

YEMANJÁ

Oxalá has two wives. The oldest one, who is unattractive, is Nanan—the mother of Omolu, Loko and Oxumare. Nanan is identified with Sant'Anna, mother of Maria. She lives alone in the depths of a river in West Africa among the seaweeds which are her hair. Sometimes Nanan is considered to be the mother of all beings. However, she is not loved and respected as much as feared and disliked and is paid homage to for these reasons. When she descends [i.e., incorporates through means of the possession trance in her initiated medium], many times she dances behind her three children. Her colors are [dark] blue and [opaque] white symbolizing her old age and senility and the water in which she lives.

The youngest and most beloved wife of Oxalá is Iemanjá [Yemanjá/Yemojá], identified with the Virgin Mary. Voluptuous, she is represented with vast breasts and large, sexually potent buttocks. As she also lives in the waters near Oxalá, Iemanjá's colors are [crystal] white and [light] blue. She is well loved among women, especially the stout ones. ... [While] Oxum is believed to live on the surface of the waters, and Nanan in the depths, Iemanjá lives in the middle.

Although Iemanjá possesses some of the caprices of feminine vanity, she does not have the same [extravagant] requirements of Oxum. She is especially docile and tractable, complacent and accommodating and causes gentle breezes on fishing trips and tranquility within the family. ... Even though she is confused with European or indigenous [Indian] myths, she does not have the voluptuousness of the mermaids or the perversity of the *iaras* [mythological river sirens] (Seljan 1967:39).

In Candomblé Nagô mythology Yemanjá is considered the mother of all Orixá except the children of Nanan. This may be explained by a myth in which Yemanjá is sexually molested by her son, Aganju, and while running away, trips and falls, giving simultaneous birth to many Orixá and the Ogun River in Nigeria (Nina Rodrigues [1896]1935: 222-223). In Nigeria Yemanjá (there Yemojá) is a mythical queen, the source of the Ogun River, and the wife of King Okere of Saki (a town in the Yoruba interior; pc: Wandé Abimbola, April 4, 1983).⁴⁴ Although the concept of Yemanjá as a queen in her former life seems to be superseded by the other myth, Yemanjá is conceptually depicted as a queen in art.

Yemanjá in Bahia is amalgamated with the Virgin Mary of the Immaculate Conception. In this aspect she is known as Nossa Senhora de Conceição da Praia and is the female patron saint of Bahia, fishermen, and business enterprises (Tavares:1964: 4-14). The church dedicated to this saint was painstakingly built with stones and tiles brought by ship from Portugal. The adoration of Yemanjá has evolved into a national cult.⁴⁵

Brazilian images of Yemanjá vary—for some she is a mermaid with long flowing hair, for others a blue-eyed woman rising out of the sea, dressed in a blue gown with silver stars and a silver crown atop a head of cascading black hair. As Nossa Senhora de Conceição she stands on the heads of angels, wearing a long dress and a gold or silver crown. Her eyes and hair are black and her skin pure white.

December 8 is the Roman Catholic holy day for Nossa Senhora de Conceição and is shared by Yemanjá. On this day, after an early Mass, there is a huge procession from the church when the image of the saint is paraded through the streets (Fig. 10). A few days earlier, the area around the church and the Mercado Modelo are decorated with colorful lights and streamers in much the same manner as for Carnival. Hundreds of temporary wooden shacks bearing names of the Orixá (e.g., *barraca Yansan*) or Christian proverbs serve as bars and eateries for thousands of people who participate in this street party (*feira de largo*). A characteristic of Bahia which attracts tourists from all parts of Brazil and from other countries is this coincidence of



Figure 10. Sculpture of Nossa Senhora de Conceição in a procession after High Mass on her holy day, Bahia, December 8, 1981.

street festivals with annual religious holidays, masses, and processions of saints. This festival (as with Carnival and others) is characterized by an overwhelming number of participants, a fact that was noted as early as 1859, twenty-nine years before the abolition of slavery within Brazil, by a German traveler:

A small procession came out of the Church of Nossa Senhora de Praia, on December 8, causing great excitement among the passers-by especially because of the Blacks [in the procession] who produced the most unique impression. It was a great day for the people of color. The Black men and women enthusiastically danced in front of the church and in the streets. ... [It was] an original, genuine African picture. I was unable to force myself to refrain from looking at [the] Black women ... some perfect beauties from the Costa da Mina [the area along the African coast, including Nigeria, Ghana, P.R. Benin]. Some of them exquisitely carved in basalt, in complete negligence, with the bust semi-nude on one side, splendidly erect, rounded ... flexible shapes of a brilliant black, many with bare shoulders. They displayed rich necklaces of coral, genuinely African, with gold decorations, around their black necks. Many of these wore thick gold chains adorning their waists and their fore-arms covered with bracelets up to their elbows. It appears to me, however, that the majority of them were carefully dressed in a manner consisting of a turban wrapped around the head, a heavily embroi-

dered white scarf, a finely embroidered shirt and a pleated, fringed full round skirt (Verger 1981a:74).

This quotation is important in that it reports the early association of Africans with Nossa Senhora de Conceição and suggests that syncretism with Yemanjá had occurred well before the abolition of slavery in 1888. It further notes that the prototypes for the Candomblé liturgical uniform were already in use. It seems likely that the African participants were both slaves and freed Blacks. The contemporary festival is remarkably similar to the 1859 event described above. The participants are still predominantly of African descent. The crowds are intense, the music is deafening, and the revelry and *samba* dancing last until dawn.

An annual festival called "Presents for Yemanjá" (*presentes de yemanjá*) is celebrated on February 2 on the mainland and on the island of Itaparica. Although this day is the holiday of Nossa Senhora das Candeias, who is syncretized with Oxum, it has been appropriated by the devotees of Yemanjá. On the mainland the festival includes an authentic Candomblé ritual, a semi-religious presentation of gifts by thousands of devotees, and a huge street party. The ritual can be performed at any large body of water (e.g., the Dique de Tororó, a manmade lake, or anywhere on the Bahian coast). The location of the *presentes de yemanjá* which draws the largest crowds and which I documented and participated in is Rio Vermelho around the small yellow church of Sant'Anna. Before 5 a.m. on the festival day, there is a private ritual offering (*ebo*) to Yemanjá by *adoxu* from different Candom-



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blés. The *ebo* consists of boiled white corn mixed with palm oil and onion and is considered the favorite food of Yemanjá in Candomblé Nagô. A temporary structure is built of wooden posts and wide palm leaves. This houses the drummers and some of the initiates who sing Yemanjá's praises and dance in an attempt to evoke her presence. In a small house near the shore, fishermen clear space for the thousands of individual gifts in huge wicker baskets (*cestas*) which they will take to sea. As the sun rises a long line of devotees begins to form. This annual ritual can correctly be said to transcend all class and racial barriers. The reasons for this may be found in the syncretism of Yemanjá with the Virgin Mary. This explanation was supported by most of the upper- and middle-class participants (the devotees were mostly women and children) whom I interviewed while they stood in line to offer gifts. It was their belief that they were giving to and obtaining blessings from both entities. Each gift served a dual purpose and reaped double spiritual benefits. Offerings included face powder, cheap or fine perfume, all kinds of flowers with white and pastel colors predominating, combs, mirrors, soaps, ribbons, and other articles that a woman might desire. Some carried elaborate floral arrangements in baskets with dolls, and I even saw a boat made entirely of flowers with a doll (representing Yemanjá) on top. Each gift was accompanied by a note of thanks or a request for aid. Usual concerns were love, employment, control of a philandering husband, children, or aspects of well-being. Some of the devotees went directly onto the rocks or into the water to pray and offer their individual gifts.

On the island of Itaparica the annual *presentes de yemanjá* honors both Oxum and Yemanjá. The primary participants in this ritual are Egun (cult of the ancestors) priests, their wives, children, and relatives, and a few spectators peripherally affiliated with the cult or coincidentally on the beach. I participated in and documented a ritual held at Bela Vista, a *barracão* for Egun festivals. During the day Egun of Oxum and Egun of Yemanjá appear to bless presents. This is followed by a procession of *adoxu* dressed in white liturgical gowns usually reserved for public festivals for the Orixá, carrying baskets on their heads containing gifts and floral offerings. Drummers singing praises (*oriki*) and songs accompany the procession down the hill to the beach. The *adoxu* traverse the shore several times and then are assisted by Egun priests (*amuixan* and *ojé*) into boats. Drummers, singers, and relatives also board the boats, and the gifts are rowed out to deep sea to be deposited on the third wave. The songs often

evoke Oxum and Yemanjá who possess some of the *adoxu*. This is an indication that the gods are pleased and have accepted the gifts. When the boats return a large crowd accompanies the Orixá, priests, and drummers to the church square. The Orixá dance until dusk at which time the *adoxu* are taken away to have the trance lifted. A purely secular festivity occurs at nightfall. The ritual must be sanctioned by the ancestors, as noted by Didi dos Santos, artist, scholar, and Alapini of the Egun cult:

Annually, on the island of Itaparica, 15-30 days before February 2 ... approximately January 17, the devotees or members of the Terreiro Ilé Agboulá, the *terreiro* of Egunguns meet there and offer *ossé* [weekly or monthly sacrifice] and a gift of *acaça* [white solidified corn gruel] and candles for the Egungun Baba Bakabaka, the patron king of the *terreiro*, on Bela Vista, Ponto de Areia. They then wait for the result to be given by the Egun, after which the *ojé* [people who work with Egun] make the delivery of the *ossé*. Afterwards, they hear the voice of Egun, giving them the direct authorization to initiate the festivities of Oxum, Mother of the Water, syncretized with N.S. das Candeias [and Yemanjá]. After blessings and prayers to Olorum [the supreme god] for peace for every one present and the successful, peaceful and harmonious completion of the festival, Egungun leaves (in Seljan 1967:34).

The origin of the *presentes de yemanjá* festival in Brazil is clearly Yoruba. Many researchers, including me, have witnessed and participated in very similar rituals in Abeokuta, a center of Yemojá (Yemanjá) worship in Africa. The processional destination is the Ogun River, the depths of which harbor Yemojá (pc:Abogun Yemojá, Ibara, May 4, 1983). While most ritual visits to the river are for the purpose of replacing shrine water, offerings (*ebo*) of Yemojá's favorite food are also made (boiled white corn mixed with shea-nut butter [*ori*] and heads and organs of sacrificed animals). Devotees carry these gifts to the river on their heads. The frequent occurrence of possession by the Orixá at this time is interpreted as a sign of Yemojá's pleasure and acceptance of the gifts.

In Brazil Orixá Yemanjá manifests herself in her *adoxu* during rituals and sacrifices (*matanças*) which precede the public festivals of the Candomblé. A formal ritual costume is worn by the Orixá when she is brought out to dance and reenact

myths. The outfit is a synthesis of African and European elements which have symbolic functions in Candomblé Nagô (Pl. III). The ensemble varies only slightly for different Candomblés and consists of a silver-colored metal crown (often fringed with beads), bead necklace, blouse, skirt, fan and/or sword, starched undershirts, and silver-colored bracelets, armlets, and skirt bangles.

The crown (*ade*; Fig. 11) is the object most closely associated with Yoruba kings in West Africa. Yemanjá's metal crown probably recalls Yoruba royalty transposed to a female goddess. It represents Yemanjá's sovereignty over the sea and, according to some, all water. The crown appears in Europeanized versions of Yemanjá such as Dona Janaina which is so popular on Bahian chromolithographs.

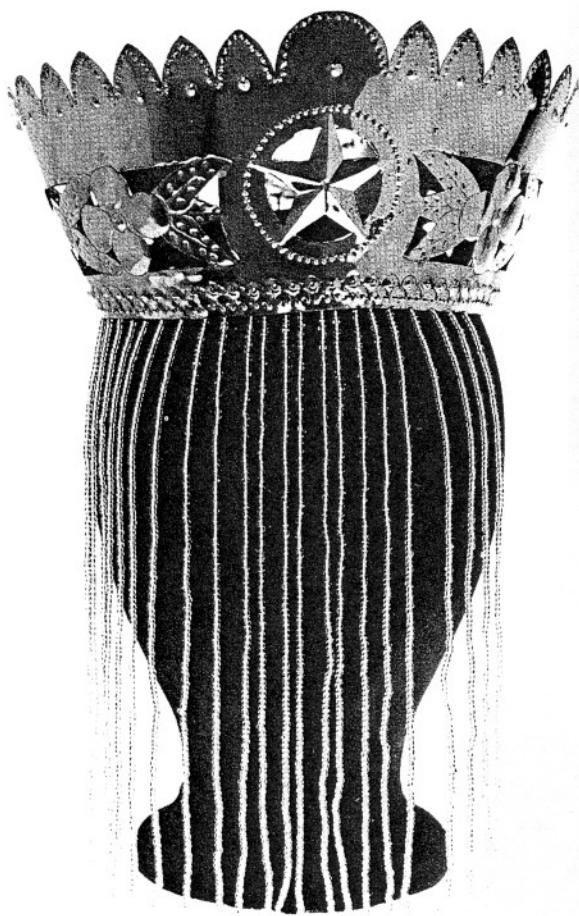


Figure 11. Beaded crown (*ade*). Tin, glass. Diameter: 21.5 cm. UCLA MCH X83-536a. Museum purchase.

Images of the Nossa Senhora de Conceição de Praia syncretized with Yemanjá also bear a similar crown (Fig. 10). The crown may also refer to the earthly interpretation of Yemanjá as queen and wife of Okere of Saki. This would, however, be a rather free Afro-Brazilian translation of a male Yoruba symbol. The fringe of tiny crystal beads that often characterizes Yemanjá's crown is symbolic of water and serves to veil the face of the Orixá. Similar fringes are found on the beaded crowns of Yoruba kings. According to Thompson:

the crown incarnates the intuition of the royal ancestral force, the revelation of great moral insight in the person of the king, and the glitter of aesthetic experience. ... Indeed, the prerogative of beaded objects is restricted to those who represent the gods and with whom the gods communicate: kings, priests, diviners and native doctors (1972: 227-229).

In this context the beaded veil may indicate the presence of the supernatural, visually communicating Orixá status. Only those Yoruba kings who can trace direct descent from Odudua (now worshiped as an Orisa) may wear the beaded fringed veil, a symbol of supernatural kingship. Only incarnated Orixá wear the *ade yemanjá* which symbolizes the force and royalty of the spiritual presence. According to Mellor (in Thompson 1972), "... the beaded crown with veil is the essential sign of kingship." In the Candomblé Nagô the only Orixá who wear the beaded veil are Oxalufon (Obatala in his aspect as father of all Orixá and rightful king of Ile Ife⁴⁶), Yemanjá (mother of all Orixá except Loko, Omolu, and Oxumare), and Oxum (queen of rivers, fresh water, and fecundity in her role as Iyami Aje or witch [Verger 1981b]). These three are linked more deeply with mythical royalty and power than any other Orixá in the pantheon except for Xango, and the beaded fringe veil may symbolize this relationship.

The fan (*abebe*; Figs. 12,13) of silver-colored metal is another important attribute of Yemanjá. It refers to her status and beauty as the cherished younger wife of Oxalá. Although I did not find round fans in actual use in Ibara (the Yemojá shrine in Abeokuta), they are mentioned in a verse from the ancient literary corpus of Ifa as a symbol of Yemojá (Thompson 1983:73). There Yemojá's power to bring peace and coolness to the world is expressed through the back and forth movements of the *abebe*. Bahians use the *abebe yemanjá* in ritual dance to expel negative forces (D. dos Santos n.d.:94). The *abebe* and the *ade* are kept in the altar for Yemanjá when not in use. The clear beads (*ileki*)

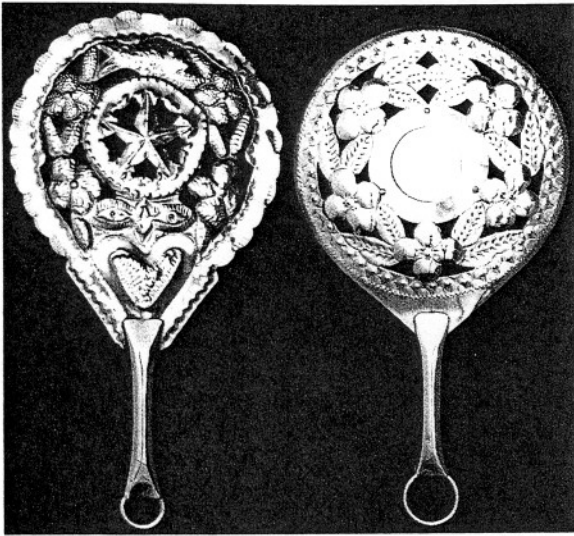
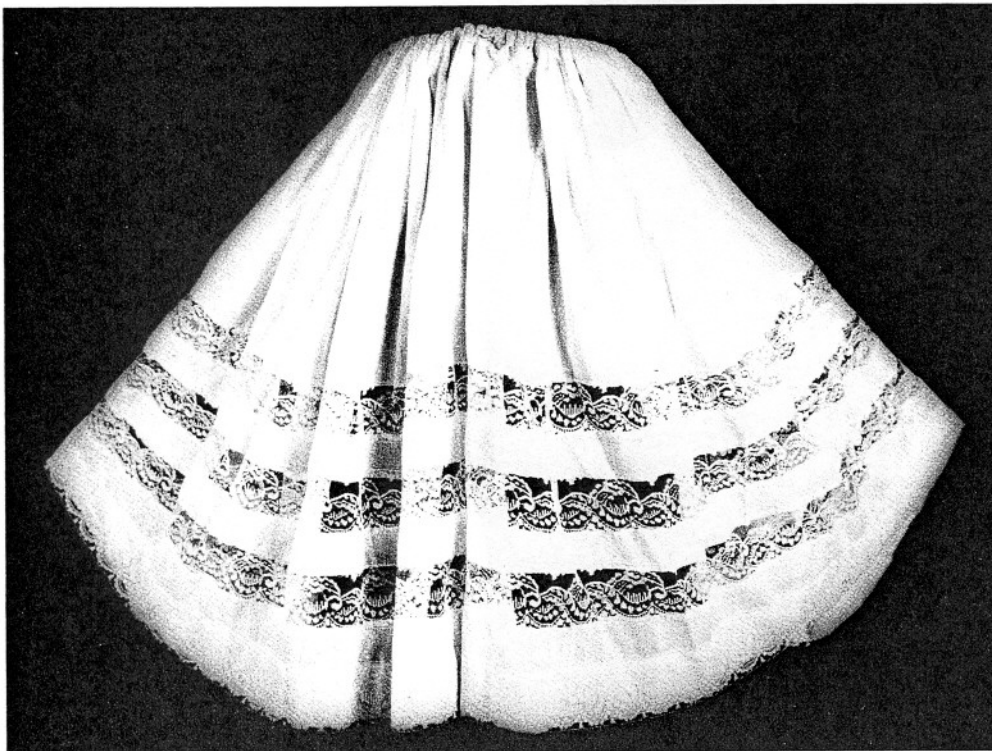


Figure 12. Fan (*abebe*). Tin, mirror. Height: 28.9 cm. UCLA MCH X83-536b. Museum purchase.

Figure 13. Fan (*abebe*). The central mirror refers to the vanity of Yemanjá and also symbolizes her cool, calm nature. Copper, mirror. Height: 30.8 cm. UCLA MCH 83-520. Anonymous gift.

Figure 14. Petticoat (*anágua*). Heavily starched cotton, synthetic lace. Width: 91.5 cm. UCLA MCH LX82-856. Promised gift of Mrs. Elizabeth Lloyd Davis and Mr. and Mrs. Richard Rogers.



that Yemanjá wears are the general insignia of the Orixá and are worn by initiates in single strands. For festival use, twelve- or sixteen-strand necklaces are worn. Tiny beads are usually secured at intervals by large oblong crystal beads. A single necklace of very large beads may also be worn but only for formal public occasions. Crystal symbolizes the clarity and transparency of water, the natural element associated with Yemanjá, and the coolness and purity of her nature (also symbolized by white metals such as silver).

The full transparent skirt (*saia*) is made of very expensive material and is reminiscent of the full skirts worn by wives of slave masters. This type of skirt is depicted in many eighteenth and nineteenth-century illustrations of European and American dress (De Brett 1940). This mode was undoubtedly copied by Bahian upper-class wives and *mulata* mistresses of slave owners and was apparently appropriated by Africans for festival and Candomblé use as early as 1859. According to the illustrations, slaves and liberated Blacks wore a different style of skirt which barely reached the lower leg. The *saia yemanjá* is made of six meters of cloth and can be decorated with rosettes, tiers of ruffles, flowers, and ribbons in the manner of eighteenth and nineteenth-century models. The extreme fullness is achieved by using two or more petticoats (*anágua*s; Fig. 14) made of very thin muslin

(*murin*), edged with a border of lace ten or more centimeters wide. These petticoats are heavily starched using an age-old technique employed by slaves who did this work for their mistresses. The process is very time-consuming and difficult, and the skill is passed down from mother to daughter. In the Candomblé where I lived, only two women knew how to starch "properly;" that is, not too much which would leave the *anágua* very stiff, nor too little, which would result in a limp petticoat and therefore be *feia* (ugly). *Anáguas* were individually starched in a large black iron pot over a wood fire built in the courtyard of the *adoxu*'s house. Chunks of starch were dissolved in boiling water and stirred vigorously to prevent lumping. The *anágua* was thoroughly immersed for a substantial period of time, pulled out with a heavy stick, and suspended over the pot to cool before being wrung. After drying on the grass in the sun, the petticoat was ironed—an arduous job requiring much pressure due to the stiffness. At the time of my research, the usual price for starching one *anágua* was \$1,000 to \$1,500 *cruzeiros*, an exorbitant sum considering that the minimum monthly wage at the time was \$20,000 *cruzeiros*, the equivalent of \$35.00. All the initiates who could pay or barter for the service had their petticoats starched because it resulted in beauty and prestige.⁴⁷ The petticoats were carefully put on and taken off and were worn for as long as possible, frequently until noticeably dirty. The pleasing aesthetic effect of the Orixá's skirt (*saia de Orixá*) was definitely dependent upon appropriate fullness.

The blouse (*blusa*; Fig. 15) of the *axo yemanjá* (costume of Yemanjá) is called *bordado* after the embroidery technique which embellishes it. Cut-and-drawn thread floral patterns are painstakingly embroidered along the edges in a very slow and tedious process. The cost of this garment varies according to the intricacy of design and ranges from \$50 to \$300 for a blouse or skirt entirely covered with *bordado*. Liturgical vestments made using this technique are highly prestigious and are usually worn by the *iyálorixá* or very high-status *ebomin*. I have known women to save for a year in order to purchase one piece of *bordado*.

The two scarves (*ojá*) follow an African antecedent when worn wrapped on the head. Wrapping the *ojá* around the upper torso and tying it in a big bow on the front of the chest is an indigenous innovation; there seem to be no African nor European prototypes for this style.

The chain at the waist and the metal symbols hanging from it are called *pinca* (*iba* in Yoruba; Fig.

16). They are earned only after the seven-year *obrigação* marking the transition from *iyawo* to *ebomin*. Silver-colored objects signify the Orixá Yemanjá, brass or gold-colored objects represent Oxum, and copper or copper-colored pieces are reserved for Yansan. It is believed that the metal's color reflects the nature of the Orixá represented: Yemanjá, cool; Oxum, warm; Yansan, hot. All silver-colored items on the *pinca yemanjá* are symbols of Yemanjá's favorite material possessions: combs, fans, mirrors, slippers.

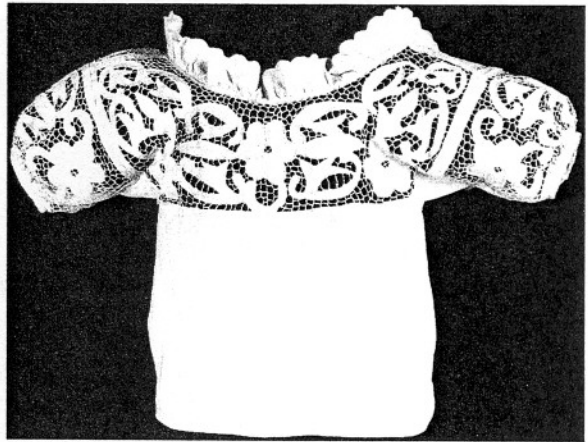


Figure 15. Blouse. Made using the elaborate technique known as *bordado*. Cotton. Width: 81.3 cm. UCLA MCH X83-564. Gift of Dr. and Mrs. Seymour Bird.



Figure 16. *Pinca* (also called *ibá*). Worn at the waist as part of the ceremonial dress of Orixá Yemanjá. Tin. Length: 36.9 cm. UCLA MCH X83-536c. Museum purchase.

The silver-colored sword (*espada*; Fig. 17) represents the aspect of Yemanjá cultivated at Ilé Axé Opô Afonjá called Iyá Tanan; this Orixá is believed to reside in wells 200 or more feet in depth. Iyá Tanan is symbolized in Afonjá by green crystal beads, a color symbolic of Yemanjá which I have not seen anywhere else except in the Egun *terreiro* on Itaparica which is linked to Afonjá. According to the head priestess, this variation of Yemanjá comes from the Grunci (probably the Gurunsi of Upper Volta) nation⁴⁸ and is characterized by a personality which rapidly alternates between hotheaded aggressiveness (symbolized by the *espada*), denoting a warrior aspect, and gentleness, protectiveness, and motherliness (symbolized by the *abebe*), denoting her more feminine aspect. Iyá Tanan (Yemanjá) is regarded as mother of all Orixá not borne by Nanan. In this capacity she must be invoked along with Oxalá during all phases of initiation, especially those involving evocation of trance (creation of a new being) and the ceremony associated with the relearning of routine tasks and behaviors (*quitanda*). It is interesting that as important as Yemanjá is in Afro-Brazilian religion and Luso-Brazilian culture, there are very few people in whom she chooses to manifest, compared to the great number of initiates for Orixá such as Ogun, Yansan, and Oxossi. There are only one or two *adoxu yemanjá* in any Candomblé, and mediums of this type are sometimes actively recruited.⁴⁹

In the shrine of Yemanjá in Afonjá, the residence of Iyá Tanan is symbolized by a round well rim approximately 92 cm high and 153 cm in diameter, made of cement and encrusted with cowries and seashells.⁵⁰ It is located in the shrine of Yemanjá

(*ilê yemanjá*) which consists of two rooms adjoined to the northern facade of the shrine (house) of Oxalá (*casa de oxalá*). The proximity of Yemanjá's shrine to Oxalá's may symbolize their mythical relationship as wife and husband and as mother and father of most Orixá. I know of no other shrines juxtaposed in this way.

Participants in private rituals (*ossé*) and sacrifices (*matanças*) at this shrine must be initiates. During the ceremonies they remain in the outer room kneeling with their heads resting on their hands. The inner room (the actual shrine area) is where sacrifices of Yemanjá's favorite animals (duck and guinea hen) are made and where divination with *obi* (an African fruit also cultivated in Bahia⁵¹) is performed. The only persons allowed into the inner shrine are the *iyálorixá*, her assistant (Iyá Kekere), the men who perform the sacrifice (*axogun*; women cannot shed blood), *adoxu yemanjá* (usually of the *ebomin* level), and the manifested Orixá Yemanjá. *Ossé* and *matanças* are performed at 5 or 6 a.m. on the day of the great annual festival. Spiritually, they are very important since the *axe yemanjá* is activated and redistributed by means of these rituals.

When Orixá Yemanjá danced in the *barracão*, I noticed many spectators and initiates eagerly awaiting an embrace from her. She does this by first opening her arms widely and then closing them tightly around the recipient, touching the initiate's chest with the left, then with the right shoulder. I could not ascertain the significance of the gesture beyond the fact that recipients believed they were given the spiritual force (*axe*) of the Orixá (pc:Nivalda, *abian* Oxaguian, June 22, 1981).



Figure 17. Sword (*espada*). Symbolizes the warrior aspect of Yemanjá known as Iyá Tanan. Tin. Length: 33.6 cm. UCLA MCH X83-524. Anonymous gift.