Invocation

Aládékojú, I am calling on you
Hail My Beloved Mother Aládékojú
The Beloved one from the town of Èfòn Èkìtì
Hail the Powerful Mother Aládékojú,
5 The descendent of the one who uses the crown made of brass
We travel to the town of Èjìgbò
Where we visited the Ògìyan (the Òba of Èjìgbò)
The one who dances with the jingling brass
My wondrous Mother!
10 Who owns plenty of brass ornaments in the town of Èfòn
She moves majestically in the deep water
Oh spirit! Mother from Ìjèṣàland
The land of the tough and brave people
Men who would fight to secure their wives
Even to the point of killing themselves
15 Along with their wives if everything fails
Hail the great Mother Òṣùn
Whose whole body is adorned with brass
She joins the Òwà (Ìjèṣà Òba) to celebrate his festival
20 She shares her holy day (Friday) with Sàngó
My confidante
She waits at home to assist barren women to bear children
Òṣùn has plenty of cool water to heal diseases
Death to the Tapa (warriors from the North)
25 Òṣùn surrounds her whole body with Edan
With the shining brass as a Lantern at night,
She very quickly moves round the house
To fetch her sword, ready for battle
Hail the Mother, Òṣùn Òṣogbo
My mother, the marvelous cook
My Mother who makes succulent fried bean pattie (àkàrù), bean cake (òjlè), and corn cakes (òkuru) as well
Those who refuse to hail my Mother
Will be denied tasteful bean cakes and corn cakes
My mother who provides bean cake for the Èfòn people
When my mother wakes up, she prepares food for her household
My mother will then proceed to the kolanut stall
As she trades in kolanut,
She is also carrying her corn to the mill to grind
At the same time she is also dying clothes (adire) by the sidewalk
There is no task my mother cannot do
She even keeps a stable for rearing horses
My mother lives in the deep water
And yet sends errands to the hinterland
Aládékojú, my Òlódîmarè (supreme Goddess)
Who turns a bad destiny (òrì) into a good one
Òṣùn has plenty of brass ornaments in her storage
Òrógùn, Òrógùngúnìdá,
The favorite wife of Òrinmilà (god of divination)
The owner of the indigo pigeon
In vivid colors of the rainbow,
Her image appears brightly dressed on the river bank
Aládékojú, the owner of the mortar made of brass
Òṣùn fights for those she cares about
Human beings (èniyàn) do not want us to eat from a china plate
(àwo tánígaran)
Ògbônnmèlè, do not allow the evil world (aye) to change our good fortune into a bad one
Do not let the wicked persons overcome us
Once, Òṣùn was plucking medicinal leaves
Òṣanyìn (herbal god of medicine) was also plucking his own leaves
Before Òsanyìn turns around,
Òṣùn had taken Òsanyìn’s leaves from the grinding stone
Only Òṣùn can mold my destiny (òrì)
So that it becomes as strong as rock
Òṣùn Òṣogbo, I greet you
Òṣogbo orókì emerges from afar off,
And the crowd in the market went wild with joy
The Òba’s beloved water, do not forget me
Òṣùn who stands on the hill
And beckons at the kolanut seller in the market to bring kolanut
Ládékojú stands on the river bridge
And calls the seller of honey in the market
She beckons at the palm wine seller to bring her wine
The palm wine sells at an exorbitant price;  
But my mother does not buy overpriced goods  
The mighty water is rushing past  
It is flowing to eternity.¹

Introduction

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

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

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

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

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

**Ọsogbo Ethnogenesis: Narratives of Origin**

Shrouded in myth and legend, Ọsogbo recalls the founding narratives of Yorùbá towns and cities. Although these narratives contain historical facts, they are intertwined with sacred narrative and metaphor that the community believes to be true. Scholars and local historians have presented differing versions of this central narrative, but there is no sharp disagreement on the basic sequence of events comprising the foundation of the community. This myth of origin is closely knit with the myth of both the Ọṣun River and the powerful goddess inhabiting the river. According to this mythistory, Ọsogbo was founded by a prince of Iléṣà, a Yorùbá city-state about 20 kilometers from Ọsogbo. Prince Ọlăroọyè (Lároọyè) had settled in a village called Ìpolé, near Iléṣà. As a result of a water shortage in Ìpolé, Ọlăroọyè and Ọlutímehin (Tímehin), a hunter, led a group of people in search of water, as was the custom in ancient days. The duo and their cohorts discovered a large river, later called Ọṣun. They went back to report to Ọwátè, Ọlăroọyè’s father, and to invite Ọwátè to settle in the new place on the Ọṣun riverbank. But before they left, they decided to make a mark on the riverbank where they discovered Ọṣun. They felled a big tree that made a very loud noise on the river, whereupon they heard a loud booming voice say: *Wọn ti wọ ikọkọ aró mi ọ, èyin Osọ inú ighọ e tún dé* (You have destroyed my pots of dyes. You wizard of the forest, you’re here again). They were frightened and offered...
sacrifices to the deity. But the goddess Òṣun appeared to Òlároóyè and Timéhin asking them not to panic.

Òwàtè decided to remain in Ìpolé, but gave his blessing to his son Òlároóyè’s and Timéhin’s mission to settle in the new land. With these revelations, Òlároóyè and Oluítiméhin’s party came back and settled by the riverbank.

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

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

In several works on African religion and gender — most appropriately on religion and women — a major theory argues that religion and ritual in the “hands” of men play a major role in taming and controlling the “dangerous and destructive” power of women (d’Azevedo 1994), power symbolized and actualized in the form of a witch. Witches are believed to be human agents whose reputed antisocial behavior obstructs the social and communal order. Yorùbá tradition and scholarship support this argument. The Yorùbá proverb ológùn ló lèe sokọ Àjé literally means “only the medicine man can be the husband of a ‘witch’.” “Husband” here connotes domestication: the husband must control through “brute” force; he is not the peaceful spouse of a beautiful woman. In a new feminist interpretation of Yorùbá tradition, female symbols and experiences are privileged over male images. Feminist interpretations present powerful images and symbols of deities as mothers, wives, warriors, and other female roles. We are
indeed experiencing the Yorùbá concept: the transcendent and the sacred in a radically different and fresh context. This new hermeneutics in the recent works of scholars—Diedre Badejo, Mei-Mei Sanford, Deidre Crumbley, and Oyeronke Oyewumi—indicates that researchers should continuously and rigorously interrogate myth and ritual as those described above in which male and female images are pitted against one another. No longer can we rely on conventional wisdom that assumes male superiority in all cultures! New hermeneutics are attempting, as Ursula King remarked, to balance and contrast male images of the sacred “which have been predominant” in most world religions, especially in Islamic and Judeo-Christian traditions, including rich images of the sacred as mother “and other female expressions” (King 1990: 203).

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

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

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

Òṣùn gbólóogún, eruèle gbólóogún lo
Ò má gbólóogún, eruèle gbólóogún lo
Osùn drowned the medicine man
The forceful and torrential water drowned the medicine man

Here Òṣùn is employed by both men and women devotees to ward off evil: although Òṣùn heals with her cooling water, she also uses torrential water to destroy the evil medicine men. The narratives show that in the contest between Òsanyìn, the god of herbal medicine, and Lároóyè with Tìmèhìn, they defeated
Ôsanyin and wrested the sacred sixteen-pointed lamp (àtùpà olójùmèríndínólò- gún) away from Ôsanyin.

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

Ôsun njáwé, Ôsanyin njáwé, Agbèbú yanṣẹ. Ôsun ti kó t’ósanyin lọ lójú olo.

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

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

As the young virgin carries Ôsun’s sacred calabash containing Ôsun’s brass objects from the king’s palace to the riverbank, several people assembled at Ôsun’s shrine wail in prayer to Mother Ôsun to take the “hands” and “eyes” of evil people from their bodies (lyá ówó oṣó, ojú ájé, mu kúró lára ni o). Babalowo Ifáyemi Elébuibon remarks on the mechanism of Ôsun’s healing power: “Ôsun does not use herbal medicine to heal, she uses ordinary cooling water to heal” (Oroki: A Video Film on Ôsun Ôsogbo Festival, 1997). To receive Ôsun’s healing, one cannot combine herbal medicine with Ôsun’s cool water.

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

From the nature and character of images of Òrìṣà Ôsun described above, it remains clear that the goddess Ôsun appears as the dominant deity in Ôsogbo social and religious life. One of the Ôsun verses cited earlier refers to her as
Olódúmarè mi, my Supreme Goddess, a metaphoric reference to Òṣun as a great goddess, having the qualities of the Supreme God for the devotee. She has attributes encompassing other deities and cultural heroes in Òṣogbo myth. This universalism is demonstrated in mythical and in practical ways. In addition to serving as the home and courtyard of the river goddess, Òṣun’s sacred grove also houses the shrines of several of Òṣogbo’s deities (Ogungbile 1998a: 70). Among the shrines is the temple of Ògbóni, serving as the meeting place for Ifá diviners. Òṣun provides shelter for the Orò grove that is used as the meeting assembly of Ògbóni members. The hunter’s Epa grove is also located here in the Òṣun compound. The first market stall in Òṣogbo is named after the first Òba, Láró-óyè’s, market (Ogungbile 1998a: 70); it was a center of trade and commerce in ancient times.

**Òṣun and Òṣogbo’s Political Economy**

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

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

Òṣun is an archetypal woman who embodies the core values and impetus for Òṣogbo’s economic success. Here moral and economic order are intricately linked, but not in the Weberian sense. Òṣun’s social and economic empow-
erment of the inhabitants of Òṣogbo forms the basis of her popularity today. Òṣun’s role in Òṣogbo’s economic order is also reflected in the Òṣun ritual. On “outing day,” as the Arugbá dances to the riverbank, market women exclaim that through Òṣun’s help, they have paid off their debts (mo já gbésé). Their excitement can be compared to that of Americans who suddenly discover they are able to pay off huge credit card debts!

**The Òṣun Festival and Ritual of Kingship**

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

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

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

The last stage of Wíwá Òṣun appears to be a recent innovation in Òṣun festivals—never mentioned in previous descriptions of the festival: the Òṣun festival includes the visit of Òṣun priestesses, *Iyá Èwe* (mothers of the little ones), to the marketplace to solicit gifts from those buying and selling. Jingling the Òṣun sacred bell and bestowing prayerful blessings on market products, the priestesses
move around the market stalls, soliciting buyers and sellers to dig deep into their pockets to donate to the Òṣun coffers. Although in the character of Òṣun as a trader and powerful marketing merchant, this innovation can be explained in terms of the changes in the political economy of the city. In the past, hundreds of Òṣogbo indigenes would bring gifts of farm produce to the Òba and Iya Òṣun. But as the tradition of harvest gifts diminished, a system of voluntary sacred market gift-giving has evolved, by which the expenses of the Òṣun festival are partially met.

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

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

The Ikínké Òṣun, or ritual washing of Òṣun’s paraphernalia with the sacred leaves (ewe òrìṣà) occurs the day after Ìwò Pópó. Here Òṣun’s images are brought out from the inner shrine, washed, and adorned in readiness for her feasts. As Chief Ifáyemí Èlébuiñó remarked, Wón mí látí sọ àwọn ibò Òṣun di ọtun (They
must renew all Ḍ̀ṣìn’s propitiatory objects). On this day too, the Arugbá Ḍ̀ṣìn, the virgin who carries Ḍ̀ṣìn’s sacrificial apparel to the riverbank, begins her initiatory ceremony in preparation for the Herculean task to follow.

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

In this reenactment ritual, the cutlass chiefs, the Arugbá and Ìyá Èwe, take turns dancing around the lamp. The king, his wives, and the chiefs also dance around the lamp three times, after which the king proceeds to the Ồgu Shrine of Olu’tìme-hìn, the first hunter and discoverer of the Ḍ̀ṣìn River. Upon his return, the sacred lamp will have been removed, and the king and his entourage will dance as they return to the palace. While the ritual acknowledges the reality of Ṣànyin’s medicinal power—the reality that the Ồṣogbo’s indigenes and Ḍ̀ṣìn’s devotees will continuously encounter, and wrestle with—the ritual ultimately reaffirms Ḍ̀ṣìn’s domestication and appropriation of Ṣànyin’s medicinal power. It affirms Ḍ̀ṣìn’s skill in outmaneuvering controlling male forces of evil, symbolized by bad medicine (oogun buburu). It is no coincidence that Ifá diviner priests, experts in the confluence of spiritual and medicinal forces, are at hand to supervise this highly theatrical performance. The removal of Ṣànyin’s lamp before the return of the king from Olu’tìme-hìn’s (Ôguin) shrine indicates the victory of the Ḍ̀ṣìn sacred power because “the moon must disappear before the day dawns” (ọjọ̀ ọ kí n málè bá ọṣùpá).

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

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

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

The main attraction of the Òṣun festival is the ritual procession and pilgrimage of the king, the Arugbá, and the Òṣogbo people to the Òṣun River to present their sacrificial offerings to the goddess. The major players in the ceremony are the Iya Òṣun, the chief priestess of Òṣun; the Arugbá, the young virgin who conveys Òṣun’s paraphernalia and sacrificial objects to the riverbank in a large brass bowl (Ìgbá Òṣun); and last, the king himself, the chief sacrificer. A day before the pilgrimage, Ifá divination is consulted to ensure the Arugbá’s successful journey, a tedious and Herculean task fraught with many taboos. The Arugbá is chosen by a divination process as well. When the present Arugbá Gbónjubọla Òyewale Matanmi was chosen—summoned to the palace and informed by the king—she was quite surprised. “How could that be, when I never visited Òṣun river nor participated in Òṣun’s tradition before” (Oroki 1997) was her initial reaction! Reminiscent of the annunciation to the Virgin Mary in Christian traditions, the Arugbá is presented before a host of Ifá priests in the home of Oluawo, the Ifá chief priest. The Ifá is consulted by a middle-aged diviner and the revela-
tion announced to those present. In Faleti's Oroki video cited above, the Arugbá was enjoined by Ifá to be happy and relax (ko dára yá). Ifá promised to keep all evil away from her (Ifá ní ọsun ó diná ibia). Most importantly, Ifá predicted that through her carrying the sacrificial offering to Òṣùn, the town of Òṣogbo would prosper and the Arugbá’s own prospects would be accomplished (Ire ilu Òṣogbo á dé; ire ti e ná à dé).

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

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

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

One of the dancing groups that pay homage to the Oba is the ancestral masquerades (egungun). Clad in colorful costumes, depicting their image-symbols, many of the egungun appear before the king to pay obeisance and salute him, acknowledging his spiritual and temporal authority in Òṣogbo. The distinguishing mark of the ancestral masquerade is that their wood masks and cloth veils
indicate that they are of Òyó origin, symbolizing immigrants, outsiders whose migration to and sojourn in the land is still a remembered and celebrated event in Òṣogbo history. Having outnumbered the autochthonous group of Ìjèṣà origin (of whom the king is an integral part), the Òyó-Ìjèṣà conflict continues to be a matter of concern in contemporary Òṣogbo. The festival thus represents the Òyó’s attempt to ameliorate conflicts and neutralize competing claims by acknowledging the Ìtààójà as the head of a diverse, multi-clan, heterogeneous community. As Richards argues, “the mask,” and I would argue, its cloth veil, appears to have “exemplary qualities as a conceit or metaphor for discourses which attempt to characterize the cultural identities and differences which epitomize the representations” of the people. (Richards 1994: 5). Egungun, ancestral spirits, are deceased elders who appear during festivals to celebrate with living members of their lineages. As Richards further states, “remembrance of the ancestors is vital to the success of human endeavors; to ignore them will result in witchcraft, plagues, and social dissolution” (1994: 7).

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

One special attraction of the festival in the video is the appearance of a young man standing inside a large empty carton of schnapps dressed like a Muslim Imam, holding prayer beads. While this may be interpreted as an unofficial Muslim presence, it is also a parody, making a statement about a Muslim consuming alcohol. At the same time the performance provides glimpses of what I will discuss later as uncivil religion, a protest against the new Islamic resurgence as an expression of antagonism toward Òṣùn ceremony. Indeed, some of the Òṣùn songs sung on this day reflect tension with Islam, as I will also show. The Ìtààójà gave a stately address in which he located Òṣùn ceremony within the context of Òṣogbo’s mythistory and civil religion. He denounced those who claim that Òṣùn is a “pagan” worship. Instead, he claimed, “it demonstrates man’s search for his origin in consonance with the practice of our ancestors.” The Ìtààójà’s
speech reflects his own personal struggle with the changing face of religion in Òṣogbo. A staunch Muslim, a former Islamic teacher, and now a king, he recognizes the significance of Òṣun in the kingship rituals. He, therefore, locates Òṣun as ãṣà (tradition) as opposed to èsin (religion or worship). If American discourse on civil religion faces criticism and debate at the intellectual and cultural level, so does the meaning of Òṣun in contemporary Òṣogbo.

After the stately ceremony, the Òba wears the ancestral veiled crown, which he dons like the Ooni’s Are in the Òlojo festival in the Ile-Ife, once a year. Like the Ooni, who would then encounter Ògún, the god of iron and war and Ile’s patron deity, the Àtáójá proceeds to Ile-Òṣun and sits on the sacred stone where Larooye Gbadewolu, the first king, sat to take Òṣun’s blessings. There, the priests and priestesses of Òṣun propitiate Òṣun on his behalf and there he encounters the goddess.

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

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

The Òṣun festival is very complex; and so will be any attempt to interpret it. It encompasses various motifs and, given some of the chronological changes that have occurred in the accounts of the festivals available to us, it clearly shows that it is a composite festival. In the character of city festivals in the history of religions, such as the Roman Parilia festival, Òṣun probably developed from an agricultural new-yam festival into a festival commemorating the foundation of the city of Òṣogbo. As Òṣogbo developed from a small settlement into a large town-
ship, Òṣùn became a political celebration just like the Parilia celebration, a simple pastoral festival that grew to become a “noisy” celebration of Rome’s birthday (Beard et al. 1998: 119).

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

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

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

Íwọ lọba
Íwọ ọgbà
Íwọ lọba lọba lọba . . .
(Ọgungbile 1998b: 7)

You are the King
You are the Elder
You are the King, the real King

Olagunju (1972) observed that the Arugbá’s attendant, in sympathy with the heavy load that the Arugbá was carrying, uttered the following incantatory words of assistance: Oluwa mi, ofe o (My lord, may the load be lighter), Muọ ọọọ ọ, Ọyà Àtàójá (Walk gently, Àtàójá’s mother). The Arugbá, as the reincarnation of Òṣùn, displays the persona of the great goddess. She is honored as the surrogate “mother” of the king and she is bestowed with the sacredness that befits the Òṣùn. Hence, she must accomplish for her community the observance of the elaborate taboos that surround the office of the Arugbá and the rituals required of her.

**Òṣùn as Civil Religion**

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

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

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

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

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

Islam, Ọṣun, and Uncivil Religion

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

In the last few years, the people of Òṣogbo protested against a small group who would abuse Ọṣun through uncivil religious responses, such as religious intolerance, or what Simeon Ilesanmi, in his critique of my earlier works, called “experiences of civil religion tumults” (1995: 62). While the Òṣogbo people’s
protestations against Òṣùn’s cultural despisers are not new, their tempo has increased, with the recent rise of militant Islam in contemporary Òṣogbo. The reasons are both ancient and new. We have it on record that in the nineteenth century, under the war of expansion of Islam from Northern Nigeria, Òṣogbo became a major center of conflict between the Fulani Jihadists and the remnants of the old Òṣùn Empire. As the Muslim forces took Ilorin, a Yorùbá city and gateway to Northern Nigeria, and sacked the Òṣùn Empire, the Yorùbá who fled the region took refuge in Òṣogbo, thus making the town a target of the Jihadists. Òṣogbo was attacked in 1839, but with the assistance of Ibadan soldiers, the Jihadists were effectively stopped in 1840 (Gbadamosi 1978: 10). The victory of Òṣogbo and the defeat of the Muslim forces is given prominence in Òṣùn’s tradition, which claims that Òṣogbo’s victory was achieved through the assistance rendered by the Great Mother when Òṣùn poisoned the Jihadists’ food, according to the famous story recounted earlier.

In spite of this temporary halt to the expansion of Islam, the tradition made further inroads at a later date, and Islam now constitutes the most dominant proselytizing religion in the city. Modern Òṣogbo is a highly heterogeneous town, where multiple though often divergent values are viewed as ideal, in consonance with Yorùbá modernity. Within this plurality, Òṣùn provides the symbol and avenue for the “construction of a collective identity,” in Òṣogbo based on what is perceived as tradition (asa) and not strictly religion (èṣìn). Whenever Islam, and to a lesser extent Christianity, and modern development present conflictual ideologies, the Òṣogbo people react in protest. An old popular Òṣùn song states that for centuries before Western doctors arrived, people depended on the flowing water of Òṣùn to raise their children (Selèrù ògbò, ìgbàrà ògbò, lòsun fì n wo ’mọ̀ rè kì dòkità ó tò dè). Another stanza of the same song condemns the excesses of modernizers (aláṣẹjù) whose exclusive terms go against cultural norms and decorum. Òṣogbo can accept foreign traditions, but only if they do not compete with their host’s ideologies.

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

(I) Báhá Onírígbòn
Yèé g̀bò ̀èbò wa
Eníkan ọ̀ mì ọ̀ má má
Kírun lọjójúmọ
(Òṣùn bìle (1998b: 137)

You long-bearded Malam
Stop poking your nose into our rituals
No one disturbs you from performing
Your daily prayer (sallat)

(II) Níbo lọ ní n gbé Yèyé mi sì ó?
Eníláwàání ósù
Tó ní n wá sè ’mòle
Níbo lọ ní n gbé Yèyé mi sì?
(Badejo 1996: 150)

Where do you want me to cast My Great Mother?
You with wretched turbans
Who want to convert me to Islam
Where do you want me to cast My Great Mother?
This strong critique of exclusivist Islamic ideology is an attempt to protect Òṣogbo’s religious harmony in an atmosphere of increasingly pluralistic value systems. The critique of Islamic militancy is not a rejection of Islam. Indeed, most Òṣun participants and devotees of Òṣun profess to be Muslims.

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

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Mejéjì ẹ̀ló maa se</th>
<th>We shall practice both together</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Kò báájẹ̀ o</td>
<td>It is not wrong</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ká s’úlúwálá</td>
<td>To perform ablution (a Muslim ritual)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ka wọ́dó Òmọ</td>
<td>And to go to Òṣun River to seek for children</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mejéjì ẹ̀ló maa se</td>
<td>We shall do both.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Ogungbile 1998b: 136)

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

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

References Cited


