

## Osun and Brass

### An Insight into Yoruba Religious Symbology

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#### *Understanding the Brass Symbolization of Osun*

The popular saying, *Idẹ ni àpébo Ọ̀ṣun*, meaning, “brass is collectively worshiped as Osun” sums up the symbolism of brass objects in the Osun worship context. Most of her shrine objects and the jewelry of her votaries are made of brass and the variety of brass objects in her worship context depends on the means of the owners and whether the shrines belong to individuals or communities. In individual shrines, the brass objects may not be more than bangles—unadorned, twisted, or engraved—simply called *idẹ*, brass alloy. Whereas in community shrines such as Ikere Ekiti, there are cutlasses, fans, and staffs in addition to such bangles (see Agboola 1997). During the finale of Osun’s popular annual festival at Osogbo, two brass anthropomorphic figurines, *ẹdan*, carried to the river in a covered calabash, are said to be her symbol (Beier 1957: 170). In Ikere, hair pins, *aginna*, and hair combs, *òdòyà*, which are usually made of ivory in most of her other shrines, are also in brass. Also in Ikere, a brass basin referred to as a calabash is a substitute for the covered calabash in which all her brass objects are carried to the river during her annual festival (Agboola 1997: 24). In addition, various figural sculptures, especially human group compositions and animals such as the crocodile, chameleon, and lizard, all in brass, used to be in the collection of the Institute of African Studies, University of Ibadan in Nigeria (Adepegba 1991: 51–54).

Although Obalufon is the deity credited with the introduction of brass and brass work, Osun is variously referred to as the owner of brass in their oral traditions. In *Ọ̀ṣẹ̀ Tùrà*, the Ifa poem that narrates the position of Osun among the leading Yoruba deities, her peers gave her the appellation, *a rí pẹpẹ kó idẹ sí* (Adeoye 1985: 205) which literally is, “she who has a shelf to keep brass.” Her other praise names which have to do with brass include *a fi idẹ rẹ ọmọ* (she who



8.1 Brass group likely for Osun (18 × 27 cm).  
*All photos in this chapter by C. O. Adepogba, reprinted from his  
 Yoruba Metal Sculpture.*

lulls her baby with brass) and *a gbé inú òkun yìn ibon idẹ* (she who shoots a brass gun from the sea), the sea in this context meaning any river with which she is associated (Ibid.: 208, 214).

### *Association of Osun with Rivers*

The worship of Osun in annual festivals in communities such as Osogbo and Ido Osun takes place in the biggest river named after her that passes by or through the communities. Her association with the river in such communities is so strong that Osun appears human only in her deified conception. For example, in the story of how she became the titular deity of Osogbo, she is said to have manifested herself as a river spirit, complaining of her dye pots which Timeyin, the founder of the town, unknowingly broke as he felled a tree into the river (Osogbo 1977: 5–7). In the tradition, she is portrayed as existing as a water spirit before the town was founded and although brass objects — two brass figurines in Osogbo and a variety of brass objects in her sanctuary in Ikere — are carried to the river during her annual festivals, offerings and supplications are made to her through the rivers designated as hers (Speed and Beier 1964).

An explanation that quickly comes to mind for associating her with rivers is

the claim that Osun, like some other female Yoruba deities, did not die but became a river at the end of her life. According to the story of her last day as narrated in the *Ìkà Èlẹ́ja* Ifa poem, Osun, Yemoja, and Yemoji were fellow wives of Sango, the god of thunder (Adeoye 1985: 222). Orunmila predicted for Sango that unless he sacrificed that feather of the parrot's tail which he always wore as an ornament on important occasions, he would lose three of his valuable belongings. But Sango did not heed the prediction. Then came a general festival of all deities for which his three wives were angry because they were not invited. In anger, each of his wives reacted by having her own separate festival. Among the Yoruba, the successes of ceremonies are judged by the number of people in attendance, hence Yemoja decided to wear Sango's ornamental feather to attract people to the arena of her own festival. As a result, she outshone her fellow wives and the feather she wore made many people say that she must have been Sango's favorite wife, a comment which could not but anger her fellow wives. The fellow wives, reacting to the comment, decided to desert Sango who then realized their departure as the losses that Orunmila predicted for him but that he had failed to heed. He then started to pursue them to explain what had happened but as he was about to reach them, each became a river on the spot. Yemoja, on hearing what had happened, instead of feeling happy that she would become the only wife of Sango, followed her co-wives' example and became a river as well. The tail feather of the parrot, however, is today displayed together with hair pins and combs as hair decorations by Osun's devotees in the annual festival of the goddess in Ikere (Agboola 1997: 22).

Other Yoruba deities that are similarly associated with rivers are Erinle, especially in Ilobu, and Yemoja in Obadan and Ayede. Although the big river in Osogbo is the famous Osun River, Osun worshipers in towns far away from it used to designate any chosen river near them as hers. A stream designated as hers in Oyo is the first stream on the way to Ilora (Adepegba 1984: 70–86).

Water is so significant in Yoruba traditional worship that a water pot, *awe*, filled with river water and small round stones from riverbeds, *ẹta* or *ọta*, is a common sanctuary symbol. Water is considered medicinal and salutary, a panacea to all life problems that can be taken from any river, as in the words of a common religious song: *Odò gbogbo l àgbò, níbo ni ngbé bù ú?* (Every river is medicinal, where do I go to drink it?).

Water is considered efficacious when taken very early in the morning before the river is disturbed, and a common Yoruba prayer or wish is that their lives should be as cool and clear as water drawn from rivers early in the morning. The pebbles, *ẹta* or *ọta omi*, in their own cases symbolize longevity as they may wear down but rarely break. *Òyígíyìgì, ọta omi, òyígíyìgì, ọta omi, àwá d'òyígíyìgì, a ò kú, òyígíyìgì, ọta omi* (*Òyígíyìgì*, the water [river] pebbles, we have become *òyígíyìgì*, we will not die again, *òyígíyìgì*, the water pebbles), goes an Ifa song.

If water is, therefore, as important as that in the worship of many deities, rivers



8.2 Brass equestrian figure container, likely for Osun (32.5 cm).

in the worship of Osun or indeed any other deity whose worship takes place in rivers are more or less adjuncts to the other symbols of such deities. In fact, sixteen cowries strung together representing *ẹ̀rìndìnlógún*, the divination system which Osun introduced, are also constant in the shrine symbols of Osun (Adeoye 1985: 209).



8.3 Brass bird figure container, likely for Osun (30 × 19 cm).

### *Osun: A Biographical Sketch*

Osun was one of the Yoruba primordial deities. Yet she was at first not considered to be a fellow deity by her peers. According to *Òṣẹ̀ Tùrà*, the Ifa poem already mentioned as explaining her position among the other Yoruba deities, she was the seventeenth of the primordial *orisa* and was at first not involved in the management of the world because she alone was a woman. But the earlier sixteen deities were having problems until they went to God for direction and were told



8.4 Brass musicians in uniform, likely for Osun (17.5 cm each).

to invite Osun to all that they wanted to do, for normalcy to be restored. According to God, she should be involved because she was as powerful as men. Even in those early times, she was already associated with knowledge, brass, and Ijumu, one of the places with which she is still traditionally identified. It was when they were inviting her to join them as God directed that she was addressed by the male deities as *A rí pepe kó ide sí*, which is, “She that has a shelf to keep brass,” already mentioned, and *Ìyá Ìjùmú, òyéyé ní imò*, meaning, “The mother [old woman] of Ijumu that is full of understanding” (Adeoye 1985: 205).

Osun is said to have first married Orunmila, the god of wisdom, whom she later divorced to marry Sango because she was childless. It was when she was Orunmila’s wife that Orunmila gave her *ẹ̀rìndínlógún*, the divination system she is said to have originated. The system involves the use of sixteen cowries and a simplified Ifa poetry. Her barrenness continued after leaving Orunmila and when she did not know what to do, she went back to Orunmila for consultation on what to do to enable her to have her own child. As stated in *Ògúndásèé*, the Ifa

poem that advised her on what to do, she could not have her own child unless she sacrificed to God to send children *en masse* to the barren women of the earth and it was out of the children that God would send that she would have her own child. She sacrificed as prescribed and it was when God sent many children to the world that she too had a child. But it did not end there. Any time that the children of the other barren women were sick, it was to her that Orunmila directed their mothers for their care. The association of both her and Orunmila with the introduction of similar divination systems might also be the reason for pairing them together as husband and wife.

As for Osun's occupation, it is only in the story of the origin of Osogbo already cited that Osun is portrayed as a dyer. Osun is better known for *ẹ̀rìndínlógún* divination and the power to cure diseases and solve any life problems. In fact one of her praise names, Modeni, *anínla ní 'lé awo*, refers to her as someone very eminent in the house of secrets, another name for divination as well as other supernatural practices (ibid., 214).

Osun's association with places such as Osogbo, Iponda, and Igede seems to have been based on her being actively worshiped there at present. There is nothing to indicate that any of them was her place of birth or abode. In the light of recent archaeological data from Iffe Ijumu, only Ijumu is as old as Ile Ife, the city with which most of the major *orisa* are associated and it is just a district and not a town or village (Oyelaran 1997). The present population of the district are so dominantly Christian that there is hardly any trace that Osun was ever actively worshiped there. Thus the generation to which Osun belonged and where she hailed from and lived are difficult to ascertain. However, she is addressed as an Ijesa woman (Adeoye 1985: 214) and a close look at the communities in which she is actively worshiped shows them as concentrated in Ijesa areas: Iponda, Iperindo, Odo, Ibimogba, and Osogbo (the last, though, only in origin). She is also worshiped in Igede and Ikere in Ekiti as well as in Ido Osun in the Oyo-speaking area.

### *Osun Brass Objects and Brass Alloy in Yoruba Culture*

The brass objects associated with her worship and priesthood could be classified into two: those that are exclusive to her shrines and those that are also found in the shrines of other deities in brass or any other metals. Those that are exclusive to her shrines are bangles, hair pins, and combs, containers (lidded, small containers decorated with cast figures and a basin), ladles, and fans. Those objects that are also found in the shrines of other deities, though in metals other than brass, include cutting tools such as swords, cutlasses, and knives; and sound-making objects such as rattles and bells; as well as staffs in the size of walking sticks.

Those that are found only in her shrines are obviously personal effects that are exclusive to women. They are bangles, hair pins, and combs which are adorn-



8.5 Brass crocodiles associated with Osun, collected in Osi,  
(27 × 9.5 cm each).



ments, fans which in secular contexts are for comfort and prestige, figural small containers which serve the same purpose as trinket or vanity boxes, and basins, bowls, and ladles which are basic objects for food preparation and other women's occupations. However, the interpretation of some of them is not quite unambiguous. For example, as Osun symbols, the fans are in specific numbers. As a rule, they are eight, four with holes — usually four on the handle of each — and four without any holes. They are also not called *abẹ̀bẹ̀*, the Yoruba word for fans, but rather *ẹ̀dan*, the Yoruba word for spiked brass figures of the *Ògbóni*, the secret cult of elders (Adeoye 1985: 209). As already indicated, a pair of *ẹ̀dan* that is carried to the river in a closed calabash during her annual festival in Osogbo has been reported to be her symbol. It has however not been ascertained that the fans serve the same purpose in Osun's context as the spiked figures do in the *Ògbóni* traditions. The bangles, especially the unadorned ones, may be more than ordinary hand jewelry as they are often rubbed with the squeezed juice from the leaves of a local plant, *crossopteryx febrifuga*, as a common cure for chronic sores (Adepegba 1991: 54). The cooked juice is also used for the same purpose among the Hausa and when applied to sores gives the same peppery sting. This means that, ordinarily, the plant's chemical property is the basis of the efficacy of any preparations in which it is included and the rubbing of the metal to the juice connects Osun's healing qualities to the sore-healing property of the plant.

The interpretations of the objects which are common to the shrines of Osun and other Yoruba deities are also not unambiguous. The cutting tools, swords, cutlasses, and knives are weapons for defense and attack. Deities are not expected to defend themselves against any negative forces as their powers are limitless. Hence their followers depend on them for safety and protection against any evils, including their enemies' attacks. The weapons therefore are only to subdue their worshippers' enemies. Osun's knife, however, is believed to have the power of ensuring healthy menstruation, a prerequisite for women's fertility, which is an important specialty of Osun as a child-giving goddess (Adeoye 1985: 210). The sound-making objects are for invocation and the ones made in brass are especially valued for the quality of their sounds as evident in the saying, *Saworo ide, b' ó balè, a ró*, which literally means, "the brass rattle that sounds as it touches the ground."

Walking sticks, besides being carried for prestige by eminent personalities, are used by the aged and the infirm (Adepegba 1991: 31–32). Hence the staffs in shrines might have been adopted because of their supportive significance and association with longevity, a common desire in Yoruba prayers.

All the metal objects in Osun shrines are made of brass, the alloy which was of high ornamental value to the Yoruba. Only coral beads, or *okun*, were equal to it in value. Both coral and brass were appreciated as jewelry, brass as bangles and coral as neck beads. Only children are rated higher as possessions than the two ornaments, as seen in the saying, *Ọmọ l' okùn, ọmọ n' ide*, "children are corals and brass." It is an instructive saying to the people that are prone to flam-

boyance that the most precious belonging a person should strive after is his or her own children.

Brass, like lead, is valued for its rust-free and enduring quality. In an Ifa song (Adepegba 1991: 3), the lasting quality of the two metals is pointed out as follows:

<i>Mo f'orí ba 'lẹ̀, mo d'íwin o, mo f'orí ba 'lẹ̀, mo d'íwin</i>	I bowed my head to the ground (was humble), hence I have become a spirit.
<i>Mo f'orí ba 'lẹ̀, mo d'íwin o, mo f'orí ba 'lẹ̀, mo d'íwin</i>	I bowed my head to the ground (was humble), hence I have become a spirit.
<i>Ikán kì í mu 'de, òròrò kì í r' òjé</i>	White ants never devour brass, worms do not eat lead, (both do not rust).
<i>Mo f'orí ba 'lẹ̀, mo d'íwin</i>	I bowed my head to the ground (was humble), hence I have become a spirit.

The two alloys are precious because they do not weather. Hence both of them were made into bangles, brass for Osun and lead for Obatala, the *orisa* of creation. The reference to the bangles made in both metals simply as *ide* and *òjé*, the respective Yoruba names for the alloys, most likely suggests the original objects into which the alloys were manufactured. In the case of Obatala, the bangles are always unadorned. Thus it is likely that originally, the brass bangle of Osun was also unadorned. As the unadorned brass bangle used to be a medicine for curing sores and Osun is a reputable diviner and native doctor, the use of the brass bangles in that context probably started as a way of enlisting the support of the deity in the cure of sores.

Brass is an alloy of copper and zinc but copper has not been ascertained to be obtainable in Nigeria and there is no word for zinc in Yoruba language. Hence brass used to be obtained pre-mixed and any alloy containing copper must have been obtained from outside Yorubaland. It is for this reason that the bronze, brass, and copper used for ancient Nigerian sculptures such as those of Igbo Ukwu, Ife, Tsoede, and Benin are said to have come from outside Nigeria, especially from the north through the trans-Saharan caravan trade (Adepegba 1995: 13–14). Any such alloys, therefore, must have been an expensive commodity and any jewelry made from them, a highly valuable treasure. Osun then must be a very rich *orisa* to have been referred to as owning enough brass to “keep on a shelf” and “lull her children with” as indicated in her praise names. The association of brass with Osun shows her as a powerful medicine woman and diviner, popular and rich enough to wear the most valuable ornaments.

The shrine symbols, taboos, and types of offerings associated with most *orisa* are reflections of the deities' earthly tastes, interests, and dislikes, specific experiences, occupations, and habits. However it is not in the shrine objects alone that Osun's earthly taste is reflected. *Yanrin* (*lactuca taraxacifolia*), the vegetable that is usually offered to her as sacrifice is also said to be the vegetable she very much liked to eat in her earthly life (Adeoye 1985: 211). Ironically, many Yoruba do not eat the vegetable because of the common belief that eating it destroys the

efficacy of traditional medicines. But this is to be expected as the healing power of Osun does not rest mainly on medicines but in water therapy. Medical care given to children under Osun's protection rarely involves the use of medicines (Osunwole 1997).

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