

Performing Osun without Bodies: Documenting the Osun Festival in Print

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ore ye ye o

An experiment in translating performance events into ethnographic scholarship drawing on both verbal and visual means of communication. Keywords: Ethnographic Methodology, Osun, Yoruba, Textualization



"Artist's Proof" "Devotee" D. R. Polite 1995

MY challenge as an ethnographer is finding an appropriate translation of the Yoruba *orisa* (deity) Osun and her annual festival for the academic readers of this scholarly journal. As the principle of eros, the *orisa* of sensuality and fertility, Osun is performance, she is vitality and life. This life is manifest not only in the children she brings to women, but also in her annual festival. Each year she is honored along the banks of her river in Osogbo, Nigeria. Osun offers protection, children and other blessings for the gifts of food, prayers, dance, song and respect people bring to her river home. At the Osun Festival, thousands of indigenes and foreigners alike make the ritual journey of transformation from the *oba's* (king's) palace, through the town of Osogbo, to the Osun River and back again to the palace, their spirits replenished and their promise to Osun kept.

Textualizing Osun

Osun is the only woman in the Yoruba pantheon of *orisa* given the power of divination, and she is the only female *orisa* who descended from *orun* (the world of deities and ancestors) to *aye* (the earth plane). Her sweet, water healing powers extend around the African diaspora to Haiti where she is known as Erzulie, Freda or Dahomey, to Puerto Rico and Cuba where she is Ochun, and to Brazil where Osun lives as Oxum. Given her power and prominence within the Yoruba pantheon of *orisa* and the global manifestation of her power, it is surprising that Osun has not received more attention in major Goddess literature.

While textualizing Osun may redress the omissions of the Goddess literature, textualizing can also ossify Osun. Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett describes this danger in her discussion of ethnographic artifacts. Taking Osun out of her complex context and displaying her pieces in print changes her into an "ethnographic fragment . . . informed by a poetics of detachment" (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 388). This problem seems most pronounced when Western scholars treat non-Western spirituality. Ultimately, those who want to know Osun will have to know her through their own reality. What, then, is this sharing of Osun that is mediated by my fieldwork and by the confines of print?

In print, one problem is time. The culture gets set in the past while the ethnographer and reader are in the here and now. The shared present time of fieldwork becomes the powered present of the ethnographer, and secondarily, the reader. Margaret Thompson Drewal reminds us "present tense leaves the impression that the performance is always the same. But the normatized performance is not performance at all" (22). Kirsten Hastrup also addresses the issue of tense and concludes that the present tense accurately identifies the act of writing. While the fieldwork may be in the past, the writing is in the present making present tense appropriate in print. Although I understand Hastrup on this point, I think it more appropriate to find a "temporal methodology" (Drewal 35) that responds to the specificity of the festival, that situates the festival in time and among identified participants.

Authority is yet another problem in translating performance into print. The ethnographer remains "I" on the page while the fieldwork community members are in the subordinate third-person position. "[H]owever many the direct quotations, the informant's voices cannot penetrate the discursive speech of the ethnographer. . . .

However much we replace the monologue with dialogue the discourse remains asymmetrical . . ." (122). Text is simply a different reality from performance. The very mindset of print must be disrupted to allow for a performance-centered ethnography, a performance-based way of experiencing the page.

In spite of these obstacles, some have written about Osun. Susanne Wenger, also known as Mama Adunni, applies a highly intellectual style to her discussion of Osun, which gives rise to such explanations as "They, the goddess [Osun] and the river (named after her) are according to the Orisa born transcendental-physical relative hierachic order one and the same phenomenon of sacred reality" (84). In a book-length study of Osun, Dierdre Badejo offers a detailed description of the Osun Festival with pictures and *oriki* (praise songs) for Osun. In her earlier writing, Badejo explores the ways in which Osun can provide a feminist model for African Americans. Olaosun Monifa Olakesi, a Tennessee *olaorisa* (devotee) has published a description of the spiritual experience of Osun. There is an official Osun Festival booklet published each year by the Osogbo Cultural Heritage Council giving festival attendees background about Osun and a description of "tourist attractions" in and around the Osun Sacred Groves. Although each of these works contributes mightily to our understanding of Osun, none of these varied examples structurally reflect Osun.¹ My desire is to treat the page as a descriptive canvas and move toward experiencing the page as performance space.

When considering the politics of textualization, it seems wise to heed Dwight Conquergood's advice: "Because the conceptual deck is stacked in favor of text-based disciplines, methods, and epistemologies, we need to ask, whose interests are served by the textualization of performance practices?" (Conquergood 2) bell hooks simply tells us that we must always ask "who is sponsoring the party and who is giving the invitations." (54) The "Osun Osogbo Festival 1995 Brochure" costs 10 *naira* (about 12 cents) and is produced by the Osogbo Local Government. The proceeds go to promote the Festival along with beer and cigarette sponsors. None of the money goes to the devotees nor do the devotees contribute to the print text that is published about Osun. Only indirectly are the spiritual aspects of the Osun Festival served by this brochure. My own textualizing has obvious careerist dimensions, and the deeply spiritual impulses to textualize are not appropriate discussion for academic essays.

Though print's generally linear, fixed, and singular construction contradicts the seriate, simultaneous, improvisational, and circular nature of the Osun Festival, print does allow for return, for a deepening re-visit to the experience. A reader can curl up with a text year after year and make repeated discoveries that were previously unavailable to the reader. An important consideration, then, is how to capitalize on this repeatability.

Performative Possibilities

What we lose in textualizing is performance. In spite of performative possibilities of print, we simply lose performance itself. Performativity on the page is neither tactile nor easily simultaneous. Peggy Phelan has described performative writing as enacted writing rather than description, writing in which "the present matters as much as, or more than, the future" (30). Anthropologist Kathleen Stewart turns to

the power of stories as a performative method of sharing culture, always with the understanding that ethnography is not the enterprise of “getting culture right.” She offers provocative possibilities that suit her individual role as an anthropologist and the West Virginia coal-mining world she explores. A related development in writing about performance is feminist ethnography. Especially noteworthy for their experimentations with form are Zora Neale Hurston with her much discussed style of storytelling-documentation-autobiography and Kamala Visweswaran with her use of dramatic structure and storytelling. Anthropologist Lila Abu-Lughod warns that “feminist anthropologists might find the risks of these sorts of ethnographic experiments too high” (qtd. in Visweswaran 19) given the negative impact such experimentation might have on developing careers.

My goal here is to change a reader’s expectations of the page without being glib or gimmicky. With this writing, I want to discover the ways in which the page can perform Osun, to create an interaction between the page and the reader, to give the reader my experience of the Osun Festival. In doing so, I intend to follow Stephen Tyler’s recommendation for an emergent ethnography—a translation that shares the culture in its very structure. My hope, then, is to create a union with the reader that is seriate, simultaneous, sketch-driven, improvisational, incorporative, circular, and transformative! With the collaboration of several visual artists and many Yoruba friends and acquaintances, the following pages are my response to this challenge.

The next four pages may require performative reading, in which the reader finds a point of interest on the page, and lingers or moves on to another. The reader can read or look or scan or skim. Some readers may head for the Yoruba waves of songs and stories that ground each of the pages, while others may opt for an appreciation of the visual art that is included. Readers will engage with the text in whatever ways suit them. The pages are necessary physical divisions that should not imply sequential relationships; the reader is encouraged to move between these four pages following whatever seems satisfying, puzzling, or interesting. The reader can capitalize on the repeatability of print by journeying again and again through specific images and ideas, all the while remembering that some experiences gain clarity over time and through accretion. There will be names, phrases, places and ideas in the next four pages that may frustrate or confuse the reader; consider this the fieldwork experience of trying to understand the experience while you are in the midst of it. Several pages of discussion about the various images follow the next four pages. The discussion can be read in conjunction with the visual pages, or after experiencing the visual pages, or the discussion need not be read at all.

ore yeye osun

Osun is not only an idea—it is the water; it is the physical body of the wisdom of heaven. Olodumare is sacred, not anthropomorphized. Europeans have eaten too much wrong food literally and spiritually.

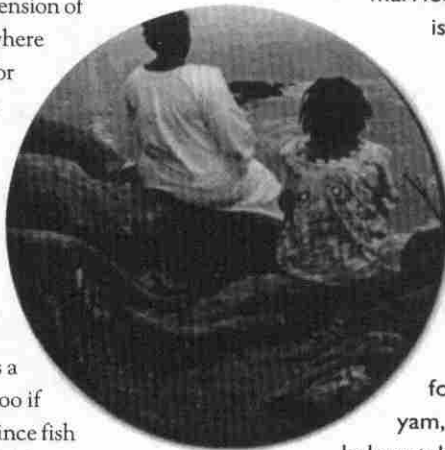


Osun is a woman/she helps them with their problems/she will help with any problem

You have to prove yourself to the earth before you are initiated. Black Americans must find their own evolutive speed. They must discover Ogboni, the sacred dimension of matter of earth right where they are. They are there for good. Who knows what is sacred is the earth is Ogboni.

Osun is married to Ogun/they were husband and wife in the old days/Osun and Obatala are like sisters/Osun is married to Ogun now/ Ogun is senior to all orisa/he is the most powerful/ everything belongs to Ogun

Osun Osogbo is her mightiest and most sacred aspect.



Osun has helped me in many ways/I have family problems/many wives but didn't bond/ now I am bonded to one

In Osun worship, it is a gross violation of taboo if one kills or eats fish since fish are Osun's favorite children.

for Osun, give pounded yam, rice, beans, palm oil, goat, kola nut, bitter kola

Mama Adunni 1994

Osun behaves in a good way/she will try her best to offer the request to the person



Oseni Adeyemi 1994



Osofbo ilu aro Oroki asala are o petan are petan wongba o Osun osofbo pele o Pele o olomoye
Timogun roroa Laro ma ma pele o Osidan o ma roro o Osun Osofbo pele o pele
Selaru sifo asfara sfo lara fi siso ororo re ki dolita oto de alimo ma kwanle Oun la rufawe mo



Osun is the mother of Christians and Muslims because everybody needs water/Osun does not get annoyed quickly/if she gets offended, she will tell them what they should do and then if they don't she'll be angry/Osun has 201 husbands and has children for all of them/breasts of Osun all over her body because she is the mother of multitudes/bene, Osun should be prayed to for husbands and children/once you go there with your mind and believe, she will hear you/ but you know more when you practice than when you talk about it

Iya Ewe 1994



The ase of Osun is at Osogbo. All Osuns are received through Osogbo. . .She married orunmila and through him received the cowries. Orunmila taught people not to rely on only one work. He taught wife Osun how to divine so that people would not be disappointed when he could not always get clearance to divine for them. . .Osun does not use medicine, only water for cure for healing. . .

There is no man Osun can't conquer. When woman runs the river, man disappears. When woman crosses the road, man retreats.

Professor Bayo Ogundijo 1995



Osogbo is the domain of spirits. It was founded by a woman so that things here are to be done in a humane way. The city takes on woman traits. The Osun Festival is becoming more cultural

than religious though it is a covenant between the oba and Osun.

The oba has two personalities in one. One: the private person two: the father of everybody in Osogbo. The traditional religion is your culture.

Oba Oyewale Motaponi III 1994



Once, Osun saved the people of Osogbo from invasion by the Fulani who wanted to take the people as slaves. During the time of this Jihad from Sudan and the conversion to Islam, Osun appeared before the Islamic troops wearing only an ire wrapped round her waist and carrying baskets of savory foods. She oiled her black skin so that her body glistened in the sun. The troops were taken with desire and ate heartily from the baskets as Osun moved from man to man offering food and a closer look at her beautiful body. Soon, the men became violently ill with dysentery for Osun had poisoned the food. They were so stricken they could not fight. It was then clear how powerful Osun was and it was then that the people really began to honor her.



We are
 children of a goddess
 Our laughter carries the words
 of our forbidden drums
 in ragtime rhythms
 and blues bebe
 Bebe
 the dance for the King
 that our Mother taught us
 Iya, jowo
 ka wa jo bebe
 Bee ni
 Sisters we are
 and we wear
 our hips
 Like monuments of time
 sculptured in the image
 of our goddess
 of our Mother
 where hands
 and babies
 pause. . .
 Awa obinrin Osun
 * * *

We are
 daughters of a goddess
 And her saline blood blows
 for she is the river
 flows "deep like the river"
 Obinrin dudu, Oso dudu
 Awa emyan dudu oso Osun
 * * *

Sisters we are
 Children of a goddess
 We sacrifice to know
 We offer our losses
 as our willingness
 to gain
 We are
 daughters of a goddess
 Bound by a Mother's Love
 We are
 the Sisterhood
 of Osun's daughters.
 —Diedre Badejo

Drifting on a memory

river osun's oblique moment
 her lucid pirouettes feed oya's ready blast
 & yemoja's bottomless waves himn pause
 & muse pause
 wash my hands & feet in the world



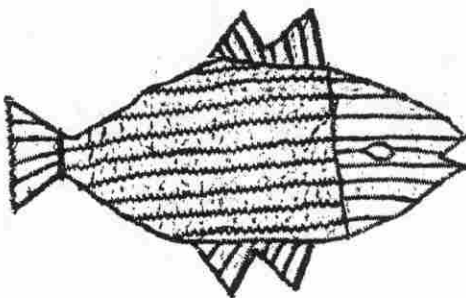
my whisper touches
 osun in your veins
 rivers deep placid inhales'
 liquid drowns pauses' static in
 motion sister of patience
 daughter of balance
 nimble everlasting never stillness
 never changed neverever repeats
 endless never more jade never
 swirls of shaded always and then

Flowing through my mind with ease

y'know I have no recollection
 of what I thought green was before
 osun's grove her bed and she twisting
 & shaded lying silent canopy rains
 filters grains of dim & cool mourning
 as exhales join

shaded grove of mother I knelt
 kneels loving L's Left deference
 & down to divine closeness "velvet & furs" &
 trane ballads & she ain't back off
 like a God would-a she ain't raise up
 in judgment she lay beneath imale
 under & moving around

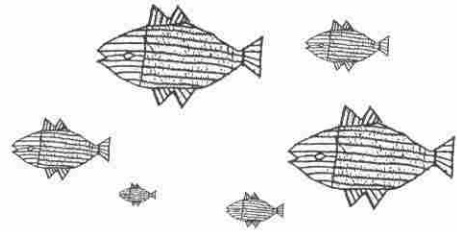
—Edward C. Pavlic



Once, the leader Laro accompanied by the hunter Timeyen, set out to find water for their people during the time of drought. They came to a lush river surrounded by much vegetation and many old old trees. Laro and Timeyen decided this would make an ideal location for their new town and so began cutting down trees to use for the building of homes. One tree fell across the river that encircled the land and a voice rose up from the river. It was Osun. She was furious. They had carelessly broken her Indigo pots when felling the trees. There was sound from the river. "You bad people!" Osun was calling to them. "All my pottery of dye—you have spoiled them!" She told them they could not create a town on the banks of her river—it would be too disruptive to her treasured solitude. Instead, if they moved their town up the hill and come back to the river each year to praise her, she would reward them with abundance and protection. Laro and Timeyen wisely agreed. And this is how Osogbo began.



Babalawos must be trained. They have inside power and he is tested with initiation. Women are also babalawos. You are now a seer, you now have inside power. Osun followers are seers. They have witchcraft ability, they can foretell. Iya Osun can tell without ever tossing kola.
 Prince Adenle 1995



There's no way you can avoid water! Osun likes fashion. People like her because she is feminine, elegant and kind.

Traditional religion is in the blood. Everyone is traditional on festival day, but wait until they get home! The oba's head is in traditional religion even if parents were Christian or Muslim; they are buried in the tradition.

There are about forty-one shrines for Osun in Osogbo or forty-one dimensions of Osun. Different shrines have different days of processional, and some are on the same days. People process until December with Osun. Every five five day worship the orisa. Not set up around the Western calendar.

Dayin Otagiwola 1994

The higher you come up, the more humble your position.
 Mama fidumi 1993

Political issues kept people from coming so festival was smaller than usual.
 Ifajemi Eleburuwo 1993



If it's not good, why do you have to take it away? The colonists knew the power of the Yoruba orisa and that's why they had to take it away. It's a type of deceit. . . The Christians and Muslims run to the "pagans" when they need help.

Ifamabiwo 1994



The spirituality is in the act itself rather than a display of worship or reverence. It's a carnival/party and it's the act of gathering and partying that pleases Osun—not solemn prayers or reverent expressions.

Joni L. Jones 1993



Osun lo ni nwa o u Osun lo ni nwa o ha Emi oma bawo dodo ni o
 Mowa dupe ojo o ee Mowa dupe ojo ha Iya ijesa gbomo mi komi
 Gbere iya ijesa gbera komi mode Gbere iya ijesa gbera komi mode
 Daku afomi warun maje fose rodun Meha pokunwo aye omo lemi ma fo

Osun lo ni nwa
 Mowa dupe ojo



Column One

Mama Adunni is the affectionate term for Austrian-born artist Susanne Wenger. Wenger came to Nigeria in 1950 with her then-husband Ulli Beier. She soon became seriously ill and listened to the Yoruba babalawos who counseled her. After regaining her health she began spiritual and artistic collaborations with several Yoruba artists, and is now a respected Ogboni fully integrated into Yoruba society. By 1965 she had begun the New Sacred Artists who spearheaded a project to save Osun's sacred groves from pillaging by residents and disregard by the Nigerian government. Today the work of the New Sacred Artists magnificently adorn the groves and give a stature to Osun's sacred grounds.

Mama Adunni granted me this interview during my second visit to Osogbo 17 August 1994. When we first met in 1993, I thought we had a rocky encounter in which I was cast as the American dilettante and she as the colonizer/savior of Yoruba culture. She is a central figure in Osogbo and an important member of the group of devotees who are principally in charge of the spiritual nature of the Osun Festival. I was nervous about this meeting but welcomed a chance to speak to someone without need for a translator.

We were seated on the third level of her home in the heart of Osogbo with many children playing, working or sleeping inside and outside the home. The dwelling is embellished with the elongated carvings and clay art work of the New Sacred Artists which makes this home stand apart from the flat-surfaced clay homes that surround it. To get to the third floor I climbed a narrow winding uneven staircase with hammered metal swinging doors that marked each landing. The walls along the staircase were/are covered with painted or carved figures. I sat on a hammered metal chair in a room full of wood figures—many four or five feet high—and metal furniture pounded and curved into animals and other beings. She arrived with her characteristic hat and make-up of eyebrow pencil drawn high on her eyelid. She is a short wiry white woman with a stern carriage until she releases the deepest smile. Mama Adunni speaks in such a way that I found it difficult to interrupt her. Her stories, her commentaries about the state of Nigeria and the world in general, her advice all flowed from her in an easy and continuous stream. I was mesmerized by her wisdom, her determination to live her life as she saw fit, and her stunning art works. She was generous with her time and resources.

1995

Her comment that “Osun is not only an idea . . . it is the *water*” speaks of Osun’s power and her necessity. Human life cannot exist without her sweet waters. Each time we drink, swim, bathe we are feeling Osun’s generosity. Water cushions our nine-month womb journey and nourishes plant life that sustains us outside the womb. Indeed, Osun is water is life. John Mason of the Yoruba Theological Archministry translates Osun as “spring” or “source” (294). The local television station is called “The Source of the Living Spring.” It is fitting that she grants children to barren women. Osun as water is the most fundamental way in which I am coming to know this *orisa* (deity).

Olodumare is the Supreme Being while the *orisa* are manifestations of that being. People do not pray directly to Olodumare but instead seek support and guidance from the appropriate *orisa*.

I asked Mama Adunni how African Americans might best honor the *orisa* and her response speaks of the fluidity and incorporation that is reflected in many aspects of Yoruba life. Each person I asked about the relationship of African Americans to the *orisa* offered a suggestion that spoke to creating our own paths rather than rigidly following Osogbo practice. While most recommended we learn Yoruba for so much is there in the language, they also said the *orisa* would be pleased at any ways we chose to honor them. I still take this advice cautiously realizing that there may be taboos that transcended the devastation of the trans-Atlantic slave trade.

The Ogboni are the council of elders who are integral to festival and ceremonial life. The print literature on the Ogboni does not address the spiritual ways in which the Ogboni seem to operate in Osogbo. Because I frequently wear cowrie shells associated with diviners and other tradition bearers, I was often asked if I was Ogboni. There was a wry smile on one inquiring woman’s face, a knowing kind of look as she asked the question, as if we both shared some secret. More than a council of elders, Ogboni are a powerful group acknowledged for their wisdom and the close relationship to the *orisa* brought about by their age.

There are many different roads to Osun or dimensions of Osun. John Mason describes many in *Orin Orisa*. Because Osun was instrumental in the founding of Osogbo, Osun Osogbo is her “most sacred aspect.” Osun is the patron *orisa* (deity) of Osogbo and she feels much affection for the town and its people.

Mama Adunni admonished me not to eat fish. Doyin Olayiwola, a preeminent Festival participant and student of Mama Adunni, seemed to sense my disappointment and amended the advice. Doyin advised me not to “eat fish from the Osun river.” While the taboo is clear, it was important that there was flexibility within the practice.

Column Two

Oseni Adeyemi is a groundskeeper at the Osun Groves. He keeps the vegetation even with his machete and wards off thieves and vandals who have been destroying the work of the New Sacred Artists. Ogun, the *orisa* (deity) of iron, rides Oseni’s head so this groundskeeper must give proper respect to Ogun even while discussing Osun. Through divination one comes to know which *orisa* governs your path or rides your head, the head being the entry point and dwelling for the *orisa*. One’s head, *ori*, is sacred. This gives rise to the importance of *ori inu*, inner head, which is closely

associated with *iwa*, character. As Oseni explained, “the head is most important part of body.”

Osun was married to many of the *orisa*, not only Ogun. Her union with Ogun was a good one, but not as satisfying as her marriage to Sango. She was not Sango’s favorite wife (Oya held that distinction) but Osun and Sango were lovers whose passions are known around the African diaspora. Osun was also married to Obatala in Obatala’s male aspect. Mama Adunni suggests that “sixteen cowries [a principle form of Yoruba divination] *belongs* to Osun and she gives them to priests. Perhaps they were given to her from Obatala.” (Quoted in Wenger, 74) Cowries are one-inch white shells with a prominent yoni on one side and a rounded back on the other. A more common reference to Osun’s divination ability is noted by Diedre Badejo who writes “Osun is also a diviner who learned the *merindinlogun* (sixteen-cowries divination) from Orunmila, the Ifa divination deity of wisdom and knowledge” (Badejo 1995 1). Iya Ewe, a major Osun diviner, told me that Ifa was Osun’s first husband and that he gave her *opele*, a form of divination distinct from sixteen cowries. These varied comments about who gave Osun divination powers and whether those powers were through sixteen cowries or *opele* should not be taken as contradictions. They exist as collective realities reflecting the Yoruba ability to incorporate diversity rather than exclude philosophies and perspectives. Osun and Obatala surely work in concert as she grants conception while Obatala shapes the fetus in the womb.

Oseni attests to Osun’s powers when he describes how she specifically helped him. Because of his praise and sacrifice, she granted him a happy home life. He lists the offerings that are most common to Osun.

Bottom Waves

I learned this *oriki* (praise song) for Osun in 1993 while en route to the Osun Festival. I was in a lively van packed full of artists who would be dancing at the Festival representing the Nike Center for Art and Culture.

The *oriki* tells some of the story of the founding of Osogbo and begins by referencing the town. In a 1994 interview, Oba Oyewale Matanmi III, the current *Ataoja* (ruler) of Osogbo, said Osogbo is another name for Osun. Some have noted the possible etymology of Osogbo as *oso* (wizard) and *igbo* (grove), or wizard’s grove, which conforms to stories about the town’s origins discussed below. The opening also proclaims Osogbo as the *ilu* (town) of *aro* (indigo dye) which is painstakingly made from the leaves of the *elu* plant. The leaves are pounded, dried for two or three days, and mixed in a clay pot with alkaline water for another three or four days. During this stage, the mixture must be stirred every thirty minutes and kept covered. It takes almost two months to make a clay pot. Silifat Adunni Raseed, a master indigo craftswoman, has been making *aro* (indigo dye) and *adire* (patterned indigo cloth) since she was ten. When I talked with her in 1995 about her craft, she said it had been dying out until the Museum of Ife took an interest in it. She learned the art “from the womb,” from her grandmother, Salamatu Asabi, and her mother, Wulemat Alake who is from Abeokuta where many Yoruba traditions are maintained. Silifat creates designs on plain or brocade cotton (known as guinea brocade) by applying a cassava paste to the cotton with a chicken feather. This is classic *adire* she learned from a master, but she also knows *adire oniko* (wrapping the cloth into

patterns with raffia) and *adire alabere* (sewing raffia or cotton threads into the cloth). Silifat offers *oriki* for Iya Moopo, the *orisa* of potters, so that the work will go well. If it doesn't, she makes sacrifice and places it around the pot. Those who work with indigo thank Osun for the water. They could not do their work without her.

Osun was an *Iyalaro* (indigo mother) who devoted much time to her craft. According to Professor Bayo Ogundijo of Obafemi Awolowo University, she taught the women who came to her how to dye with indigo. Silifat says that Osun soaked cloth in the indigo she made but Osun did not work the cloth with cassava or raffia. In an interview, Professor Ogundijo referred to Osun as a working mother because she worked indigo, cared for many children, and divined when needed.

Oroki asalaa names Osogbo as the town where people run for safety, *Oroki* being the name of the town before it was called Osogbo and *Asalaa* being the wilderness where many sought safety during the intertribal wars. The *Ataoja* (ruler of Osogbo) suggested that *oroki* is also a philosophical *oba* (ruler) committed to doing things properly. The name then becomes a command to "do it, do it, do it." If Osogbo is another name for Osun, as suggested by the *Ataoja*, and *Oroki* is a profound ruler, then the praise song opens with the union of Osun (as Osogbo in phrase one) and the ruler (as *oroki* in phrase two). This union is an important dramatic ritual of the Osun Festival.

Osun Osogbo pele o is an apology offered to Osun for disturbing her peace when people came to her groves seeking refuge at the time Osogbo was founded. The phrase is said now when entering the groves to acknowledge that we are visitors to her home and hope we are welcome. The *Ataoja* says that we are "begging" her to welcome us. Batik artist Yetunde Omoniwa, who regularly sings this *oriki* at festival time, says the phrase means "Osun we hail you." The next phrase in the praise song, *Olomoyoyo*, names Osun as the mother of many children.

In the next lines, Timeyin and Laro, co-founders of Osogbo are greeted and praised. Ogidan, a brother to these men, is also saluted. In addition to being a name, Ogidan is also the rock of authority, the *Ataoja's* stone seat in the original Osogbo palace and the personification of that energy. The *Ataoja* alone is allowed to sit upon it, and no one may walk upon it. During the festival, I was surprised by how many people did not know this and had to be told by devotees to move off it, now!

Seleru agbo and *agbara agbo* describe the growing, flowing medicinal waters and herbs of Osun. *Losun fi nwo omo re ki dokita otode* tells that Osun used to care for her children before Timeyen and Laro came to her river. These lines continue the images around the founding of the city. *Abimo ma dana le*, she who gives birth without the knowledge of the doctor; *osun la npowe mo*, it is Osun that we are referring to. Here Osun is praised for her skill which exceeds that of a doctor.

Central Photo

To the left is seated Iya Ewe who became my friend and guide through my understanding of Osun. She has the full roundness that is associated with Osun and with prosperity generally. Iya Ewe is a former Arugba Osun and the daughter of the current Iya Osun. It is the Arugba who carries the tray of food offerings atop her head through the streets of Osogbo. Her face is covered by a tapestry canopy held by devotees who run and dance alongside her. She must not stumble in her procession from the *Ataoja's* palace through the town to the Osun shrine near the banks of the

Osun River. As I talk to Iya Ewe, I feel how much she enjoyed her time as Arugba Osun though she believes the role is losing its respect. Iya Ewe is currently married with two children, but as Arugba Osun she had to remain a virgin. The Iya Osun, Iya Ewe's mother, is the major contact between humans and Osun, her name meaning Mother Osun. She is in her seventies, her mobility is constrained, and her vision is weak. Because of this Iya Ewe takes on many of her mother's duties, and may indeed be named Iya Osun when her mother dies. Orunmila, the *orisa* of divination, will be consulted to determine who will continue as Iya Osun.

I am seated to the right in the photograph. Iya Ewe and I are on the shore of the Osun River sitting on the mammoth roots from a large tree that thrives on its proximity to Osun's waters. The river is at its normal level, however, before the festival, the river is said to fill almost to the brim. During each of my visits this was the case, with a huge storm having rolled in the night before each festival raising the river's level well above the roots pictured in the photograph.

* * * * *

Top Comments

I talked with Iya Ewe at her bead shop on the road just outside the entrance to the Osun Groves. She sells bracelets, beads, bells, and *ibeji* (twin) carved figures. The large wooden doors to the small shop open out toward the street to display many various colored necklaces. Several children play around and through the shop as Iya Ewe and I talk—talk aided by my friend and, on this occasion, translator Michael Oludare. We sat on wooden benches inside the shop with occasional interruptions from children, neighbors, and caretakers needing information from Iya Ewe. I asked her how Osun felt about the many Yoruba who have adopted Islam and Christianity. Because Osun as water is essential for all human life, and because Osun grants conception, she is the mother of us all. Iya Ewe also described Osun's patience and her power. *Once, Osun was annoyed with the male orisa because they looked down on her. She said "I will show them the power of woman," and she blocked their way. The power that Olodumare gave to Sango and Ogun and Orunmila and the others was not working. They became quite upset and worried, so they ascended to heaven on a chain to speak to Olodumare about their problem. They told him there was no rain and no vegetation. Olodumare said "Look around. What is missing?" Obatala was the only one who realized that Osun was not there. They had not invited her to the meeting because she was a woman. The male orisa called to Osun and she refused them bluntly. Olodumare ordered them to apologize and to invite her. She demanded to learn all their secrets. Osun said "Now that you recognize me, everything will be perfect." Then there was rain and a good yield to the crops.*² Osun will not be ignored. To do so is to cut off life, to stop the flow.

There is dispute over the number of Osun's husbands and her children. Most people agree with Iya Ewe who says that she has had many husbands. It seems she learns different skills from each which accounts for some of her power; Ogun's warrior strength, Obatala's peace, Orunmila's divination, Sango's passion are all hers.

When Iya Ewe speaks of the "breasts of Osun all over her body" she is being both

literal in the sense that Osun can care for many children, and figurative as an image of her mothering powers. Iya Ewe makes a similar literal/figurative statement when she says that "Osun has 201 husbands."

Like Mama Adunni, Iya Ewe also encouraged me to honor Osun in my own land. She suggested appropriate procedures for sacrifice because "you know more when you practice than when you talk about it."

Middle Comments

Professor Ogundijo teaches at the Institute of Cultural Studies at Obafemi Awolowo University in Ile-Ife. Ogun is the *orisa* (deity) who rides his head but he says he was born of Osun because his mother drank from the Osun River before he was conceived. On 14 August 95, a few days before the festival, Professor Ogundijo insisted on taking batik artist Yetunde Omoniwa and me on a tour of Ife. We drove through the campus into town where we visited the major shrine for Obatala and past the ground where Oduduwa, the creator of land, set down his stake. He shared these comments with me while he navigated the infrequently paved bumpy roads that wind through the town.

Professor Ogundijo tells me that Osun's life force is in Osogbo and all devotees of Osun are therefore connected to Osogbo. Over my three visits, I met devotees from Germany and Portugal who needed to meet Osun in her home. Osogbo is where one can replenish the *ase* (life force) connection to Osun; the festival likewise serves this purpose as the blessings Osun extends to Osogbo generate out to the entire world.

Osun learned divination through cowries, the shells often worn by the council of elders, and she passed that skill on to her devotees. As noted earlier, Mama Adunni believes these abilities came from Obatala while Ogundijo and most others believe she acquired this practice from Orunmila, the *orisa* (deity) who governs Ifa divination. According to Ogundijo, this sharing of power was practical; Orunmila needed help in serving the spiritual needs of the townspeople.

When Ogundijo described Osun's healing powers, he noted that *iyannrin*, one of her special foods, has the ability to spoil medicine. It might be, he speculated, that this ability in the vegetable is what actually destroys the medicines that people rely on. Osun's powers are legion. *Once, when the orisa were descending from heaven, they became stuck between heaven and earth because there was a big river they could not cross. Ogun said they should call on Osun for help. Agbedelede! Osun with all the bangles along her arms! She graciously agreed to help. She asked them to close their eyes and then they found themselves on the other side of the river. Without her help, they could not get to earth.*

Third Comments

Ataoja is the title given to the *oba* (ruler) of Osogbo. It loosely means fish, *oja*, in hand, *ata*. The *Ataoja* is chosen through Ifa divination and must assume the role regardless of his other life choices. The current *Ataoja*, Oba Oyewale Matanmi III, was the budget officer for the University of Lagos when he was chosen as *Ataoja* in 1976. The *Ataoja* is Muslim and his predecessor was Christian. Prince Adenle of the Osogbo Cultural Heritage Council explained this relationship when he said, "He

was chosen by Ifa, not chosen by Muslims.” Because Oba Oyewale Matanmi III is Muslim, he must rise early on the morning of the Osun Festival—traditionally the third Friday in August—attend service at the mosque across the street from the palace since Friday is a worship day for Muslims, then prepare for the procession to and from the Osun River. Again, the Yoruba incorporate difference and individuality.

I had met the *Ataoja* the previous year but this talk in 1994 was the first extended visit I had with him that did not include several other U.S. visitors. There were four or five other men in the room who occasionally chuckled at my questions and the *Ataoja*'s responses. Yetunde Omoniwa was with me to help me present the customary gift, in this instance elegant wine, and to assist if translation was necessary, though most often the *Ataoja* spoke to me in English. We were in an upper room of the palace with a fan whirring and with dim lighting from the partly shuttered windows. We not only talked about Osun but also about my work and about my daughter. When I returned in 1995, he warmly remembered our conversations.

When the *Ataoja* refers to Osogbo as the “domain of spirits,” he is referring to the possible etymology of Osogbo as wizard's (*oso*) grove (*igbo*). *Once, during the time of a drought, Timeyin went through the forest in search of water. After some time passed—and he broke taboo by killing a pregnant elephant and made ebo (sacrifice) to redirect the ase (life force)—he came upon Oseyin, the herbalist who was praising and dancing with sixteen spirits. Timeyin sang with the spirits and made them his friends. They danced around a lamp that Timeyin took with him as he continued his search for water. The lamp had a bird on top and sixteen leaves like a tall plant. Timeyin brought his people to the water he found at the Osun River, but Osun sent them away because they disturbed her peace. She told them to use the lamp as a means of communication between her and them. They were to stick the lamp in the ground and listen. If they could hear her, they were too close and had to move further away. They finally settled in the area now known as Oja Oba or King's Market.*³ The “domain of spirits” recalls the annual Festival of Sixteen Lamps (*olojumind in logun*) which precedes the Osun Festival by seven to ten days. A lamp, similar to the one around which Timeyin danced, is lit at the *Ataoja*'s palace. People come to gather around the sixteen fires. Three times during the evening, the *Ataoja* and his processional dance through the palace compound, circle the lamp and return to the palace. His entourage is followed by the Iya Osun and Osun devotees who also dance around the lamp. The gatherers remain until dawn when the lamp must be tipped over in view of the *Ataoja* as he makes his final dance around the lamp.

Oba Oyewale Matanmi III says the Osun festival is becoming more cultural than religious. I found it difficult to separate the two. The cultural aspects enhanced the religious ones and the religious ones were deepened by the cultural ones. Many performers, devotees, and interested onlookers make the ritual walk from the palace to the shrine, to the river, and back to the palace on the day of the Festival. The drummers, acrobats, praise singers, dancers, and stilt walkers offer their talents at a special station by the river where the *Ataoja*, his wives and other palace officials receive them. These are the cultural activities to which Oba Oyewale Matanmi III was referring. While these performances are happening near the river, the religious events are taking place in the Osun Shrine several hundred yards away. The Iya Osun, the Arugba Osun, the Aworo Osun (high priest) and other members of the Iya

Osun's spiritual family receive offerings of food and money, provide kola readings with carefully broken and tossed kola nuts, and extend blessings to hundreds of people throughout the day. Both these "cultural" and "religious" performances jointly comprise the festival. In addition, people offer prayers and *oriki* (praise songs) throughout the day on the banks of the river. Anyone attending the festival can move among these various locations at will. The *Ataoja's* later comment that "the traditional religion is your culture" suggests the synthesis of "culture" and "religion" even while his earlier words presume a split between "culture" and "religion." The event is one continuous though seriate performance that melds culture, religion, secular practice and sacred veneration.

The covenant between the *Ataoja* as a descendent from Laro, the first ruler of Osogbo, and the Iya Osun as representative of Osun on the earth plane is made when the *Ataoja* enters the Osun shrine, sits upon the seat of authority and makes an offering to Osun. The offering is added to the large wooden tray of food offerings already presented by others seeking Osun's support. If the *Ataoja* makes a monetary offering, the Iya Osun keeps the money on Osun's behalf. The Iya Osun offers the *Ataoja* a kola reading, and the promise of protection and abundance is strengthened.

Bottom Waves

Osun's powers are amply demonstrated in her role as warrior. She attacks in her particular domain, the stomach, and she uses her beauty to serve her people. This warrior image of Osun is decidedly different than the one fashioned through the practice of Santeria in which she is frequently portrayed as a seductress.⁴ But Osun seems in control of her beauty; she does not unwittingly become ensnared in political and dangerous situations because of her attractiveness in the way that, for example, the Greek Helen does.

Art at Right of Page

This ink on rice paper drawing by Michael Oludare combines common Osun references with fascinating innovations. Like many Yoruba artists responding to Osun, Oludare has given the image a human torso with fish properties below the waist. Her fish bottom, however, incorporates a cat fish dipping into the calabash formed by her tail. The calabash suggests Osun's generosity, her sharing.

The cracks in the rice paper where the ink has rested give a watery scrim through which one views the entire scene. This watery feel is especially evident in the lower fish portion of the work. Her full breasts and belly may tell us she is pregnant or may simply reflect the full bodies preferred by the Yoruba as a sign of prosperity. The pendulous breasts are markers of her femaleness and the nipples seemed poised to feed.

She wears the *ide* (brass bracelets) and brass necklaces associated with Osun devotees. The clanging of the bracelets calls Osun just as the large bell rung at the river during the festival alerts Osun to the presence of her followers. The bell is also a way of knowing that the prayers at the river will be answered. Oludare's figure is open-mouthed in song. *Ide nron gbogan ide nron gbogan momabo olosun sore o ide nron gbogan*. Iya Ewe, the Iya Osun's daughter, my friend Yetunde Omoniwa and I sang this over and over, energetically shaking our arms downward to make our

bracelets jangle. Omoniwa translated the song as “The bangles that sound vigorously, the bangles that sound vigorously, I make friends with Osun worshippers, the bangles that sound vigorously.” Iya Ewe says when you befriend an Osun devotee the devotee will give you bangles. And she did. I wear them most days. Because each bracelet weights approximately eight ounces, I have to stop wearing them periodically to give my arms and shoulders a rest.

While the lower calabash may be Osun’s offering to us, the upper calabash is the devotee’s offering to Osun. This is imaginatively carried with fin hands continuing the fish-human union that is important to the image and to our understanding of Osun.

* * * * *

First Poem

Diedre Badejo is a professor of African World Literatures and Cultural History at the University of Louisville, Kentucky and has just completed a book length study of Osun that will help to spread knowledge of this powerful *orisa*. In this excerpt from Badejo’s “Sisterhood,” the persona describes the relationship that exists between Osun and African-American women. The joining of “forbidden drums” with “ragtime rhythms” and “blues bebe,” the coupling of “she is the river” with the reference to Langston Hughes’ “deep like the river,” melds the Yoruba experience with the African-American one. The persona’s use of “*omo dudu*” (black children), “*obinrin dudu*” (black women) and “*eniyan dudu*” (black people) make it clear that the persona, even while speaking Yoruba, is not just referring to Yoruba people. She is acknowledging the “Sisterhood/of Osun’s daughters” around the Black Atlantic. Badejo told me that the poem came to her just as it appears here even though she does not have extensive understanding of Yoruba language. She believes that there is a swelling interest in Osun that portends good. She sees her work and mine as ways of sharing Osun’s blessings with others.

Second Poem

I met Edward Pavlic in Ile-Ife in 1995 while he was involved in a Yoruba culture course at Obafemi Awolowo University. He is completing his doctorate from Indiana State University. In this excerpt from Pavlic’s “osun a devotee of revolving wax/ & currents of sound/in green,” Pavlic visually mimics the “hips like monuments” of Badejo’s poem. The lines undulate on the page like the river, like Osun. Like Badejo’s persona, Pavlic’s persona takes African-American references such as the lyrics to Al Green’s music—“drifting on a memory . . . flowing through my mind with ease”—and “[Col]trane ballads” and juxtaposes them with specific references to Osun. This poem, like Pavlic’s scholarship, explores the interconnectedness of the Black Atlantic.⁵

Bottom Waves

I have given parts of this story elsewhere in this discussion. Most of the elements in this version at the bottom of the page were said to me by *babalawo* (diviner) Ifayemi Eleburuibon during my visit in 1993. Osun’s dialogue was added by visual artist

Idowu Adewale Abolubode in 1994. Abolubode most likely borrowed the dialogue from Mama Adunni's account of the founding of Osogbo (Wenger 29) since he studied painting with Mama Adunni for several years and regards her with much affection.

While this story credits Laro with the founding of Osogbo, Timeyin actually found the appropriate spot for re-location of his people during the drought. Timeyin broke taboos along the way when he killed a pregnant elephant and consorted with dancing spirits. It may have been because of these violations or because Osun "took great pleasure in the younger Laro" (Wenger 29) that Osun installed Laro as the first ruler of Osogbo. Each *Ataoja* (ruler of Osogbo) is a ritual descendent from Laro, the first ruler of the town.

Top Image—Pounded Aluminum

At the top of the page is the pounded aluminum work of Idowu Adewale Abolubode who began his work as an artist with Mama Adunni. At the time of our talk in 1994, he was also working at the Nike Center for Art and Culture. This pounded aluminum depicts the Osun Festival with the *Ataoja* facing toward the viewer with his crown atop his head and his throne chair rising behind him. He is holding a horse-tail whisk in front of him. To the right of the *Ataoja* is a crawling insect, one of the realistic details that Idowu likes to include in his work; to the left of the *Ataoja* is a large tree with many branches and roots, not unlike the roots on which Iya Ewe and I sat looking out at the river in 1994. The image also suggests the tree carelessly felled by Timeyin at the time of the founding of Osogbo. In the right portion of the work, a devotee is feeding a huge fish from a calabash. Abolubode wanted to make a sharp distinction between the land and the river because the earth and the water domains are quite different. To achieve this effect Abolubode uses scratch marks as water and tiny crescents as earth. He also creates a distinct vertical separation between the fish/water and human/earth. That line is penetrated at the point of union between humans and Osun, devotees and *Orisa*.

Osun lives in the water with her fish children. It is through the water that she extends her blessings. The large fish as Osun receives the offering, an acknowledgement of the gift and an assurance that the blessings will follow. To the far left of the work, which extends beyond what is shown here, many men come to offer praise to the *Ataoja* and by extension to Osun. These images are all scenes from the Festival in which people perform for the *Ataoja* and devotees feed Osun. Although Abolubode depicts only males, the Osun Festival is led by women. Many men actively participate but the dominant force is female.

Lower Fish

This is the embroidery from the festival garments made for me in 1994. Many fish are embroidered in gray onto white guinea brocade. The fish adorn my *buba* (shirt), *iro* (wrap skirt), and large *iro*-like fabric that is tied over the *iro* itself. The women and men who are a part of the Iya Osun's compound wear embroidered white clothing on the day of the festival. Each garment is distinctive and is also embroidered with praise names or roles of the wearer, such as Arugba (virgin who carries the calabash offering) or Iya Osun (major Osun diviner). While the garments are special, they are not precious. Many bear the signs of previous wear. During the festival, the garments gather the dust from the mile-long processional, the juices and droppings of offerings

made at the shrine, the dirt from hours of sitting on the stones in the shrine, and the grime of sweat and heat from six-to-eight hours of active wear.

Those persons wearing white from the Iya Osun's compound adorn themselves with beaded necklaces, some with beaded pendants, some in the shape of fish, some bearing Osun's name. Many also wear *ide* (brass bracelets) and coral which are associated with Osun. In 1994, Iya Ewe wore a white beaded cap with many beaded tendrils. Most of the other women had their hair fashioned "old style," in cornrows, done particularly for the Festival. In 1995, I gathered part of my dred locks into a cowrie barrette. By this time, many in the compound had come to know this *oyinbo* (stranger, "white" person) and did not display surprise at the way I braided cultures—my Mephistos with the embroidered festival whites, my hips finding *iragbaba*, *iragbaba* in the drums while swaying with a Kirk Franklin and the Family beat.

* * * * *

Top Left Column

Prince Adenle's father preceded Oba Oyewale Matanmi III as *Ataoja* of Osogbo. Adenle works for the Osogbo Cultural Heritage Council that oversees the Osun Festival. The Council coordinates the vendors, the sponsors (including Target cigarettes and "33" Export beer), the devotees, and the *Ataoja's* entourage. I had met Prince Adenle in 1993 when he conducted a tour of the Osun Groves for me and the other Americans with whom I was traveling. In 1994, he helped me secure permission from the Council to videotape and photograph the festival. By 1995, we felt comfortably acquainted. Adenle shared these comments shortly after the festival. A graduate student from Obafemi Awolowo University doing research on indigenous theology was also present and asking his own questions.

Near the end of his comments, Adenle referred to divination with kola, or kola nut. The five-segmented kola is used most for divination since five is Osun's number. Other kola are used, but the five-sided is best. Osun used cowries (one-inch white shells) for her divination work, and she passed cowrie divination on to her followers. Only once did Iya Ewe, daughter of Iya Osun, use cowries in working with me, and that was in private work with no translators and no children after kola had been tossed. I requested specific information that is more difficult to glean from kola. The kola readings are direct and powerful. Most often, when a four-segmented kola is tossed, if two sides are facing up and two down, it is good news. Three down, one up . . . take care. Four down . . . bad news, and according to carver Emmanuel Ogunbemi, one must now go to Ifa. With Iya Ewe when the kola was four down, the suppliant had to touch the earth and his chest three times. Before the reading, Iya Ewe gave me the kola, instructed me to hold it to my head and pray. She then broke it into its parts and tossed it with a wrist snap that reminded me of tossing dice. After the reading, she and I ate the kola.

Second Left

In 1993 I was traveling with several other Americans. The man who was leading our group on this "tour" had repeatedly described how important Mama Adunni was and how honored we should feel because she would talk with us. Mama Adunni

is an Austrian-born artist who was instrumental in preserving the Osun Groves as sacred ground. In 1993, she was a frequent companion to the Iya Osun, assisting the ailing woman greet visitors during the night watch before the festival and aiding the Iya Osun in fulfilling her divination duties at the Osun Shrine. She is a member of the respected Ogboni society and has achieved high spiritual status in Osogbo. In spite of her position, she has earned the kind name Adunni. At the time of this visit, Mama Adunni was busy making final festival preparations and entertaining the many guests who had come for the festival. She gave us a great deal of her time and shared much with me about paths to Osun. She seems to exemplify "the higher you come up, the more humble your position."

Third Left

Ifayemi Eleburuigon is a *babalawo* (diviner) in Osogbo. He has performed many duties for the Osun Festival including the ritual work required with the Arugba before she can carry the sacred calabash on the day of the festival. He has traveled extensively and is well-respected as a major *babalawo* in the region. We talked in his office at his home the day after the Osun Festival.

In 1993, shortly before the Osun Festival on 20 August, Nigerians had begun democratic presidential elections. Chief Moshood Abiola was winning when President Ibrahim Babangida halted the elections and appointed General Sani Abacha to serve as interim president. Abiola protested and was jailed. This was the political backdrop for the 1993 Osun Festival. There was so much uncertainty about Nigeria's stability that Ifayemi felt many international guests stayed away. While many attendees surely increases the *ase* (life force), large numbers are not necessary to renew the pact between the *Ataoja* and Osun, between the people of Osogbo and Osun. The 1994 and 1995 Festivals had significantly more people than in 1993. Since 1993, Abacha has remained president and Abiola has remained in prison. Strikes by government workers protesting the aborting of the elections and the imprisonment of Abiola were violently squelched by the government; there have been severe gas shortages for the Nigerian people while the government continues to export its customary quantities; a major newspaper was shut down; and tragically, in 1996 Abiola's senior wife was murdered. These events do not stop the festival but surely color the tone and energy of the event.

Fourth Left

Ifamabiwo is a bank clerk married to a Christian Yoruba woman. Their children are raised Christian. He has much respect for Yoruba philosophy and disdain for Christianity and Islam. He is not troubled by his wife and children's Christianity because "the one thing that binds the Yoruba are the *orisa* (deities)." This sentiment, that the *orisa* pervade Yoruba sensibility, was echoed by others. My Yoruba friend Yetunde Omoniwa who was born into a Muslim family and later adopted Christianity says "I believe the *orisa* because they are true." A man I met at an Anglican church service was Muslim and had attended the Osun Festival in 1993. He explained that he was duty bound to honor the *orisa* no matter what other religious choices he might make. Christianity and Islam are strong in Osogbo but Yoruba practice is a core experience. As Ifamabiwo notes, the Christians and Muslims go to *babalawos* (diviners) and perform private sacrifices when they need help.

I attended different Christian church services during my visits to Osogbo. At one service in 1994, the minister made fun of those persons who believe in the *orisa*, and the congregation laughed heartily. It was interesting that this service was in English until the minister spoke of the *orisa*. Then, he spoke in Yoruba and adopted a frightened, whiny sound which added to the humor. He used Yoruba to underscore the disdain for the “old ways.” At another service, the minister spoke specifically about the Osun Festival and how the congregation should not attend. I knew some of the people in church that day, and knew that some of them would be at the Festival as part of the work for the Nike Center for Art and Culture.

In 1994, just after the Osun Festival wound down, I was walking down the street still wearing my embroidered white garments, when Ifamabiwo’s Christian wife shouted to me “*Ore ye ye O!*”—a praise for Osun the mother of us all.

First Right

Doyin Olayiwola is an *adire* (patterned indigo cloth) artist who lives and works with Mama Adunni. Olayiwola explains Osun’s importance in a way that is similar to comments by Mama Adunni. Water is Osun, essential for life. Olayiwola goes on to make the claim that “traditional religion is in the blood.” Here, she echoes Ifamabiwo’s belief that “the one thing that binds the Yoruba are the *orisa*.” This underlying unity of Yoruba belief may allow the Yoruba to co-exist with Muslims and Christians with little overt hostility. If they are all Yoruba, it doesn’t matter what choices they may make; those choices do not bind them, but being Yoruba does.

During the Osun Festival, as the many people process through the streets of Osogbo, we stop at specific locations. Many of these locations have shrines for Osun though they are not always visible from the street. In addition to the very public Osun Festival, Osun’s followers privately honor her on other designated days. I have not witnessed the other ceremonies that Olayiwola mentions. However, in 1994 I did attend an *ose*, a service for *orisa* held every five days, or “five five days” as Olayiwola says. The *ose* (*orisa* service) was held at Mama Adunni’s home. Everyone huddled in a small room around a bowl of kola soaking in water. Everyone chanted *oriki* (praise songs) to the *orisa*, a 25–30 minute memorized chant that the children knew as well as the adults. I joined in when I could with “*ase*,” a way of finishing a phrase in affirmation. The kola were then passed around and everyone ate the bitter dry root. The eating of kola seals the bond with the *orisa*. It is a way of ingesting the words and the spirit. The group moved to an adjacent room and energetically danced for the *orisa* for more than an hour. The drummers would begin a rhythm that initiated a specific dance. The dancers sang *oriki* while offering the movements designated for the specific *orisa*. Sometimes a dancer would begin an *oriki*, the other dancers would join the chant often in a call-and-response style, and the drummers would follow. One young woman gently instructed me in the ever-changing movements. I had learned one movement specific to Osun from Iya Ewe, the Iya Osun’s daughter, and had performed it often as part of the processional at the festival. It is a bent-back movement with hands scooping as if holding a large calabash. The feet take you from side to side and backward and forward in a zig zag, “like a river” as Iya Ewe told me. The movement suggests Osun pouring out her blessings. At the *ose* (*orisa* service) this was the only dance I knew. Eventually, some people left while the remaining ones went to another room, and the dancing and

praising continued. Here, soloists sometimes performed while the others continued their movements. One young man danced vigorously for Ogun. The dance became more and more vigorous though it didn't seem to take more effort from the dancer. The young man went from side to side with abrupt angular movements, arms raised up in Ogun warrior fashion, hands fanning his shirt, feet snapping from left to right. I watched, dazed by the beauty and skill.

I stayed at the *ose* (*orisa* service) for about three hours. The group was headed to another home to continue the service, and I headed back to my room in Dada Estate, a community near Osogbo. This is the practice every five days. One gives over to the *orisa*, and much of the "sacrifice" is made through endurance. Staying up all night for the night wakes before the Festival of Sixteen Lamps and before the Osun Festival, dancing, praising and drumming through the night, all-day service to the *orisa* every five days—these activities let the body know that something is happening. It is a physical commitment that strengthens the spiritual connection. It is the necessary participation for transformation.

Second Left

I wrote these comments in my fieldnotes in 1993. I was struck by the carnival-like atmosphere combined with the spiritual. I believe the swelling *ase* (life force) of the many people, the praising, the circular processional, the swirl of activities were all necessary for spiritual bonding. The Osun Festival is not a set of rote actions that must be precisely followed from year to year. Instead, it is a fluid blend of previously enacted events (the *Ataoja* at the shrine, the Arugba with covered face moving throughout the streets of Osogbo, the feeding of the river with offerings, the Iya Osun's kola readings) and innovations born of necessity and creativity (varied clothing and hair styles, dances, *oriki* [praise songs] and drumming that happen as inspired, one year followers dancing with brass fans and chickens—the next year no such items present), a slippery undulating series of immediate responses.

Bottom Waves

I'd heard this song in 1993 and 1994 at the festival, but did not memorize the words and sounds until 1995. My friend Batik artist Yetunde Omoniwa helped me with the translation. "Osun asks me to come, Osun asks me to come. I have never been to the river. It's Osun who asks me to come. I have come to thank you for the other day, I have come to thank you for the other day. Mother give me my child. I have come to thank you for the other day. I have come to collect my blessing. I have come to collect my blessing. Please, mother that cures with water, don't let me celebrate with sorrow. I will not carry the dead baby, I will only carry the living ones." The woman has come to thank Osun for accepting the sacrifice the other day, and now wants to receive the child that Osun promised. Maybe the woman has only had *ibiku*, troublesome children who die early and return again and again. The direct prayer to Osun suggests a friendship with, and a deference to this *orisa* (deity).

Photo

This is a view down a private path near the entrance to the Osun groves. The path is encircled by entrance/exit to the shrine of Iyemowoo (*Orisa* associated with

creation) crafted by artist Adebisi Akanji and Mama Adunni. Adunni writes that the shrine represents the “goddess’ sacred womb, birth into another dimension of reality” (1990 86). The opening is a clay yoni that only the Arugba Osun and members of the Iya Osun’s compound traverse on the day of the Festival. A camera crew, perhaps from the local television station, accompanied us in 1995 while the thousands of other participants traveled the public path to the left. The two paths are separated by trees and bush, and even with the din of sound from the other participants, this private path gives a sense of coolness and solitude. The path eventually empties into the groves joining the other participants in the public acknowledgement of Osun.

* * * * *

Woodcut

We return to the image that began this essay, a woodcut by Arlene R. Polite. When I first set about to share Osun through a scholarly journal, I asked Polite if she would help me. I had long admired her work—the many female images she creates and the provocative way the lines of her woodcuts seem to vibrate, to perform. We met three or four times to discuss how we might work together, and at one of our meetings she showed up with this. Polite is an African-American artist whose work in the Philippines for the Peace Corps left her deeply suspicious of colonial impulses in “foreign” lands. It also provided her with a rich intuitive understanding of identity construction. I told her my stories, shared the work of Yoruba artists, gave her articles to read, and this woodcut was her response. In this essay it speaks to the braidedness of culture, the exploration of the ways in which “tradition is in the blood,” and the many varied voices that shape my response to culture and to identity. I can’t share my sense of Osun without sharing the images, ideas, and art that guide my thinking on this side of the Atlantic.

In “Devotee,” the woman is offering thanks to Osun for the child she is now carrying. Her low slung *iro* (wrap skirt) reveals her pregnant belly. Her angled feet are dancing for Osun whom she must have pleased, because Osun as fish has come up to greet her. The woman wears a brass necklace and the “old style” corn rows seen on Osun’s followers on Festival day. Her sturdy arms bear the offering of thanks to be poured into the river that surrounds her, the river and trees forming a fertile, nurturing yoni. The offering includes a fish, a violation of Osun taboo, but perhaps an improvisation on tradition which would also allow me to eat fish as an offering to Osun.

In discussing how she moves from three-dimensional images to the two-dimensional requirements of paper Polite wisely said “I resist the two-dimensional less when I recognized that it *can’t* be three-dimensional. I don’t think in terms of a woodcut. My first language is three-dimensional.” I am learning to think of performance, my first language, as a reality on the page—and not resist the possibilities.

Notes

¹Here, I mention only those writers whose work clarifies my discussion of the problems of textualization. Several others have discussed Osun in print, including John Philip Neimarc, Louisah Teish, Ulli Beier, William Bascom, J.O. Awolowo, Antonio Benitez-Rojo, John Mason, Joseph Murphy, and Raul Canizares. Also of interest is the film “Osun: Her Power, Her Worship, by Osuntoki.

²Iya Ewe said this about Osun 3 August, 1995 while we talked in the Osun Shrine at the Osun Groves on 25 July, 1994.

³On 25 July, 1994 Idowu Abolubode told me this about Osun. His account is based heavily on information from Mama Adunni's *A Life With the Gods in Their Yoruba Homeland*.

⁴For a discussion of Osun through Santeria see Raul Canizares' *Walking with the Night*.

⁵For Pavlic's scholarly exploration of these themes, see "Syndetic Redemption: Above-Underground *Emergence*" in David Bradley's *The Chaneyville Incident*.

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afi imo jo osun
iya wa ama pe ni imo
she who bears Osun with knowledge
our mother we have more knowledge

