ọ̀ṣogbo’s ethnogenesis; the goddess nature of Òrìṣà Ọ̀ṣun; her relevance to gender discourse; her associations in popular parlance with Ọ̀ṣogbo’s economy and entrepreneurship; the links between the Ọ̀ṣun tradition and Ọ̀ṣogbo’s sacred kingship; and the Ọ̀ṣun festival performance as the embodiment of Ọ̀ṣogbo’s civil religion.

Ọ̀ṣogbo Ethnogenesis: Narratives of Origin

Shrouded in myth and legend, Ọ̀ṣogbo recalls the founding narratives of Yorùbá towns and cities. Although these narratives contain historical facts, they are intertwined with sacred narrative and metaphor that the community believes to be true. Scholars and local historians have presented differing versions of this central narrative, but there is no sharp disagreement on the basic sequence of events comprising the foundation of the community. This myth of origin is closely knit with the myth of both the Ọ̀ṣun River and the powerful goddess inhabiting the river. According to this mythistory, Ọ̀ṣogbo was founded by a prince of Ilẹ̀ṣà, a Yorùbá city-state about 20 kilometers from Ọ̀ṣogbo. Prince Ọ̀láróoyè (Láróoyè) had settled in a village called Ìpolé, near Ilẹ̀ṣà. As a result of a water shortage in Ìpolé, Ọ̀láróoyè and Olútímẹ̀hìn (Tímẹ̀hìn), a hunter, led a group of people in search of water, as was the custom in ancient days. The duo and their cohorts discovered a large river, later called Ọ̀ṣun. They went back to report to Ọ̀wátẹ̀, Ọ̀láróoyè’s father, and to invite Ọ̀wátẹ̀ to settle in the new place on the Ọ̀ṣun riverbank. But before they left, they decided to make a mark on the riverbank where they discovered Ọ̀ṣun. They felled a big tree that made a very loud noise on the river, whereupon they heard a loud booming voice say: *Wón ti wó ikòkò aró mi ò, èyin Oṣó inú igbó ẹ̀ tún dé* (You have destroyed my pots of dyes. You wizard of the forest, you’re here again). They were frightened and offered

sacrifices to the deity. But the goddess Ọṣun appeared to Ọlároóyè and Tìmẹhìn asking them not to panic.

Ọwátẹ decided to remain in Ìpolé, but gave his blessing to his son Ọlároóyè's and Tìmẹhìn's mission to settle in the new land. With these revelations, Ọlároóyè and Ọlútímẹhìn's party came back and settled by the riverbank.

There is another narrative that complements the central Ọṣun story. When Tìmẹhìn arrived at Ìpolé after discovering the Ọṣun River, he narrated how Lároóyè and he had encountered and fought with spirits believed to be led by Ọsan-yìn, the god of medicine inside the grove. According to this event, Lároóyè seized from these spirits the “magical” lamp of sixteen points (*àtùpà olójúmẹrìndínlógún*). The people of Ìpolé took these revelations to mean that settling near the Ọṣun River was sanctioned.

By the next rainy season, the river flooded, probably as a result of the power of Ọṣun. Those who once lacked water now had an overabundance of floodwater that was of no use to anyone. Lároóyè's party consulted Ifá divination, as was the custom, and learned that the goddess Ọṣun was angry because the Ọṣogbo people were too close to her abode, the source of the floods. Sacrifices were offered to appease her; as a sign that Ọṣun was pleased with the offerings, the fish-goddess messenger, *Ikò*, surfaced to reveal herself to the people. The king stretched forth his arms to welcome the fish-deity, a gesture causing the Ọba of Ọṣogbo to be called *Àtáọja* (one who spreads forth hands to welcome fish).² Ọba Adénlé interpreted his title as “the one who stretched forth his hands to receive the water from the fish's mouth.” This fish-water is regarded as sacred, as a potent medicinal substance that the ọba and the Ọṣogbo people may use for healing and other rituals. They therefore moved to their present abode in Ọṣogbo and settled a few kilometers from the Ọṣun River. They adopted the river goddess as the tutelary deity of the town and as protector of their king and their royal lineage. The annual Ọṣun festival functions to propitiate the goddess Ọṣun and serves as the festival of the king, stemming from the mythology as an essential renewal of the life of the Ọṣogbo community.

In several works on African religion and gender — most appropriately on religion and women — a major theory argues that religion and ritual in the “hands” of men play a major role in taming and controlling the “dangerous and destructive” power of women (d'Azevedo 1994), power symbolized and actualized in the form of a witch. Witches are believed to be human agents whose reputed antisocial behavior obstructs the social and communal order. Yorùbá tradition and scholarship support this argument. The Yorùbá proverb *ológùn ló lèe sọkọ Àjẹ* literally means “only the medicine man can be the husband of a ‘witch’.” “Husband” here connotes domestication: the husband must control through “brute” force; he is not the peaceful spouse of a beautiful woman. In a new feminist interpretation of Yorùbá tradition, female symbols and experiences are privileged over male images. Feminist interpretations present powerful images and symbols of deities as mothers, wives, warriors, and other female roles. We are

indeed experiencing the Yorùbá concept: the transcendent and the sacred in a radically different and fresh context. This new hermeneutics in the recent works of scholars — Diedre Badejo, Mei-Mei Sanford, Deidre Crumbley, and Oyeronke Oyewumi — indicates that researchers should continuously and rigorously interrogate myth and ritual as those described above in which male and female images are pitted against one another. No longer can we rely on conventional wisdom that assumes male superiority in all cultures! New hermeneutics are attempting, as Ursula King remarked, to balance and contrast male images of the sacred “which have been predominant” in most world religions, especially in Islamic and Judeo-Christian traditions, including rich images of the sacred as mother “and other female expressions” (King 1990: 203).

In interpreting the Ọ̀ṣun myths cited above, I would like to pursue King’s lead by examining contrasts in Ọ̀ṣun’s symbols and images with predominant male symbols and expressions of the sacred in Yorùbá thought and ritual. I am arguing that Ọ̀ṣun tradition overturns both conventional wisdom and the prevalent theoretical position that is assumed to be “part of a very African definition of humanity” (Van Beek and Blakely 1994: 9). From the mythic narrative, we see Ọ̀ṣun as a benevolent deity, a source of goodness and kindness. Not only does she “affirm the legitimacy and beauty of female power,” but she is indeed a “symbol of life, death, and rebirth of energy” (King 1990: 207).

Significantly, Ọ̀ṣun abhors evil machination, especially of medicine men (*oloogun*). She champions the cause of devotees who seek her help in struggling against evil magic and medicine. A close reading of the narrative suggests that there is a clash between both powerful and moral opposites (Wald 1997: 67), one represented and championed by the wizards of the forest (*osó inú Igbó*), the male hunters who inhabit the mainland and the forest, together with medicine men, and the other symbolized in Ọ̀ṣanyìn, the god of herbal medicine.

Another opposite, represented by the female, is symbolized in Ọ̀ṣun. In this opposition, Ọ̀ṣun claims a clear victory. This victory seems to verify Victor Turner’s comment about Ndembu people: “in the idiom of Ndembu ritual, hunting and masculinity, or virility and symbolic equivalent, and the symbols and gear of hunters are reckoned to be *mystically* dangerous to female fertility and reproductive processes” (Turner 1957: 27 in Turner 1992: 109). Several *orin* Ọ̀ṣun and other Ọ̀ṣun traditions point to these moral opposites. A melodious lyric recalls the power of the forest mother:

Ọ̀ṣun gbólòògùn, eruleṣe gbólòògùn lẹ
 Ó mà gbólòògùn, eruleṣe gbólòògùn lẹ

Osun drowned the medicine man
 The forceful and torrential water drowned the
 medicine man

Here Ọ̀ṣun is employed by both men and women devotees to ward off evil: although Ọ̀ṣun heals with her cooling water, she also uses torrential water to destroy the evil medicine men. The narratives show that in the contest between Ọ̀ṣanyìn, the god of herbal medicine, and Lároóyè with Tìmẹhín, they defeated

Ọṣanyìn and wrested the sacred sixteen-pointed lamp (*àtùpà olójúmèrìndìnló-gún*) away from Ọṣanyìn.

The lamp now constitutes an important insignia of Ọṣun. Incorporating potentially powerful symbols and ritual objects of magical and potent force belonging to the ritual apparel of cultural heroes characterizes West African Yorùbá societies. Another *orin* Ọṣun refers to a direct encounter between Ọṣanyìn and Ọṣun:

Ọṣun níjáwé, Ọṣanyìn níjáwé, Agbébú yansé. Ọṣun ti kó t'òsanyìn lẹ́ lójú ọlọ.

Once Ọṣun and Ọṣanyìn were plucking medicinal leaves. Ọṣun, who lives in the deep water, yet sends errands to the hinterland, removed Ọṣanyìn's leaves from Ọṣanyìn's grinding stone without his knowledge.

Here, once again, Ọṣanyìn, the god of medicine, personifies the male malevolent force and the evil medicine men on whom Ọṣun relentlessly wages war on behalf of her clients, with Ọṣun ultimately gaining the upper hand.

As the young virgin carries Ọṣun's sacred calabash containing Ọṣun's brass objects from the king's palace to the riverbank, several people assembled at Ọṣun's shrine wail in prayer to Mother Ọṣun to take the "hands" and "eyes" of evil people from their bodies (*Iya ọwọ ọsọ, ọjú àjẹ, mu kúrò lára mi o*). Babalawo Ifáyemí Èlèbuìbon remarks on the mechanism of Ọṣun's healing power: "Ọṣun does not use herbal medicine to heal, she uses ordinary cooling water to heal" (*Oroki: A Video Film on Ọṣun Ọṣogbo Festival*, 1997). To receive Ọṣun's healing, one cannot combine herbal medicine with Ọṣun's cool water.

Just as these narratives of Ọṣogbo ethnogenesis and her relationship to Ọṣun are within the very traditional purview of the Yorùbá religious structure, a nineteenth-century narrative affirms Ọṣun's significance in the modern history of Ọṣogbo. According to this legend and historical narrative, during the Yorùbá civil war an event took place that changed the course of Yorùbá—and Nigerian—political history. Having liquidated the former Ọyọ empire, the Fulani Muslim Jihadists camped outside the gates of a city near the home of Ọṣun, ready to overrun the remaining Ọyọ soldiers who took refuge in surrounding villages and towns. But the invaders met their "Waterloo" in Ọṣogbo when Ọṣun, who turned herself into a food-vendor, sold poisoned vegetables (*ẹfọ Yánrin*) to the Muslim Fulani soldiers. The Jihadists instantly developed uncontrollable diarrhea; in their weakened state they were routed out of Ọṣogbo. The Ọṣogbo battle had significant consequences for the Yorùbá people, especially since it stopped the Jihadists' rapid expansion into southwestern Nigeria. Moreover, Ọṣun's victory over the Muslim forces continues to be recalled in Ọṣun's festival, in which Ọṣun's songs castigate fanatical forms of religious and secular tradition, especially those hostile and antagonistic toward Ọṣun's moral authority.

From the nature and character of images of Ọrìṣà Ọṣun described above, it remains clear that the goddess Ọṣun appears as the dominant deity in Ọṣogbo social and religious life. One of the Ọṣun verses cited earlier refers to her as

Olódùmarè mi, my Supreme Goddess, a metaphoric reference to Ọ̀ṣun as a great goddess, having the qualities of the Supreme God for the devotee. She has attributes encompassing other deities and cultural heroes in Ọ̀ṣogbo myth. This universalism is demonstrated in mythical and in practical ways. In addition to serving as the home and courtyard of the river goddess, Ọ̀ṣun's sacred grove also houses the shrines of several of Ọ̀ṣogbo's deities (Ogungbile 1998a: 70). Among the shrines is the temple of Ọ̀gbóni, serving as the meeting place for Ifá diviners. Ọ̀ṣun provides shelter for the Orò grove that is used as the meeting assembly of Ọ̀gbóni members. The hunter's Epa grove is also located here in the Ọ̀ṣun compound. The first market stall in Ọ̀ṣogbo is named after the first Ọ̀ba, Lárò-óyè's, market (Ogungbile 1998a: 70); it was a center of trade and commerce in ancient times.

Ọ̀ṣun and Ọ̀ṣogbo's Political Economy

The tradition of Ọ̀ṣun links the goddess with Ọ̀ṣogbo's prosperity and entrepreneurship. Centrally placed at the intersection of various Yorùbá cities, Ọ̀ṣogbo has emerged as a growing political and economic center of the region. As a major trading center and administrative headquarters in the colonial period, Ọ̀ṣogbo served as a main railway terminal between Kano in the northern region and Lagos in the southwestern region (Egunjobi 1995: 27–28). During the colonial period, Ọ̀ṣogbo also had an airport. Linked with Ọ̀ṣun, its traditional trade and commerce brought Ọ̀ṣogbo fame for its indigo dye, kolanut trade, and arts and crafts. The *oriki* Ọ̀ṣun, cited at the beginning of this paper, reflects these various economic interests.

Oriki, or praise poetry, emphasizes that Ọ̀ṣun specializes in many trades, including kolanut and indigo dye. From the ordinary bean, Ọ̀ṣun makes a variety of dainty treats—bean cakes (*àkàrà*) and bean porridge (*òlẹ̀lẹ̀*). Ọ̀ṣun owns stables for trading in horses. The *oriki* emphasizes that Ọ̀ṣun is superwoman. No form of work is too difficult for her to perform. As Ọ̀ṣun trades in kolanut in the public market, at the same time she rushes to grind corn to make tasty corn torte to sell. All the while she maintains her dye trade. The well-established indigo dye industry and markets sustained the ancient Ọ̀ṣogbo kingdom. Hence, the town is often referred to as *Ìlú aró* (the town of indigo dye). Ọ̀ṣun's encounter with the first settlers of Ọ̀ṣogbo occurred when Láròóyè and Tímẹ̀hìn felled a big tree on the river Ọ̀ṣun. The goddess claimed it destroyed her pots of dye (*Ìkòkò aró*). Another *oriki* Ọ̀ṣun refers to the goddess as a strong woman owning a wealth of coral beads (*Ìlẹ̀kẹ̀*) and brass ornaments (*Idẹ̀*). She is described as *arípepe kóde sí obinrin l'Ọ̀ṣun* (a strong woman, she has good storage places for her valuable brass ornaments).

Ọ̀ṣun is an archetypal woman who embodies the core values and impetus for Ọ̀ṣogbo's economic success. Here moral and economic order are intricately linked, but not in the Weberian sense. Ọ̀ṣun's social and economic empow-

erment of the inhabitants of Òṣogbo forms the basis of her popularity today. Òṣun's role in Òṣogbo's economic order is also reflected in the Òṣun ritual. On "outing day," as the Arugbá dances to the riverbank, market women exclaim that through Òṣun's help, they have paid off their debts (*mo já gbèsè*). Their excitement can be compared to that of Americans who suddenly discover they are able to pay off huge credit card debts!

The Òṣun Festival and Ritual of Kingship

Starting from the first day of *Wíwá Òṣun* (literally, "to search for our goddess Òṣun"), the annual Òṣun festival and kingship ritual lasts fourteen days. The Òṣun festival begins when the community is informed by the visit of Òṣun devotees to their lineage houses and various places in the town. During this ceremony, senior priests and priestesses of Òṣun, dancing to the *bembe*, Òṣun's sacred music, visit the home of key Òṣun functionaries, other civil chiefs, and the private homes of the *oba* who reign in Òṣogbo. With public affirmation, the town begins in full swing to prepare for the Òṣun festival.

In a comprehensive account of Òṣun's 1972 festival, J. O. Olagunju (1972: 2) helps us understand the changes in the Òṣun festival over the past two-and-a-half decades. Olagunju reports that in the evening of *Wíwá Òṣun*, the *Àtáója* and the *Iya Òṣun* visit the market to declare publicly that it is time "to eat the new yam," and thus remove the taboo forbidding the harvesting and selling of new yams in Òṣogbo. From its very nature and name, *Wíwá Òṣun* is a multi-variant ceremony with complex symbolic meaning. To link the start of Òṣun with the new-yam ritual is a recognition of the fact that Òṣun nurtures the Òṣogbo people. The *Iya Òṣun* and the *Àtáója* are intricately linked in the ritual washing of Òṣun — Òṣun is present everywhere in Òṣogbo's spatial and temporal life.

More importantly, by its very meaning and essence, *Wíwá Òṣun* represents a quest for the divine presence and power of the goddess Òṣun, who is harnessed at this auspicious time to aid individuals and to serve communal ritual purposes. The motif of service remains constant in the numerous private and public ritual ceremonies comprising the Òṣun festival. *Wíwá Òṣun* may be seen as an entry into the *communitas* stage of a community's own rite of passage. Characteristic of a transitional stage in rites of passage, the festival represents a time when the Òṣogbo people, both individuals and lineages, forget all squabbles. One Òṣogbo inhabitant remarked, "We do this so that our prayers and requests will be answered by our Great Mother."

The last stage of *Wíwá Òṣun* appears to be a recent innovation in Òṣun festivals — never mentioned in previous descriptions of the festival: the Òṣun festival includes the visit of Òṣun priestesses, *Ìyá Èwe* (mothers of the little ones), to the marketplace to solicit gifts from those buying and selling. Jingling the Òṣun sacred bell and bestowing prayerful blessings on market products, the priestesses

move around the market stalls, soliciting buyers and sellers to dig deep into their pockets to donate to the Ọ̀ṣun coffers. Although in the character of Ọ̀ṣun as a trader and powerful marketing merchant, this innovation can be explained in terms of the changes in the political economy of the city. In the past, hundreds of Ọ̀ṣogbo indigenes would bring gifts of farm produce to the Ọ̀ba and Iya Ọ̀ṣun. But as the tradition of harvest gifts diminished, a system of voluntary sacred market gift-giving has evolved, by which the expenses of the Ọ̀ṣun festival are partially met.

In *Ìwọ̀ Pópó*, the first public ceremony in the Ọ̀ṣun festival, the Àtáója — accompanied by a great assemblage of his wives, the chiefs of the town and the palace, and courtiers, friends, and palace messengers — proceeds through the main street which runs the length of the ancient city. This was the street that allowed major access to and from the ancient city before modern development began. In this stately procession, the Àtáója is greeted by his subjects who gather to pay him homage, to acknowledge his rule, and to praise his majestic walk. It is not uncommon to hear the greeting *Kémi olá ó gùn* (May your prosperity last long) and *Kádé pé lóri, kí bàtà pé lẹ̀sẹ̀* (May you long wear the royal crown and the royal shoes).

Gary Ebersole, commenting on a similar ceremony in Japanese culture, noted that ritualized public processions demonstrate, “charisma, order and status” (1989: 40). As in the *Kunimi* ritual of ancient Japan, in *Ìwọ̀ Pópó*, a “ritual act of viewing the land,” the Àtáója “represents himself to the people precisely as the sacred king who, as premier ritual intermediary between the realm of the [Ọ̀ṣun] and the human sphere, had sole power to assure peace, prosperity and fertility of the land” (ibid.). *Ìwọ̀ Pópó* is, above all, a boundary rite similar to the ritual of *Omiabé* in Ondo’s kingship festival (Olupona 1991). In *Ìwọ̀ Pópó*, one Chief Ọ̀gáálá goes against all odds, leads the strong men of his family to secure the space where Ọ̀ṣun’s festival and procession take place. Like Chief Olotualẹwa in Oñdó’s *Omiabé*, whose role was to clear the ancient Oñdó’s territory of vagabonds or other disturbing elements who might obstruct the king’s festival, Chief Ọ̀gáálá’s triumphant return from Àtáója’s errand in which he secures “the dangerous path of Jamigbo to Ọ̀ṣun’s river” (Ogungbile 1996: 24) is greeted with joy and great merriment. The people in his entourage sing on their return that Ọ̀gáálá deserves to be given a gift of meat to eat. Indeed, he is presented with a live goat by the king as a reward for his bravery and assistance. The *Ìwọ̀ Pópó* ceremony symbolically establishes Ọ̀ṣogbo’s ancient space and territory over which the king exercises his power and dominance. On the other hand, the king also pronounces blessings on his subjects and the territory.

The *Ìkúnlẹ̀ Ọ̀ṣun*, or ritual washing of Ọ̀ṣun’s paraphernalia with the sacred leaves (*ewe òrìṣà*) occurs the day after *Ìwọ̀ Pópó*. Here Ọ̀ṣun’s images are brought out from the inner shrine, washed, and adorned in readiness for her feasts. As Chief Ifáyemí Èlẹ̀bùibon remarked, *Wọn ní láti sọ àwọn ibo Ọ̀ṣun di ọ̀tun* (They

must renew all Ọṣun's propitiatory objects). On this day too, the *Arugbá Ọṣun*, the virgin who carries Ọṣun's sacrificial apparel to the riverbank, begins her initiatory ceremony in preparation for the Herculean task to follow.

In the evenings of *Ìkúnlẹ Ọṣun*, the sixteen-pointed lamp (*àtùpà Olójúmèrind-ínlogún*) sacred to Ọṣanyìn is lit for the night vigil of the Ọṣun festival. This is the legendary magical lamp which the founding ancestors seized from Ọṣanyìn, the god of medicine. The lamp represents Ọṣun's superior power over sorcerers (*oṣó*) and medicine men (*oloogun*), because, having seized the lamp, Ọṣun incorporates it into her paraphernalia. By doing so Ọṣun recalls a method of power-acquisition that appears in several cultures, whereby a foreign source of power considered beneficial is acquired and incorporated into a chief's or warrior's arsenal for control and mastery. As a royal ritual, the town's *babalawo* (Ifá priests) supervise the ceremony of lighting the magical lamp to ensure its proper use and continued domestication by Ọṣun and her protégé, the *Àtáója*. The presence of the *babalawo* at the ritual may also be connected to the fact that Ọṣun was wife to *Ọrúnmilà*. The diviners burn the oil lamp until early morning.

In this reenactment ritual, the cutlass chiefs, the *Arugbá* and *Ìyá Èwe*, take turns dancing around the lamp. The king, his wives, and the chiefs also dance around the lamp three times, after which the king proceeds to the *Ọgún* shrine of *Olútìmẹhìn*, the first hunter and discoverer of the Ọṣun River. Upon his return, the sacred lamp will have been removed, and the king and his entourage will dance as they return to the palace. While the ritual acknowledges the reality of Ọṣanyìn's medicinal power—the reality that the Ọṣogbo's indigenes and Ọṣun's devotees will continuously encounter, and wrestle with—the ritual ultimately reaffirms Ọṣun's domestication and appropriation of Ọṣanyìn's medicinal power. It affirms Ọṣun's skill in outmaneuvering controlling male forces of evil, symbolized by bad medicine (*oogun buburu*). It is no coincidence that Ifá diviner priests, experts in the confluence of spiritual and medicinal forces, are at hand to supervise this highly theatrical performance. The removal of Ọṣanyìn's lamp before the return of the king from *Olútìmẹhìn's (Ọgún)* shrine indicates the victory of the Ọṣun sacred power because “the moon must disappear before the day dawns” (*ojo ò kì ní mólẹ bá òṣùpá*).

An important aspect of the Yorùbá kingship ritual is the propitiation of royal ancestors and the king's own *orí* (head). In the twin rituals of *Ìbọrí* and *Ìbọdẹ*, four days before Ọṣun's day, the town's notables, royals, and priestly class assemble in a palace hall in which all ancient crowns and other royal wares, such as the beaded shoes and staff of office, are kept. The king, with schnapps (liquor), prays to the royal ancestors. Though he acts as the successor to the former wearers of the royal emblems, he himself is simply dressed. In his prayers, he invokes the spirit of all ancestors “in the name of *Odùduwà*, our forefather, and in the name of *Lároóyè*, the first king.” The *Àtáója* prays for this community, the people present, and Nigeria.

The schnapps and condiments are passed around for all to taste. The language

of the ceremony reflects a simple, non-sectarian tone. The liquor was called *ọ̀tí àdùrà* (prayer liquor) to counteract any claim that a Muslim *Ọ̀ba* drinks alcohol. But we know that in Yorùbá society, no Christian or Muslim would refuse *ọ̀tí àdùrà*, with which schnapps is associated. The chanting and recitation of the names of the past and present kings from Olároóyè to Àtáója Matanmi III, accompanied by the royal drum, brings the first part of the ceremony of *Ìbọ̀rí* and *Ìbọ̀adé* to a close. After each king is mentioned by the chants, there is a response of *Kábíyèsí* (Long live the “kingship”) from the audience, an acknowledgment of the power that the deceased royals, though dead, still live on and that the incumbent king needs their blessing and assistance to achieve a peaceful and prosperous reign. While the occasion commemorates the memory of the deceased royal ancestors and cultural heroes, it also allows the king to renew his own kingship. The royal chanters and drummers, in their recitation, usher the community into active participation in the reality of the sacred time and Ọ̀ṣogbo’s mythistory as charted by past rulers. By reciting his list, the king reaffirms the chain of authority, and in an attempt to authenticate the present, links the present with the mythic past. The audience too acknowledges the power of the ancestors’ living presence by their response of *Kábíyèsí*.

The ceremony is followed by a private ritual during which the spirit head (*Orí Inú*, literally “the inner head”) of the king is propitiated. As in the *Ìbọ̀rí* ceremony of Ila-Ọ̀rangun’s kingship ceremony, discussed by Pemberton and Afọlayan (1996), the purpose of Àtáója’s *Ìbọ̀rí* is to enable him to invoke his “spirit-head” who is believed to be the shaper of his earthly destiny. The propitiation of the king’s *Orí* follows a logical sequence to *Ìbọ̀adé* because the king must reaffirm his kingship through his own head (*Orí*) on which he wears the crown, the most visible symbol of kingship. This he does, in communion with the previous wearers of the crown in the *Ìbọ̀adé* ceremony.

The main attraction of the Ọ̀ṣun festival is the ritual procession and pilgrimage of the king, the Arugbá, and the Ọ̀ṣogbo people to the Ọ̀ṣun River to present their sacrificial offerings to the goddess. The major players in the ceremony are the *Iya Ọ̀ṣun*, the chief priestess of Ọ̀ṣun; the Arugbá, the young virgin who conveys Ọ̀ṣun’s paraphernalia and sacrificial objects to the riverbank in a large brass bowl (*Igbá Ọ̀ṣun*); and last, the king himself, the chief sacrificer. A day before the pilgrimage, Ifá divination is consulted to ensure the Arugbá’s successful journey, a tedious and Herculean task fraught with many taboos. The Arugbá is chosen by a divination process as well. When the present Arugbá Gbọ̀njubọ̀la Oye-wale Matanmi was chosen—summoned to the palace and informed by the king—she was quite surprised. “How could that be, when I never visited Ọ̀ṣun river nor participated in Ọ̀ṣun’s tradition before” (Oroki 1997) was her initial reaction! Reminiscent of the annunciation to the Virgin Mary in Christian traditions, the Arugbá is presented before a host of Ifá priests in the home of Oluawo, the Ifá chief priest. The Ifá is consulted by a middle-aged diviner and the revela-

tion announced to those present. In Faleti's *Oroki* video cited above, the Arugbá was enjoined by Ifá to be happy and relax (*ko dára yá*). Ifá promised to keep all evil away from her (*Ifá ní òun ó dinà ibi*). Most importantly, Ifá predicted that through her carrying the sacrificial offering to Ọṣun, the town of Ọṣogbo would prosper and the Arugbá's own prospects would be accomplished (*Ire ilu Ọṣogbo á dé; ire tì ẹ ná à dé*).

On the day of Ọṣun, the Arugbá is escorted to the Ọṣun chamber in the palace compound to prepare for the journey. Having ritually prepared her for the task ahead, the Igbá is placed on her head and two lobes of kolanut are stuck into her mouth to prevent her from talking. Like the Olojo kingship festival in Ile-Ife, in which the Ooni (the Ile-Ife king) must not utter any word once the sacred *Are* crown is placed on his head, the Arugbá's silence is to prevent her from uttering any curse, because whatever she says will come to pass. From here the Arugbá proceeds to the king's palace to receive his blessings and to inform him that the ceremony has commenced.

The king's own entourage in a car convoy follows the Arugbá's procession to the Ọṣun River very closely. The crowd, numbering thousands of visitors and Ọṣogbo natives, who by now have gathered on the streets and on balconies of houses on the route where Arugbá's procession passes, besiege her, shouting their prayers and wishes for long life, children, wellness, and prosperity. And at times they curse their enemies as well. There is the belief that the Arugbá, as she proceeds toward the Ọṣun River, conveys the community's prayerful wishes to the "Mother Ọṣun." To prevent mishaps that may occur as the teeming crowd besieges her, young boys with whips (*atorin*) and other Ọṣun devotees provide safe passage for the Arugbá who is piloted along the route on her way to the riverbank. As she moves along, she stops in auspicious places, in shrines and temples of supporting deities to whom priests in various places offer prayers for a peaceful pilgrimage.

On reaching the Ọṣun grove, the Arugbá enters the Ọṣun shrine where the brass *Igbá Ọṣun* is removed from her head and carried into the inner shrine. The Ọṣun festival has become a popular public festival and a strong tourist attraction. This new image has enhanced its performance but has also turned it into a choreographed spectacle. A public ceremony takes place here in which the king and his visitors are entertained by different segments of the society. In turn, the chief members of the religious groups, diviners, hunters, and traders, rise up to pay homage to their king while an announcer takes a roll call of every group present, and the Ọba waves his horse tail (*irunkere*) in acknowledgment of the greetings of his subjects.

One of the dancing groups that pay homage to the Ọba is the ancestral masquerades (*egungun*). Clad in colorful costumes, depicting their image-symbols, many of the *egungun* appear before the king to pay obeisance and salute him, acknowledging his spiritual and temporal authority in Ọṣogbo. The distinguishing mark of the ancestral masquerade is that their wood masks and cloth veils

indicate that they are of Ọ̀yọ́ origin, symbolizing immigrants, outsiders whose migration to and sojourn in the land is still a remembered and celebrated event in Ọ̀ṣogbo history. Having outnumbered the autochthonous group of Ìjèṣà origin (of whom the king is an integral part), the Ọ̀yọ́-Ìjèṣà conflict continues to be a matter of concern in contemporary Ọ̀ṣogbo. The festival thus represents the Ọ̀yọ́'s attempt to ameliorate conflicts and neutralize competing claims by acknowledging the Àtáója as the head of a diverse, multi-clan, heterogeneous community. As Richards argues, "the mask," and I would argue, its cloth veil, appears to have "exemplary qualities as a conceit or metaphor for discourses which attempt to characterize the cultural identities and differences which epitomize the representations" of the people. (Richards 1994: 5). *Egungun*, ancestral spirits, are deceased elders who appear during festivals to celebrate with living members of their lineages. As Richards further states, "remembrance of the ancestors is vital to the success of human endeavors; to ignore them will result in witchcraft, plagues, and social dissolution" (1994: 7).

Why would the Ọ̀yọ́ ancestral masquerades appear in a ceremony that is, strictly speaking, not a festival of lineage ancestors? Their appearance is to acknowledge their own bond and allegiance as sacred representatives of the Ọ̀yọ́ lineage sojourning in Ọ̀ṣun's domain, a place where the sacred king guarantees them rights of abode, in spite of their foreignness — even though the Ọ̀yọ́ groups outnumber the aboriginal Ìjèṣà people in present-day Ọ̀ṣogbo. The ritual of paying homage is all the more important when we recognize that in real terms, there is always the possibility of conflicts breaking out between the Ọ̀yọ́ immigrants and the Ìjèṣà aborigines. Such rancorous conflicts resulting from economic and sub-ethnic identity issues are temporarily submerged in order to celebrate the unity of the community, an indication of Ọ̀ṣogbo's preference for communityship over communalism. That the *Egungun* agency plays this role becomes clearer when we recognize, as Richards has rightly observed, that throughout Yorubaland *Egungun* provides a strong "sense of collective identity," especially in places where "diverse groups and lineages required a homogenizing influence to which they could demonstrate their shared allegiance" (1994: 7).

One special attraction of the festival in the video is the appearance of a young man standing inside a large empty carton of schnapps dressed like a Muslim Imam, holding prayer beads. While this may be interpreted as an unofficial Muslim presence, it is also a parody, making a statement about a Muslim consuming alcohol. At the same time the performance provides glimpses of what I will discuss later as uncivil religion, a protest against the new Islamic resurgence as an expression of antagonism toward Ọ̀ṣun ceremony. Indeed, some of the Ọ̀ṣun songs sung on this day reflect tension with Islam, as I will also show. The Àtáója gave a stately address in which he located Ọ̀ṣun ceremony within the context of Ọ̀ṣogbo's mythistory and civil religion. He denounced those who claim that Ọ̀ṣun is a "pagan" worship. Instead, he claimed, "it demonstrates man's search for his origin in consonance with the practice of our ancestors." The Àtáója's

speech reflects his own personal struggle with the changing face of religion in Ọṣogbo. A staunch Muslim, a former Islamic teacher, and now a king, he recognizes the significance of Ọṣun in the kingship rituals. He, therefore, locates Ọṣun as *àṣà* (tradition) as opposed to *ẹ̀sìn* (religion or worship). If American discourse on civil religion faces criticism and debate at the intellectual and cultural level, so does the meaning of Ọṣun in contemporary Ọṣogbo.

After the stately ceremony, the Ọba wears the ancestral veiled crown, which he dons like the Ooni's *Arẹ̀* in the Ọlojo festival in the Ile-Ife, once a year. Like the Ooni, who would then encounter Ọ̀gún, the god of iron and war and Ife's patron deity, the Àtáọ́ja proceeds to Ile-Ọṣun and sits on the sacred stone where Larooye Gbadewolu, the first king, sat to take Ọṣun's blessings. There, the priests and priestesses of Ọṣun propitiate Ọṣun on his behalf and there he encounters the goddess.

Sacrificial offerings to Ọṣun at the river ends this ceremony. The priests and priestess of Ọṣun, led by the Iya Ọṣun, place the sacrificial offerings of food presented by the king inside a big bowl (*Ọpón Ọṣun*) which is carried by a young man to the riverbank, where Iya Ọṣun will present it to Ọṣun. The solemnity of the ritual is indicated by the teeming crowd who appropriately remove their head scarves and caps as the sacrifice is conveyed to the river. This is both a reference to the goddess and at the same time an indication that this sacrificial moment is the most auspicious time. Water taken from the river at this stage is seen as especially efficacious. The Ọṣun priestesses claim that in the past this was the moment when Ọṣun would send her messenger (*Ikò*) in the form of a big fish, who would appear and pour water from his mouth into the big bowl. The water, they claim, served as a source for healing women, children, and all who seek the deity.

With the sacrifice over, the Arugbá leads the procession and returns with the Ọṣun bowl to the palace where the bowl is kept. Five days later, in a ritual called *gbígbéṣè r'odò*, there is a joyful return to the Ọṣun shrine, though this is performed mainly by women and children. This is the occasion when those whose prayers have been answered by Ọṣun bring their pledges and offering of thanks to her. In a more relaxed atmosphere, the Arugbá, her friends, and the previous carriers of Ọṣun's sacrificial offerings interact and converse about their experiences as bearers of Ọṣogbo's gift to the great mother. A large portion of the gifts presented to Ọṣun are displayed so that people can behold the wonders and healing powers of the goddess. At the appropriate time, part of the food offerings are taken to the river and presented to Ọṣun — they are thrown into the water.

The Ọṣun festival is very complex; and so will be any attempt to interpret it. It encompasses various motifs and, given some of the chronological changes that have occurred in the accounts of the festivals available to us, it clearly shows that it is a composite festival. In the character of city festivals in the history of religions, such as the Roman Parilia festival, Ọṣun probably developed from an agricultural new-yam festival into a festival commemorating the foundation of the city of Ọṣogbo. As Ọṣogbo developed from a small settlement into a large town-

ship, Ọ̀ṣun became a political celebration just like the Parilia celebration, a simple pastoral festival that grew to become a “noisy” celebration of Rome’s birthday (Beard et al. 1998: 119).

The Ọ̀ṣun festival manifests attributes of new year festivals characteristic of agricultural societies. As in the new year festival of the Ila people, beautifully described by Smith and Dale (1920) and later interpreted by Evan Zuesse (1987), ceremonies and rituals of Ọ̀ṣun combine various elements: the invocation of a savior goddess and the two cultural heroes and founders of Ọ̀ṣogbo, Olútimehìn and Olároóyè, for the purpose of bringing about human and agricultural fertility. Human fertility provides a popular and continued relevance in modern Ọ̀ṣogbo.

As the founding ritual of Ọ̀ṣogbo, the burden of its performance lies with the king who has adopted the festival as his own ritual and ceremony. The ideology and ritual of sacred kingship embodies the totality of life in the Yorùbá communities. Sacred kingship is a fundamental cultural construct. It is a mode of connection to ancestors and the gods and their powers, a charter for land title, a basis for political status, and the definition of seniority and gender.

Ọ̀ṣogbo civil religion emanates from the institution of sacred kingship which derives its source and energy from the traditions of Òrìṣà Ọ̀ṣun. This sacred kingship is also the focus of a multi-religious Ọ̀ṣogbo community. To illustrate the logical connection between sacred kingship and Ọ̀ṣun, it is germane to our argument to see the way in which the crowd responds to the appearance of Arugbá carrying the sacred calabash to the river. The drummers for the festival recite that the Arugbá is the real king:

Ìwọ l'ọ̀ba	You are the King
Ìwọ làgbà	You are the Elder
Ìwọ ọ̀ba ọ̀ba ọ̀ba . . .	You are the King, the real King

(Ogunbile 1998b: 7)

Olagunju (1972) observed that the Arugbá’s attendant, in sympathy with the heavy load that the Arugbá was carrying, uttered the following incantatory words of assistance: *Olúwa mi, ọ̀fẹ́ o* (My lord, may the load be lighter), *Mọọ ọ̀ra ẹ̀, ìyá Àtáọ́ja* (Walk gently, Atáọ́ja’s mother). The Arugbá, as the reincarnation of Ọ̀ṣun, displays the persona of the great goddess. She is honored as the surrogate “mother” of the king and she is bestowed with the sacredness that befits the Ọ̀ṣun. Hence, she must accomplish for her community the observance of the elaborate taboos that surround the office of the Arugbá and the rituals required of her.

Ọ̀ṣun as Civil Religion

There is a tendency in the scholarship on Yorùbá religion to divide the pantheon of deities into major and minor deities and to privilege the so-called major deities. It is assumed that these major deities are at all times and in all places

quintessential and that they hold supreme power in all Yorùbá towns and cities. Such an approach neglects the myths and historicity of particular towns and cities and the broader spectrum of their complex ritual life that “celebrates a real beginning, the coming into being of a new sub-ethnic entity” (Hikerson 1996: 84). I have shown from my description and interpretation of the Òṣun festival that city tutelary gods and goddesses play central roles in Yorùbá city spirituality. City spirituality can be described as a phenomenon whereby a particular place, settlement, city, or township derives its sacredness from its relationship to a deity, ancestor, or cultural hero who performs the central role in its myths, legends, and history. Myths, ritual, performances, and symbols of this sacred being form the core of Yorùbá civil religion.

Civil religion, a concept first used by Rosseau (1988 [1762]) and popularized in Robert Bellah’s (1970) seminal essay “Civil Religion in America,” is a multi-various concept, adopted in general to interpret how a nation, community, or political entity endeavors to “understand its historical experience in religious terms” (Wald 1997). In my own previous works on the subject (Olupona 1988, 1996; and Nyang, 1993), I tried to relate the idea beyond the analysis of the interaction of religion and polity in the emerging African states, especially in Nigeria, to examine its application to the understanding of the ideology and rituals of local communities (Olupona 1991; Ilesanmi 1995). My basic thesis is that in several Yorùbá towns and cities generally under the aegis of sacred kingship, the community annually reaffirms its core values and mythistory. We have seen that the Òṣogbo people claim descent from a common ancestral origin — Olároyè and Olútìmèhìn. Even though the Òṣogbo people today “espouse different, even conflicting ultimate meaning systems” (Woocher 1990: 156), the people acknowledge “themselves as participants in a common social order” (1990: 157) under the canopy of sacred kingship whose ideology, rituals, and symbols are derived from Òṣun’s religious experience. Civil religion, then, is as Jonathan Woocher claims, “a religious meaning system which symbolically expresses and sustains the unity of [Òṣogbo] society even in the face of religious diversity” (ibid.). Civil religion has its deepest meaning in the understanding of Yorùbá communal tradition when it is viewed as a tradition, “a sacred organic reality into which one is born” (Wentz 1998: 51). I will further examine this issue in the last section of this essay.

The Òṣun festival is a theatrical and visual rendition of, and statement about, Òṣun’s personality and essence and her role in the salvation history of Òṣogbo, as the one who provided an abode for the drought-stricken people of Ìpolé. More importantly, Òṣun plays a role in Òṣogbo’s modernity as the source of an invisible religion that heals potential social and religious cleavages within Òṣogbo society, and that provides the basis of Òṣogbo’s economic prosperity. I will pursue several of these themes, drawing from my analysis of Òṣun festivals presented above and other historical and oral sources, especially the *Oríkì Òṣun* which I used as a preface to this chapter.

Religious Pluralism and Civil Religion

Ọ̀ṣun tradition, especially her ritual process, illustrates not only that Ọ̀ṣun is the embodiment of Ọ̀ṣogbo's ideology and rituals of sacred kingship, but that she is the very expression of royal protection (Frankfurter 1998: 3). Ọ̀ṣun is at the center of both royal kingship and the pantheon of deities in Ọ̀ṣogbo's cosmology. Several verses of Ọ̀ṣun's *Oríkì* show this linkage. First, Ọ̀ṣun encompasses the Ọ̀ṣogbo universe of meanings. Ọ̀ṣun is addressed as my Olódùmarè (Supreme God), a symbolic reference to Ọ̀ṣun as the Ultimate Being and the source of Ọ̀ṣogbo's essence. Second, another Ọ̀ṣun song reads: *Ab'Owa s'odun, aba Sango s'ose* (One who celebrates the festival with Owa [the Ìjèṣà Ọ̀ba] and also shares a holy day with Sango). The collective propitiation of Ọ̀ṣogbo's deities and cultural heroes by the king takes place in conjunction with Ọ̀ṣun's festival. As in the ritual of *arebokadi* (the ritual offerings to palace deities and the royal ancestors enshrined in and around the palace) in Ondo's kingship festival (Olupona 1991) and, in Ọ̀ṣogbo too, three major spiritual agents: *Ifá* (divination god), *Eégún* (ancestor spirit), and *Ogun* (god of iron and war) are particularly prominent in Ọ̀ṣun's festival.

One of the major tests of civil religions in contemporary Yorùbá society is the way in which the two world religions, Islam and Christianity, feature in a town's religious landscape. Both Islam and Christianity have been domesticated by Yorùbá religious traditions, but by their sheer size and influence they continue to effect changes upon Yorùbá indigenous traditions. Are these two global traditions subsumed under the sacred canopy of Ọ̀ṣun and Àtáója's authority? By and large, Ọ̀ṣogbo Muslims and Christians acknowledge Àtáója's kingship and Ọ̀ṣun's role in their town's mythistory. But in modern Ọ̀ṣogbo, with the growth of militant Islamic and Christian influences, skirmishes between followers of Ọ̀ṣun traditions and those of the two world religions have resulted in uncivil practices. The case of Islam deserves particular mention because it poses the greatest challenge to Ọ̀ṣogbo's civil religion and because it has a special relationship to Ọ̀ṣogbo.

Islam, Ọ̀ṣun, and Uncivil Religion

What is the importance of Islam to Ọ̀ṣun's festival? Muslims constitute about 70 percent of Ọ̀ṣogbo's total population. Islam is therefore a major religious tradition in the city. Besides, a large number of Ọ̀ṣun's devotees and Ọ̀ṣun priests and priestesses are Muslims. Paradoxically, Ọ̀ṣun festival day, normally a Friday, coincides with the Muslim prayer day, thus making Ọ̀ṣun, Sango (god of thunder and lightning), and Muslims share a similar holy day, which also creates conflict.

In the last few years, the people of Ọ̀ṣogbo protested against a small group who would abuse Ọ̀ṣun through uncivil religious responses, such as religious intolerance, or what Simeon Ilesanmi, in his critique of my earlier works, called "experiences of civil religion tumults" (1995: 62). While the Ọ̀ṣogbo people's

protestations against Òṣun's cultural despisers are not new, their tempo has increased, with the recent rise of militant Islam in contemporary Òṣogbo. The reasons are both ancient and new. We have it on record that in the nineteenth century, under the war of expansion of Islam from Northern Nigeria, Òṣogbo became a major center of conflict between the Fulani Jihadists and the remnants of the old Òyó Empire. As the Muslim forces took Ilorin, a Yorùbá city and gateway to Northern Nigeria, and sacked the Òyó Empire, the Yorùbá who fled the region took refuge in Òṣogbo, thus making the town a target of the Jihadists. Òṣogbo was attacked in 1839, but with the assistance of Ibadan soldiers, the Jihadists were effectively stopped in 1840 (Gbadamosi 1978: 10). The victory of Òṣogbo and the defeat of the Muslim forces is given prominence in Òṣun's tradition, which claims that Òṣogbo's victory was achieved through the assistance rendered by the Great Mother when Òṣun poisoned the Jihadists' food, according to the famous story recounted earlier.

In spite of this temporary halt to the expansion of Islam, the tradition made further inroads at a later date, and Islam now constitutes the most dominant proselytizing religion in the city. Modern Òṣogbo is a highly heterogeneous town, where multiple though often divergent values are viewed as ideal, in consonance with Yorùbá modernity. Within this plurality, Òṣun provides the symbol and avenue for the "construction of a collective identity," in Òṣogbo based on what is perceived as tradition (*asa*) and not strictly religion (*èṣìn*). Whenever Islam, and to a lesser extent Christianity, and modern development present conflictual ideologies, the Òṣogbo people react in protest. An old popular Òṣun song states that for centuries before Western doctors arrived, people depended on the flowing water of Òṣun to raise their children (*Sélèrú àgbo, àgbàrà àgbo, lòṣun fí n wò 'mò rẹ́ kí dọ́kítà ó tó dé*). Another stanza of the same song condemns the excesses of modernizers (*aláṣeṣù*) whose exclusive terms go against cultural norms and decorum. Òṣogbo can accept foreign traditions, but only if they do not compete with their host's ideologies.

The following two popular Òṣun songs recorded by Badejo (1996) and Ogungbile (1998), are directed against Islam's "hegemonic ambitions" and sense of religious superiority. They strike at the very root of Òṣun's encounter with Islam:

- | | |
|---|--|
| (I) <i>Bàbá Onírugbòn</i>
<i>Yéé gbọ́ t'ẹ̀bọ́ wá</i>
<i>Enìkan ọ̀ mọ̀ ní o mọ̀ mọ̀</i>
<i>Kírún l'ojójúmọ̀</i>
(Ogungbile 1998b: 137) | You long-bearded Malam
Stop poking your nose into our rituals
No one disturbs you from performing
Your daily prayer (sallat) |
| (II) <i>Níbo lo ní n gbé Yèyè mi sí ọ̀?</i>

<i>Eníláwàáni òsì</i>
<i>Tó ní n wá sè 'mọ̀lẹ̀</i>
<i>Níbo lo ní n gbé Yèyè mi sí?</i>
(Badejo 1996: 150) | Where do you want me to cast My Great
Mother?
You with wretched turbans
Who want to convert me to Islam
Where do you want me to cast My Great
Mother? |

This strong critique of exclusivist Islamic ideology is an attempt to protect Ọ̀ṣogbo's religious harmony in an atmosphere of increasingly pluralistic value systems. The critique of Islamic militancy is *not a rejection of Islam*. Indeed, most Ọ̀ṣun participants and devotees of Ọ̀ṣun profess to be Muslims.

Another song clearly shows that both traditions can be practiced by the same person, a claim that the Yorùbá worldview enables people to make this accommodation:

Méjèjì l'á ó ma ẹ	We shall practice both together
Kò bàáǵe o	It is not wrong
Ká s'álùwàlá	To perform ablution (a Muslim ritual)
Ka wọ̀dò Ọ̀mọ	And to go to Ọ̀ṣun River to seek for children
Méjèjì l'á ó ma ẹ	We shall do both.
(Ogungbile 1998b: 136)	

It is through the role of the kingship in protecting this right of practicing Islam and visiting Ọ̀ṣun simultaneously — the right to ask for the three blessings of life: children; prosperity; and long life — that the significance of Ọ̀ṣogbo civil religion becomes clearer. The incumbent king, as an individual, is a staunch Muslim and a former Quranic teacher, and as a trained accountant, a modernizer. But as David Laitin (1986) remarked, all religious traditions belong to the king (*ọ̀ba oní gbogbo ẹ̀sìn*). Indeed, the rhetoric surrounding the Àtáója during the annual Ọ̀ṣun festival supports this view. When he was asked what were the happiest days of his life, he did not say, to the surprise of everyone listening, “it was the day [he] ascended the throne of [his] forebears.” Rather he replied that there were many happy days, including the day Ọ̀ṣogbo was granted an Anglican Diocese (Ajayi 1996), an affirmation that civil religion is a pointer to “values that are larger than personal purposes” (Lorin 1986: 334).

Notes

1. My translation of an Ọ̀ṣun recording by the Institute of African Studies' Research Team, University of Ibadan, Nigeria; carried out with an unnamed Ọ̀ṣun priestess, 1970.
2. As an undergraduate at the University of Nigeria, Nsukka, in 1973, I heard a similar story from the late Àtáója Adenle, in my class at Ọ̀ṣogbo on a research expedition.

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