

CHAPTER TWO

Hidden Power

Ọ̀ṣun, the Seventeenth Odù

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From Ọ̀ṣogbo in Ọ̀ṣun State to Ikóro in Ekiti, from Ibadan in Ọ̀yó to Ìjùmú in Kwara State of Nigeria, and throughout the Yorùbá diaspora in the Caribbean, Latin America, and North America, the Yorùbá continue to venerate their most powerful female *òrìṣà* (deity), Ọ̀ṣun. The images alluding to her presence and power are as diverse as the people and the geographical locations where she is worshiped. Thus, the definition of Ọ̀ṣun's identity extends beyond Ọ̀ṣogbo and many Yorùbá towns where she is believed to have turned into the Ọ̀ṣun River, and where festivals are held in her honor annually. Equally complex is Ọ̀ṣun's personality, which has largely been constructed according to her worshipers' differing needs and spiritual goals. Be that as it may, there are a few generally held beliefs about Ọ̀ṣun, namely, that she embodies the very substance of the water we drink; with her fan, *abẹ̀bẹ̀*, (a noun formed from the verb *bẹ̀* [to beg]), she "begs" the air we breathe, she "cools and purifies it, neutralizing its negative contents"; and, by virtue of her profession as the foremost hair-plaiting expert in Yorùbá mythology, she affects the destinies of all beings and the *òrìṣà* in profound ways. A well-known *oríkì* (praise citation) introduces her:

Ọ̀ṣun, Ẹ̀ṣẹ̀ṣẹ̀sí, Olóoyà iyùn Adagbadébu Onímọ̀lẹ̀ Odò Elétùtù Èdìbò Èkó Obinrin gbádámú, Obinrin gbàdàmù Obinrin tí kò ẹ̀é gbá l'égbẹ̀ mu. (Ọ̀ṣẹ̀ Onabajo, personal communication, 1985)	Ọ̀ṣun, (embodiment of grace and beauty) The preeminent hair-plaiter with the coral- beaded comb Powerful controller of the estuary Propitiator-in-chief of Èkó (the City of Lagos) A corpulent woman Who cannot be embraced around the waist.
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Besides adding to the power and beauty of the human face and the head which is the focus of much aesthetic interest in Yorùbá art, hair-plaiting carries an important religious significance in Yorùbá tradition. The hair-plaiter (hair-dresser) is seen as one who honors and beautifies *orí* (*orí-inú*), the "inner head,"

the “divinity” of the head. One’s head is also taken to be the visible representation of one’s destiny and the essence of one’s personality.¹ Hair-plaiting is thus highly regarded, as a good *orí* will, to some extent, depend on how well its physical counterpart has been treated. It is also primarily for this reason that most Yorùbá will be reluctant to haggle over the charges of a hair-plaiter or hairdresser.²

It should not be surprising that Ọ̀ṣun, “the preeminent hair-plaiter with the coral-beaded comb” is believed to have the power to influence the destinies of men, women, and the *òrìṣà*, and that Ọ̀ṣun’s presence is crucial to the sustenance of life and order on earth. Archaeological excavations in the ancient city of Ifẹ̀, ancestral home of the Yorùbá, have revealed several terra-cotta heads of women with elaborate coiffures which date to the eleventh and twelfth centuries. While we may never be able to determine the identities of the women portrayed, we can, at least, assume that religio-aesthetic notions similar to those narrated in the *Ifá* literary corpus about Ọ̀ṣun might have informed the creation of these terra-cotta sculptures. The persistence of certain hairstyles, particularly the *òwéwé* which is found on at least one ancient terra-cotta head from the Olókun grove,³ and its recurrence, with only very slight modification, in the Ọ̀tònpòrò Èpa mask carved by Fásíkù Aláayè of Ikẹ̀rín in 1976 is noteworthy (fig. 2.1).

Still treasuring the important heritage of hair-plaiting and hairdressing, women members of the Yeye Olóríṣà society in Ọ̀wò spend hours and sometimes days styling their hair elegantly for the annual Igógó festival to honor Ọ̀rọ̀ṣẹ̀n, another important female deity who was the legendary wife of Ọ̀lówò Rẹ̀nrẹ̀ngẹ̀jẹ̀n, Ọ̀wò’s ruler. For Yeye Olóríṣà, who are a highly respected group of women, their coiffure is not considered complete without the insertion of ornate brass and, in recent times, plastic combs which hold up bright red parrot feathers (fig. 2.2). Wearing their ritual costumes, these women create their own aesthetic atmosphere at the peak of their performance in the Igógó festival, magically charging it with their “bird (*eyẹ*) power.” It is believed that this bird power has *àṣẹ* (life force, authority, or voiced power to make something happen) that enables women to accomplish whatever they wish. It is probably because of this power also that men are afraid to move too close to Yeye Olóríṣà as they believe that they may lose their sexual potency. It is interesting that the red parrot feather which is on this occasion believed to possess the magical power to alter the nature of persons and objects, is also prohibited on the blacksmith’s premises lest his metals change their chemical properties.⁴

The overall welfare and prosperity of the town appear to rest with the Yeye Olóríṣà. All visual evidence points to their influence and power. Male chiefs including the Ọ̀lówò, the ruler of Ọ̀wò, also plait their hair to respect and acknowledge the authority of the goddess Ọ̀rọ̀ṣẹ̀n. Depending on their status, chiefs may insert one, two, or three red parrot feathers in their plaited hair with or without the brass comb. The Ọ̀lówò may add two long white egret feathers to distinguish him as the Oba (ruler) of Ọ̀wò (fig. 2.3a and 2.3b).



2.1 Òtònpòrò, Epa mask by Fásíkù Alááyè of Ìkẹrín, 1976.
Photo by Rowland Abiodun.



2.2 Yeye Olórìṣà, a ranking priestess during the Igógó festival in Ọ̀wò, 1976.



2.3a Ọba Ọ́gúnọ̀yẹ̀ II, Ọ́lọ̀wọ̀ of Ọ̀wọ̀ with plaited hair, wearing a pair of *pàkatò* (criss-crossed beaded bands across his chest), and *àbòlúkùn* (big, white skirt) during the Igógó festival, 1974. Photo by Rowland Abiodun.



2.3b Ranking male chiefs with plaited hair at the Igógó festival in Ọ̀wọ̀, 1974. Photo by Rowland Abiodun.

Even though Ọṣun is not worshiped in Ọwò, and I am not suggesting here that Ọṣunṣen and Ọṣun are the same *òrìṣà*, there are many aspects of the Igógó festival which remind one of Ọṣun. The blouse and big skirt worn by the Ọlówò and his chiefs during this festival are unmistakably feminine. The skirt, called *àbòlúkùn* in Ọwò, is very close to what Yorùbá descendants still wear in the New World, namely Brazil and Cuba, to mark themselves as high priestesses of several *òrìṣà* including Ọṣun. The exact significance of this very imposing skirt was not revealed to me, but in the context of use, it certainly creates an aura of majesty, power, affluence, and plenitude through its arresting whiteness and volume.

Indeed, the Ọlówò's role and function during this festival resembles that of Ọṣun. He is regarded as the source, and the one who sustains the community's peace and prosperity. He asserts this role ritually, dramatically, and choreographically during the Igógó festival. Combining the dignity and color of the elaborate *àbòlúkùn* costume with the penetrating metal-gong *agogo* music to which he dances in graceful wave-like movements, the Ọlówò effectively moves the hearts and bodies of his subjects. And in response to his body movement in the imposing *àbòlúkùn*, the crowd cheers their ruler with praises such as:

Okun àrágbàngbì

The mighty, expansive ocean

Àkàtá-ílá borí Ọghò málẹ̀

The great, wide umbrella-like shelter of Ọwò

Ọgèdẹ̀ so tòò-tòò

The prolific banana tree which bears much fruit

In the above praises, the use of the water imagery, namely, “the mighty, expansive ocean,” is intriguing since Ọwò has no bodies of water that can be described as such, and Ọṣunṣen was not a water deity. This leads one to speculate on how attributes usually associated with Ọṣun have been adopted by other Yorùbá communities located outside of those areas where Ọṣun is now actively worshiped. It is, of course, also possible that there may have existed a more ancient set of female-related attributes from which even Ọṣun's identity might have been constructed. This latter suggestion seems quite plausible, when we consider the range of similarities in costume, coiffure, choreography, use of birds' feathers (especially the red parrot tail feathers), and fans in the Igógó and Ọṣun festivals.

When we try to search for the meaning and significance of the *àbòlúkùn* in Ọwò's Igógó festival, we find that the *ìgbá odù*, a special wooden bowl, used to store sacred divination items during the initiation of Ifá priests,⁵ provides us with useful clues. This wooden bowl-with-lid echoes the shape of *àbòlúkùn* when worn while also conveying a strong visual sense of protection and stability. Carved to look like a female figure, the body is made up of top and bottom halves. This bowl-like container is retainer and shelter of Ifá divination objects as well as *ikin*, the sixteen sacred palm nuts symbolically representing the sixteen principal *Odù*, all male, and a seventeenth small ivory object called *olóri-ikin* (“The principal *ikin*”). This *olóri-ikin* reminds us of Ọṣun, the seventeenth *Odù*

with whom the destinies of the remaining sixteen *Odù* rested. With both arms spread out and hands resting on a relatively large and pregnant-looking belly, the *ìgbá odù* radiates a commanding presence and an unmistakable female authority whose influence is felt by all.

For a clearer picture of the role of Ọṣun among the *Odù* (or *òrìṣà*) in Yorùbá thought, and her indispensability to successful and harmonious political, economic, religious, and social life, we shall consider the following Ifá divination verse (see appendix following this chapter for the Yorùbá original):⁶

- It was divined for the sixteen *Odù*
 Who were coming from heaven to earth
 A woman was the seventeenth of them.
 When they got to earth,
 5 They cleared the grove for Orò,
 Orò had his own space.
 They cleared the grove for Ọpa,
 Ọpa's abode was secure.
 They prepared a grove for Eégún,
 10 Eégún had a home.
 But they made no provision for Ọṣun,
 Also known as "Sẹ̀gẹ̀sí, the preeminent hair-plaiter with the coral-beaded comb."
 So, she decided to wait and see
 How they would carry out their mission successfully;
 15 Ọṣun sat quietly and watched them.
 Beginning with Èjì-Ogbè and Ọyèkú méjì,
 Ìwòrí méjì, Odi méjì, Iròsùn méjì
 Ọwònrín méjì, Ọbàrà méjì, Ọkànràn méjì,
 Ọgún-dá, Ọsá, Ọràngun méjì and so on,
 20 They all decided not to countenance Ọṣun in their mission.
 She, too, kept mute,
 And carried on her rightful duty,
 Which is hair-plaiting.
 She had a comb.
 25 They never knew she was an "àjé."
 When they were coming from heaven,
 God chose all good things;
 He also chose their keeper,
 And this was a woman.
 30 All women are àjé.
 And because all other *Odù* left Ọṣun out,
 Nothing they did was successful.
 They went to Eégún's grove and pleaded with him,
 That their mission be crowned with success.
 35 "Eégún, it is you who straightens the four corners of the world,
 Let all be straight."
 They went to Àdàgbà Ọjòmù
 Who is called Orò

“You are the only one who frightens Death and Sickness.
 Please help drive them away.” 40
 Healing failed to take place;
 Instead epidemic festered.
 They went to Ọ̀sẹ̀ and begged him
 To let the rain fall.
 Rain didn’t fall. 45
 Then they went to Ọ̀ṣun
 Ọ̀ṣun received them warmly,
 And entertained them,
 But shame would not let them confide in Ọ̀ṣun,
 Whom they had ignored. 50
 They then headed for heaven
 And made straight for Olódùmarè,
 Who asked why they came
 They said it was about their mission on earth.
 When they left heaven, 55
 And arrived on earth
 All things went well;
 Then later things turned for the worse,
 Nothing was successful.
 And Olódùmarè asked 60
 “How many of you are here?”
 They answered, “Sixteen.”
 He also asked,
 “When you were leaving heaven, how many were you?”
 They answered, “Seventeen.” 65
 And Olódùmarè said, “You are all intriguers.
 That one you left behind
 If you do not bring her here,
 There will be no solution to your problem.
 If you continue this way, 70
 You will always fail.”
 They then returned to Ọ̀ṣun,
 And addressed her, “Mother, the preeminent hair-plaiter with the coral-beaded
 comb.
 We have been to the Creator 75
 And it was there we discovered that all Odù were derived from you [Ọ̀ṣun],
 And that our suffering would continue
 If we failed to recognize and obey you [Ọ̀ṣun].”
 So, on their return to the earth from the Creator,
 All the remaining Odù wanted to pacify and please Ọ̀ṣun. 80
 But Ọ̀ṣun would not go out with them.
 The baby she was expecting might go out with them,
 But even that would depend on the gender of the baby
 For she said that if the baby she was expecting
 Turned out to be male, 85
 It is that male child who would go out with them

- But if the baby turned out to be female,
 She [Ọṣun] would have nothing to do with them.
 She said she knew of all they [the Odù] had eaten and enjoyed without her,
 90 Particularly all the delicacies and he-goat they ate.
 As Ọṣun was about to curse them all,
 Ọṣẹ covered her mouth
 And the remaining Odù started praying
 That Ọṣun might deliver a male child.
 95 They then started to beg her.
 When Ọṣun delivered
 She had a baby boy
 Whom they named Ọṣẹ-Túrá.

Though known as Ọṣẹtúrá among *babaláwo* (the priests of *Ifá*), this baby boy is, in fact, Èṣù, the one who approves of, and bears sacrifices to, the *òrìṣà*.⁷ Mothered by the most powerful and influential female divinity, Èṣù is not just the *provocateur par excellence*, but the embodiment of the element of the possibility of uncertainty in the Yorùbá world. The hook-like dance staff worn on the right shoulder by Èṣù's devotees is Janus-faced, recalling his *oríkì* as the *òrìṣà* “who belongs to opposing camps without having any feeling of shame” (*a ṣòtún ṣòsì láì ní tíju*). Some scholars have read the hook part of the staff as his long hair, seeing it as evidence of Èṣù's libidinous energy, aggression, and unrestrained sexuality. While this interpretation may be supported to some extent by Èṣù's own *oríkì*, a more convincing explanation might be found in Ọṣun's profession as hair-plaiter, and her apparent link with *orí* (*orí-inú*). Be that as it may, Èṣù's indispensability in the Yorùbá pantheon is a concrete reminder of Ọṣun's presence and power in the earthly and spiritual realms.

In the divination verse above, the Creator-God has placed all the good things on earth in Ọṣun's charge, making her “the vital source” as her name suggests. Without Ọṣun's sanction, no healing can take place, no rain can fall, no plants can bear fruit, and no children can come into the world. Granted that every *òrìṣà* must have their own *àṣẹ*, one must wonder about Ọṣun's seemingly superior *àṣẹ* that was able to counteract the activities of her fellow *òrìṣà*. Alternatively, it is conceivable that the *àṣẹ* of female *òrìṣà* is inherently different from the male *òrìṣà*, and perhaps even antagonistic when they compete, with one (presumably, the female *àṣẹ*) neutralizing the other (that is, the male *àṣẹ*), as appears to be the case in this story.

There are a few hints in Yorùbá tradition that Ọṣun's gender, especially as the only female *òrìṣà* of the seventeen that came to the earth at creation, must have had much to do with her power and influence. It is, for example, considered good luck if one's first child is female. Such parents are believed to start with *ọwọ èrò*, “the hand of propitiation,”⁸ perhaps better translated as “the cool hand of propitiation” which ensures ease and success in any undertaking. For related reasons, perhaps, parents frown on prolonged bachelorhood. Even though they realize how difficult it is to sustain a marriage, parents, nevertheless, press their

sons to get married because they believe that a man's successful life cannot really start until he has a wife or wives. This *Ifá* verse from *Ọ̀ṣẹ̀túrá* points to this belief:

<i>Àìní obínrin kò ẹ̀ é dáké lásán</i>	Having no wife calls for positive action
<i>Bí a dáké lásán, enu ní í yọ ní</i>	To keep quiet is to invite trouble and inconveniences
<i>Níní ẹ̀jọ́, àìní ọ̀ràn</i>	Having a wife is as difficult as having none
<i>Ènìà kò l'óbinrin</i>	One without a wife
<i>Ó tó kó káwó l'orí sọkún gba ojà lọ</i>	Should cry and weep publicly in the marketplace
<i>Kì ísẹ̀ ọ̀ràn àṣẹ̀jú</i>	It is neither an extreme action
<i>Ọ̀ràn àṣẹ̀sá kọ́. (Ogunḃowale 1966: 1)</i>	Nor an overreaction.

From the above verse, it would appear that in Yorùbá tradition, women are thought to be indispensable to men as *Ọ̀ṣun* was to the sixteen male *òrìṣà* or *odù* at the time of creation. Disguised here, however, is the ambivalent attitude of men toward women. This can be attributed to the belief that, like *Ọ̀ṣun*, women of any age are potential *àjẹ* who possess *eye*, the “bird power.” The fear of this extraordinary power has caused men to appease women as they do “our mothers” (*àwọn ìya wa Ọ̀ṣòròngà*), a term used synonymously with “*àjẹ*” but often incorrectly translated as “witches.”⁹ Consequently, in many social, religious, and political gatherings, men endeavor to placate “our mothers” and to pray to them to use their powers for the good of society. As a divine ruler, *Ọba* William Adetona Ayeni in the northeastern Yorùbá kingdom of Ila-Orangun, while referring to the cluster of birds on his great crown, is reported to have said, “Without ‘the mothers,’ I could not rule.”¹⁰

Even though much of the traditional political power in Yorubaland today seems to be located in the domain of men, Yorùbá oral traditions and visual art do not provide much authority for assuming that this has always been the case. For example, we are not quite certain of the gender of *Odùdúwà*, the progenitor of the Yorùbá race, since we have as much evidence for considering *Odùdúwà* feminine as masculine.¹¹ The indeterminacy of *Odùdúwà*'s gender will make more sense when we know more about *Ọ̀ṣun*, the *òrìṣà* who could not be ignored by her peers, and the echoes of whose multifarious dimensions of feminine power and presence continue to reverberate in Yorùbá culture and society.

Looking at the purported “crown of *Odùdúwà*”¹² from *Ìdànrè* in *Oṅdó* State of Nigeria, we are immediately struck by its similarity to another crown from *Ilésà* in *Ọ̀ṣun* State, worn by women as recently as twenty years ago (fig. 2.4). The *Ìdànrè* crown, though ancient and simple in appearance, is essentially complete. It is roughly conical in shape and has all the important attachments which aid its identification as a truly authentic symbol of divine authority among the Yorùbá. William Fagg describes the crown:

It . . . consists largely of strings of red beads which are mostly stone but may include some coral. It also includes a rather miscellaneous assortment of beads. . . . It (the crown) is not very much like the Benin coral and carnelian crowns, but does look



2.4 Priestess of Ọwáń wearing *adé àforíṣokùn* (crown) in Ilẹ̀ṣà, taken before 1960. Photo from the collection of Reverend Father T. M. Ilesanmi.

like the ancestor of the falling curtains of seed beads on the crowns of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. (Fagg 1980: 12)

The crown from Ilẹ̀ṣà is called *adé àforiṣokùn*, and it is worn by the most senior priestess of Ọwàrì, the third or fourth Ọwá “ruler” of Ijeshaland, where Ọṣun still has very active devotees.¹³ Like Odùdúwà, Ọwá was a warlike, temperamental, and very powerful ruler according to Ilẹ̀ṣà oral tradition. The *àforiṣokùn* crown also resembles the purported “crown of Odùdúwà” in many ways. It is possible that they may have functioned in similar contexts.

Both *adé àforiṣokùn* and the purported crown of Odùdúwà possess the *oṣù*, “a tuft or a kind of medicinal package with magical power, attached or sewn to the top of Yorùbá crowns.”¹⁴ Sometimes concealed under heavily beaded decorations or disguised as bird motifs on crowns, the *oṣù* must never be opened nor its contents revealed to the wearer of the crown. The vitality, force, and authority of a divine king would seem to be closely connected with the magical ingredients in this *oṣù*.

The veil (*ibòjú*), which is an important part of the Yorùbá crown, is present in the Ìdànrè and Ilẹ̀ṣà examples. Intended to hide the identity of the wearer who is supposed to operate from the height of an *òrìṣà*, “a divinity,” the *ibòjú* of the *adé àforiṣokùn* suggests how the Ìdànrè crown may have looked in actual use. The priestess of Ọwàrì holds a white horse-tail whisk in her right hand and a two-piece wand of office in her left. She wears several rows of tightly packed beaded necklaces, along with a long and expensive neck chain which hangs down well past her torso. Flanked on both sides by her women supporters, the priestess displays her symbols of authority, power, and influence.

The crown with the veil is the most important symbol and conveyor of divinity in the institution of obaship. It also downplays gender differences through visual means, just as the Yorùbá word *oba*, (ruler) is not gender specific and cannot be taken to mean only “king” as many researchers have erroneously assumed. In fact, the following traditional greeting for an *oba* is inclusive of both genders:

<i>Kábíyèsí</i>	One whose authority cannot be challenged
<i>Aláṣẹ</i>	Who is endowed with <i>àṣẹ</i>
<i>Èkejì-Òrìṣà</i>	And ranks only with the <i>òrìṣà</i>
<i>Ikú</i>	Death, the embodiment of finality
<i>Bàbá-Yẹyẹ</i>	Ultimate Father-Mother

The most important element in the Yorùbá concept of divine leadership is *àṣẹ*,¹⁵ the essence of which is the energy or life force needed to control the physical world as well as to activate, direct, and restructure social and political processes. Thus, it would seem totally unreasonable to exclude Ọṣun from the institution of obaship. After all, Ọṣun’s *àṣẹ* can always be used to a ruler’s advantage in the event of a power tussle. Ọṣun in this context, however, should be taken as a metaphor for “our mothers” as well as for feminine power and presence in general.¹⁶

From available archaeological finds mainly at Ilé-Ifẹ̀, the sacred city of the Yorùbá, the recognition of the important role of women would appear to be of great antiquity. The brass figure pair found at Ìta Yemòó, Ilé-Ifẹ̀, in 1957,¹⁷ as well as other terra-cotta heads found in the same city, give some indication of the status of Yorùbá women in the pre-colonial era. In the brass pair, the slightly shorter figure with narrower shoulders appears to be the female. Her cloth wrapper is tied high enough on her torso to partially cover her breasts, which is in agreement with the way Yorùbá women still wear their wrapper when they do not wear a *bùbá* (blouse). Her shoulder sash, made of bead or cloth, hangs diagonally across the main torso with the tied end resting on the left hip. This diagonal shoulder sash is a mark of the woman's status and possibly an indication of her cult affiliation. This interpretation makes sense when we look at the attire of a female cult called Yeye Olóriṣà in Ọ̀wọ̀ which is less than one hundred miles east of Ifẹ̀. Here the cult members wear a bright red diagonal shoulder sash across their chests. The female brass figure is dressed like an important chieftain with all the regalia of office equal to that of her male counterpart.

In Oṅdó, another major Yorùbá town situated some forty-five kilometers southeast of Ilé-Ifẹ̀, there is the Ọ̀lọ̀bùn, otherwise known as *Ọ̀ba Obinrin* (female ruler) (fig. 2.5), who is in charge of the market and plays an important role in the installation rites and ceremonies of the Ọ̀ṣemàwé (the male ruler) of Oṅdó. She wears two white egret feathers in addition to a red parrot feather like her male counterparts in Yorubaland. She carries a white horse-tail fly whisk to mark her high status, and wears an immaculate white outfit every day of her life. She wears red tubular coral beads around her neck, wrists, and ankles according to Oṅdó tradition. When seated on her throne, the Ọ̀lọ̀bùn always has on the ground before her a calabash container, on top of which stringed white cowrie shells have been placed in a special order. *Igbá ajé* (the calabash of wealth) symbolizes the important office of Ọ̀lọ̀bùn as the Lord of the market and the controller of all commercial transactions (fig. 2.6). Until the Ọ̀lọ̀bùn passed away in 1980, she actually visited the market several times each month, touching important market stalls and commercial establishments with her *ọ̀pá-ajé* (the staff of wealth), which is her staff of office. Such rounds are believed to boost trade and improve the community's economic situation.

It is still recalled in Oṅdó that the first traditional ruler was a woman named Púpúpú. Today the Ọ̀lọ̀bùn and her female chiefs hold very high and sometimes the highest political positions and are influential in campaigns for high offices in the town of Oṅdó. At the installation of the Ọ̀ṣemàwé in the late 1970s, the Ọ̀lọ̀bùn was the one who presented the *ọ̀ba*-elect, Robert Adekolurejo, to the people of Oṅdó. Similarly, during the installation rites, Ọ̀lọ̀bùn's chiefs and other high priestesses in Oṅdó performed purification sacrifices to pave the way for a peaceful reign. Thus the role of women appears to be to neutralize malevolent forces and evil machinations, but they are ultimately more politically powerful than the ruler, being the power behind the throne.



2.5 The Ọlọbùn, (Ọba Obìnrin, “Female Ruler”) of Oṅdó, 1976.
Photo by Rowland Abiodun.



2.6 *Igbá ajé*, ỌṢUN's ritual calabash container which identifies her as the Controller of all market transactions in Oṅdó, 1976.

Photo by Rowland Abiodun.

The hidden power of women is better understood when we examine the way it is related to *Eégún*, the ancestral masking tradition in Yorubaland. The word *Eégún* refers to the concealed power of ancestors. Pierre Verger has suggested that *Eégún* may have belonged originally to women.¹⁸ *Eégún* is also used as a euphemism for female genitalia because they are hidden. The clitoris in particular is traditionally regarded as possessing “concealed power” which women can use to accomplish whatever they desire. Additionally, it is noteworthy that Yorùbá tradition privileges female triplets (*ato*) when it comes to holding high positions in the secretive and male-dominated *Eégún* (for deceased ancestors).

All these attributes are also associated with ỌṢUN and perceived to be integral to her influence, extraordinary insight, and ability to do things which the other

òrìṣà could not do. Thus, Ọṣun’s “concealed power” has earned her the title of “the leader of the àjé.”¹⁹ The following lines of her *oríkì* acknowledge her exceptional ability:

She is the wisdom of the forest
 She is the wisdom of the river
 Where the doctor failed
 She cures with fresh water.
 Where medicine is impotent
 She cures with cool water. (Beier 1970: 33)

Many Ọṣun priests, priestesses, and devotees literally believe in the power of water to heal their ailments and problems. Water, Ọṣun’s main curative agent, is an active ingredient in the Yorubá preparation of *ẹ̀rò* (a softening agent/medicinal preparation). Used ritually, water is believed to effect harmony and peace, to eliminate tension, and reduce heat. Thus, with cool water, a person’s *orí* can be improved or “softened” if it is considered “hard” (*le*), that is, attracting a series of inexplicable disasters. The following incantation for *ẹ̀rò* medicine shows how water is perceived in traditional thought:

<i>Bí oorú bá mú</i>	When the weather is blazing hot	
<i>Abẹ̀bẹ̀ ní í bẹ̀jẹ̀</i>	It is the fan that pacifies it.	
<i>Bí iná bá á jó koko</i>	When there is a flare-up,	
<i>Omi là á fí í pa á</i>	We use water to quench it.	
<i>Ọ̀gèrẹ̀, iná mà nílẹ̀ omi lọ</i>	Defiantly, fire chases water,	5
<i>Ọ̀gèrẹ̀</i>	Sweeping past.	
<i>Bí iná bá nílẹ̀ omi</i>	If fire chases water	
<i>Tí kò padà léyìn omi</i>	And does not turn back,	
<i>Èrò pẹ̀tẹ̀</i>	Propitiation is the answer.	
<i>Ọ̀gèrẹ̀, iná má nílẹ̀ omi lo</i>	Sweeping past, fire is chasing water.	10
<i>Sẹ̀sẹ̀</i>	Even with all its flare,	
<i>Iná kò gbọ̀dọ̀ lé sẹ̀sẹ̀</i>	Fire dares not chase its glow	
<i>Kó le'e wọ 'nú odó.</i> (Adeniji, personal communication, 1976)	Into the river.	

In the above incantation, both water and the fan which Ọṣun priests and priestesses often use in their rites and ceremonies are the verbal metaphors for the soothing, disarming, and softening power associated with Ọṣun. What is terrifying about this power, however, is its noiselessness and lack of ceremony, making it extremely difficult if not impossible to identify its source or prevent its action. The following excerpt from the *oríkì* of “our mothers” captures the negative side of such power:

Mother who kills without striking
 My mother kills quickly without a cry
 Mother who kills her husband and yet pities him. (Beier 1958)

Whatever enables “our mothers” to extinguish life in this manner, that is, without any visible or materially attributable force, presupposes their foreknowl-

edge of the metaphysical principles of life, especially its source, which is what Ọṣun is all about. This belief makes “our mothers” and all women indispensable to normalcy, orderliness, increase, and progress in the traditional society. Consequently, women are not only feared, but their cooperation is also sought in all endeavors as the verse below shows:

<i>Ó ní gbogbo ohun tí ènià bá n' ẹ̀,</i>	In anything we do,
<i>Tí kò bá fí ti obìnrin kún un,</i>	If we do not guarantee the place of women,
<i>Ó ní kò lè ẹ̀é ẹ̀ . . .</i>	That thing will not succeed.
<i>Ó ní kí wón ó máa fí ibà fún obìnrin</i>	[Ifá says,] “we should acknowledge the power of women,”
<i>Ó ní tí wón bá ti fí ibà fún obìnrin,</i>	[And that,] “if we acknowledge their power,
<i>Ilé ayé yíò máa tòrò. (Vergier 1965: 218)</i>	The world will be peaceful.”

And, in another divination verse, we find the grave consequences of ignoring “our mothers,” which was the mistake made by the sixteen male *òrìṣà* at creation:

<i>Wón dífá fún iyami Ọ̀ṣòròngà</i>	It was divined for <i>Ìyàmi Ọ̀ṣòròngà</i> .
<i>Tí wón n' tìkòlẹ̀ ọ̀run bọ̀ wá sílé ayé . . .</i>	Who was coming from heaven to earth;
<i>Wón lẹ̀ni tí kò bá fí t'awón ẹ̀,</i>	They said whoever refused to acknowledge them,
<i>Àwón ó máa bàà ẹ̀,</i>	They will afflict him.
<i>Àwón ó máa kó ifun ènià;</i>	They will take his intestines;
<i>Àwón ó máa je ojú ènià;</i>	They will eat his eyes;
<i>Nwón ò sì ní gbóhùn enikòkòkan.</i>	They will drink his blood
<i>(Vergier 1965: 218)</i>	and no one will hear a sound.

In Yorùbá art it is not the faithful rendering of anatomical details such as muscles that is supposed to convey the effect of power and action but the intelligent, creative, and skillful combination of forms by the artist. Movement is suggested through rhythmic forms and creative use of space. Faces conceal emotions in most Yorùbá sculpture and function “noiselessly” like Ọṣun and “our mothers” until all opposition toward them is dissolved.²⁰

Visual representations of female *òrìṣà* like Ọṣun have influenced Yorùbá aesthetic considerations and artistic processes far more than scholars have acknowledged. To illustrate, let us examine the image of woman on an *ìròkẹ̀* (*Ifá* divination tapper). The *ìròkẹ̀* consists usually of three sections: the topmost or pointed-end section; the middle section; and third or bottom section, in order of importance. Elsewhere, I have suggested that the topmost part symbolizes the inner, spiritual *orí*, while the middle section, usually a human head or a kneeling nude woman holding her breasts, symbolizes humanity choosing its destiny (*orí*) in heaven.²¹ The woman is depicted in a kneeling position called *ikúnlè-abiyamọ̀* (the kneeling with pain at childbirth), which is intended to appease and “soften” the gods and solicit their support in choosing a good *orí*. Equally effective in honoring the *òrìṣà* is the nakedness of the kneeling woman, which the Yorùbá believe possesses the *àṣẹ̀* to make her wishes come to pass. Thus a Yorùbá man

will be disturbed if his wife threatens to undress during a disagreement, fearing that her nakedness would give her utterances causative power.

The figure of the kneeling woman carrying a bowl is common in Ifá, Şàngó, and Ọşun sculptural repertoires. In Ifá, it is known as *agere Ifá* or *ibòrì Ifá*,²² and among Ọşun and Şàngó devotees, it is called *arugbá*, meaning “the one who carries the calabash holding the ritual items” for these *òrìşà*. Essentially, the *arugbá* carries, honors, and beautifies sacrifices during the annual festivals. The *agere Ifá* is used to store *ikin*, the sixteen sacred palm nuts of divination. In many examples of this sculpted container, the female figure elevates *ikin* both physically and symbolically, creating for them a fitting aesthetic atmosphere.²³ In other instances, the *agere Ifá* may take the form of *olúmèyè*, which is a kneeling woman carrying a cock intended for offering to an *òrìşà*. That women are preferred to men for bearing sacrifices of such magnitude is further indication of their special relationship to the *òrìşà*.

In the helmet masks generically known as *Eḷèḷḷòḷ* or *Epa* in northeastern Yorubaland, a common theme of the superstructure is that of a kneeling woman with two children called *Òtòḷḷòḷ niyì Eḷèḷḷòḷ* (*Òtòḷḷòḷ*, the pride of *Eḷèḷḷòḷ*) (Figure 2.1). She is an embodiment of all that can be considered beautiful in the Yorùbá notion of womanhood, which includes the gift of children. *Òtòḷḷòḷ* is painted in black, red, yellow, and white to make her beauty visible even at a distance. She has a very elaborate hairdo (*òwéwé*), and large, well-defined eyes to accentuate her face. The long and beautiful neck is encircled by a choker and a string of beads, while decorative body paintings emphasize the roundness of the arms and breasts. References to similar aesthetic notions about women abound in Ifá divination literature:

Funfun niyì eyín
Ègùn gágàgà niyì orùn;
Ọmú sikişikişiki niyì obimrin.
 (Abimbola 1968)

Whiteness is the beauty of the teeth;
 Just as a long, graceful neck
 And full, erect breasts make the beauty of
 women.

The above lines remind one of the image of Ọşun, also called *Şèḷḷèşì*, not only as the “embodiment of grace and beauty” as contained in her *oríkì* (citation poetry), but also as the only *òrìşà* in whose power it is to grant or reject the request for the gift of children. Whereas non-initiates might appreciate Ọşun for her attractive physical attributes only, her worshipers are quick to recognize the visual metaphorical allusions to their *òrìşà*’s fecundity as the following song by supplicants demonstrates:

Ó ní oún ó fọtún gbómọ jó
Òun ó fòşì gbómọ pọn
Òun a tárán bosùn

The supplicant prays that she may dance with
 a baby in her right hand;
 That she may sling a baby on her back with
 the left one;
 That she may immerse her velvet in
 camwood [so that she may bear children];

	<i>Kúlúmbú yeyeyẹ</i> <i>Ọun a sì jó wọjà</i>	<i>Kúlúmbú yeyeyẹ</i> That she may dance into the marketplace to proclaim her blessings,
10	<i>Kúlúmbú yeyeyẹ</i> <i>Ọun o dirí ọwẹwẹ</i>	<i>Kúlúmbú yeyeyẹ</i> That she may plait her hair in the ọwẹwẹ style,
	<i>Kúlúmbú yeyeyẹ</i> <i>Ọyeyẹ kúlúmbú</i>	<i>Kúlúmbú yeyeyẹ</i> <i>Ọyeyẹ kúlúmbú</i>
15	<i>Ọun a sì mésin gùn</i>	That she may ride on horseback [that is, be seen as fortunate and successful]
	<i>Kúlúmbú yeyeyẹ</i> <i>Ọyeyẹ kúlúmbú.</i> (Adeniji, personal communication, 1976)	<i>Kúlúmbú yeyeyẹ</i> <i>Ọyeyẹ kúlúmbú.</i>

To recapitulate, Ọṣun’s power is complex. She has strong metaphysical connections with pivotal *òrìṣà* like Orí, Ọrúnmilà, and Èṣù, making her not only a resilient but an indispensable *òrìṣà*. Also, by sharing the same *ìwa tútù*, “cool character” with Olódumarè (the Supreme Creator), Ọṣun increases her sphere of influence among the *òrìṣà*. She emerges arguably as the most powerful *òrìṣà* in the Yorùbá pantheon. Beginning with Ọṣun’s profession as hair-plaiter, we see how that becomes a metaphor for her influence on, and indirect control of, Orí, the *òrìṣà* of the inner spiritual head or destiny of a person, thing, or deity and by extension, the Yorùbá divine rulership which is modeled after the concept of *orí*. The Ọràngun’s declaration, “Without ‘the mothers,’ I could not rule,” is a statement never made in terms of fathers. This reveals the true source of power in traditional politics and government.

Even though Ọṣun was the last of the seventeen *odù* (or *òrìṣà*) who came to earth at the time of creation, she quickly became the most influential one by demonstrating to the remaining *òrìṣà* that without her *àṣẹ* (power or life force), their mission could not succeed. In a different but related instance, Ọṣun, identifiable as the seventeenth *ikin* in the *Ifá* divination system, takes charge of, and directs, all *Ifá* divination procedures. Ọṣun is probably this same *olóri-ikin*, otherwise known as the wife of Ọrúnmilà in the context of the initiation of *Ifá* priests at *Igbó’dù* (the *Ifá* grove).²⁴

When Ọṣun gave birth to Ọṣẹtúrá (also known as Èṣù), she consolidated her power base by making her presence and influence totally inescapable in the earthly as well as in the spiritual realms. Èṣù, the “one who belongs to two opposing camps without having any feeling of shame,” is the *òrìṣà* most crucial to the maintenance of the precarious balance between the malevolent and the benevolent powers of the universe. He is also the major link between his mother Ọṣun and the remaining male *òrìṣà*. In this role of power broker, Èṣù not only broadens the power base of Ọṣun, but also creates a situation whereby it is virtually impossible to accomplish anything without propitiating him or Ọṣun. Thus, when we

use *omi tûtù* (cool water) to propitiate Èṣù, we are not only appeasing him, but also soliciting Ọṣun's support in our bid to eliminate friction in the world, heal disease, prosper, and bear children.

Knowing, as she did, that she was the source of all good things as stated in the Ifá literary corpus, Ọṣun never needed to vie for position among her fellow *òrìṣà*. Her demeanor invokes the Yorùbá saying, *Asúréte kò r'óyè je, arìngbèrẹ ni í móyè é délé* (One who walks slowly, that is, acts intelligently and gracefully, will bring the [chieftaincy] title home, while the one who runs [that is, acts recklessly] misses the chance of enjoying a title). Compared with the other *òrìṣà*, Ọṣun represents a higher and more inclusive religio-aesthetic concept whose canons can be immediately relevant to the solution of human problems, regardless of their origin, nature, or severity. Her presence and that of “our mothers” must be acknowledged at all major events, festivals, and celebrations of new seasons and the new year. Virtually all greetings on these occasions end with the prayer *Ọdún á yabo* which is a wish for a “feminine, productive, harmonious, and successful year, season, or celebration.” This verbal invocation not only acknowledges the spiritual attributes and vital force (*àṣẹ*) of womanhood which is epitomized in Ọṣun, but is also a practical acceptance of the superior power of “our mothers” in helping the community to cope with all the challenges of a new season, year, or millennium.

In lines 77–78 of the Ifá text on Ọṣun cited earlier in this essay, the relationship between Ọṣun and her fellow *òrìṣà* is stated explicitly. The remaining sixteen *Odù*, all male, had to go to the Creator to discover that “. . . all (the remaining) *odù* were derived from you (Ọṣun).” She had not told them. To better amplify her power, she chose to keep this fact hidden.

Appendix

A dífá fún àwọn Odù Mètàdínlógún
 Tíwọn nítkòlẹ̀ ọrun bọ wá síkòlẹ̀ ayé,
 Obínrin lóṣe ikẹ̀tadinlógún wọn
 Nígba wọn délé ayé,
 Wọn lagbó Orò 5
 Orò wà nínú wọn
 Wọn lagbó Ọpa,
 Ọpa níbẹ̀ níbẹ̀
 Wọn lagbó Eégún,
 Wọn tẹ̀gbàlẹ̀ f' Eégún 10
 Wọn ò wá ẹ̀fún Ọṣun
 Ẹ̀ẹ̀gẹ̀sí Olóyà iyùn
 Ó wá ní òun ómáa wòó
 Bí wọn ó ẹ̀ ẹ̀ é tí e e e dáa

- 15 E fi silẹ o jàre
 Àti orí Èjìogbè, Ọyèkú méjì
 Ìwòn méjì, Ọdí Méjì, Ìròsùn méjì,
 Ọwónrín méjì, Ọbàrà méjì, Ọkànràn méjì,
 Ọgúndá, Ọsá, Ọràngún méjì àti bèẹbẹẹ lọ.
- 20 Wọn ò bá mú Ọsun lọ sóde mọ
 Ní òun nàà bá sì dáké
 Ní ó bá nṣiṣe rẹ
 Orí ni ó má a rídi
 Ó wá ní òyà kan,
- 25 Wọn ò mọ pé àjẹ ni,
 Nígba wọn ti nṣòrun bọ,
 L'Olódùmarè ti yan gbogbo àwọn ire,
 Ó sì wá yan alátẹlẹ wọn,
 Èyí un sì ni obìnrin.
- 30 Obìnrin gbogbo ló lájẹ
 Wọn ò wá mú Ọsun,
 Wọn ẹe gbogbo nìkan kò gún
 Wọn wá lagbó Eégún
 Wọn ni Eégún jẹ ó gún o
- 35 Iwo lo jẹ kí igun ayé mọrẹrin ógún,

 Jẹ ó gún o
 Wọn wá lọ sí Àdàgbà Ọjòmù,
 Èyí ni Orò
 Iwo nìkan ni ò ní dẹrù ba ikù dẹrù bàrùn,
- 40 Bani lé wọn lọ o
 Àisàn kò ní san
 Yíó wá bú regeḡe
 Wọn wá lọ sódodọ Ọsé
 Kọ jẹ kójò ó rọ,
- 45 Ọjọ ò rọ
 Wọn wá lọ sódodọ Ọsun
 Ọsun kí wọn dárádára
 Ó sì ẹe wọn lálẹjò
 Itijú kò jẹ ki wọn ó leè finú han Ọsùn
- 50 Tí wọn ti fowọ ti tirẹ sẹhin
 Wọn wá kojú sí ọrún
 Ó di ọdọ Olódùmarè
 Wọn ní kí lódé?
 Wọn ní Olódùmarè ló fún wọn
- 55 Nígba tí wọn ní lọ
 Nígba tí wọn délé ayé,
 Wọn ẹe é, gbogbo è dára lọ
 Ni gbogbo nìkan wá yí,
 Kò sì bamu mọ
- 60 Wọn bá bi wọn pé,
 Eyin mélòó ló wá?

Wọn ní àwọn m̀̀r̀̀nd̀̀nl̀̀g̀̀ǹ̀ǹ̀ǹ̀	
Wọn ní ìgbà è ní lọ ní j̀̀un	
Èyin m̀̀l̀̀d̀̀ò̀ l̀̀è l̀̀ò?	
Wọn ní àwọn m̀̀̀t̀̀ad̀̀nl̀̀g̀̀ǹ̀ǹ̀ǹ̀	65
Q̀̀l̀̀ò̀run wá ní oǹ̀r̀̀k̀̀ísí ní yín	
Ìkan t̀̀è ỳ̀ ò̀ s̀̀h̀in un,	
T̀̀èè ba l̀̀ò p̀̀è wá,	
Òr̀̀ò yín k̀̀ò ní s̀̀è s̀̀è.	
Bí e se máa ní s̀̀è	70
Tí ỳ̀ò máa bàj̀̀e nàa nù un.	
Wọn wá lọ s̀̀òd̀̀ò Q̀̀s̀̀un,	
Wọn ní Ìyá Olóòyà Iyùn,	
Àwọn d̀̀òd̀̀ò Èlédàá báyií ló wí	
À s̀̀e ara Q̀̀s̀̀un ni ẁ̀n ti ỳ̀ ò̀ gbogbo Odù	75
Ìyà ni yío j̀̀e yín,	
Tí e k̀̀ò bá mú t̀̀i Q̀̀s̀̀un s̀̀e.	
Ni ẁ̀n bá dé Ode Ayé,	
Àwọn Odù tí ó k̀̀u f̀̀e máa mú Q̀̀s̀̀un lọ sode,	
Q̀̀s̀̀un ní òun ò ní máa bá ẁ̀n lọ sode	80
Ó ní oyún tí m̀̀b̀e ní k̀̀un òun	
Ni yío máa bá ẁ̀n lọ sode	
Óní t̀̀'óun bá bím̀o,	
Tí ó bá j̀̀e o k̀̀unrin,	
O k̀̀unrin náa ni yío máa	85
Báayín lọ sóde.	
Tí ó bá s̀̀i j̀̀e ob̀̀inrin,	
Òun yío ỳ̀o ti òun sí èh̀in	
Ó ní gbogbo ohun tí ẁ̀n j̀̀e ní òun m̀̀o.	
Orí ajá, òr̀̀ík̀̀o tí ẁ̀n ti j̀̀e ni òun m̀̀o.	90
Nígbà tí Q̀̀s̀̀un f̀̀e f̀̀oh̀un, Q̀̀s̀̀e ló f̀̀o ẁ̀o bòò l̀̀enu.	
Àwọn Odù yókù wá ní b̀̀e b̀̀e pé	
Kí Q̀̀s̀̀un ó bí o m̀̀o k̀̀unrin	
Ẁ̀n wa ní b̀̀e e	
Nígbà tí Q̀̀s̀̀un yó bím̀o,	95
Ó bí o k̀̀unrin	
Ẁ̀n sì s̀̀o o ní Q̀̀s̀̀e-túrá.	

Notes

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1. For a more detailed discussion of *orí* (*orí-inú*), the “inner head,” the divinity (or òr̀̀s̀̀à) of the head, see R. Abiodun, 1987.

2. In the colonial past, “income tax” was called *owó-orí*, because it was forbidden to haggle or protest tax assessments.

Ọṣun devotees would wonder why it has taken until only recently for Western medical science to recognize the all-pervading influence of their *òrìṣà*, Ọṣun, outside of Yorubaland. The news report below would only confirm what Ọṣun worshipers have known for generations. Titled “Science proves women’s claim that hairdo makes them feel better,” it states that

Women leaving a hairdressing salon not only look better, but their health has measurably improved, says psychologist Tony Lysons. When a woman has her hair washed, trimmed and dried, her morale goes up, while her heartbeat slows and her blood pressure goes down by five percent, Lysons said, commenting on research he carried out at University College in Swansea, Wales. He researched his conclusions by connecting electrodes to women as they sat at their hairdressers. (*Toronto Star*, October 5, 1987)

3. See F. Willet, 1967: Plate 29.

4. D. Badejo, 1996: 94–97 also discusses the use of parrot feathers in Yorùbá mythology.

5. See R. F. Thompson, 1971: p. 65, fig. 4.

6. Pa Adeniji, personal communication, 1976.

7. B. Idowu, 1970: 81.

8. R. C. Abraham, 1958: 193.

9. See also Drewal and Drewal, 1983, and B. Lawal, 1996, for more discussion on *àwọn ìyá wa* (our mothers) in Gẹ̀lẹ̀ḍe; and D. Badejo, 1996, in the context of Ọṣun.

10. J. Pemberton in Drewal et al., 1989: 210.

11. See Lucas, 1948.

12. W. Fagg, 1980: Fig. 6.

13. I am grateful to Reverend Father T. M. Ilesanmi for calling my attention to this crown.

14. See M. T. Drewal, 1977.

15. For more on the concept of *àṣẹ*, see R. Abiodun, 1994.

16. Badejo notes that “Ọṣun as well as other women ‘like her’ who possess innate kinetic power reap benefits from her action.” (1996: 78). See also C. Odugbesan, 1969.

17. Willett, 1967: see pl. 10 and color pl. III.

18. See P. Verger, 1965.

19. Badejo (1996: 77–80) also comments extensively on Ọṣun as “the leader of the *àjé*.”

20. For more on this aesthetic notion, see Abiodun, 1990: 77–78.

21. Abiodun, 1975.

22. W. Fagg et al., 1982: Plate 15.

23. Abiodun, 1975: 447–450.

24. Badejo (1996: 75) remarks that “[Ọṣun’s] marriage to Ọ̀rúnmilà suggests that wisdom and knowledge are qualities shared by male and female.”

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