CHAPTER TWO

Hidden Power

Ọṣun, the Seventeenth Odù

Rowland Abiodun

From Ọṣogbo in Ọṣun State to Ikóro in Ekiti, from Ibadan in Ọyó to Ìjúmọ́ 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 Òrîṣà (deity), Ọṣun. 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 Ọṣun’s identity extends beyond Ọṣogbo and many Yorùbá towns where she is believed to have turned into the Ọṣun River, and where festivals are held in her honor annually. Equally complex is Ọṣun’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 Ọṣun, namely, that she embodies the very substance of the water we drink; with her fan, abẹbẹ́, (a noun formed from the verb bẹ́ [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 Òrîṣà in profound ways. A well-known oríkì (praise citation) introduces her:

Ọṣun, Sègègèsi, Ọlóoyá iyín
Adagbadébú Onímọ́lè Odó
Eleétù́ ÉĎ́bó Ékó
Obinrin gbádámù, Obinrin gbádámù
Obinrin tí kọ́ ẹ̀ẹ́ gbá l'égbẹ́ mu. (Ọpẹ̀
Onabajọ, personal communication, 1985)

Ọṣun, (embodiment of grace and beauty)
The preeminent hair-plaiter with the coral-beaded comb
Powerful controller of the estuary
Propitiator-in-chief of Ékó (the City of Lagos)
A corpulent woman
Who cannot be embraced around the waist.

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 (hairdresser) is seen as one who honors and beautifies orí (orí-imú), 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. 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.

It should not be surprising that Òṣùn, “the preeminent hair-plaiter with the coral-beaded comb” is believed to have the power to influence the destinies of men, women, and the órìṣà, and that Òṣùn’s presence is crucial to the sustenance of life and order on earth. Archaeological excavations in the ancient city of Ìfẹ̀, 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 ìfà literary corpus about Òṣùn might have informed the creation of these terra-cotta sculptures. The persistence of certain hairstyles, particularly the òwèwè which is found on at least one ancient terra-cotta head from the Olòkùn grove, and its recurrence, with only very slight modification, in the Òtòpò̀rò Èpa mask carved by Fásìkù Àlàyè of Ikèrin in 1976 is noteworthy (fig. 2.1).

Still treasuring the important heritage of hair-plaiting and hairdressing, women members of the Yeye Olórisà society in Òwò spend hours and sometimes days styling their hair elegantly for the annual Igógó festival to honor Ôrónṣẹ̀n, another important female deity who was the legendary wife of Òlòwò Rèn rènègènìjèn, Òwò’s ruler. For Yeye Olórisà, 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 (eye) 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 Olórisà 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.

The overall welfare and prosperity of the town appear to rest with the Yeye Olórisà. All visual evidence points to their influence and power. Male chiefs including the Òlòwò, the ruler of Òwò, also plait their hair to respect and acknowledge the authority of the goddess Ôrónṣẹ̀n. 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 Òlòwò may add two long white egret feathers to distinguish him as the Oba (ruler) of Òwò (fig. 2.3a and 2.3b).
2.1 Òtòńpòrò, Epa mask by Fásíkù Aláayè of Ìkèrin, 1976.
Photo by Rowland Abiodun.
2.2 Yeye Olórisà, a ranking priestess during the Igógo festival in Òwò, 1976.
2.3a Oba Ògúnoyê II, Òlòwò of Òwò with plaited hair, wearing a pair of pàkátò (criss-crossed beaded bands across his chest), and àbòlákùn (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 Òwò, 1974. *Photo by Rowland Abiodun.*
Even though Òṣùn is not worshiped in Òwò, and I am not suggesting here that Òrọ̀ṣẹn and Òṣùn are the same Òrìṣà, there are many aspects of the Igógó festival which remind one of Òṣùn. The blouse and big skirt worn by the Òlówọ and his chiefs during this festival are unmistakably feminine. The skirt, called ̀ábò́lú́kù́n in Òwò, is very close to what Yorù́bá descendants still wear in the New World, namely Brazil and Cuba, to mark themselves as high priestesses of several Òrìṣà including Òṣùn. 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 Òlówọ’s role and function during this festival resembles that of Òṣùn. 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 ̀ábò́lú́kù́n costume with the penetrating metal-gong agógo music to which he dances in graceful wave-like movements, the Òlówọ effectively moves the hearts and bodies of his subjects. And in response to his body movement in the imposing ̀ábò́lú́kù́n, the crowd cheers their ruler with praises such as:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Praise</th>
<th>Meaning</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Okúń ̀ráágbááríghí</td>
<td>The mighty, expansive ocean</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>̀Àkátá-ílá bò́rì Òg собой́ málé</td>
<td>The great, wide umbrella-like shelter of Òwò</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ògèdè so tòó-̀tòó</td>
<td>The prolific banana tree which bears much fruit</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In the above praises, the use of the water imagery, namely, “the mighty, expansive ocean,” is intriguing since Òwò has no bodies of water that can be described as such, and Òrọ̀ṣẹn was not a water deity. This leads one to speculate on how attributes usually associated with Òṣùn have been adopted by other Yorù́bá communities located outside of those areas where Òṣùn 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 Òṣùn’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 Òṣùn festivals.

When we try to search for the meaning and significance of the ̀ábò́lú́kù́n in Òwò’s Igógó festival, we find that the igbá odu, 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 ̀ábò́lú́kù́n 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 ̀ikìn, the sixteen sacred palm nuts symbolically representing the sixteen principal Odu, all male, and a seventeenth small ivory object called ̀oló́rì-ìkìn (“The principal ̀ikìn”). This ̀oló́rì-ìkìn reminds us of Òṣùn, the seventeenth Odu
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
Igbà odù radiates a commanding presence and an unmistakable female authority
whose influence is felt by all.

For a clearer picture of the role of Ṫṣùn among the Odù (or Òríṣà) in Yorùbá
thought, and her indispensability to successful and harmonious political, eco-
nomic, 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 Òrò,
Òrò had his own space.
They cleared the grove for Ṫpa,
Ṫpa’s abode was secure.
They prepared a grove for Eégún,

10 Eégún had a home.
But they made no provision for Ṫṣùn,
Also known as “Ṣègèṣì, 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 Ṫṣùn sat quietly and watched them.
Beginning with Èjì-Ogbè and Ṭvèkú méjì,
Èwòrí méjì, Òdí méjì, Òrosùn méjì
Òwònrín méjì, Òbara méjì, Òkànrán méjì,
Ògùn-dá, Òsá, Òràngùn méjì and so on,

20 They all decided not to countenance Ṫṣùn 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 Ṫṣùn 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 Òdàgbà Òjómù
Who is called Orò
“You are the only one who frightens Death and Sickness.
Please help drive them away.”

Healing failed to take place;
Instead epidemic festered.
They went to Òṣùn and begged him
To let the rain fall.
Rain didn’t fall.

Then they went to Òṣùn
Òṣùn received them warmly,
And entertained them,
But shame would not let them confide in Òṣùn,
Whom they had ignored.
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,
And arrived on earth
All things went well;
Then later things turned for the worse,
Nothing was successful.
And Olódùmarè asked
“How many of you are here?”
They answered, “Sixteen.”
He also asked,
“When you were leaving heaven, how many were you?”
They answered, “Seventeen.”
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,
You will always fail.”
They then returned to Òṣùn,
And addressed her, “Mother, the preeminent hair-plaiter with the coral-beaded comb.
We have been to the Creator
And it was there we discovered that all Odù were derived from you [Òṣùn],
And that our suffering would continue
If we failed to recognize and obey you [Òṣùn].”
So, on their return to the earth from the Creator,
All the remaining Odù wanted to pacify and please Òṣùn.
But Òṣùn 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,
It is that male child who would go out with them.
But if the baby turned out to be female,
She [Ọṣùn] would have nothing to do with them.
She said she knew of all they [the Odù] had eaten and enjoyed without her,
Particularly all the delicacies and he-goat they ate.
As Ọṣùn was about to curse them all,
Ọṣé covered her mouth
And the remaining Odù started praying
That Ọṣùn might deliver a male child.

They then started to beg her.
When Ọṣùn 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 ọrìṣà. 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 ọrìṣà “who belongs to opposing camps without having any feeling of shame” (a sọtún sọsi lái ni tijú). 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 Ọṣùn’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 Ọṣùn’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 Ọṣùn’s charge, making her “the vital source” as her name suggests. Without Ọṣùn’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 ọrìṣà must have their own ăṣè, one must wonder about Ọṣùn’s seemingly superior ăṣè that was able to counteract the activities of her fellow ọrìṣà. Alternatively, it is conceivable that the ăṣè of female ọrìṣà is inherently different from the male ọrìṣà, and perhaps even antagonistic when they compete, with one (presumably, the female ăṣè) neutralizing the other (that is, the male ăṣè), as appears to be the case in this story.

There are a few hints in Yorùbá tradition that Ọṣùn’s gender, especially as the only female ọrìṣà 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 owó èrò, “the hand of propitiation,” 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 Ṣeṣùrúrú points to this belief:

Having no wife calls for positive action
To keep quiet is to invite trouble and
inconveniences
Having a wife is as difficult as having none
One without a wife
Should cry and weep publicly in the
marketplace
It is neither an extreme action
Nor an overreaction.

From the above verse, it would appear that in Yorùbá tradition, women are thought to be indispensable to men as Ṣùn was to the sixteen male orisù 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 Ṣùn, women of any age are potential ọjẹ who possess ọye, the “bird power.” The fear of this extraordinary power has caused men to appease women as they do “our mothers” (àwọn iya wa Òṣòròngà), a term used synonymously with “ajé” but often incorrectly translated as “witches.” 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, Òba William Adetònà Ayéni 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.”

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 Òdu òwa, the progenitor of the Yorùbá race, since we have as much evidence for considering Òdu òwa feminine as masculine. The indeterminacy of Òdu òwa’s gender will make more sense when we know more about Ọṣùn, the orisù 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 Òdù Òwà” from Ìdannè in Òndo State of Nigeria, we are immediately struck by its similarity to another crown from Ìleṣà in Ọṣùn State, worn by women as recently as twenty years ago (fig. 2.4). The Ìdannè 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 Òwári wearing adé àforískin (crown) in Iléṣà, 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 nine-
teenth and twentieth centuries. (Fagg 1980: 12)

The crown from Iléṣà is called adé àforíṣokún, and it is worn by the most
senior priestess of Òwářì, the third or fourth Òwá “ruler” of Ijeshaland, where
Ọṣun still has very active devotees. Like Odùdíwà, Òwá was a warlike, tempera-
mental, and very powerful ruler according to Òjëṣà oral tradition. The àforíṣokún
crown also resembles the purported “crown of Odùdíwà” in many ways. It is
possible that they may have functioned in similar contexts.

Both adé àforíṣokún and the purported crown of Odùdíwà possess the osù, “a
tuft or a kind of medicinal package with magical power, attached or sewn to the
top of Yorùbá crowns.” Sometimes concealed under heavily beaded decorations
or disguised as bird motifs on crowns, the osù must never be opened nor its con-
tents 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 osù.

The veil (ìbójù), which is an important part of the Yorùbá crown, is present in
the Ìdánrè and Iléṣà examples. Intended to hide the identity of the wearer who
is supposed to operate from the height of an Òrìṣà, “a divinity,” the ìbójù of the
adé àforíṣokún suggests how the Ìdánrè crown may have looked in actual use.
The priestess of Òwářì 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 dis-
plays her symbols of authority, power, and influence.

The crown with the veil is the most important symbol and conveyer of divinity
in the institution of obaship. It also downplays gender differences through visual
means, just as the Yorùbá word Òba, (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 Òba is inclusive of both genders:

| Kábiyéṣí | One whose authority cannot be challenged |
| Aláṣẹ | Who is endowed with áṣẹ |
| Òkejì-Òrìṣà | And ranks only with the Òrìṣà |
| Òkù | Death, the embodiment of finality |
| Bàbá-Yéyé | Ultimate Father-Mother |

The most important element in the Yorùbá concept of divine leadership is
áṣẹ, the essence of which is the energy or life force needed to control the physi-
cal world as well as to activate, direct, and restructure social and political pro-
cesses. Thus, it would seem totally unreasonable to exclude Ọṣun from the insti-
tution of obaship. After all, Ọṣun’s áṣẹ 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.
From available archaeological finds mainly at Ilé-Ife, 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 Yemọ̀, Ilé-Ife, in 1957, 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 Olóríṣà in Òwò which is less than one hundred miles east of Ifé. 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 Òǹdó, another major Yorùbá town situated some forty-five kilometers southeast of Ilé-Ifé, there is the Olóbùn, otherwise known as Oba Obirin (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 Òṣemàwé (the male ruler) of Òǹdó. 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 Òǹdó tradition. When seated on her throne, the Olóbùn 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 Olóbùn as the Lord of the market and the controller of all commercial transactions (fig. 2.6). Until the Olóbùn passed away in 1980, she actually visited the market several times each month, touching important market stalls and commercial establishments with her òpá-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 Òǹdó that the first traditional ruler was a woman named Púpùpú. Today the Olóbùn 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 Òǹdó. At the installation of the Òṣemàwé in the late 1970s, the Olóbùn was the one who presented the oba-elect, Robert Adekolurejo, to the people of Òǹdó. Similarly, during the installation rites, Olóbùn’s chiefs and other high priestesses in Òǹdó 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 Olobun, (Oba Obinrin, “Female Ruler”) of Ondo, 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. 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 Òṣùn and perceived to be integral to her influence, extraordinary insight, and ability to do things which the other
orîsà could not do. Thus, Òṣùn’s “concealed power” has earned her the title of “the leader of the àjé.” The following lines of her orîkì 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 Òṣùn priests, priestesses, and devotees literally believe in the power of water to heal their ailments and problems. Water, Òṣùn’s main curative agent, is an active ingredient in the Yorùbá preparation of èrò (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 èrò medicine shows how water is perceived in traditional thought:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Bí òoru bá mú} & \quad \text{When the weather is blazing hot} \\
\text{Abébé ni i bégé} & \quad \text{It is the fan that pacifies it.} \\
\text{Bí imá bá á jó koko} & \quad \text{When there is a flare-up,} \\
\text{Omi là á fi i pà á} & \quad \text{We use water to quench it.} \\
\text{Ògèrè, iná mà rílé omi lò} & \quad \text{Defiantly, fire chases water,} \\
\text{Ògèrè} & \quad \text{Sweeping past.} \\
\text{Bí iná bá ní lè omi} & \quad \text{If fire chases water} \\
\text{Tí kò pàdà lèyin omi} & \quad \text{And does not turn back,} \\
\text{Èrò pètè} & \quad \text{Propitiation is the answer.} \\
\text{Ògèrè, iná mà lè omi lò} & \quad \text{Sweeping past, fire is chasing water.} \\
\text{Sèèè} & \quad \text{Even with all its flare,} \\
\text{Iná kò gbodò lè sèèè} & \quad \text{Fire dares not chase its glow} \\
\text{Kó le’e wo ‘nú odó.} & \quad \text{Into the river.} \\
\end{align*}
\]

In the above incantation, both water and the fan which Òṣùn priests and priestesses often use in their rites and ceremonies are the verbal metaphors for the soothing, disarming, and softening power associated with Òṣùn. 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 orîkì 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 Òṣùn 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:

| Ò ní gbogbo ohun ti ènìà bá ní ṣe,  |
| Tí kò bá fì tì obinrin kùn un, |
| Ò ní kò lè ṣẹẹ ṣe . . . |
| Ò ní kí wòń ó máà fì ibà fún obinrin |

- In anything we do,
- If we do not guarantee the place of women,
- That thing will not succeed.

[Ìfá says,] “we should acknowledge the power of women,”

| Ò ní tí wòń bá ti fì ibà fún obinrin,  |
| Ilé ayé yìò máà tòrò. (Verger 1965: 218) |

[And that,] “if we acknowledge their power,
- 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:

| Wòń díjú fììn iyàmí Òṣòraògà |
| Tí wòń ní tìkọlẹ èrun bọ wá sílẹ ayé . . . |
| Wòń lènì tí kò bá fì t’áwòń ṣe, |

- It was divined for Òyàmì Òṣòraògà.
- Who was coming from heaven to earth;
- They said whoever refused to acknowledge them,

| Áwòń ó máà bàà jà, |
| Áwòń ó máà kó ifùn ènìà; |
| Áwòń ó máà je ojú ènìà; |
| Nwòń ò si ní gbóhùn enikéòkan. |

- They will afflict him.
- They will take his intestines;
- They will eat his eyes;
- They will drink his blood
- and no one will hear a sound.

(Verger 1965: 218)

In Òṣùbá 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 Òṣùbá sculpture and function “noiselessly” like Òṣùn and “our mothers” until all opposition toward them is dissolved.20

Visual representations of female Òrìṣà like Òṣùn have influenced Òṣùbá aesthetic considerations and artistic processes far more than scholars have acknowledged. To illustrate, let us examine the image of woman on an ìrókè (Ìfá divination tapper). The ìrókè 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 ikùnìlè-abiyaample (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 Òṣùbá believe possesses the àṣẹ to make her wishes come to pass. Thus a Òṣùbá 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, Sàngó, and Òṣùn sculptural repertoires. In Ifá, it is known as agere Ifá or ibòrì Ifá,22 and among Òṣùn and Sàngó devotees, it is called arugbá, meaning “the one who carries the calabash holding the ritual items” for these òrìṣà. 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 ọlúmèye, which is a kneeling woman carrying a cock intended for offering to an òrìṣà. That women are preferred to men for bearing sacrifices of such magnitude is further indication of their special relationship to the òrìṣà.

In the helmet masks generically known as Èléfos or Èpa in northeastern Yoruba land, a common theme of the superstructure is that of a kneeling woman with two children called Òtònpòrò niyi Èléfos (Òtònpòrò, the pride of Èléfos) (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. Òtònpòrò is painted in black, red, yellow, and white to make her beauty visible even at a distance. She has a very elaborate hairdo (òwèwè), 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 niyi eyin
Ègún gágàgà niyi orùn;
Ọmú sìkinísìkì niyi ohinrin.
(Àṣìmbòla 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 Òṣùn, also called Ọ̀ṣẹ̀gẹ̀sì, not only as the “embodiment of grace and beauty” as contained in her orìkì (citation poetry), but also as the only òrìṣà in whose power it is to grant or reject the request for the gift of children. Whereas non-initiates might appreciate Òṣùn for her attractive physical attributes only, her worshipers are quick to recognize the visual metaphorical allusions to their òrìṣà’s fecundity as the following song by supplicants demonstrates:

Ó ní oún ó fọ̀ṣùn gbómọ́ jó
Óun ó fọ̀sì gbómọ́ pọ̀n
Óun a tāràn bọ̀sùn

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];
To recapitulate, Òṣun’s power is complex. She has strong metaphysical connections with pivotal Òrīṣà like Òrì, Òrùnmilà, and Èṣù, making her not only a resilient but an indispensable Òrīṣà. Also, by sharing the same ìwa títù, “cool character” with Òlódùmarè (the Supreme Creator), Òṣun increases her sphere of influence among the Òrīṣà. She emerges arguably as the most powerful Òrīṣà in the Yorùbá pantheon. Beginning with Òṣun’s profession as hair-plaiter, we see how that becomes a metaphor for her influence on, and indirect control of, Òrì, the Òrīṣà 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 Òrì. The Òrànṣùn’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 Òṣun was the last of the seventeen odù (or Òrīṣà) who came to earth at the time of creation, she quickly became the most influential one by demonstrating to the remaining Òrīṣà that without her ìṣẹ̀ (power or life force), their mission could not succeed. In a different but related instance, Òṣun, identifiable as the seventeenth ìkin in the Ìfá divination system, takes charge of, and directs, all Ìfá divination procedures. Òṣun is probably this same olórí-ìkin, otherwise known as the wife of Òrùnmilà in the context of the initiation of Ìfá priests at ìgbo’dù (the Ìfá grove).24

When Òṣun gave birth to Òṣẹtúrá (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 Òrīṣà 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 Òṣun and the remaining male Òrīṣà. In this role of power broker, Èṣù not only broadens the power base of Òṣun, but also creates a situation whereby it is virtually impossible to accomplish anything without propitiating him or Òṣun. Thus, when we
use omi tútù (cool water) to propitiate Èṣù, we are not only appeasing him, but also soliciting Ọṣùn’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, Ọṣùn never needed to vie for position among her fellow ọrìṣà. Her demeanor invokes the Yorùbá saying, Asúrétete kò r’óyè je, aríngbèrè ni i mòyè é délè (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 ọrìṣà, Ọṣùn 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 (àṣe) of womanhood which is epitomized in Ọṣùn, 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 Ọṣùn cited earlier in this essay, the relationship between Ọṣùn and her fellow ọrìṣà 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 (Ọṣùn).” She had not told them. To better amplify her power, she chose to keep this fact hidden.

Appendix

A difá fún àwọn Odù Métàdìílògún
Tíwón rítúkọ̀lè ṣ̀rùn bò wá síkọ̀lè ayé,
Obìnrin lọṣe ́iketàdìílògún wọ̀n
Nígbà wón délè ayé,
Wón lagbó Orò
Orò wá nínú wọ̀n
Wón lagbó Ọpà,
Ọpà ríbẹ̀ ríbẹ̀
Wón lagbó Ògún,
Wón tègbàlè f’Ògún
Wón ọ́ wá ̀ṣéfún Ọṣùn
Ṣèègbé Olóóyà iyùn
Ọ́ wá ní òun ńmáa wòó
Bí wọ́n ọ̀ṣe ́ṣè ́ẹ̀ t̀̀f̀̀ è è è dàá
ősUN aCROSS THE wATERS

15  E fi sile o jare
    Ati ori Ejiogbe, Oyeku meji
    Iwori meji, Odi Mejii, Irorsun meji,
    Owonrin meji, Obara meji, Okanran meji,
    Ogundai, Osai, Orangun meji ati behebele lo.

20  Won o ba mu Osun lori sojede mo
    Nii unos ba ba si dake
    Nii ba riise re
    Ori ni o ma a ridi
    O wa ni ooyan kan,

25  Won o mo pe ajie ni,
    Nigba won ti itu run bo,
    L’Olodumare ti yan gbogbo awon ire,
    O si wa yan alatele won,
    Eyi un si ni obinrin.

30  Obinrin gbogbo lo latiye
    Won o wa mu Osun,
    Won se gbogbo nkan ko gun
    Won wa lagbo Eegun
    Won ni Eegun je o gun o

35  Iwo lo je ki igun ayee meereen ogun,

J’o gun o
    Won wa lo si Adagba Ojomu,
    Eyi ni Oror
    Iwo nikan ni o ni dere wa iku dere baruun,

40  Banile won long o
    Aisan koi nisan
    Yi o wa bu regede
    Won wa lo sodo Ose
    Koi je kojo o ro,

45  Ojo oru
    Won wa lo sodo Osun
    Osun ki won dairada
    O si se won laleyo
    Ititu ko je ki won o leene finu han Osun

50  Ti won ti fowo ti tiri sehin
    Won wa koju si ortun
    O di odo Olodumare
    Won ni ki lodie?
    Won ni Olodumare lo fun won

55  Nigba ti won ni lo
    Nigba ti won delo ayi,
    Won se e, gbogbo e dada lo
    Ni gbogbo nikan wa yi,
    Koi si bamu mo

60  Won ba bi won pec,
    Eyin mело o lo wa?
Notes

I wish to express my gratitude to Pa Adeniji of Iwo, Pierre Verger, the Olóbùn of Òndó, and Madam V. S. Abiódùn (my mother), all of whom are now deceased, for sharing with me their knowledge and insights on the subject of women, and especially oríşi (orí-inú), the “inner head,” the divinity (or òrìṣà) of the head, see R. Abiodun, 1987.
2. In the colonial past, “income tax” was called ọwọ-ọrị, 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 ọrịṣa, Ọṣun, outside of Yoruba-land. 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)

5. See R. F. Thompson, 1971: p. 65, fig. 4.
9. See also Drewal and Drewal, 1983, and B. Lawal, 1996, for more discussion on ăwọn iyá wa (our mothers) in Gèlède; and D. Badejo, 1996, in the context of Ọṣun.
12. W. Fagg, 1980: Fig. 6.
13. I am grateful to Reverend Father T. M. Ilesanmi for calling my attention to this crown.
15. For more on the concept of ăṣe, 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.
20. For more on this aesthetic notion, see Abiodun, 1990: 77–78.
24. Badejo (1996: 75) remarks that “[Ọṣun’s] marriage to Ọrúnmiła suggests that wisdom and knowledge are qualities shared by male and female.”

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