



Osun across the
Waters

A YORUBA GODDESS IN AFRICA
AND THE AMERICAS

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editors

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CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

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The child of Ife where the sun rises
The mother who gives a bounteous gift
The tender-hearted one
The source of water
The child of Ijesa
The water to whom the king prostrates to receive a gift
— *oriki Ọ̀ṣun*, Ode Remo 1992¹

Ọ̀ṣun across the Waters

Ọ̀ṣun is a brilliant deity whose imagery and worldwide devotion demand broad and deep scholarly reflection. The purpose of collecting the essays for this volume is not only to document the historical and cultural significance of Yoruba traditions, but to emphasize their plural nature, their multivocality both in Africa and the Americas. We hope the effect will be prismatic, freeing the representation of Yoruba religion in general and Ọ̀ṣun traditions in particular from the constricting views which have prevailed. Most previous accounts of Yoruba traditions have been content to characterize Ọ̀ṣun as “river goddess,” “fertility goddess,” “the African Venus.” These ethnocentric and reductive views fail to reflect the centrality and authority of Ọ̀ṣun in Yoruba religious thought and practice. Neither do they convey the multidimensionality of her power: political, economic, divinatory, maternal, natural, therapeutic. This volume reveals the diversity of aspects of Ọ̀ṣun layered in any single tradition as well as the multiple traditions of Ọ̀ṣun thriving in Yorubaland and the Americas.

We are interested in seeing the dynamism and texture special to *òrìṣà Ọ̀ṣun*. The contributors to the ground-breaking *Africa's Ogun*, edited by Sandra Barnes, explored the complex nature of Ọ̀gún, the *òrìṣà* who transforms life through iron and technology (Barnes 1997). *Ọ̀ṣun across the Waters* continues this exploration of Yoruba religion by documenting what “Ọ̀ṣun religion” looks like. Indeed the phrase “Ọ̀ṣun religion” is a provocative translation of the Yoruba as revealed in the conversation of two Yoruba men when they visited the home of an Ọ̀ṣun

priestess in New York. When one inquired at the doorway, “What is the religion (*ẹ̀ṣin*) of this house?” The other replied, “*ẹ̀ṣin* Òṣun.”

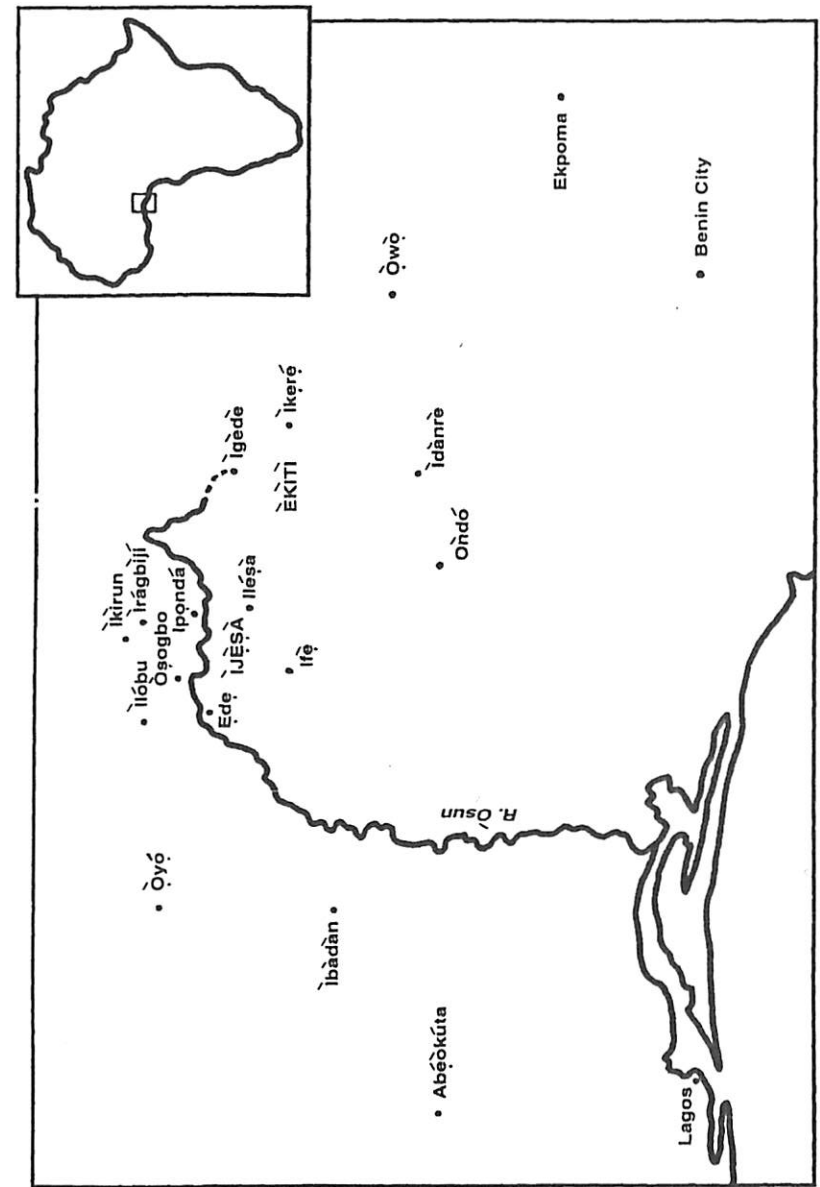
Òṣun’s themes can be seen in counterpoint to those of Ògún. Both are transformers: Ògún transforms through technology; and Òṣun through the simplest of natural substances, water, and by the mystery of birth. Both are creators of civilization and urban life, Ògún by creating the iron tools of agriculture and conquest, Òṣun by creating the wealth of cowries, and the court and shrine artistry of brass and bronze. Òṣun is known as a “cool,” peaceful deity and Ògún as a “hot” warrior *òrìṣà*. Yet both rise in defense of their devotees and conquer — Ògún by the knife or the careening truck, Òṣun by the often silent, inexorable movement of water. Both heal: Òṣun by water; and Ògún by the herbal expertise of his hunters and the ability of his priests to facilitate difficult births and dissipate life-threatening blockages in the body. Òṣun and Ògún present dynamic examples of the resilience and renewed importance of traditional Yoruba images in negotiating spiritual experience, social identity, and political power in contemporary Africa and the African diaspora.

The seventeen contributors to *Òṣun across the Waters* trace the special dimensions of Òṣun religion as it appears through multiple disciplines in multiple cultural contexts. Tracing the extent of Òṣun traditions, we go across the waters and back again. Òṣun traditions continue to grow and change as they flow and return from their sources in Africa and the Americas.

Òṣun the Source

Òṣun’s name means source. It is related to the word *orìṣùn*, the source of a river, a people, or of children. The word Òṣun can be glossed as that which runs, seeps, flows, moves as water does. Òṣun is the perpetually renewing source of life, modeling in *ṣẹ̀lẹ̀rú*, the appearance of sweet water from dry ground, a mode of hope and agency in new and difficult situations, a way out of no way that has made life possible for her devotees in West Africa and the Americas. Rowland Abiodun, David Ogungbile, and Diedre Badejo describe Òṣun’s elemental power as water to make life possible and to preserve life for creation. Mei-Mei Sanford documents the continued acknowledgment of Òṣun’s watery potency by Nigerian Christians, citing an Aladura leader who identifies Òṣun and *Yẹ̀mọ̀ja* with the uncreated waters of Genesis.

Òṣun may also be understood as the source in other ways. As the hair plaiter with the beaded comb, she controls the outer head and the inner head, or destiny. She is the seventeenth *òrìṣà* to come from heaven to earth, and without her the other *òrìṣà* are powerless and human life is impossible. Abiodun tells us that she is also the seventeenth *Odù*, indispensable to the process of divination. Òṣun is the owner of *Ejẹ̀rindínlógún*, sixteen cowries, a form of divination distinct from Òrúnmílá’s *Ifá* and widely practiced by women as well as men. The narrative of Òṣun as “married” to Òrúnmílá and the injunction that the *babaláwo*’s “wife” be



Detail of Òṣun sites in Africa. Map by Mei-Mei Sanford, drawing courtesy of David Hagen.

a priestess of Ọṣun, understood in the context of the testimony of elder diviners of both systems, reveals a thoroughgoing vision not only of complementarity but of primacy. *Babaláwo* cannot divine without Ọṣun because, as Wande Abimbola argues in his essay, her *Ẹ̀rindínlógún* are the source of their *Ifá*.

The Ijesa ọ̀riṣà

The best-known source of Ọṣun traditions arises in Ijesa country in a region of West Africa that since 1991 has been known as Ọṣun State, Nigeria.² Though Ijesa traditions have been fundamental in shaping the image of Ọṣun worldwide, the deity is recognized by her devotees in any locality and she takes on images appropriate to them. The most well-known narratives about the first encounter between human beings and Ọṣun are set in the Ijesa settlement of Osogbo. Migrants from Ijesa settled on the banks of the river that has been named after her and have sacrificed to her there ever since. Virtually all of the people of Osogbo are drawn into the annual celebration of Ọṣun's role in the life of the city. Two essays in this volume examine the festival at Osogbo where the pact of mutual support between Ọṣun and the city's *ọ̀ba* (sovereign) is ceremonially renewed. Diedre Badejo explores the ways in which devotion to Ọṣun makes explicit the implicit power of Osogbo women in social, economic, and political spheres. Jacob Olupona relates how the royal house of Osogbo finds in the image of Ọṣun a way to negotiate power among the many constituencies of the city to work toward a civil society. The Osogbo festival is the largest event in Nigeria dedicated to a traditional deity and has become an international tourist attraction drawing thousands to witness the grandeur of the festival and give praise to Ọṣun.

Though the Osogbo festival is the most well-known center of Ọṣun devotion, there are significant Ọṣun festivals in other cities of Nigeria and other parts of the world. Some Ọṣun centers are ancient Yoruba towns, named as roads or aspects of Ọṣun in the divination verses of *Ẹ̀rindínlógún* and *Ifá*: Iponda, Ewuji, Ijumu, and Oro.³ Ọṣun traditions can be traced as well by examining the distribution of brass arts associated with her worship. In this volume Cornelius O. Adepegba examines the styles and traditions surrounding the ritual use of Ọṣun's brass objects in Ijesa, as well as Ife, Oyo, and Ekiti. There are important Ọṣun shrines in Iragbiji, Iponda, Igede, Ibadan, Oyo, Ijebu, Ekiti, and Abeokuta, as well as Rio de Janeiro, Salvador da Bahia, Havana, and New York. Everywhere Ọṣun is worshiped her flowing water appears. Devotees in every town have their own Ọṣun river, stream, or spring. In Yemoja's own city of Abeokuta, an Ọṣun priestly lineage and an Ọṣun river flourish.⁴

With the catastrophic mass enslavement of Yoruba men and women in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, Ọṣun traditions were carried across the Atlantic and redeveloped in Cuba and Brazil. Under conditions of enslavement and cultural marginalization, Ọṣun traditions became a key feature

of African-Atlantic strategies of adaptation and resistance to European values and spirituality. Joseph Murphy looks at the ways that Ọṣun came to be identified with the patron saint of Cuba. Ysamur Flores-Peña shows how the different blendings of Yoruba and Spanish aesthetic traditions among the Cuban *Lucumí* could act as "confrontation weapons in the hands of the deity [Ọṣun] and her altar makers."

Yoruba traditions are currently experiencing a renaissance in the United States. Spurred by the influx of Caribbean immigrants since the 1960s, tens of thousands of Americans are embracing Ọṣun as the key to successful living and spiritual development. Rachel Harding listens to African American priestesses who have found in Ọṣun ways to connect to their religious roots and build a new spirituality that fulfills their quest to live as strong Black women.

The celebration of Ọṣun traditions in the Americas has spread well beyond the circles of her immediate devotees. The Odunde festival in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, was begun in 1975 and has become a city institution that draws thousands to worship at the Schuylkill River. Ieda dos Santos tells us how "everyone is Oxum's" in Bahia, Brazil, where the *mae d'agua* festivals for her and *Le-manja* are the most popular Afro-Brazilian celebrations of all. In Miami every September 8th at the shrine of the Cuban saint, Our Lady of Charity, hundreds of devotees of Ochún gather to make offerings at the shore of Biscayne Bay.

The connection between Ijesa and Ọṣun is well known in the Americas. We find *cabildos* or chartered clubs in nineteenth-century Cuba that identified themselves as Ijesa. Today there are special Ijesa drums for Ochún in Matanzas that sound distinctive rhythms for her worship. In Brazil, Ijesa rhythms are the definitive beat of carnival troupes called "afoxés" who adapted Oxum rhythms to public performance. Afoxés and Bloco Afros were the most visible and popular expressions of a reassertion of Afro-Brazilian identity in Bahia in the nineteenth-seventies and it is consonant with Ọṣun's power to find her the pulse of what might be called the "black pride" movement of Brazil.

Aláde: "The Crowned Woman"

Ọṣun is praised as a crowned woman, and one who "dances to take the crown without asking" (Verger 1959: 426). The former *Àtáója* (ruler of Osogbo) Adenle praised her in Ijesa fashion as the great *ọ̀ba* of the water, and elaborating, described her palace and courtiers resplendent in the deep pools of the river (Verger 1959: 408). The Ijesa Empire, where Ọṣun is hailed as *Ọ̀ba Ijesa*, has a history of women sovereigns, counting at least five women rulers among the thirty-nine *Owá* whose names are known. The number of women rulers in Ijesa may, in fact, be considerably higher.

When the Nigerian historian Bolanle Awe was told of Sandra Barnes's characterization of Ọ̀gún as an "empire builder," she declared, "Ọ̀gún is an empire

builder as well.”⁵ In Osogbo and the other towns where she is the tutelary deity, Ọṣun is a warrior as well as a peacemaker. She carries a cooling brass fan in one hand and a brass cutlass in the other. Ọṣun is a fierce defender. A praise song collected by Pierre Verger in Ipetu says: “Owner of the knife, I take refuge by your side,” and another from Osogbo says: “We can stay in the world without fear” (Verger 1959: 429, 422).

In towns that Ọṣun protects, the well-being of the city and exercise of sovereignty is dependent on the pacts that she makes with the people and with the sovereign. In Osogbo people sing: “Who does not know that it is Ọṣun Osogbo who enables the *oba* to rule Osogbo?”⁶ In Iragbiji, another strong Ọṣun town, it is the senior priestesses and priests of Ọṣun who install the Iragbiji (*oba*). Without their active consent, he cannot reign. Adeleke Sangoyoyin, an Iragbiji *oriṣà* priest, averred: “No *oba* can rule without Ọṣun.”⁷

Ọṣun can be understood as the basis of sovereignty because of her immense power and her ownership of the cool air and cool water essential to life. In this aspect, she is the “great water to whom the ruler prostrates to receive a gift” for his people (Sanford 1997: 184). In the Americas, sovereignty is a central metaphor of initiation and priesthood, and coronation is impossible without a trip to the river. A New York Ochún priestess has said, “The river is the entry into *santo*,” life in the *orichas*.⁸

Another reason that Ọṣun is the source and condition of the *oba* exercising rulership is that she is the leader of the *Àjé*, the people, particularly elderly women, who use power secretly. “The Mothers,” as they are commonly known, are imaged as birds and it is their female bird power that is suggested in the birds that surmount Yoruba crowns. They indicate that the *oba* rules with the power of the Mothers or under their watchful scrutiny. Medicines that activate the ruler’s potency are placed inside the crown by elderly priestesses. These medicines are so powerful that the sight of them would cause the sovereign to die. *Ọba* William Adefona Ayeni of Ila-Orangun has said, “Without ‘the Mothers,’ I could not rule.”⁹

Ọṣun and Religious Complexity

Ọṣun’s identity as the source shows her at the heart of Yoruba ideas of divinity. Diviners can’t divine without Ọṣun; sovereigns can’t rule without her; the *oriṣà* can’t build the world without her arts. She is the ever-renewing source below the surface of the visible who makes renewal possible. She is thus able to make herself anew whenever she comes to consciousness and she is made anew wherever her devotees re-envision her.

This dynamism is characteristic of the nature of Ọṣun as an *oriṣà*. In this volume we step past the crude systemizing that reduces Ọṣun to “river deity” or “goddess of love” to embrace a complex vision of multidimensional divinity.

There are simply too many aspects of Ọṣun to categorize her in single or simple ways. She has multiple iconographic and ritual media that connote her to her initiates. These are found in the many stories told about her, in the songs sung at her ceremonies, and in the furniture of her shrines. In each locale across the waters and within individual devotees, Ọṣun is recognized in these symbols that may have continuous and discontinuous allusions to each other. The different identities of Ọṣun may flow into one another or arise spontaneously to the surface “from nowhere.” She is water, river, fish, fan, mirror, brass (gold, copper, coral, yellow, money), honey, pumpkin, peacock, vulture, beautiful hair, comb, perfume, and many other things known and yet to be found. In this volume, Robert Farris Thompson finds echoes of her ringing laugh in sounding brass, cool breezes, sweet honey, and sharp blades.

Ọṣun can be old and young, rich and impoverished, loving and spiteful. At every turn she is something that the devotee does not expect. She cries when she is happy and laughs when she is sad. She is a powerful sovereign and a master of domestic arts. She heals with cool water, and destroys life in raging flood. She is a loving mother and a leader of vengeful spirits who can take anyone’s child away.

These multiple Ọṣuns arise out of the experience of many communities and many individuals. In the Americas they are organized as “roads,” distinctly different Ọṣuns who are celebrated in different narratives, songs, and ceremonies. Isabel Castellanos shows us that five roads of Ochún in Cuba take their devotees down different paths in understanding the goddess and themselves, ranging from Ochún Ololodí, the serious diviner, to Ochún Ibú Kolé, the powerful buzzard, to Ochún Yeyé Moró, the gorgeous dancer. There is indeed one Ochún but she is the unknown source of the different roads, and their destination.

This ability of Ọṣun to be many things allows devotees to hold their religious lives in complexity. As an *oriṣà*, Ọṣun offers what all the *oriṣà* offer: the good things in life, health, wealth, and love. But she brings them in certain ways, along certain roads, that must be learned and followed to receive her blessings. She can be one *oriṣà* among many, or many *oriṣà* in one. She can even be the Supreme Being. Many priests and priestesses of Ọṣun address her as *Olúwa*, “My Lord.” Amid the titles and attributes of Ọṣun that Jacob Olupona offers us in the beautiful invocation that begins his essay is the stunning declaration that, for the singer, Ọṣun is “my Olódùmarè,” my God Almighty. Here Ọṣun is recognized as God, the author of destiny and divinity’s source.

As there are many ways of being Ọṣun, her devotees may find her in novel forms. Ọṣun and the *oriṣà* cross denominational and cultural borders. Joseph Murphy chronicles the representation of Ochún as a Catholic saint in colonial Cuba. Mei-Mei Sanford profiles Nigerian Christian women who have found their commitment to Christianity suffused with their devotions to African goddesses of water. Even in the contested religious space of Osogbo, Jacob Olupona finds Muslims honoring Ọṣun.

Ọṣun is the *òrìṣà* who heals with cool water. When she is invoked her presence is felt to bring lightness and effervescence to illness, want, and gloom. Ọṣun's ability to heal is based on her sovereignty and her compassion. She is a warrior who can fight for her children and vanquish enemies visible and invisible. And she is a loving mother whose embrace is there for those who need her. George Brandon writes, "Ochún's abode is a safe house for the anguished and afflicted." He draws a portrait of the Ochún priestess Bianca who works in the rubble-strewn streets of the South Bronx. Bianca finds in her devotion to Ochún her inspiration to care for others. The Ochún priestess is called to exhibit, in Brandon's phrase, "a charity that always assures you that if you give, you will always have something *to give*."

In the Umbanda communities of Rio de Janeiro, Lindsay Hale tells us of Oxum's irrepressible and abundant sexuality that bubbles up through the constrictions of race, class, and sexual hegemonies to celebrate sexuality and affirm her children, gay and straight, who express it.

In São Paulo, Oxum is a mother for the motherless. Filmmaker Tânia Cypriano introduces us to Pai Laércio Zaniquelli, priest of Oxum, who has made his house a home for thirty-two children living with HIV and AIDS.

In Manuel Vega's portrait of Mãe Menininha of Gantois done expressly for this volume, we find the strength and compassion, brass and honey, of *ẹ̀sìn Ọṣun* fully lived. He tells us that in Mãe Menininha's presence he understood Ọṣun profoundly when she sang "the *òrìṣà* came down like stars from the sky!" Her life was devoted to serving others. When, years ago, Brazilian songwriter Dorival Caymmi asked in a popular song, "And the most beautiful Oxum?" he and all Brazil knew the answer: "She is at Gantois."

In the seventeen essays that follow, the contributors to *Ọṣun across the Waters* explore Ọṣun traditions both in depth and breadth. We examine the special themes that Ọṣun religion suggests as well as the variety of contexts in Africa and the African diaspora where these themes have developed. We begin now to trace the path of the deity of water, the source of life, power, and authority.

Notes

1. Sanford, Mei-Mei Elma Cooper, "Powerful water, living wood: The agency of art and nature in Yoruba ritual," Ph.D. dissertation, Drew University, 1997, p. 184.
2. The goddess is recognized in the state motto, "Home of Living Spring," which is stamped on car license plates.
3. Wande Abimbola, personal communication to Mei-Mei Sanford, Oyo, 1992.
4. J. D. Y. Peel, in his analysis of Abeokuta Christian Missionary Society journals (1845–1912) found more references to Ọṣun than to Ẹ̀mọ̀ja. See his "A Comparative Analysis of Ogun in Precolonial Yorubaland," *Africa's Ogun: Old World and New*, 2nd Ed. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997, p. 265.
5. Bolanle Awe, personal communication to Mei-Mei Sanford, Ibadan, 1989.
6. Jacob Olupona, personal communication to Mei-Mei Sanford, 1998.
7. Adeleke Sangoyoyin, personal communication to Mei-Mei Sanford, Iragbiji, 1997.

8. Madrina, personal communication to Joseph Murphy, 1979.
9. Quoted by Rowland Abiodun in this volume citing Drewal, H. J., and J. Pemberton III, with R. Abiodun, *Yoruba: Nine Centuries of African Art and Thought*. New York: The Center for African Art and H. N. Abrams, 1989, p. 210.

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mulata is a heavily eroticized figure densely entangled in the political economies of race and sex. In Cuba, but also in Brazil and to a certain extent Mexico as well in the 1930s and 1940s, the mulata (and in Mexico, the mestizo) also became a trope for national identity.

13. Field notes, 1980, Bronx, N.Y.

14. For another version of this myth, see Gonzalez-Wippler 1985.

15. Compare this story to the *erindinlogun* verses, Oshe Tura, cited in Bascom 1980. In this story a war between the *orisha* and malevolent witches ends after Òsun approaches the enemy singing and dancing. The witches, attracted by her performance, follow her all the way from their abode, the Town of Women, to the king's palace where they are installed at court and put under his control.

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CHAPTER THIRTEEN

"What Part of the River You're In"

African American Women in Devotion to Òsun

Rachel Elizabeth Harding



A lineage of water and gold; the shaken gourd and the metal fan, the artist, the fabric, the painted beads. The connoisseur: good stuff when she sees it. Sunflower. A plate of coins. Yellow cloth *gelé*, draped long. A high bed, rose petals sinking beneath the brown plush of her thighs. Aromatic herb smoke: lemon thyme, manjerição, alfazema. The poem lifted like thin gold leaf from her lips. The song's bitter smell. The storyink damp; cuneiform spatter of falling water on rock. Gullysnake in the hips. Something the body knows about a current. Her line of women, the half-reed voices of her grown daughters in wingspan. . . .

This essay is a collective reflection on the presence of the deity Òsun and the meaning of Orisha religion in the lives of six African American women — four with parental roots in the southern United States, one Haitian-American, and one with combined Caribbean and southern U.S. ancestry. Two are simply allegiant devotees of Òsun, having been guided at certain pivotal points by Her energy, though not initiated as Her priestesses. Four others are consecrated to sacerdotal duties and are at various stages in their development as spiritual leaders and transmitters of Òsun's energy. The priestess who is youngest in years of initiation celebrated her second ritual anniversary in November 1998. The most senior Òsun initiate has been a priestess for twenty-eight years. All of the women were raised in greater-or-lesser proximity to the Christian church: Baptist, United Methodist, Catholic, Lutheran, and Presbyterian.

These six women presently represent several different traditions within Orisha religion: Lucumí/Santeria of Cuban origin, Yoruba/Ifá of Nigerian origin; African American Yoruba tradition; Brazilian Candomblé; and a combined experience of two or more traditions. Two of the women also serve the Haitian *lwas*. Iyalosha Osuntoki Mojisola, a priestess of Òsun, is a filmmaker and physical education teacher living in New York. Her godmother, Iyalosha Majile Osunbunmi Olafemi, was senior priestess of Òsun at Oyotunji, South Carolina, from 1971 to 1981 and lives presently in Tampa, Florida. Marcia Gibson Minter, art director at a women's magazine in New York, is a devotee of Yemanjá and Oxum and is

affiliated with the Ilé Axé Opô Afonjá Candomblé community in Bahia, Brazil.¹ Iyalosha Òsunnikantomi Egbénihun Ajoké lives in Cleveland, Ohio, where she works as a registered nurse and gives leadership to a Yoruba Ilé and healing ministry. She is a priestess of Òsun and the Egbeogba. Manbo Asogwé Dorothy Désir-Davis, a curator and scholar of African diasporan art and culture, is a devotee of Ochún and Yemaya as well as a Vodou priestess in the Minokan Sosyté of Haiti. She lives in New York. Iyalosha Osunguunwa, a Vodou *manbo sur-pointe* and priestess of Òsun, is director of a pre-school in Manhattan.

The devotees and priestesses speak of Òsun with tremendous gratefulness, recounting examples of the deity's beneficence in their lives. Iyalosha Osuntoki describes Òsun as the mother of kindness:

[She is] the one who gives you anything you want. Especially when you know what you need in life—when you are focused and aware of what you need—to keep you healthy, to keep you at peace with your spirit. She is the giver. The mother of peace.²

The other women interviewed for this essay echo Osuntoki's sense of the deity's benevolence and further emphasize the creativity and aesthetic acumen associated with Òsun. She is healer, artist, mother, bringer of joy and laughter, consummate diplomat and reconciler, resource of grace, and connoisseur of that which has beauty and value. She is also the feminine principle of sensuality, of luxuriant sexual arousal, and the gratifying spirit that accompanies good food, good friends, and good times.

At points, however, some of the women speak with ambivalence about certain representations of Òsun, indicating discomfort with the popular stereotype of the river deity as “flirt” or “sex goddess.” In other moments they affirm that recognizing their connection to Òsun was a critical, transformative experience in their lives—giving them new and deeper understandings of their most essential being. Both Iyalosha Majile Osunbunmi Olafemi and Iyalosha Osunguunwa describe Òsun's energy and presence as having “saved” them at very vulnerable points in their personal histories. The nurturing and self-affirmation Òsun passed on to these women upon claiming them as her daughters has helped sustain each through a variety of hardships—from physical illness and the loss of children in one case, to depression and disbelief in her own beauty in the other. Iyalosha Òsunnikantomi Egbénihun Ajoké and Manbo Asogwé Dorothy Désir-Davis speak of the very personal and particular influence Òsun has had in their lives as well. For Òsunnikantomi, Òsun is a deity tied specifically to the accomplishment of her personal destiny and chosen for very precise reasons by her *orí*, even though in some ways, the priestess feels equally close to another *orisha*, Yemoja. For Dorothy, Ochún represents an important, albeit partial, element of her existence—assisting her with a deeper appreciation of her femininity, sexuality, and aesthetic strengths. Osuntoki describes her relationship to Òsun in terms of the peace and kindness she receives from the *orisha*, and which, in turn, she attempts

to communicate in her life and work. And Marcia Gibson Minter, whose principal *orisha* is Yemanjá, talks about Oxum as representative of her youth, her playfulness, and the grace that brought her son into the world.

The specific nature of relationship to Òsun varies widely among the women. All speak eloquently and insightfully of their connection to the river goddess and her influence in their lives. For these priestesses and devotees, the lessons and blessings of Òsun are simultaneously very personal and applicable to others in search of a more profound comprehension of self and spirit.

“What Òsun Teaches”: The Lessons and Blessings of Òsun

Marcia Gibson Minter was informed in her first divination reading with a Brazilian *mãe de santo* (priestess) that she was a daughter of Oxum. Marcia had been so certain of her integral connection to Yemanjá that she found the reading hard to believe. “Oxum?!” she asked in surprise. “Are you sure?” The priestess conducting the reading insisted that Oxum was indeed the *orisha* at the young devotee's head. Marcia remained perplexed about the pronouncement but began to search for ways to cultivate and acknowledge her connection to Oxum.

I started trying to do things for Oxum to try to make up for all the time I had been giving attention to another *orisha* [Yemanjá]. I started reading more about Oxum, how I could connect with her energy. And, you know, I had to work on it. It was hard.³

The connection to Yemanjá seemed more natural to her. And eventually, Marcia discovered that indeed her strong affinity to Yemanjá was a true instinct. A second *mãe de santo*—the renowned Iyalorisha Stella de Oxossi of Axé Opô Afonjá in Salvador, Bahia—divined the relationship and confirmed Yemanjá as Marcia's principal *orisha*. But Mãe Stella further explained that it was not a particularly unusual occurrence to find Yemanjá and Oxum's presence shared. “That happens all the time,” she said. “And why not? Yemanjá is Oxum's mother.” In a sense, the Iyalorisha explained, the two deities are one. Marcia notes that during rituals for Yemanjá at the Axé Opô Afonjá candomblé, some form of offering or acknowledgment is made to Oxum as well, and vice-versa. Indeed, as time has passed, Marcia is more firmly aware of the conjoined energies of Oxum and Yemanjá in her own life. As she notes:

My Oxum is so wrapped up in my Yemanjá. Oxum represents my youth. But I think my personality develops around Yemanjá being the principal influence. Oxum is the voice that keeps me a little more playful—but in a mature way. Not silly. The Oxum part of me balances my Yemanjá. My Yemanjá is so serious. I have, like a sad Yemanjá. Not so much sad as serious. My Oxum balances that. She brings more joy to it.⁴

Marcia recognizes a special relationship to Oxum in the circumstances surrounding the birth of her son, Azari. For two years prior to Azari's conception, Marcia felt that Oxum wanted her to have a child. “For some reason I didn't feel

like it was Yemanjá, but it was Oxum,” Marcia says. Once Marcia and her husband, Daniel, decided to try to have a baby together, they determined to conceive in an atmosphere of supplication and thankfulness to the *orishas*. “It happened almost instantly,” Marcia recounts, both grateful and somewhat awed that they would get pregnant after only a week of trying. The pregnancy itself was smooth. “I felt great,” she recalled. “No problems whatsoever.” Marcia had been actively cultivating the energy of the various *orishas* who guide and protect her family as well as praying for the health of the coming child. “So I was surprised to be in the delivery room with what happened,” she said.

I didn't expect the delivery to be three days long with so many complications. I'm certain it was the energy I asked for from the *orishas* that got us through. Azari was born with the cord around his neck twice and had to be sucked out [of my womb], and his heart had to be pounded to restart because it had stopped. He came into the world and then left that fast, and then came back. . . . Something happened in that moment when we almost lost him. I don't know if momentarily Yemanjá wanted him and Oxum gave him back to me? I don't know. But Daniel and I are certain that the *orishas* gave this child to us.⁵

Òsun is traditionally known for her role as mother. The Ibeji, the twin deities, are children from her union with Sàngó, and women who wish to conceive and bear children appeal to her especially in her form as Òsun Oshogbo. In addition to the images and stories of Òsun as mother, there is often a kind of counter-narrative in Yoruba-based religions that suggests Òsun's unwillingness to take on the full responsibility of parenting — giving her children to Yemoja to raise. Dorothy Désir-Davis speaks of her own relationship to Òsun in these terms. A devotee of the deity, she is uncomfortable with some of the arch, hyper-feminine aspects of Òsun's image. While she recognizes that the goddess's energy and influence have been pivotal in her development, Dorothy says she always had the sense that eventually another *orisha* would claim her:

I don't like the extremely flirtatious aspect of Ochún. It's not my nature. When I studied Afro-Cuban dance I couldn't get into all that hip-wiggling movement. I knew I would end up with something else, another *orisha*. So, as things progressed, I ended up with Yemaya. Of course, Ochún gives away her children to Yemaya. Ochún flirts and Yemaya works and has a greater measure of responsibility. But you have to pay homage and respect to those who have protected you. Especially *orisha* and *hwa*.⁶

Majile also expressed dissatisfaction with the image of Òsun as “sex goddess”:

Another thing people should understand, Òsun is not a sex goddess. I wish they would stop putting the sex thing on her. She represents love more than anything, and love is everywhere. Love for parents, for children, for beauty, for objects. Love is not just sex. And sometimes it's not in sex at all.⁷

In contrast to representations of Òsun as less parentally responsible than some of the other *orisha*, several of the devotees and priestesses suggest an alternative experience with the mothering energy of Òsun. Òsunnikantomi describes her sense of Òsun's nurturing spirit in terms of both motherhood and inventiveness. In Òsunnikantomi's experience, the nourishing and sustaining qualities of Òsun are often expressed in artistic work.

Most Òsun people I know are very nurturing and very creative in the field of art or performance, theater, that type of thing.⁸

Majile also sees the maternal influence of the river deity in her own life as a mother to eight children. When asked about the ways in which Òsun's energy manifests in her daily experience, Majile responds, “I'm still a mom — so her presence is strong in my family life.”⁹

One of the most moving accounts of the nurturing and mothering spirit of Òsun comes in Osungunwa's testimony. She was called to initiation into the deity's priesthood just days after a surgery. It was a difficult time. But as Osungunwa recalls, Òsun's presence and summons in that moment were not surprising:

This is her area. She saved my life. I've always had trouble having children. I've lost a lot of children. But I've had some strong spiritual experiences as a result — my sight increased. But it was very traumatic.¹⁰

As happened for Marcia in the distress and miracle of the birth of her son, Osungunwa too felt Òsun's mothering restoration in the midst of her own suffering. When approaching her second anniversary as a priestess of Òsun, Osungunwa considered the deity's meaning in her life:

For me, Òsun represents healing . . . because she transforms you, in a way. She transforms your soul in a way that's a marvel. Òsun marked a transition for me.¹¹

These sentiments of the *orisha*'s rescuing presence in times of adversity are amplified and complemented by other assertions relating to Òsun's aesthetic, artistic, and sensual energies and to the interpretations of womanhood she engenders in her devotees. Majile brings many of these elements together as she reflects on Òsun's significance for her life. “She's my whole life,” the priestess affirms. As a young girl, Majile didn't consider herself attractive, and occasionally suffered from depression. She also had frequent experiences with disturbing spirits and visions which she later attributed to her need to be initiated and her own internal unused healing power.

I've had so much experience with spirits. I've had a tough life. Not in terms of poverty, but with emotions. Coming from a family with natural ability in the occult — but with no training. But I survived all that madness. When I came to [Òsun] I was tired of life. Nobody seemed to see life like me. She bathed and healed me.

Totally. She showed me that I was so beautiful. As a child growing up, I thought I was ugly. Òsun came into my life and opened my eyes and said, "Look at yourself through your own eyes, not someone else's."

After I received Òsun I had an earth-shaking experience. I was going to the post office, and the post office had a big plate-glass window. As I rode up to the window I was looking at the window and I saw a woman getting off of a bicycle, and I said to myself "She sure is pretty." And as I walked closer I realized that the woman was me. I stood there looking with tears in my eyes.¹²

Dorothy describes her experience with Ochún as a process of coming to terms with her own femininity, which she had suppressed to some extent due to years of intensive martial arts training and a deep internal resistance to sexist images of women.

I try to use Her as a guide, a feminist one; [a model for] how women need to operate to get what they need, what they want.

Arrival at this understanding of Ochún has been an ongoing process for the *manbo* and devotee. For many years she studied martial arts and was often the only female student in the classes.

I shared the locker room with the boys, the men. And I heard how they talked about women—that macho shit. I learned a hell of a lot about dealing with them. How they think about women. I also scared a lot of men, in my neighborhood and in my school. Because everybody knew that Dorothy knew martial arts and could kick butt. But I also realized that I needed to be softer, I needed a sweeter disposition. And if Ochún was watching me then, it was likely the young warrior Ochún.

I dressed androgynously for many years. I almost never wore dresses, because I hated how men would look and leer. As I got older, I realized, now you don't have to be so hard. I had to learn how you do the flirtation, charm, be sweet, without compromising myself.¹³

Dorothy's connection to Ochún was divined by priests Carmen and Tony Mondesire. "Ochún loves you," they told her, and explained that she needed to set up a place in her house dedicated to the goddess's energy.

My Ochún wanted gold. Not copper and not brass. This is what Tony told me. And I was trying to understand not just the metal gold, but the concept of gold. It is flexible, it is malleable, it gives. . . . Gold is something that endures, it lasts. It is a weight, it is a measure of value.¹⁴

Although she later established a connection with Yemaya and also with the *lwas* of the Vodou tradition, Dorothy has maintained a relationship to Òsun that centers particularly around the aesthetic energy she brings to her living space and her work as a collector and interpreter of African diasporic art.

I needed to provide Ochún a space. At the front of my house are shades of yellow. I have created an altar-like environment for Ochún in my living room. I don't pray

there but anyone in the religion recognizes Ochún's influence. It was under her guidance that I understood I needed to have a house.¹⁵

For Manbo Dorothy, the lessons she learned from Òsun were pivotal in her efforts to secure a house of her own. And as she describes the process and its impetus, she emphasizes that the house and what it represents are not just for her, individually, but are for her son as well.

I have a child. A black child. He's a black male in this society and he has to have every advantage I can give him. What I had to do to get the house—being extraordinarily creative, [using] the warrior aspect—it's all tools of Ochún. I've done my best to fill the house with art, wonderful fabric, tactile things, olfactory stimulants—it is a luxurious space. There is something for all the senses, literally everywhere you look. Paintings, sculpture—*anywhere* [my son] looks in this house affirms his sense of Self.

Ochún can teach you about creativity, softness, understanding luxury. So you have enough sense to surround yourself with the best you can afford. Part of the lesson Ochún gives is how you keep these things. For my son, they are in his head and heart, they will never be taken away. Knowledge is like that too. Not as a luxury, but [as] an essential thing. What Ochún teaches us is to acquire knowledge of things. Connoisseurship. You have to know something good when you see it. You have to know the value of Self and History as well. Beyond the surface, these ethical and philosophical manifestations in day-to-day living are what Ochún teaches.¹⁶

"Daughter of Two Waters": Iyalosha Òsunnikantomi Egbénihun Ajoké

I was told I was a daughter of two waters—Òsun from the head and Yemoja from the neck down. At my initiation, I was told it would've been fine for me to be initiated to Yemoja, but my *orí* chose Òsun because the energies of Òsun following me, the roads of Òsun, would enable me to develop myself to the fullest—so that's why Òsun took over for me.¹⁷

Iyalosha Òsunnikantomi is a priestess of Òsun and the Egbèògbá. Born and raised in Cleveland, Ohio, she was initiated to Òsun in that city in 1992, and in 1996 to the Egbèògbá in Nigeria. She is a mother, a nurse, a lecturer, and the chief priestess at the Yoruba house she founded, Ilé Osunbarada. Although consecrated to Òsun and maintaining a strong relationship to that *orisha*, Òsunnikantomi does not give Òsun initiations. Her more public role within the Ifá system is as a priestess of the Egbèògbá—a collective spirit, little-known in the United States, which manifests in dreams, bringing information and healing, as well as disruption at times.

They are a group of deities, a group of spirits. They are looked at as comrades in Heaven—that's how my Baba describes them. And once we leave the Spirit world to come into this life, those comrades come with us. They come at night, in the form of dreams, to give messages.

The fact that she was advised by Ifá not to give initiations of Òsun is further evidence to Òsunnikantomi of the very personal nature of her relationship to the river goddess.

It's a little different for me. Òsun seems to be for me very personally. But I don't give Òsun — other than an *eleke*. She is for me in a personal way.

This individual, focused relationship to Òsun is something the Iyalosha has considered deeply over the years since her first initiation. She is also a daughter of Yemoja and might have become a priestess of that *orisha* if circumstances had been different. Òsunnikantomi recounts that in light of her own inclination to put other people and their needs ahead of the necessities of her own life, her *orí* chose Òsun because of the river deity's capacity to help concentrate self-directed energy.

For me, Yemoja does not force herself, does not make demands. She steps back and doesn't ask until the need is there. Then she'll step in and say, "Baby, this is what you need to do." Then she'll step back into her place of observation.

Òsunnikantomi insists that her experience of Yemoja is particular and she is careful not to make a general statement about characteristic paths of the deity. "This is how I envision [Yemoja] — this is the energy of the icon in my house." While recognizing the appropriateness of Òsun's energy for the specific needs of her life, the priestess continues to acknowledge the strengths of Yemoja. "When I visualize my Yemoja, I see, not an old woman, but an older woman, wiser, more matronly. But she's a fighter."

Marcia's and Dorothy's testimonies further affirm Yemoja's tendency to combine reticence with a fighting spirit. Like Òsunnikantomi, both women have a close relationship to Yemoja as well as to Òsun.

One of Òsunnikantomi's greatest struggles with Òsun arises from the goddess's exigency:

She wants me to do these things but it seems like they're impossible. I can try to do what She wants me to do and if it's too demanding or seemingly impossible, I may deviate, but then She'll just shut the other things down. Like, "Didn't I tell you to do *this*?"

Like most of the devotees and priestesses interviewed for this essay, Òsunnikantomi describes the nature and spiritual energy of Òsun in very complex — sometimes contradictory — terms. This is not a simple deity. None is. But partly due to Òsun's close association with the Ajé, the witches of Yoruba myth, she is recognized as having sharp places in her personality, rages, and deep spells of fearsome, seemingly arbitrary power. French scholar of Yoruba religion Pierre Verger writes of this awesome, frequently misunderstood female energy as a "dangerous, aggressive force" which requires those who encounter it to observe an attitude of "prudent reserve."¹⁸ Òsunnikantomi:

Òsun is very complex for me. I was told once, by a *babalawo*, that if I wanted to know Òsun I should study the river. And I've done that a few times. Òsun is deep, she's murky, she's cloudy, you can't see what's going on. She can be clear, reflective — that's the whole mirror energy, cleansing. She can be destructive, unstoppable. She can be even parts of the river [that] are foul, static. She is all these things. Over the six years that I've been aware of having her, I've probably experienced many of her aspects. The *oriate* who did my initiation said She frightened him most of all the *orishas* because you never know what you're going to get with Òsun. She's very complicated — it just depends on what part of the river you're in. How the flow is going.

Finding the Way In: Roads to Orisha Religion

The Black cultural-nationalist movement of the late nineteen-sixties and early nineteen-seventies was an important context for the development of African religious consciousness among several of the priestesses and devotees interviewed for this essay. The movement's emphasis on African historical and cultural identities often found a compelling parallel in a search for spiritual traditions that predated the diasporic experience of slavery. As with many of their contemporaries who were active in the nationalist period, Majile, Osuntoki, Òsunnikantomi, and Osungunwa found the time especially conducive to the exploration of new meanings of self, community, and spirituality.

Majile and Osuntoki were members of the Yoruba-based community at Oyotunji Village in South Carolina for ten and twelve years, respectively. Majile and her then-husband, Oseijiman Adefunmi,¹⁹ were among the community's founders. Initiated in 1970, a year before Oyotunji was formally organized, Majile became the community's first priestess of Òsun. Osuntoki was initiated at the village in the following year.

While Oyotunji was an important element in Majile's developing connection to African spirituality and culture, she recalls that it was in fact her own family that first taught her to view herself as African. As a child she heard stories of her mother's grandfather, whom they called "Grandpat," and who was likely one of the last Africans to arrive in the United States as a slave.

I knew I was an African person — I got that from my family. . . . I felt this African blood real strong in me. Especially in music.²⁰

Osuntoki refers to the nationalist period as a pivotal moment in her own exposure to Yoruba religious tradition. Osuntoki's introduction came by way of a Yoruba language instructor at a New York dance school.

This was in the early seventies. Because of him [the teacher] I met other people, just in everyday socializing. . . . I was interested in African culture and I began to meet more people. . . . People who were living the culture, living the religion. The seventies was a time when lots of people were finding their roots. Especially [in terms of] African culture, religion, traditions. . . .²¹

For many of the women, attraction to Yoruba-based religion was a response to a deep search for a form of spirituality that felt consistent with their beliefs and constitutions and that offered an alternative to the dissatisfaction they felt with the traditional Christian church. Òsunnikantomi explains that at the time she was exposed to Orisha religion she was active in the United Methodist Church:

But I was searching, I wasn't happy with some things. The structure — some things were going on in the Northeast Ohio conference, racial things, and I wasn't happy with the way they were being handled.²²

Majile was also in search. Seeing an impotence on the part of her northern church in the face of the great trauma of Black suffering in the South, Majile, while still a child, began to grow disillusioned with Christianity.

On Sundays, my grandmother would read the Bible to us and then read the newspapers about Black people who had been killed in the South. The lynchings, castrations, all the horrible deaths that happened, she would read to us about it. And she would pray about it. Then I would go to Sunday School and see this white Jesus and I'd be waiting for them to say something in church about the things my grandmother had talked about. But they never did. I was confused and angry. At Sunday School it seemed like the white Jesus was doing nothing for Black people. I was never a Christian at heart. Even at five, seven years old. I couldn't feel it.

At about age seventeen, Majile became a Sunni Muslim, still looking for a spiritual space that was comfortable for her. This aspect of her search was eventually frustrated by her awareness of problems of racism within the Islamic community. In contrast to her experiences with Christianity and Islam, Orisha religion moved her in a deep and personal way.

The first time I saw an Elegba service I got so happy — I was about to walk up the wall, I felt so good. That was the first true experience with religion I had. It made me feel good.²³

Òsunnikantomi also feels a sense of compatibility and comfort with Orisha religion. She describes learning of Yoruba traditions through friends of her sister, who was a student at Howard University in Washington, D.C. She also read an article in *Essence* by Iyanla Vanzant which led her to explore more on her own. For Òsunnikantomi as well as for others, the depth of personal focus in the African religion is pivotal. Through its central ritual of divination, Ifá offers a way to enter into a spiritual communion with one's destiny which takes into account the specific needs and conditions of each individual's life. Òsunnikantomi suggests that this orientation to religion contrasts strongly with the biblical tradition of commandments and general precepts applied indiscriminately to all people:

In the church, it was more a group thing — this is how *everybody* is supposed to pattern their life. Whereas with Ifá, it was more personal — especially in terms of destiny. I felt at home! . . . For people who are looking for powerful changes in their lives and are willing to be obedient [to divination], it's a wonderful thing. Especially

if they want to be able to participate in the changes. To have the Spirit speak directly to them. It's very personal.²⁴

Osuntoki makes a similar assertion about her preference for Orisha tradition:

African religion felt more interesting. I felt like there was more freedom in the African religion — more room for the development of people's personalities.²⁵

In addition to the sense of comfort the devotees and priestesses feel in their relation to African deities and to Ifá tradition, several women talk about the role of dreams, nightmares, and visions in their impulse toward Orisha religion. Manbo Dorothy, who is Haitian-American, recalls that at the time she first started to explore her relationship to the *orishas*, she had been in some internal conflict about how to connect with her ancestral legacy. She experienced some very striking and disturbing dreams in which she was visited by recently deceased relatives and as a result of these she realized she needed to talk to someone about what was happening in her spiritual life.

A while back I had a series of dreams that were very disturbing to me, about three people in my family. My paternal grandmother, my aunt (her sister), and an uncle on my father's side. All of them passed within nine months of each other [in 1992–93]. . . . When they crossed over, all of them, ten days later I had a visit from them. But the last one, the one from my uncle, kind of took me over the edge. Because it had a warning — it was directed at me, my sisters, my family in general; but especially at me.²⁶

The dreams worried Dorothy and she began to search for their meaning. When Dorothy was growing up, no one spoke much within her household about the tradition of Vodou; but she does recall an accusation made that her mother's mother was a *manbo*. And this gave Dorothy some reference for the experiences she was having.

I did know that in each family a *lwa* was to be served. And I do know that the gift of vision, of sight, of being a "real" priest — one born with a crown as opposed to being made — comes every other generation. Which means my mother was skipped, but I knew I was in line to receive Ocha, to use a Lucumí term.²⁷

Although her mother had taken her to a few Vodou ceremonies when Dorothy was a child, it was not until she became an adult that she began to look more profoundly into her own spiritual identity and role (impelled in large part by the dreams of her deceased family members and by other dreams and visions as well). Interestingly, she explored the Lucumí path before eventually finding her way to the Vodou priesthood. It was through Lucumí that she made her connection to Ochún. Now she maintains responsibilities in both traditions, but is more active in Vodou because of her sacerdotal duties there.

But I cannot abandon Orisha and there is no point in abandoning them because in Vodou we speak to them in our prayers. I used to think I needed hard and fast

divisions between them. But names don't matter. It is the spirit of the thing, its essence that matters.²⁸

"All Our Path": *Iyalosha Osungunwa*

I have always loved spirituality. [As a child] I was very interested, and so I really studied. I was interested in theology and I asked a lot of questions. There were wonderful ministers at that [Presbyterian] church, African American ministers who let me challenge them. They enjoyed it.²⁹

Osungunwa's father, a Jamaican immigrant, and her mother, a native of Prince Edward County, Virginia, fed their daughter's spiritual interests and sensitivities in a variety of ways. The father was an initiate in the Egyptian Mysteries and when Osungunwa was still a baby, he had her baptized in that path. Osungunwa's father also studied with an Indian spiritual leader. She remembers visiting the guru and receiving his blessing when she was eight years old. The *iyalosha* describes her father as an agnostic, a philosopher, who encouraged her to read metaphysical literature.

He had all kinds of philosophy books around. When I was ten he was giving me books by Plato: "Read this." And books on Egypt. And then when I'd finished that, he'd give me something else. I was constantly being fed a diet of mystical writings.

Osungunwa's mother was raised in the Baptist church. As a little girl, Osungunwa went to Baptist services in New York City with her grandmother and great-aunt. Later, when the family moved to Queens, Osungunwa's mother joined a local Presbyterian church and Osungunwa regularly accompanied her there for most of her adolescence. In spite of her father's mystical influence, and Osungunwa's own emerging spiritual sensibilities, the mother always encouraged her daughter toward a more conventional religiosity. "My mother fought the good fight to keep me a Christian. . . . That was very important to her." When she was around twenty years old, however, Osungunwa became a Sunni Muslim. "I was still on my spiritual quest. . . . I stayed a Sunni for a long, long time."

The individual connection to God encouraged in Islam was especially attractive to Osungunwa, although she eventually had difficulties with some of the more patriarchal aspects of the religion. After eighteen years as a Muslim, she began to desire a more Afrocentric spiritual grounding. "I looked long and hard. I even went back to the church. You know, there is a certain comfort in the Black church." But this time, the Black church Osungunwa returned to was Catholic. It was a very progressive parish, where the priests were teaching liberation theology and where she became very involved in the life of the congregation as a kind of lay pastor.

Osungunwa's attraction to the Catholic church was partly due to the fact that her brother, a professional musician, was living and working in Brazil and

would regularly send letters and postcards with stories of his experiences there. She became especially intrigued by Candomblé — a traditional Afro-Brazilian religion — and by the connections Africans and their descendants there had made between African rituals and mythologies and the rites and saints of the Catholic church.

In the late nineteen-eighties, in the wake of a series of conservative changes in the policies and personnel of her diocese, Osungunwa left her Catholic congregation. Not completely sure of where her search would take her next, she happened to read Luisah Teish's *Jambalaya* and began to explore the strong affinity she felt with Afro-diasporan religions. During a conference at Hunter College on religious traditions of the Afro-Atlantic world, she was able to witness ceremonies from Vodou, Lucumí, Shango Baptist, Palo, and other Afro-Latin and Afro-Caribbean sources. It was a revelation for her.

In the same period she moved into a predominantly Latino neighborhood in Newark and started to investigate the local area with a friend:

We went exploring and we found a *botánica*. We met a little man who started telling us about the tradition. He talked about his love for the tradition. But he was also Catholic. . . . He told us, "You need to go to church." We weren't interested in the church part, we wanted the *orisha* part.

Beginning with their initial connection with the man in the *botánica*, Osungunwa and her friend slowly found other people associated with Orisha religion. For a time, Osungunwa was connected with a Lucumí house where most of the members spoke Spanish. Eventually she affiliated with an African-based, multicultural house, which closely retained Nigerian cultural elements in its community life and rituals. Such direct connection to Nigerian traditions was important to Osungunwa, and it was at this house, in the aftermath of an illness, that she was called to initiation by Òsun.

Like several of the other devotees and priestesses profiled here, a significant element of Osungunwa's work is related to artistic expression. She is a visual artist who works with fiber, beads, and gourds, making *shekere* — a traditional gourd instrument of Òsun (which Osungunwa also plays) — and an art form she calls "spirit vessels." She relates that the lessons of Òsun in this realm have been particularly valuable for her, and that since her initiation she has seen a flowering in her abilities and in her exposure through group and individual shows.

[Òsun] represents creativity. . . . She represents artists. The imagination. She's your writer, your creative person. She's also a warrior. She has taken me from a quiet person to a person being more assertive and sure of herself.

She's a wise woman. She represents all the positive aspects of womanhood. But she's not frivolous. My path in Òsun is Yeye Kare — which is supposed to be a frivolous path. But in my case She lightened me up. I've always been a very serious person — but She's helped me to lighten up. Accepting my femininity.

One of the more difficult aspects of Osungunwa's path in Orisha tradition has been the tension it has created with her mother.

It's been hard for my mother to come to terms with this path. . . . She doesn't understand it all. We come out of a middle-class Black family and it's like, "What are you doing? Why do you have to wear those white clothes for a year? What am I going to say when people ask me why you do that?" . . . She's very much Yemaya. I'm the only girl. I think it's hard to have your only girl be so different from you.

It's been a little difficult for her to see me setting up altars. She asks me, "Why do you have to do all that stuff?" She says things like, "But it's modern times and we don't have to go through all those steps. Why don't you just take a shortcut?" And I tell her, "But I need to go through those steps. . . ."

Notwithstanding all the challenges, Osungunwa eagerly acknowledges her mother's strength and wisdom and describes how much it meant to have her mother participate in a very important ritual:

[My mother] even came to my initiation, my presentation ceremony. When I think of it, even now — my mother, saluting me — it brings tears to my eyes.

As mother and daughter continue to find ground on which to meet and understand each other, Osungunwa points to instances of connection between the spiritual and cultural values of the Black South and those present in African traditions:

Things like honoring the dead, the *eguns*. [Our older relatives in the South] go to the cemeteries. They take care of the graves. . . . And then when I see the nurses' board in church — the people who help you when you get the spirit. Getting happy in church, that's possession. When I explain it to my mother like that, then she's like, "Oh, okay."

The most essential element in Osungunwa's ongoing dialogue with her mother around the place of Orisha religion in the daughter's life has been to convey the deep love and respect she feels for her mother and her mother's religion — even while moving forward along a different path.

I never want her to think I'm rejecting her — I tell her that this path isn't just for me, it's all our path. . . . I want her to know, "I'm not giving you up, I'm reclaiming what's rightfully mine." I think now is a wonderful time because we have the choice to explore different paths. To feel comfortable and not be ashamed.

Family Relations

To one extent or another, all of the women have had to negotiate their way around the difference between the nature of their lives as Orisha devotees and the sometimes divergent expectations of family and friends. In most cases, there is a continuing attempt at understanding and dialogue (however difficult at

times) with parents, siblings, and other relatives which, over time, results in deeper levels of appreciation on both sides.

Òsunnikantomi, like Osungunwa, describes her struggles with family over this issue in terms of maintaining an ability to acknowledge the value of her roots in the Black Christian church. When Òsunnikantomi first began to move toward Ifá religion, there was some discomfort in her family about the meaning of this new direction. "They could not understand where Jesus fit in." Òsunnikantomi assured her relatives that it was not a question of abandoning Jesus, rather, that because the Ifá system predates Christianity, Jesus is not a focal concern in Orisha religion. Òsunnikantomi has also tried to explain her respect for Christ to family and friends within the context of her own belief. "Christ, Muhammad, Buddha, were all prophets," she tells them:

And Orunmila is the prophet of this system. It's a matter of focusing on the prophet of the system. The prophet brings forth the spiritual content of the system. He or She is the deity who speaks for the system. Therefore for me there was no problem. I simply went to another system and there was another prophet.

I don't see where there's a problem with who is the prophet, because I think there is universal truth. So when I started on this path, rather than try to convince people of what I was doing, I saw I had to try to live a life of great character so people couldn't condemn me based on how I live my life. And that's how it's acceptable now. They may not understand it, but they can see it's working for me.³⁰

Osuntoki explains that while she never experienced any serious discord with relatives as a result of her religious orientation, the passage of time has helped them to become more comfortable with her life.

I didn't have a deep conflict with my family. They didn't say I was sinning. For them it was like, "You're going backward." Which I was, in a way — going back to the ancestors. They felt that I was not going in the direction of progress. . . . I think their attitude has changed somewhat over the years. They are more accepting now. They don't see me as a fanatic. And I don't see them as fanatics.³¹

The difficulty of helping family members to understand their choice is something most of the priestesses and devotees have in common. However, there are also many instances of important familial support. Majile notes that her children are deeply connected to Orisha religion:

All of my children are very much involved. I raised eight children and seven grandchildren. Five of my children are priests and the last three were born with natural *àse*, although they have not yet been accepted into the society [as initiates].³²

For several of the women, the support of spouses has been especially meaningful. Òsunnikantomi says that her husband and partner of twenty-two years complements and sustains her spiritual energy in significant ways:

It's interesting, my husband was initiated to Sàngó two-and-a-half years ago. . . . His personality is the stereotypical Sàngó. That whole idea of lightning and rain—he tends to replenish the water source.

The essential, nurturing aspect of Òsun as fresh water can sometimes mean that the psychic reserves of her priestesses are taxed to their limits. At times like this, the complementary resources of Òsunnikantomi's life partner are invaluable.

Everything and everybody needs water. So everyone comes to you. When there is drought then there is a problem, but water replenishes itself if there is rain. . . . And Òsunnikantomi's husband is her rain.³³

Marcia's husband, Daniel, too, has been an important source of support and accompaniment in her path. "We've gone through this together. It's something that makes our marriage stronger." Daniel, an artist, uses his artwork as a way to connect with ancestral energies—energies which, for him, include the *orishas* of Yoruba tradition:

I would say, maybe that I am more "devout" if you want to use that term, or that my devotion is more "conscious," but he does the same thing through his artwork—not by keeping altars or going to ceremonies.³⁴

As with Òsunnikantomi and her mate, Marcia and Daniel have been spiritual partners for each other; each encouraging the other to follow the paths along which they are most deeply led.

"A Baseful Thing": Marcia Gibson Minter

When Marcia Gibson Minter was growing up in Richmond, Virginia, she was often aware of a presence, a kind of guardian spirit, around her. It was the kind of presence that manifested more as a feeling than anything else. Something accompanying her. Sometimes Marcia would try to write about it in journals or poems:

It wasn't at the forefront of my thought, but I would tap into it sometimes, through the writing. . . . But I was not really pursuing it. [It was] not constant. But it was a kind of baseful thing.³⁵

Marcia explains that her family was not very religious in a conventional sense. They did not go to church regularly. Nevertheless her mother always encouraged the children to respect spirituality and Marcia occasionally attended services at a local Baptist church with an aunt.

My mother's sister . . . was a very spiritual woman. . . . Aunt Shirley went to church when the spirit moved her. . . . She would go for six months straight and then not go at all for a year. And in the six months that she was going regularly, I don't mean

that she went every Sunday for six months. I mean she went to church every day for six months!

As a little girl, I went with her to church sometimes. She went to a down-home Baptist church where people got happy. I would sit beside her and wait for the moment when Aunt Shirley would get the spirit, because it happened every time. She would jump up and run up and down the aisle and speak in tongues and people would have to hold her. I would look at her in amazement, knowing that something was going on. But not knowing exactly what.

Her mother's respectful, though not church-centered, attitude toward spirituality, her Aunt Shirley's example, and her own early sense of mystical connection to protective spiritual forces were important elements in Marcia's development toward the path of African religious traditions. Early in her life she encountered a sense of the wide possibilities of religious orientation, and as an adult, felt little restriction or displacement when exploring traditions outside of conventional Christian borders.

Marcia's closest sense of connection to the *orishas* has come through Brazilian Candomblé. She began her journey to the religion in an unexpected place: Cozumel, Mexico. In her mid-twenties Marcia decided to take a trip there, to spend some time alone and think.

I was going through a time of definite, conscious spiritual growth. I needed to go away somewhere . . . to think about what was important to me. I chose Cozumel because it was cheap.

Immediately upon arriving in the airport, as she was showing her passport, the custom's agent asked her, in Spanish, if she was from Bahia. "I could speak enough Spanish to communicate with him and I said, 'No.'" The agent told Marcia that she looked like she was from Bahia and that her name was a Bahian name. Later that same day, as Marcia lay on the beach, a young woman passed by holding an empty tray in her hands, as if she had just finished selling the last of whatever she had been carrying. Marcia noticed that she and the woman bore a resemblance to each other:

She was about my color, my height, her hair was like mine. She started speaking to me in a language I didn't understand, asking me something with "Bahia" in the question. I didn't understand much but I told her no, I wasn't from Bahia. And she walked away. . . . My eyes followed her until I couldn't see her anymore.

Before these events, Marcia had never had much occasion to think of Bahia, Brazil. However, for the remainder of her visit in Cozumel she was asked about Bahia so often that she soon began to believe there was something more than coincidence at work. Returning back to the States, she began to read everything she could about Bahia. Some of the first things she discovered were descriptions of the Afro-Brazilian religion, Candomblé. "It struck me very deeply that I had

some kind of connection to this place.” Meanwhile, she married her husband and in 1990 they decided to visit Bahia; a decision Marcia says was based primarily on her “mild obsession” with the place and its religious tradition. During that visit, she saw an image of Yemanjá in an artist’s studio. “When I saw it, I knew instinctively that she was my *orisha*. . . . I just knew: “This is the spirit I have known all my life.” Years later, on a second trip to Bahia she would have her instinct confirmed — and she would also discover that she has a close connection to Òsun, and to several other *orishas*.

Marcia wonders at times if perhaps she has an ancestral link to Brazil, somewhere in her family lineage. Even though she believes the *orishas* don’t particularly care which tradition she comes to them through, she feels such a strong affinity to Bahia and to Candomblé that it makes her consider the possibility. “I wonder about that, the connection. Why, if it really doesn’t matter, am I drawn to Brazil and to Candomblé the way I am?”

“A Lot of Us Retain a Lot”: Ancestral Connections in African American Devotion to Òsun

In Brazilian Candomblé, the *dom* or “gift” of an *orisha*’s guardianship is considered an inheritance as much physical as spiritual. The *orisha* live in the bloodline, are transmitted like DNA within families, and as such, travel with their children in diaspora. They are a part of who we are, who we have been, and who we will be. There is no leaving them as there is no way for them to leave us. We have come an ancient way in each other’s tight company and have been through too much together (in this horrid and beautiful place, these Americas) to deny each other now.

The women who participated in conversations for this essay generally recognized some form of familial connection to African-based ways of being in the world. Four of the devotees and priestesses mentioned grandparents, especially grandmothers, who were healers and spiritual leaders and who represent for them a clear connection to older, ancestral forces compatible with their present paths in Orisha religion. One of Marcia Gibson-Minter’s great-grandmothers was a conjure woman and another a midwife. And Marcia sees the intense, personal, distinctive spiritual pattern of her Aunt Shirley as a connection to ancestral sacred orientations:

Especially now that she’s gone on, I definitely see her as connected to the *orishas*. I say that with certainty. It was like, when the *orisha* came to her, when she got the spirit, they came hard. And they stayed. And then they’d leave her alone for a while.³⁶

Dorothy too has *vodouisants* and healers among her immediate ancestors, although when she was growing up no one spoke much about them.

I found out this year that my grandmother on my father’s side was a *vodouisant*. . . . And *her* mother was an herb doctor. She knew herbs like nobody else. And usually, people who know herbs so well, if they are not actually initiated in the religion [Vodou] they’re darn close.

In Dorothy’s middle-class, Catholic family the tradition of Vodou in the ancestral line was not considered a subject for proper conversation. Nonetheless, Dorothy recalls that at a particular time of crisis her mother did consult an *oungan*; and she took Dorothy with her. An aunt was also present. It was at one of these ceremonies that Dorothy had her first physical experience of connection with the *lwa*:

My mother took me to several Vodou ceremonies when I was a teenager. I remember witnessing my aunt being possessed. It scared me. . . . The drummers were drumming and I heard a “pop” in the drum and felt a “pop” in my spine and it felt like a snake. And I knew what it was. I tore out of that room like nobody’s business! After that, I said to myself, “Dorothy, you can no longer say that Vodou stuff is just stuff. You may not believe in it, you may not worship it, but you better believe it’s real.”³⁷

Iyalosha Majile recalls that her grandmother and grandfather were healers:

People would come to the house and [my grandparents] would pray over them. And then they would take people into the back room and feed them clabbered milk and heal them.

The *iyalosha*’s grandmother could also “talk the fire out of burns”:

She had these words she would blow on the burns. I remember when I was little, if I would get burned on the stove or an iron or something she would blow these words on the burn and the pain would stop and there would be no scar. . . . I couldn’t get her to tell me what it was she said. I think she wanted to pass it on to my mother. We lost that.³⁸

Other people in Majile’s family also have psychic and healing abilities, including her own mother; and the priestess herself is known for her gifts as a diviner. Although such aptitudes are a strong familial inheritance, Majile remarks that few if any of the family members had formal training to develop their gifts. Initiation became, for her, among other things, a way to develop her natural strengths in that realm.

Like Majile, Osungunwa was also told family stories of an African great-grandfather:

My great-aunt on my father’s side told me that her father was an African. He came from Dahomey, which was unusual in Jamaica. Usually there [the people were] more Akan and Ashanti. But in slavery time, people were all over the place and they moved around a lot between the islands. That’s my possible lineage, but one never knows.

Osungunwa was also told of an aunt in Jamaica who practiced Obeah. As was the case in the families of most of the other priestesses and devotees, Osungunwa's relatives did not readily discuss African-based spiritual practices. Osungunwa noted an especially strong restraint in this area among her Jamaican family members:

In Jamaica, I think there's more resistance to owning it. [Referring to my aunt] they told me . . . "She's Obeah. But she's crazy."³⁹

Reflecting further on the question of the silence around African and folk-based traditions of healing, divination, and spirituality in African American communities, Osungunwa suggests that an important deterrent has been the desire among Blacks not to be seen as too different from the surrounding majority population:

One thing I'm aware of is the fear that African Americans have of not wanting to be too different. Not wanting to call too much attention to themselves and not wanting to lose that part of themselves which is *American*. Not wanting to lose that identity.⁴⁰

For the families of many of the women, the practice of Orisha religion raises uncomfortable questions about blackness and African identity within the larger American matrix. There is, of course, also a painful history of ridicule of so-called "superstition" and "hoodoo mess" which older African Americans often remember with especial poignancy.

Marcia notes, for example, that her mother is of an earlier generation which chose to forget (or at least give the appearance of forgetting) some of the ancestral traditions in order not to seem uneducated and unassimilated:

My mother came from the generation where to acknowledge those things meant you were country or unsophisticated. So my quest has been good for her in that she knows more now than she claimed to have known before about ancestors on her side of the family. . . . I think my experience is helping her to be more open to some things she had put in the back of her mind.⁴¹

Those things forgotten, suppressed, shunted to the recesses of collective memory are not always so inaccessible as one might think at first. As Osungunwa contends, "A lot of us retain a lot. African Americans, Afro-Caribbeans. The remembrance of signs, of remedies, of songs; the attention to dreams, to "sight"; the philosophic and moral complexity of stories; and the grandmothers and aunts and great-grandfathers who knew things and try still to tell us. . . ."

"Our Walk in the World": African Americanness as a Path to Òsun

In addition to her work as a nurse, Òsunnikantomi is an accomplished singer. She has performed with several local choirs in the Cleveland area, including the

Cleveland Orchestra chorus. When she was a member of her parents' church she sang regularly there, but in more recent years she has had fewer occasions to practice her musical gifts in a public forum. This year she plans to give a concert at the church of African American religious (mostly Christian) music as an *ebó* (an offering) for the ancestors.

I have an ancestral obligation to do a concert. . . . I'll be doing it in my parents' church. They can set the price, but I'll get nothing. It's an *ebó*. It's something I'm doing for the ancestors because they don't understand why I'm not singing now as much as I used to. They're saying, "You used to sing all the time. Why is it that we can't get any music from you?"⁴²

A concert of music of the Black Christian experience becomes, for an African American priestess of Òsun, an *ebó* for the ancestors. This is an inclusive understanding of ancestry holding our history in the Americas as well as the pre-diaspora experience. Such inclusiveness is an essential element in the African American meaning of *orisha* tradition. Òsunnikantomi explains that she sees her spiritual journey from Christianity to Ifá as an evolution, a kind of continuum, rather than a transformation. She is able to carry all that she is and all that she has been en route to that which she is yet to be.

I feel comfortable using all the experiences I've had. . . . If someone wants to refer to [the Bible]—say if I'm doing a consultation—that's fine. Because it's a point of reference. And if someone wants to refer to the Koran, that's fine too. I utilize the *orisha* system because it feels comfortable to me. It must be rooted in my genes. But our experience on this side of the water encompasses a lot of other things too. There's the Native American aspect—I really want to learn more about that. And then, our own ancestors in slavery used the Bible, they used what they had to use. . . . That's what my grandmother and my parents did and that's how they brought me up. It made me part of who I am today.⁴³

In the urban spaces of North America, Osungunwa suggests, the manifestations of Òsun may differ from those in Africa, Cuba, and Brazil; but this makes Òsun's devotees and Her worship even more inclusive.

In the city, going to the river, to the Hudson, to talk to Her is a little different. I was initiated upstate, in the river. . . . It was so special. So beautiful. I associate Her with nature, nature in the upstate-cold of New York. . . . I see Her on the city's streets as the consummate businesswoman, or artist. I see so many Òsuns who don't even know they are.⁴⁴

Osungunwa sees a particular value in the empowerment and insight available to African American women through the energy of Òsun and the other *orishas*.

It really makes you look at who you are and feel good about your walk in the world. Which is important, because quite often, we African American women don't walk

that way. We don't walk with our highest confidence. . . . They help us with understanding ourselves, our beauty.⁴⁵

Osuntoki speaks about how Òsun affects her interactions with people—especially with the teenaged girls she teaches. The *iyalsha* says that the deity's influence encourages her to be a force for encouragement and reconciliation; and to share what she knows with the high school students about womanhood, how to nurture their talents, and how to treasure their innermost selves.⁴⁶

Dorothy situates her Vodou priesthood and her devotion to Ochún in the context of her life as a “curator . . . thinker . . . and emerging scholar.” Carrying an acute awareness of both the trauma and the transformative power of the African experience in the Americas, the *manbo* uses the example of her enslaved ancestors as a guide—trying to emulate their genius in “taking the pain and making it power.” One of her present projects is to purchase a building which could be used as a unifying cultural and religious center: a place where ceremonies from all the diasporic traditions could be held and where classes in various languages, art, and dance styles would also be taught.⁴⁷

From Òsunnikantomi's ebó concert for the ancestors to Osungunwa's upstate-cold initiation, and from Osungunwa's ongoing dialogue with her mother to Dorothy's collective cultural-religious center, African American devotees and priestesses are finding novel and creative ways to give expression to the conjunction of Orisha tradition and African American identity in their lives. In time, the conjunctions become maps, internal compasses, ancestral echoes reversed, reverberating back, so that old paths are signaled new, and as Manbo Do tells it, “No matter what road we take, we're never lost.”⁴⁸

Notes

1. Variations occur in the spelling of names of the orishas according to different orthographic systems. I have adopted the particular spelling of each system where appropriate. The name Òsun is written variously herein as Osun, Ochún or Oxum depending on the context of each speaker. For example, when quoting Marcia Gibson Minter on her relationship to Òsun, I use the Brazilian Portuguese spelling “Oxum.” I have made similar decisions for the spelling of Yemoja/Yemaya/Yemanjá, for Sàngó/Shangó and for Ochosi/Oxossi.

2. Iyalosha Osuntoki Mojisola, interview, August 9, 1998.
3. Marcia Gibson Minter, interview, August 16 and 23, 1998.
4. Ibid.
5. Gibson Minter.
6. Manbo Asogwé Dorothy Désir-Davis, interview, September 21, 1998.
7. Iyalosha Majile Osunbunmi Olafemi, interview, August 23 and 30, 1998.
8. Iyalosha Òsunnikantomi Egbénihun Ajoké, interview, September 9 and 12, 1998.
9. Olafemi.
10. Iyalosha Shirley Pantón-Parker, interview, September 25, 1998.
11. Ibid.
12. Olafemi.

13. Désir-Davis.
14. Ibid.
15. Ibid.
16. Ibid.
17. All quotes in this section are the words of Iyalosha Òsunnikantomi Egbénihun Ajoké. Author's interview September 9 and 12, 1998.
18. See Pierre Verger, “Grandeza e Decadência do Culto de Ìyami Òsòròngà (Minha Mãe Feiticeira) entre os Yorubá,” in Carlos Eugênio Marcondes de Moura (org.), *As Senhoras do Pássaro da Noite*, (São Paulo: EDUSP, 1994), p. 16; also, Verger “The Orishas of Bahia,” in Carybé, *Os Deuses Africanos no Candomblé da Bahia*, (Salvador: Bigraf, 1993), p. 253. In his writing on Bahian Candomblé, Verger notes Òsun's ties with Iyami-Ajé or Iyami Osoronga (Mother Witch), indicating further that Òsun Ijumú (“queen of all the Òsuns”) and Òsun Ayalá or Òsun Ayanlá (the Great Mother or the Grandmother—who was the wife of Ogun) both have “a close connection to the witches, or Ajés.”
19. Oba Osejijman Adefunmi is the temporal and spiritual leader of Oyotunji Village, an African-inspired, strongly Yoruba-based community founded in 1971 in Sheldon, South Carolina.
20. Olafemi.
21. Mojisola.
22. Ajoké.
23. Olafemi.
24. Ajoké.
25. Mojisola.
26. Désir-Davis.
27. Ibid.
28. Ibid.
29. All quotes in this section are the words of Iyalosha Osungunwa. Author's interview September 25, 1998.
30. Ajoké.
31. Mojisola.
32. Olafemi.
33. Ajoké.
34. Gibson Minter.
35. All quotes in this section of the essay are the words of Marcia Gibson Minter. Author's interviews August 16 and 23, 1998.
36. Gibson Minter.
37. Désir-Davis.
38. Olafemi.
39. Osungunwa.
40. Ibid.
41. Gibson Minter.
42. Ajoké.
43. Ibid.
44. Osungunwa.
45. Osungunwa.
46. Mojisola.
47. Désir-Davis.
48. Ibid.

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CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Eḗrindínlógún

The Seeing Eyes of Sacred Shells and Stones

David O. Ogungbile



This essay focuses on Eḗrindínlógún, Sixteen Cowrie Divination, the primordial divination system claimed to have been owned by Ọṣun, the powerful goddess, a powerful and indispensable link between the humans and spiritual beings, both malevolent and benevolent. It identifies the multi-dimensional attributes of Ọṣun and her centrality in the maintenance and sustenance of the Yorubá universe vis-à-vis her ownership of the Eḗrindínlógún divination practice. The system follows a tripartite process of prognostication, explanation, and control (Ọgúngbilé 1996: 54) which corresponds to the modern medical practice of diagnosis, prescription, and medication. Thus, this essay discusses the process in relation to the two major activities that constitute the practice of Eḗrindínlógún: divinatory technique and curative practice. The study notes the importance of Eḗrindínlógún as the "seeing eyes" of most other Yorubá deities and how this has ascribed to Ọṣun a prestigious status in the ordering of the societies where she is acknowledged.

Ọṣun and Eḗrindínlógún

The connection of Ọṣun to Eḗrindínlógún underscores her position and power within the complex scheme of two groups of powerful spiritual beings who struggle for the domination of the universe. This could be explained from (1) her diverse manifestations as spiritual, human, and natural phenomena and (2) her different levels of relations with some powerful divinities who are active in the creation and maintenance of the universe. While completing the male-female principle among the spiritual beings, Ọṣun conceptualizes a working principle of the natural forces in Yorubá cosmology. Her feminine image therefore is of great biological and ecological significance among the people. It is noteworthy that Ọṣun plays a vital role not only in the creation of human beings and the