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## HOW MAN MAKES GOD IN WEST AFRICA: YORUBA ATTITUDES TOWARDS THE *ORISA*

Karin Barber

### I

The idea that gods are made by men, not men by gods, is a sociological truism. It belongs very obviously to a detached and critical tradition of thought incompatible with faith in those gods. But Yoruba traditional religion contains built into it a very similar notion, and here, far from indicating scepticism or decline of belief, it seems to be a central impulse to devotion. The *òrìṣà* ('gods') are, according to Yoruba traditional thought, maintained and kept in existence by the attention of humans. Without the collaboration of their devotees, the *òrìṣà* would be betrayed, exposed and reduced to nothing. This notion seems to have been intrinsic to the religion since the earliest times. How can such an awareness be part of a devotee's 'belief'? Rather than speculate abstractly, as Rodney Needham does (Needham 1972), about whether people of other cultures can be said to 'believe' at all, it seems more interesting to take a concrete case like the Yoruba one where there is an unexpected—even apparently paradoxical—configuration of ideas, and to ask how these ideas are constituted.<sup>1</sup> Only by looking at them as part of a particular kind of society, with particular kinds of social relationships, can one see why such a configuration is so persuasive. The notion that men make gods is by no means unique to Yoruba thought. It is present to some degree in a number of traditional West African religions, and in some, such as the Kalabari one, it can be seen in an even more explicit form than in the Yoruba one. A comparison may help to show how it is the constitution of social relationships which makes such a notion not just acceptable but central to the religious thought of the society.

Relations between humans and *òrìṣà* are in some sense a projection of relations between people in society. I would like to suggest that if the Yoruba see the *òrìṣà*'s power as being maintained and augmented by human attention, this is because they live in a kind of society where it is very clear that the *human* individual's power depends in the long run on the attention and acknowledgement of his fellow-men. It is a hierarchical society, dominated by the institution of divine kingship and articulated by a series of chiefly titles of different grades and ranks. But the dynamic impulse in political life is the rise of self-made men. Individuals compete to make a position for themselves by recruiting supporters willing to acknowledge their greatness. Titles are positions of power, but they are not hereditary; they are achieved by men who must first have established themselves. The title system itself is quite flexible, allowing a man in a small position to enlarge it by his own efforts; and it is also possible for men to by-pass the title system and become important in the town in a variety of other ways. There is, then, a lot of scope for self-aggrandisement; but the self-made man, rather like the Big Man of New Guinea, is only 'big' if other people think so. He has to secure their attention by display and distribution of wealth and by using his influence as a Big Man to protect them and intervene on their behalf. If he is not able to do this, he will not attract a following.

In the same way, in Yoruba traditional thought an *òrìṣà*'s power and splendour depend on its having numerous attentive (and wealthy) devotees to glorify its name. An *òrìṣà* without devotees fades into insignificance as far as the human community is concerned. The devotee can choose, within limits, which *òrìṣà* she will devote herself to.<sup>2</sup> If her original *òrìṣà* fails to give her what she desires—a child, success in trading, recovery from a protracted illness—she may approach other *òrìṣà* until she finds one that responds to her request.

By contrast, in a society where roles are ascribed and there is little scope for self-aggrandisement, notions of the reciprocity of the human-god relationship do not seem to arise. Among the Tallensi of Northern Ghana, for instance, humans' relations with the Ancestors are a one-way affair: the Ancestors are omnipotent and demanding, humans are passive and obedient. To put the Yoruba case in perspective, then, let us look very briefly at the contrasting case of the Tallensi.

## II

According to Meyer Fortes (Fortes 1945, 1949, 1959), the Tallensi were subsistence farmers who rarely produced a surplus and who had little material wealth. There was little division of labour except according to sex. In such an economic system there was very little scope for an individual to enrich himself at the expense of his fellow-men.

Tallensi society was based on a patrilineal lineage system in which the status and role of every member was strictly determined by his position in the genealogical grid, and could not be altered by his own efforts. Leadership at every level of segmentation devolved automatically upon the most senior member of that segment, and beneath him the position of every other lineage member was likewise fixed according to rules of genealogical seniority. At the lowest level of segmentation, the son was a minor, totally subordinate to the father, who acted on his behalf in matters political, economic, jural and ritual. Great stress was laid on co-operation, deference to elders, conformity to social norms.<sup>3</sup>

Fortes shows how Tallensi religious ideas derived from, and reinforced with moral and ritual injunctions, this ascriptive and authoritarian social structure. The most important spiritual beings in their cosmology were the Ancestors. The shrine of each ancestor was in the custody of the head of the segment that that ancestor founded. The shrines were approached only on prescribed occasions through the segment head himself and in the presence of the representatives of all the subsegments of that segment. No outsider could spontaneously come and participate. Thus there was a hierarchy of Ancestors corresponding to the hierarchy of lineage segments, and the individual's relationship with the Ancestors was regulated by his position in the lineage.

The individual's attitude to the Ancestors was one of passive acceptance. He never took the initiative, never spontaneously offered to communicate with the Ancestors through prayers and sacrifices. Even on routine occasions like harvest ceremonies, he waited for the Ancestors to demand an offering before he—often grudgingly—gave it. The Ancestors were pictured as domineering authority figures, an image of the father vastly magnified and empowered; and though they were just, they were also often capricious and unreasonable. All the human could do was to submit and accept their dominion over him.



This was true even of the 'Destiny' ancestors who accounted for and represented the individuality of each person's life and character. For though each man had his own unique cluster of 'Destiny' ancestors, nevertheless it was the ancestors who chose him, not he them; and once they had revealed themselves to him, he had to serve them to the end of his life. He could not approach new ones of his own accord if the original ones failed him, and indeed they could not be thought of as 'failing' him, only as justly punishing him for some known or unknown transgression. Besides, all the Ancestors were similar in character so there was nothing to choose between them.

The individual then was not regarded as having any power to alter the course of his life by aligning in his support the help of spiritual beings. A large part of his religious life was performed by his segment head on behalf of the collectivity.<sup>4</sup> The social structure dictated which Ancestor he worshipped, with whom and on what occasions, and he took no steps on his own behalf. The notion of Destiny, though it did account for the fact that some men were more successful than others, did not represent the ideal of individual ambition or self-improvement—it rather explained why some men were better than others at conforming to the limited, ascribed roles society presented them with.

### III

The following analysis of a Yoruba example is based on research done in Òkukù, a small but historically important town in the Odò-Òtìn district of the Òṣun area of Òyó State, Nigeria.<sup>5</sup> Yoruba political structures are well known to be of great diversity, and no attempt is being made to generalise the conclusions. However, it is evident that the fundamental political structure of Òkukù is similar to that of other Òyó-area towns, though much simpler than that of the big ones. The description of traditional institutions as they have survived to the present day is filled out with oral accounts of them as they were in the nineteenth century. There is not enough evidence to show whether or not they were very different before this period: it seems likely, however, that the turmoil of the nineteenth-century wars heightened characteristics of flexibility and openness which were already present.<sup>6</sup>

The fundamental political unit, the town, was composed of a number of localised lineages each with a high proportion of attached (and partly attached) 'guest' or stranger elements. The head of the town was the *qba*, a sacred ruler who was chosen in rotation from each of the four sections of the very large royal lineage. He was the nominal owner of the land, and retained residual rights over it; he was set apart by his enormous household of wives, servants, office-holders and (at least till the end of the nineteenth century) slaves, a household which was maintained by the labour of the townspeople; and he was backed by a powerful and pervasive ideology of royalty.

Each lineage was represented and presided over by its *baálé* or family head, who was chosen by his fellow-elders on grounds of seniority and position and who acted as *primus inter pares* in concert with them. But he did gain additional prestige from being the head of a large number of people, and in some compounds he also had rights over a special tract of farmland on which he could require all his compound members to work from time to time. Because of this prestige, the *baálé* could usually acquire a town chieftaincy title—most *baálé* were also chiefs, though many chiefs were not *baálé*.

The chiefs shared the government of the town, and the income that derived from



this, with the *oba*. The chiefs fell into three grades, each of which was internally ranked. The most important were the senior town chiefs (*iwarefa*), the top six of whom were the kingmakers. Each of the senior titles belonged to a single lineage—by and large, the older lineages in the town.<sup>7</sup> Below them were the junior town chiefs, *aládàá*. They were more numerous and acted as followers to the senior chiefs, accompanying them to meetings at the palace but not actually participating. Most of these titles could be bestowed by the *oba* on his own nominee in any compound. Then there were the palace chiefs, who were influential because they were close to the *oba* and enjoyed his special trust.

The chiefs represented the interests of their lineage members in the councils when necessary, but they also formed an important interest-group in their own right, and spent a lot of their time pursuing alliances and rivalries amongst themselves which were of no interest to the lineage members at large. There was a constant struggle between the *oba* (the crown) and the senior chiefs, collectively known as *àwọn ilú* ('the town'). There was also constant rivalry over relative rank among the chiefs themselves. The system was fairly flexible, and though precedents were often appealed to, all interested parties sought to create new precedents by pushing their claims further than ever before. Between 1800 and the present day, the order of rank of the top three senior chiefs has been changed at least three times as a result of such struggles; junior titles have also been promoted to senior status and formerly open titles appropriated by a single lineage.

But more important than this is the fact that people could make a place for themselves which was out of all proportion to their formal position in the chiefly hierarchy. One example in Òkukù in the late nineteenth century was Èlémòṅà. He was the *baálé* of a small lineage and holder of an unimportant palace title. But because of his astuteness in building up a huge household and great wealth and farms for himself, he came to be the most famous of all Òkukù's Big Men. At the height of his power he rivalled the *oba* himself.<sup>8</sup> Another example was Omíkúnlé, a young and untitled warrior in the Ìlorin-Ìbàdàn wars who was given the nickname 'Balógun' (after the Ìbàdàn general) and became so great as a result of his leadership of the fighting men of the town that the title was eventually adopted into the formal hierarchy and is now the most important of the four titles that the compound currently holds.

But if men could enlarge their positions within the chiefly hierarchy, they could also by-pass it on occasion and become Big Men without ever being given a title. The reign of Oyèékúnlé (1917-1932) was torn by a long feud between the *oba* and a faction of chiefs. But in accounts of the feud that I have been given, the leaders of the two sides were Fáwándé and Tóyìnbó, the first of whom had no chieftaincy title and the second of whom held only the palace title *Sóbalójú*. What made them great was their reputation as deadly medicine-men, for the feud was fought out in terms of incapacitating or eliminating enemies with *oògùn* (magical medicine) and *ofò* (incantations).

The ways in which men (and also women) could make themselves big were diverse, and new opportunities came up with new historical situations—two of the greatest periods of opportunity being the nineteenth century wars and the early twentieth-century expansion of the market for cash crops. But at some stage in all routes to bigness, the person had to acquire the support of a large household and a wider group of followers and hangers-on. Usually (though not always) this was achieved through

display and distribution of wealth. Even in pre-colonial days surplus was deliberately produced and sold both in the local and the long-distance markets. Trading on a large scale was characteristic of the economy. Crafts such as blacksmithing, weaving and pottery were specialist productions which enjoyed widespread markets. Before it was sacked and re-founded in the eighteenth century, Òkukù (then known as Kòṣṣin) was said to have had 140 blacksmiths who obtained their iron ore from the mines at Èjìgbò and supplied the whole area from Ìlá to Òyó with tools and weapons. There seems always to have been scope for enterprising people to make themselves wealthy.

Some of the nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Big Men in Òkukù were said to have had an initial advantage because of a craft in which they specialised. Èlémòṅà, mentioned above, started life as a carver. Others had an edge through an inheritance, often from the mother's side; others again were credited with exceptional skill as farmers, or the good fortune of having many younger brothers to work for them and enable them to expand their farms. During the Ìlorin-Ìbàdàn wars, young men who did well could enrich themselves by selling the slaves they captured and by marrying the female ones. When the Lagos-Kano railway reached Òkukù in 1904, entrepreneurs who were quick to see its possibilities built themselves up in commercial yam-farming and yam-trading. Others acquired capital by working as young men in wage-labour before coming home to set up as farmers. Once an initial advantage had been established, the pattern of development was generally similar. The extra money was used to hire extra labour in the form of *ìwòṣà* (bondsmen whose labour constituted the interest on a loan taken out by one of their senior relatives).<sup>10</sup> By the 1930s, when commercial farming suddenly expanded in response to the demand for cocoa and kola, people had also begun to hire paid labourers. *Ìwòṣà* and labourers were used to expand the Big Man's farm, and until commercial farming really got under way, there was no shortage of land: labour was the only limitation on the expansion of farms. Wealth was used to expand the household through the marriage of more wives and the rearing of more children. A successful man could also expect relatives, matrilineal as well as patrilineal, to send some of their children to live with him to enjoy the benefits of a large and well-to-do household. 'Followers' who were not actually resident in the compound would also gather; visitors would come to stay, sometimes settling permanently and becoming '*òrédèbí*' ('friends-become-family'). Ties of kinship were manipulated to bring dependants and hangers-on flocking round a wealthy man.

Recruitment of people was crucial in a Big Man's rise in two ways. First, they were actual factors in the production of wealth, as labour on the Big Man's farm and—in the case of wives—also as the producers of the future labour of the children they bore. And second, in a fairly flexible social structure where individuals could make their own position for themselves, attendant people were the index of how much support and acknowledgement the man commanded, and thus how important he was. A man without 'people' would not presume to contest a chieftaincy title<sup>11</sup>, while one of the most important ways that acquisition of such a title strengthened a man's political power was that it brought him, or put him in charge of, more people.<sup>12</sup>

Reminiscences of elders suggest that a great many men, if not all, strove to become big. The picture we get is of innumerable people building themselves up and competing to acquire their own circle of hangers-on. A few seemed to have been so outstanding that they overshadowed the rest, but almost everyone was in the game. Their competitiveness comes out in the qualities admired in a Big Man. In their *oríṣi*

(attributive poetry) we see that they were praised not only for their generosity, magnificence, style and personal splendour, but also for toughness, unassailability, intransigence, and power—often conceived in terms of the ability to perpetrate outrages with impunity. The Big Man was pictured as rising above the malicious attacks of jealous rivals and at the same time getting away with any attacks he made on *them*. He was seen as an isolated individual pitted against enemies who strove day and night to undo him. No-one could be trusted. Whereas the Tallensi said that relations between humans were essentially amicable, and that all misfortune and death was caused by the Ancestors, the Yoruba say that humans are one another's enemies, and most misfortunes are caused by the nefarious activities of *ayé*, the 'world', or more specifically the witches and wizards, and evil people employing their services.

Yoruba cosmology presents a picture of Man, a solitary individual, picking his way (aided by his *Orí* or Destiny, chosen by himself before coming to earth) between a variety of forces, some benign, some hostile, many ambivalent, seeking to placate them and ally himself with them in an attempt to thwart his rivals and enemies in human society. Among the hostile powers are the *enfyán* or witches, and the *Ajogun* which are personified evils such as Death, Loss, Sickness, etc. Among the benign ones are the ancestors who revisit their descendants in the guise of *egúngún* (masquerades), and the *òrìṣà*. Over them all is *Olódùmarè*, the High God who is not approached directly by humans, and his two intermediaries, *Èṣù* the ambivalent trickster and *Òrúnmìlà* the god of wisdom who reveals *Olódùmarè*'s will to humans through divination.<sup>13</sup>

Unlike the Tallensi, then, the Yoruba have a great variety of spiritual forces to deal with. The pantheon as a whole and the relationships between all these forces are mainly the concern of the *babaláwo*, the highly-trained specialist *Ifá* priests, who master a great corpus of divination verses dealing with every aspect of the cosmology. Ordinary individuals, though they consult *Ifá* constantly, have a more partial view of the cosmology determined by the particular powers and cults they are involved with. These are drawn principally from among the *egúngún* and *òrìṣà*.

The *òrìṣà* are said to have been people living on earth who on their departure from it were deified.<sup>14</sup> Each *òrìṣà* has its own town of origin, its own personality and special attributes, its own taboos and observances, and its own corpus of *oríkì*. Many *òrìṣà* are mythologically connected with rivers, hills and natural forces and seem to be nature spirits which have been combined with culture heroes and thus humanised (whereas pure nature spirits, *iwin*, remain outside in the bush and do not play an important part in human affairs).

*Egúngún* are of several types, some more closely associated with the ancestors than others. As well as the anonymous, plain-robed *eégún rere* (good *egúngún*) which belong to the compound as a whole and represent the collectivity of ancestors of that compound, there are the highly individual *eégún òlá* (big *egúngún*) and *eégún alágbò* (medicine-empowered *egúngún*) which, though they are revered by the whole compound as ancestral figures, also represent the particular Big Men who founded them as a monument to their own glory. The *eégún alágbò* in particular, with their flamboyant dress, ferocity and dangerous attacks on rival *egúngún*, convey the spiritual essence of human competitive struggle for dominance, as well as ancestral benignity. There are also numerous small *egúngún* which have only a residual association with the ancestors: the *pàkàá*, which are carried by young boys on certain festival days. Moreover, *egúngún* are not the only means of communication with the ancestors. The



dead can appear to the living in dreams, or their wishes can be made known through Ifã, and the descendant can then approach them directly at the *ojú oórí*, the grave where the dead person is buried inside the house and which is a kind of shrine. Offerings and prayers can be made there, and the dead can be summoned back by the chanting of their *oriki*. Questions are asked and are answered through the medium of kola in a simple form of divination.<sup>15</sup>

The *egúngún* cult is for everybody, though there are specialist *egúngún* priests too, and the *egúngún* festival is a long and spectacular affair in which every household in the town participates. But *òrìṣà* are worshipped only by their own cult members, and it is here that the elements of individual personality, choice and man-god reciprocity, which contrast so markedly with the Tallensi religion, are most apparent.

Just as the Big Man operates within the framework of the political title system, so the individual's relationship with his or her *òrìṣà* exists in a broader cult organisation.

The major public event for each cult is its annual festival, in which many non-members participate in a peripheral way. These festivals are co-ordinated into a yearly cycle, each festival following the last at intervals fixed by tradition. A further integrating factor is that the ultimate authority over every cult is the *oba*. It is he who ratifies the fixing of the date of every festival (*idájó*). He is represented by a member of his household or by his own Ifã priest at every festival sacrifice, and on their return from the shrine, the devotees always go to the palace to dance before the *oba* and ask his blessing.

Some festivals enact political and civic themes which are as important as the worship of the *òrìṣà* itself. The Olóókù festival—which is the biggest in the cycle, and the one for which everyone comes home from their farms—is essentially a royal and civic festival. The *òrìṣà* Olóókù is tended throughout the year only by the *Àwòrò* Olóókù and the members of his very small compound. But Olóókù is the town's guardian spirit, and everyone participates in its festival. In it an ancient power struggle is ceremonially re-enacted in a mock wrestling-match between the *oba* and the *Àwòrò* Olóókù. Much of the festival is concerned with the glorification of royalty and the display and ritual propitiation of the *oba*'s ancient beaded crowns. Another festival in which political themes are prominent is that of *Òtìn*, a female river deity. In this festival the opposition and interdependence of 'town' and 'crown' are symbolically affirmed in a confrontation between the *oba* and the *arugbá* *Òtìn*, who is chosen alternately from the two leading senior chiefs' compounds.<sup>16</sup> The importance of each cult festival's role in the affirmation of the town's political unity is seen most clearly when there is *disharmony* and the leaders of one cult or another refuse to do their part. This is considered a disgrace to the town and is used as a strong expression of disapproval of the *oba*.

The public civic role of the cults is reflected in their internal organisation, for the leading members of the cult take titles which are often modelled on town chieftaincy titles. These titles are ranked and also denote specific functions within the cult. Moreover, cult titles can assume a function in the town which is actually equivalent to a chieftaincy title: this happens when a 'stranger' segment, attached to a lineage but debarred from taking a title belonging to that lineage, grows big enough to feel the need for its own distinctive head. Such segments often take over a high-ranking cult title and make it their own, even calling themselves, as a group, after it.

But the core of the religion lies not in the public framework but in the personal bond

between each devotee and the spiritual being she serves. In what follows I concentrate mainly on *òrìṣà*, not including *Ifá*.

Unlike the Tallensi devotee the Yoruba one does not have to approach spiritual beings through a hierarchy of elders. Even at the sacrifices made during the annual festival, where the role of the titled priests is most prominent, individual devotees will approach the shrine with their own offerings and have kola cast for them personally. Such occasions often take hours because of the crowds of women waiting to put in their own private plea to the *òrìṣà*. During the rest of the year, devotees attend more informally to their home shrines. Each compound in which an *òrìṣà* is worshipped usually has at least one home shrine for it: either a small room off the living corridor (*òdèdè*) or a small hut built outside in the compound courtyard. It is quite common for a compound to have several shrines to different *òrìṣà*; some will be approached by the whole household, others perhaps by only one or two women who have a special relationship with that *òrìṣà*. Many compounds have a 'family' *òrìṣà* determined by their hereditary profession, their town of origin or other factors.<sup>17</sup> All members of the household approach its shrine but some will be more deeply involved in the cult than others, and some will have other *òrìṣà* as well.

A very deeply involved devotee approaches the shrine first thing every morning, uttering a prayer and offerings some small item such as kola. Every fourth day is the *òrìṣà*'s special day, on which all the devotees in the household gather early in the morning. The most senior devotee utters prayers and incantations, an offering is made, kola cast to see if it is accepted, and then women devotees chant the *òrìṣà*'s *oríkì*.

In some cults, devotees from other compounds join in on this occasion. Less frequently—in some cults every nine days, in others every sixteen, in others every calendar month—all the cult members assemble in the cult head's house, and after the normal devotions eat a meal together, make their contributions to their *àjò* (a rotating fund drawn on by each member in turn) and sometimes spend the whole day there gossiping and singing cult songs. But the devotee can approach the shrine whenever she wishes, on an impulse of supplication or gratitude. The communication can be as brief and apparently casual as she likes. Nor is the devotee always restricted to one place of worship. The hunter's gun, for instance, is a symbol of *Ògún* and wherever the hunter puts his gun down can be a temporary shrine of *Ògún*.

Again unlike the Tallensi devotee, the Yoruba one has a degree of choice as to which *òrìṣà* she pays special attention to. Attachment to a particular *òrìṣà* can arise in several ways. Where the cult is a family one, the older devotees will be succeeded by children of the household who have been showing special interest or who are deemed on general grounds of character to be suitable.<sup>18</sup> A devotee who dies always has to be replaced, but who is chosen depends on the circumstances. Some cults, including those of *Oya*, *Ṣàngó* and *Ṣòpònnòn*, have an inner circle of devotees who alone are allowed to participate in the mysteries of the cult and to be possessed by the *òrìṣà*. In these cults each initiated member (*adósù*) will make sure she has a young person marked out to succeed her and be initiated when she dies. Such children will be selected after consultation with *Ifá*, and the *babaláwo* consulted will take the prospective candidates' character and inclinations into account. But adults can also approach a new *òrìṣà* of their own accord. A woman who fails to conceive for several years may appeal to an *òrìṣà* who has given a child to a friend of hers, or to one whose style and personality appeal to her. This tends to happen most frequently at the annual festivals. If after

supplication and offerings she does conceive a child, she will keep her part of the bargain by continuing to worship the *òriṣà*, participating at least in its festival, at which time she will make it an offering such as a chicken, pounded yam or kola, and join the other devotees in their dances and processions. Often the child itself will be put into the cult as a full member. People can also appeal to a new *òriṣà* for relief from sickness or ill-luck; they might be guided to it by Ifá. If relief is granted, they will see this as a sign that they should become devotees of the *òriṣà* for life. New *òriṣà* can also be brought into the family by the wives, who continue to worship their own family *òriṣà* installing a personal shrine in their husband's house. When a compound wife dies, a successor will be found among the children to take over her shrine. As in the other cases, the person chosen might be someone who has of her own accord shown an interest in that *òriṣà*, or it might be someone picked on general grounds of suitability of character by the compound elders in conjunction with the Ifá priest. Or a household might decide that it would be advantageous to have a link with a certain cult, in which case, if there is not already a member of that cult in the compound, one of the children can be sent to work part-time for a priest of the cult in another compound and to receive instruction and initiation in return. (This is most common in the case of the Ifá cult, because divination is a profitable as well as prestigious occupation). Adjustments can be made in all these cases to match the devotee with an *òriṣà* of appropriate character—for each *òriṣà* has its own temperament and generates its own atmosphere and mood. Such adjustments are not as freely made as has elsewhere been suggested, for there are many constraints: the person selected to succeed another devotee does not actually have much say in the matter herself, except insofar as she has expressed her preferences by her past behaviour; and an *òriṣà* cannot just be casually abandoned if it fails to respond to a devotee's needs—or it might get its revenge by inflicting further misfortunes.<sup>19</sup> Nevertheless, adjustments *are* being made gradually and continuously. People usually have the *òriṣà* they want and identify with.

The sense of personal involvement and identification is strengthened by a feature of the religion which has been insufficiently remarked on: the multiple manifestations of 'one' *òriṣà*. Many *òriṣà* are worshipped quite widely. Some belong to a particular locality (those associated with certain rivers, hills, etc.) but many have devotees not only in several towns but throughout large parts of the Yoruba-speaking area. Nevertheless, each devotee can feel that she has her 'own' *Ọya*, *Ṣàngó*, or whatever it is. This is because each *òriṣà* is divided into countless versions, each with its own subsidiary name, *oriki*, personality and taboos.

In *Òkukù*, for instance, I was told that '*Orúkọ méṭadínlógún ni òriṣà Ṣòpònnòn pín sí*' (the *òriṣà* *Ṣòpònnòn* divides into seventeen names). Each of the seventeen belongs to an individual or a small group of devotees. Each manifestation had an original worshipper who discovered that manifestation's own particular taboo by reacting violently to something and becoming possessed immediately after his initiation into the cult as an *adòṣù* (in this case all the initiates I heard about were men). But once the idiosyncratic taboo had been discovered, other worshippers were drawn to that manifestation and the taboo applied to them all. *Wariwarùn*, for instance, cannot endure to have one of his devotees beaten. If this happens, the devotee in question will be possessed instantly by *Ṣòpònnòn*; drummers will have to be called and sacrifices made before he is released from the possession. *Àbàtà*'s devotees must not hear the sound of a cooking pot being scraped, *Adégbònà*'s must not have water splashed on them, and so on. The *oriki* show



that each manifestation has a different colouring to his personality. All are tough, violent and overwhelmingly powerful: but these qualities are expressed in subtly different imagery for each. *Àbàtà* ('Swamp') shows his toughness by dirtying his devotees' gifts in the mud associated with his name (thus flouting with impunity all the conventions about receiving gifts):

*Gúnyán lẹ̀bẹ̀ gbé f'Áyílẹ̀rẹ̀ o*  
*Olówó ori àjiki*  
*Erè ni òd fi ẹ*  
*Rokà lẹ̀bẹ̀ gbé f'Áyílẹ̀rẹ̀ o*  
*Ẹ̀rẹ̀ ni òd fi ẹ . . .*

Prepare fine light pounded yam for *Ayílẹ̀rẹ̀*  
 My husband whom we rise to greet  
 And he'll dirty it in the mud  
 Prepare fine light yam-flour pudding for *Ayílẹ̀rẹ̀*  
 And he'll dirty it in the mud . . .

The *oriki* of *Ògáálá*, on the other hand, are full of imagery of iron, especially the branding iron which *Sòpònnón* uses to mark his smallpox victims:

*Ó nírín ó lábẹ̀ ó ní yanyanturu*  
*Irin'ná, ọkọ ọrun mi*  
*Irin tí Agbédàjọ tí n fi n kọmọ kò tẹ̀èkáná . . .<sup>21</sup>*

He has iron, he has knives, he has all kinds of things  
 Hot iron, my original husband  
 The branding iron *Agbédàjọ* uses to scarify people is smaller than a finger-nail . . .

The many manifestations of *Enlẹ̀*, a hunter- and river-god, were known as *ibú* (pools). The *oriki* of each *ibú*, bringing out different shades of the *òriṣà's* personality (one dwelling on his prowess as a hunter, another on his drinking, another on the might of the deep river) are chanted in turn at the *Enlẹ̀* festival, as well as being collectively invoked with the refrain.

*Entúbumbú, olódò-òdò, olómi-omi*

All you pools, all you rivers, all you waters

Each manifestation is thought of as being a distinct personality. This can be illustrated by an example from the *Ọ̀ṣun* cult. In recent times in *Òkukù* there have been four manifestations of *Ọ̀ṣun* (though there may be more elsewhere): *Ìjùmú*, *Ìpòndá* (whose taboo is guinea-corn beer), *Ibú Nlá* and *Ẹ̀dan*. Each of them had, until recently, several devotees from various compounds. But as the number of traditional worshippers dwindled it became harder to find successors to devotees who died, and eventually a single woman ended up as the last devotee of both *Ẹ̀dan* and *Ìjùmú*. She worshipped both of them, keeping their calabashes—their concrete symbol and location—separate, greeting each of them separately on *Ọ̀ṣun's* weekly day, and casting kola separately before each.

Most *òrìṣà* seem to be fragmented in this way. With some the number of manifestations is determinate and there are stories explaining how the fragmentation occurred: it is said, for instance, that a quarrel between Ọya and Ògún (her first husband) led to a fight in which Ọya used her magical staff to break Ògún into seven pieces, while Ògún used his to break Ọya into nine.<sup>22</sup> It is said that each of the 256 *odù* of Ifá has its 'own' Èṣù. But in other cults it seems that the number of manifestations is indefinite and that a new one may be established or discovered by an especially powerful devotee who wants to set himself apart from his fellow cult-members. This seemed to be the case in Òkukù with the Sàngó cult, where some of the versions of Sàngó were called after their devotees' personal names.

The intimate personal involvement of devotee and *òrìṣà* is mutual. The *òrìṣà* possesses the devotee; but the devotee also, in a different sense, 'possesses' the *òrìṣà*. Many *òrìṣà* mount (*gùn*) certain of their devotees, especially at the climactic moments of festivals or on other highly-charged ritual occasions. The devotee's face, voice and movements change as the *òrìṣà* enters and empowers her or him. During the Sàngó festival the *adòṣù* take it in turns to hold a feast for their fellow cult-members. The high point of the feast is when, amidst frenzied drumming, chanting and invocation of the *òrìṣà*, Sàngó enters the *adòṣù* (usually a man) who, with a great exultant shout, strips off his ritual costume and begins to perform astonishing feats of magic and physical endurance. *Ṣòpònnòn* devotees are also possessed by their *òrìṣà* when their taboo is broken, as has been mentioned. Devotees can become possessed at the shrine of their *òrìṣà*—for instance, at the annual festival sacrifice—when they are chanting its *oríkì*. In possession, the *òrìṣà*'s personality invades and colours the devotee's, and even after it has withdrawn its imprint is left on the devotee.

At the same time the devotee 'possesses' the *òrìṣà* in the sense that she is the special custodian of her 'own' version of it. Her own style and personality affect the way the manifestation is regarded. The *òrìṣà* belonging to a powerful, wealthy, charismatic devotee will be more highly regarded than one belonging to an insignificant person. Each colours the other's personality.

Devotee and *òrìṣà* are mutually defining. The devotee—especially if she is an *adòṣù*—will be addressed and referred to as *Ìyá Sàngó*, *Ìyá Ọlòtín*, etc. The devotees of Enlè address each other by the names of their own *ibú* (e.g. *Ojútù*, *Alámò*, *Ọwáálá*, *Abátàn*, *Ìyámòkín*, *Áánù*) at cult gatherings. At the same time the *òrìṣà* is known through the devotee who 'owns' it. Some versions of *òrìṣà*, as we have seen, were named after their owners. All versions could be saluted with the *oríkì orílẹ̀* (lineage attributions) of their respective owners. One devotee of Enlè told me that the principal difference between the various *ibú* was the *oríkì orílẹ̀* attributed to them by virtue of their attachment to particular devotees. *Oríkì* are the most intimate and cherished keys to a person's identity. The closeness of the personal bond between *òrìṣà* and devotee is revealed in the way that each can be saluted with the *oríkì* of the other.

It is clear that the ordinary devotee usually finds satisfaction in one cult and is more or less indifferent to the rest of the pantheon. The inner cult members in particular tend to dissociate themselves from the activities of other cults and even feel them to be rivals. Some people, of course, worship a family *òrìṣà* as well as a personal one, and many people participate in the annual worship of those *òrìṣà* like *Olóókù* and *Òtín* which are thought of as belonging to the whole town. In recent times, with the dramatic decline of traditional worship, many old men and women find themselves in



charge of several different inherited *òriṣà*. But the living core of the religion certainly seems to have been an individual's direct, spontaneous and intimate relationship with her 'own' *òriṣà*. The importance of this relationship and the depth of involvement of course varied. For the inner circle it was certainly a whole way of life. These cult members spend all their time together on the *òriṣà*'s weekly day and on cult meeting days. During the festival, each member takes her turn to feast the others, and in the days when cults were well-attended this could have meant months of communal eating at four-day intervals. If she spent most of her life in the cult, on her death she cannot depart this world until she is released, by final secret rituals, from her cult membership. Cults with *adòṣù* have special rituals to remove the *oṣù* (a magical substance applied to the head on initiation). Members of the family are not allowed to approach the corpse until the cult members have arrived and performed the ritual. In one such ceremony that I witnessed, performed for a *Ṣàngó adòṣù*, there was a very strong feeling that the *Ṣàngó* cult owned the devotee and could claim her even against the will of the family. Some cults are very expensive to join, especially those, like *Òriṣà Oko*, *Ṣòpònnòn* and *Ṣàngó*, which have elaborate initiation rituals. Once having joined, the devotee is committed to it and will not want to waste more money supporting other cults. There is a sense of community and mutual obligation among the members of a cult, reinforced by the taboos which they jointly observe and by the feeling that they all share the same type of personality.

Each devotee concentrates on her own *òriṣà* and tries to enhance its glory through her attentions. This involves not only making offerings and chanting *oriki*, but also spending money as lavishly as possible on her day to give the feast. In return, the *òriṣà* is asked to give blessings and protection. Paramount among the blessings people desire is children; after that come wealth, health and long life. Protection is solicited against rivals and enemies, and the *òriṣà* is asked to bring about their downfall. A good example of the reciprocity of the relationship is seen in the assertion of the *Ọya* devotees that *because* the cult is so expensive, *Ọya* will *therefore* be obliged to make them successful in trade so that they can fulfil their obligations to her in style.

Everyone asks for the same things from her *òriṣà*, and everyone therefore credits her own *òriṣà* with the power to bestow them. The same qualities of generosity, life-giving power, destructive power and personal magnificence are attributed to all the *òriṣà* by their own devotees. Beneficent power gives people children: the *òriṣà* is often described in *oriki* as a creator who forges children's heads or limbs, and also as a parent who cherishes the devotee as if she were herself a baby. Destructive power protects one from one's enemies: it is invoked in imagery of blood, fire and iron; the *òriṣà* is often described as committing violent and outrageous acts with impunity, to show that he can get away with anything, withstand anyone.<sup>23</sup> Personal magnificence enhances reputation: it is the outward sign of greatness, and is described in images of riches, sumptuous garments, beads, beauty, elegance, graceful dancing and so on. Not all the *òriṣà* have these qualities in the same proportions. *Olóókù* is a 'white' deity, primarily beneficent, and his nickname is '*iwin èrò*' (mild spirit). *Ọtìn* and *Èsilẹ* are praised most for giving children, *Ṣòpònnòn*, *Ṣàngó* and *Ògún* for their savage destructive power which their devotees beg them to turn on others and not on themselves. But all *òriṣà* do have, in different degrees, all these qualities, because every *òriṣà* has to be able to fulfil all the needs of the devotee. The language of all their *oriki* is strikingly similar. In many cases the very same attributions are applied to several *òriṣà*, one devotee



borrowing from another without any feeling of incongruity to glorify her own subject.<sup>24</sup> Her concern is not to draw sharp distinctions between the various *òrìṣà* but to elevate and enhance her own so that it will be able to bless and protect her. One can see this in the stories devotees tell about their own *òrìṣà*. In the Ifá corpus, the two co-wives of Šàngó—Ọya and Ọ̀ṣun—are presented as contrasting types. Ọya is tough, fierce, harsh and vain, while Ọ̀sun the senior wife is mild, patient, long-suffering and kind. A story told to me by an Ọya devotee emphasised this contrast and gloried in Ọya's violence, which is an aspect of her power. But when an Ọ̀ṣun devotee talked about Ọ̀ṣun, he chose stories that stressed her mischievous, capricious awkwardness, her stubbornness and her primacy among all the female *òrìṣà*, concluding triumphantly '*Obìnrin bí ọ̀kúnrin ní*' (She's a woman who behaves like a man). This was the aspect of her nature that made her a valuable protector and ally in his struggle against the world.

Thus the Yoruba gods are at once fragmented and fused. They are fragmented because of the intense personal nature of the *òrìṣà*-devotee relationship, which makes each devotee desire her *own* version of the *òrìṣà* imprinted with her own personality and identity. They are fused because, underlying their differences of character and ambience, all the *òrìṣà* share the same qualities and do the same things for their devotees.<sup>25</sup> The Yoruba pantheon contains many figures oddly linked and merging with each other: *òrìṣà* that are said to be 'the same', and yet not the same, *òrìṣà* that are partly refractions of each other and partly distinct. In Ọ̀kukù there is Ọ̀tòm̀pòrò, a mask brought out during the Ọ̀tìn festival which has a fierce wild personality and behaves like an *egúngún*. It is said to be the 'husband' of the female *òrìṣà* Ọ̀tìn (who in her own legend was married to the oba of Ọ̀tan), but it also is a manifestation of Ọ̀tìn along with a whole collection of other masks both male and female. There is also Arère, a female counterpart to the fearful male hunter god Ọ̀rìṣà Oko. Arère is said to be Ọ̀rìṣà Oko's wife but also a *kind* of Ọ̀rìṣà Oko, though less powerful than the male one. There is Lóógun-Èdẹ, who is described as the youngest son of Ọ̀ṣun, but who (according to the oldest Ọ̀ṣun devotee in the town) is also a fierce male version of Ọ̀ṣun herself: '*Lóógun-Èdẹ? Ọ̀ṣun ní!*' (Lóógun-Èdẹ? He's Ọ̀ṣun!) As J. R. O. Ọ̀jọ has pointed out (Ọ̀jọ 1977) there is no clearly agreed-upon hierarchy or other ordering of the *òrìṣà* in the pantheon. Each one is all things to its own devotees.

If the Tallensi Ancestor is a magnified image of the father, the Yoruba *òrìṣà* seems in some ways very much like a magnified image of the Big Man. Big Men, like *òrìṣà*, exist in large numbers and achieve importance in diverse ways with diverse powers. Instead of occupying fixed positions in relation to each other, both *òrìṣà* and Big Men can be made bigger or smaller by the attention, or withdrawal of attention, of their own group of supporters. Both have a reciprocal relationship with these supporters. Both have to offer them, in return for their support, protection against enemies, guidance when problems arise, influence to make things go well. They provide not only material benefits, but their own prestige, of which the supporter partakes. In both cases, then, it is a relationship of mutual interest, for the supporter builds up the reputation of his protector and then benefits from it. The same qualities of character are admired in *òrìṣà* as in Big Men—except that the underlying ethic of decency and restraint which tempers the excesses attributed to Big Men is often absent in the *oríkí* of *òrìṣà*, who are pictured as much more extreme in their power, violence and grandeur than humans. Like the followers of a Big Man, devotees have a certain amount of choice as to who they decide to support. Though often bound by tradition, habit and family

connections, there is nevertheless room for adjustment. If the Big Man or *oriṣà* disappoints him, he can take his problems elsewhere. The main difference is that the devotee plays a far more active role in building up the *oriṣà* than the supporter does in building up the Big Man. The *oriṣà* themselves are not particularly competitive<sup>26</sup>; it is their devotees who try to raise them higher than other *oriṣà*. It is the devotees who spend conspicuously to increase the prestige of their *oriṣà*. Indeed, the devotee seems here to be combining the roles of supporter and Big Man. He adulates his *oriṣà* and by doing so increases his own stature.

#### IV

Because of the reciprocal nature of the relationship, and because the devotee can, if the worst comes to the worst, transfer her main allegiance to another *oriṣà*, she can afford to be forthright and demanding. The chants in which the devotees pour out praise and gratitude to the *oriṣà* also contain strongly-worded requests for further blessings, reminders that the relationship should be reciprocal, and even semi-serious threats. Far from adopting the tone of passive acceptance that characterised the Tallensi attitude to the Ancestors, the Yorùbá devotee keeps her *oriṣà* up to the mark. One devotee of Èsilẹ̀ took as the refrain to her chant this reminder:

*Eni ó gbani là á gbà*

The person who helps us is the one we help

A Sàngó devotee threatens to defect to another cult if blessings are not forthcoming:

*Sàngó bọ̀ ọ̀ gbè mí, ojútí ara tiẹ̀ ní*  
*Sàngó, bí n ò sìn ọ̀, ojútí ara tẹ̀mí ní*  
*Sàngó bọ̀ ọ̀ gbè mí n ọ̀ lọ̀ rẹ̀é ya Ọ̀ṣun*  
*Sàngó bọ̀ ọ̀ gbè mí n ọ̀ lọ̀ rẹ̀é sẹ̀gbàgbọ̀*  
*Sàngó bọ̀ ọ̀ bá gbè mí o, Erin-fibi-ládugbó-sojú*  
*Erin-gbogbo-ló-káwọ̀-ìjà-lẹ̀rí, n ò ní í kírun*  
*Bọ̀ ọ̀ bá gbè mí ní kọ̀, Erin-fibi-ládugbó-sojú,*  
*Ọ̀rẹ̀ oníbàtá, mo lémi ò ní í sẹ̀gbàgbọ̀*  
*Atóbájáyé, bọ̀ ọ̀ gbè mí n ò ní í yỌ̀ṣun*  
*Şíjú ègbè wò mí, Olúkòso Gbágídíyari<sup>27</sup>*

Sàngó, if you don't bless me the shame is your own

Sàngó, if I don't serve you, the shame is mine

Sàngó, if you don't bless me, I will go and make an Ọ̀ṣun image

Sàngó, if you don't bless me I'll go and turn Christian

But Sàngó, if you do bless me, Elephant-with-eyes-as-large-as-water-drums

All-elephants-carry-fighting-arms-on-their-heads, I won't become a Muslim

And if you bless me, Elephant-with-eyes-as-large-as-water-drums,

Friend of the *bátá*-drummers, I say I won't turn Christian

One worthy to enjoy the world with, if you bless me I won't go and make an image to Ọ̀ṣun

Open the eyes of blessing on me, lord of Kòso, Gbágídíyari.

But the Yoruba perception of *oriṣà*-devotee mutual dependence goes much deeper than this. What it comes down to is a conception of something very like collusion

between *òrìṣà* and devotee. It was a passage from *Èṣù pípè* (the *oriki* chant addressed to the trickster deity Èṣù) that first brought this to my attention:

*Èṣù mọ se mí lóde ilẹ̀ yìí lááláé*  
*Bí n bá n seégún á yídó*  
*Áá ẹ́ṣọ lórí*  
*Áá ní ò sí nńkan 'bẹ*  
*Talétalé ọlọkọ rẹ á digbèsè*  
*Èṣù mọ se mí lóde ilẹ̀ yìí lááláé*  
*Bí n bá n sòrìṣà áá fòìṣàa rẹ ya pèèrẹ̀*  
*Olóìṣà íí, áá ní ò sí nńkan 'bẹ*  
*Talétalé ọlọkọ rẹ á digbèsè<sup>28</sup>*

Èṣù don't ever attack me in this world  
 If he attacks a masquerade it will roll out a mortar  
 It will pull the cloth off its head  
 It will say there's nothing there  
 By evening its patron will have run into debt  
 Èṣù don't ever attack me in this world  
 If he attacks a devotee, the devotee will give his *òrìṣà*'s secret away  
 This devotee will say there's nothing there  
 By evening the *òrìṣà*'s owner will have run into debt.

The devotees get together to maintain the *òrìṣà*'s 'secret'; and once this secret is betrayed by a foolish devotee, the *òrìṣà* is reduced to an empty word, an object of ridicule. The devotees are in charge of the *òrìṣà*'s reputation, and if they do not collaborate with the *òrìṣà* to preserve it, the whole impressive front presented to the world will be ruined. What the passage makes very clear is that this collaboration is also to the devotee's advantage. It is the 'owner' of the *òrìṣà* who would suffer most if his *òrìṣà* were disgraced. Only a crazy person (to be afflicted by Èṣù is to be temporarily bereft of reason) would expose his *òrìṣà*, for the disgrace would rebound on him. He would have deprived himself of his background support, and 'by evening the *òrìṣà*'s owner will have run into debt'.

The chanter is not saying that there is 'really' nothing to the *òrìṣà* or *egúngún*, that it is all a hoax put over by human beings. The suggestion is rather that every reasonable person will do his best to make sure that his *òrìṣà* is a force to be reckoned with. The *òrìṣà* depends on human collaboration, but that does not mean that the *òrìṣà* does not really exist. On the contrary, it *does* exist, and the proof of this is its inextricable, intimate bond of mutual dependence with humans.

We have only to look at the model from which this conception was derived for it to become very clear. Without the co-operation of his followers (in the form of attention, service, respect, praise, etc.) the Big Man would cease to be 'big'; he would become nothing. But this does not mean that the Big Man's power is illusory. The recognition accorded him by his followers makes it possible for him to wield influence and get things done. He really is 'big'; but his bigness depends on his being acknowledged as such.



It is unlikely that the passage quoted above was inspired by scepticism arising from contact with rival belief systems such as Islam and Christianity. It seems, on the contrary, to express a conception that is at the very heart of traditional Yoruba religion. The pattern of collaboration of devotee with *oriṣà* for the benefit of both of them is embedded in the whole institutional religious order. When a Ṣàngó priest is possessed by Ṣàngó at the climax of the annual festival, he performs all kinds of feats. Nowadays his tricks include setting fire to a bunch of dry grass with his breath<sup>29</sup>, pouring sand into an apparently empty gourd and then producing groundnuts from it, plucking sweets and cigarettes out of thin air to distribute to the crowd and so on. All the fraternity of *adòṣù* know not only how these tricks are done, but also how some members of the cult went to the market-place the night before to prepare the ground in secret. This does not mean that they are deceiving their fellow-townsmen, so much as that they are presenting Ṣàngó's glory to its best advantage. Another case in point is the *egúngún* cult. All men and boys are entitled to take part in *egúngún* celebrations and 'carry' at least some types of masquerade. The masquerades are known as *ará òrun* (denizens of heaven) and women are not supposed to know that there is a living man under the costume. To show that she knows is for a woman an extremely grave ritual transgression. Recently in Òkukù an elderly woman praise-singer walked in on a partly unmasked *egúngún* during the festival: the *egúngún* had come to one of the priests' houses to refresh itself with palm wine before continuing its progress round the town. Instead of running away, the over-excited woman boldly began to chant the *oriki* not only of the *egúngún* but also of its human carrier, addressing the man to his face. She was thrown out and driven back to her husband's compound, and a few weeks later a retributive party of *egúngún* came out to punish her. She and her family escaped in time, but everything in the compound was destroyed—water pots were smashed and livestock hacked to pieces. It was only after many months of negotiation and the payment of a heavy fine that she was allowed to set foot in the town again. Women, of course, do know that *egúngún* are carried by men. In a chant performed during the *egúngún* festival vigil, a woman lamented:

*Ará dá obìnrin tí í fi mawo*  
*Obìnrin ò mọ̀gbàlẹ̀*  
*Ìbá ẹ̀e pọ̀bìnrin lẹ̀ mawo*  
*Mbá gbénú èkú wẹ̀kú<sup>30</sup>*

Woman can do nothing about it, they are not allowed to know the secret cult  
 Women cannot know the sacred grove  
 If women were allowed to know the secret cult  
 I would wear one masquerader's costume on top of another . . .

She insists that women can know nothing about the cult and in the same breath shows indirectly that she *does* in fact know that it is living men who carry the *egúngún* costumes. The important thing is not women's actual ignorance, but the maintenance of a respectful silence about their knowledge. It is a matter of keeping up appearances for the sake of the ancestors' dignity. The woman collaborates to keep the *egúngún*'s 'secret'—which is no secret—so that its splendid beneficent power will remain intact for her to profit from.

The word *awo*, so fundamental a concept in Yoruba religion, as well as meaning 'secret' also means something like 'sacred mystery' or 'spiritual power'. It is by being

made into a 'secret' that a spiritual being gets its authority. It has been said 'If something we call "*awo*" has nothing in it to frighten the uninitiated, let's stop calling it "*awo*"; but if we put a stone in a gourd and make a couple of taboos to stop people looking into it, it's become an "*awo*". The face of a denizen of heaven is "*awo*" for the very reason that if you removed its costume you might find nothing there'.<sup>31</sup> Human collusion to keep the 'secret' endows the object with spiritual power: perhaps what the 'secret' really comes down to in the end is the open secret that gods are made by men.

## V

What I have tried to argue is that this notion, which at first glance looks like scepticism, is in fact at the heart of the Yoruba devotional attitude, and that this can be understood in the light of the system of social relations from which the notion is derived.

In a highly ascriptive society like that of the Tallensi, where everybody's role is defined and limited by powerful social norms, spiritual beings are conceived of as authoritarian and unaffected by what humans think of them. It is a one-way relationship in which the Ancestors are a 'given' that the living can only accept and passively submit to.

In a Yoruba town like Òkukù, on the other hand, the social structure, though hierarchical, is open and relatively fluid. Instead of prescribing roles, it enjoins men (and women too) to make themselves into whatever they can, and places no limits on what they can achieve; instead it encourages the impulse of ambition to take any route it can find and go as far as it can. Men make themselves, by attracting supporters; and in such a society it is also conceived that men make their gods by being their supporters. If no-one supports a Big Man any more, he loses his power; if devotees abandon their *òrìṣà*, it falls into oblivion. The fundamental devotional impulse is to glorify the *òrìṣà* and strengthen its reputation so that it in turn will bless the devotee. The glorification is spontaneous and voluntary and the relation is seen as reciprocal, for the devotee is free, within limits, to attach herself to a new *òrìṣà* if her first one fails her.

The argument will be strengthened if we consider an even more extreme contrast with the Tallensi case, the Kalabari. The Tallensi and Kalabari could be seen at opposite poles of a continuum, as far as this particular argument is concerned, with the Yoruba example somewhere in the middle. All the Kalabari villages appear to have been open and achievement-oriented, and the largest and most important of them, New Calabar, developed into a trading state composed of highly active and competitive 'Houses', each of which was led by an elected leader who was chosen for his ability and ambition and was often quite young. These Houses, to remain effective trading and slaving units, had to keep up their numbers, and they did this by capturing strangers and incorporating them into the House. People as supporters were here even more important to an ambitious leader's success than in the Yoruba case. The Kalabaris' three principal orders of spiritual beings (Lineage Ancestors, Village Heroes and Water Spirits) can be invoked and thus temporarily confined in a carved figure or in the person of a living carrier; then they can be made to listen to demands, rebuked and even punished for bad behaviour. Kalabari say that it was they who gave the spirits power in the first place by making offerings and uttering praises and invocations:

hence the proverb '*Tomì, ani oru beremare*'—It is men that make the gods important. (Horton 1970). Conversely, humans can strip a troublesome spirit of the powers they have given it. Horton gives an account of a water spirit one of whose manifestations was a shark; when sharks began to infest the creek, the human community destroyed the spirit's cult objects and drank a shark's blood, and by this means wiped out the spirit's power over people of New Calabar. According to Horton, the Kalabari 'compare the spirits with men of influence, who are only big so long as their followers follow them, and who become nothing when their followers fade away'. Here the notion that men make gods, and the social model from which the notion is derived, is completely explicit.

The Yoruba conviction that the *òrìṣà* need human attention in no way questions the existence of spiritual beings as a category. *Olódùmarè*, the source and background of the spiritual order, is always there even though humans do not worship him directly:

*Òrìṣà ló ñ pa'ni í dà*  
*On on pa Òrìṣà á dà*

It is *Òrìṣà* (Supreme Being) who can change being  
No-one changes *Òrìṣà*<sup>32</sup>

It is rather that, because of the element of choice in the system, the survival in the human community of any particular *òrìṣà* depends on human collaboration. The Yoruba attitude to the *òrìṣà* could perhaps be seen as a case of what Jack Goody calls 'limited scepticism' (Goody 1975) in the sense that if one *òrìṣà* fails, the devotee is free to experiment with another, and thus there is room for a gradual adjustment and introduction of new norms. It seems clear that it was this willingness to try something new that conditioned the way Islam and Christianity were received, rather than Islam and Christianity which introduced a new attitude of scepticism.<sup>33</sup> However, scepticism—even the limited sort—does not seem quite the right word to apply to a religion whose central impulse is the ecstatic personal communication of devotee with *òrìṣà*. In this society power, whether human or divine, is adulated. Adulation increases the power. Once a devotee has settled for the *òrìṣà* that suits her, therefore, she throws herself heart and soul into its service, for she knows that enhancing its power is ultimately to her own benefit.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> What Needham is really interested in is whether or not there is a universally-experienced, discriminable inner state corresponding to the concept 'belief'. He concludes that there is not, and that therefore one should not presume to talk about the 'beliefs' of other cultures. From this standpoint, the Yoruba example would probably be seen as further proof of his conclusion: if the Yoruba state of mind towards their gods is in some ways reminiscent of a Western man's scepticism, this indicates that their experience of belief (if there is such an experience) is not the same. The question which I think ought to be addressed, on the other hand, is what are the differences of *structure*—the structure of society and of ideas—which allows something apparently similar to scepticism to play such a different role. The particular configuration of ideas which makes up the Yoruba devotional attitude only makes sense in particular social and historical circumstances. The nature of the 'experience' of belief seems to me to be less important than the nature of the social context which makes certain notions persuasive or not persuasive.

<sup>2</sup> Devotees were, of course, both male and female. Some cults were exclusive to men—for instance *Orò* and *Egúngún*, whose secrets women were not allowed to know. In most cults however men and women played an equally prominent part. It is hard to estimate what things were like in the days when all the cults were still well-attended but it is clear that some cults—such as *Ògún*—attracted more men than women, while others—such as *Òṣun*, *Òtín* and *Oya*—attracted mostly women. I give preference to the female



pronoun where cults were attended by both men and women. This is partly in protest against the standard male-oriented usage and partly because in the town where I worked there were more practising women devotees than men.

<sup>3</sup> It seems probable that Fortes, because of his own theoretical predilections, has over-emphasised the rigidly ascriptive nature of the society. There are hints of this, especially in *The Dynamics of Clanship*, where, for instance, he mentions the alacrity with which individuals took advantage of the colonial imposition of Native Authority headmen to enrich themselves far beyond what had been possible traditionally. This suggests that respect for and conformity to conventions of ascriptive seniority were not as deeply entrenched as he makes out. Nevertheless it is clear that Tale society, compared with the Yoruba, did offer relatively little scope or encouragement to individual ambition.

<sup>4</sup> It is significant that even the Earth Cult, which in some clans was an important complement to the Ancestor cult, was an affair of maximal lineages, not of individuals. As a rule, the only individuals who approached the Earth shrines of their own accord were 'pilgrims' from other groups outside Taleland.

<sup>5</sup> Òkukù's population, estimated from the 1977-8 electoral register, was about 18,000 adult males and females. Of these only about ten per cent were practising traditional worshippers. More than half were Christians, the rest Muslims. Information was collected during a three-year period of field-work (1974-7). Information about lineage history and Big Men is mainly drawn from two series of interviews, one with all the Baálé of the compounds, the other with 75 representatives of three age groups (old, middle-aged and young men) in which detailed and circumstantial reminiscences of their own lives and those of prominent men they remembered were elicited. Information about cults was based mainly on prolonged participation in cult meetings, rituals and festivals, and also on interviews with leading devotees and explanations of the meaning of the *oriki* of various *òrìṣà* from the performers. All the cults still existing in Òkukù were covered.

<sup>6</sup> Òkukù was mid-way between the Ìlorin camp, Òfà, and the Ìbàdàn camp, Ìkírùn. It was overrun and evacuated several times, and on the last occasion the population stayed for 17 years in Ìkírùn before returning to resettle Òkukù in 1893. There was no military organisation in Òkukù: instead the fighting men in the town arranged their own raiding expeditions, merely reporting the results to the *Qba* and chiefs. Even during the wars the social structure never became as flexible as that of Ìbàdàn, which during the 19th century was a society of Big Men pure and simple without the constraints of any traditionally-given hierarchy; on the other hand it never had the complex interlocking systems of hierarchy of Old *Qyó*, where hereditary privilege apparently became established by the late 18th century. According to some informants, the title system was not so important 'in the old days' as it has now become. Personal *oriki* (praise poems) suggest that the 19th century was the hey-day of Big Men, but all the oral literature shows that elements of competition and self-aggrandisement were deeply rooted in the culture and had almost certainly been present long before the 19th century.

<sup>7</sup> However, on at least two occasions the *qba* succeeded in taking away a senior title from the lineage that 'owned' it and giving it to another.

<sup>8</sup> During the royal Olóókù festival he is said to have set himself up on his own throne with all his attendants, facing the *qba* across the *qba*'s market-place. When the *qba*'s drummers warned him '*Èlémòná rora, qba kó lo jé*' (*Èlémòná* go easy, you're not the *qba*), his own drummers would reply '*Èyí tí mo ní jé yí, ó ju qba lo*' (The position I hold here is greater than an *qba*'s).

<sup>9</sup> There were a number of 19th and early 20th century Big Women in Òkukù. One of them used her terrible reputation as a witch to seize other people's farmland, which she hired bondsmen to work on. Another was the first trader to sell imported alcohol in the town.

<sup>10</sup> According to Oroge (Oroge 1971) *iwòfà* only became an important source of labour after slavery had been banned in the late 19th century. It seems from oral evidence however that slaves were not much used in Òkukù in the 19th century for labour: instead almost all of them were sold. The oral literature shows that *iwòfà* as an institution had certainly existed from the earliest times.

<sup>11</sup> In the early years of this century a junior title then held by *ilé* Olúqḍé fell vacant and the compound members asked a respectable elder, Ògúnlékè, to take the title. Ògúnlékè, however, refused on the grounds that his household was too small, he did not have enough children to back him up, and without these he would not be able to withstand the jealous attacks his appointment would arouse. The lineage had an attached female branch which had hitherto been debarred from taking any title: but this branch was headed by a bold and enterprising man who also had a large household '*Qḍéládé lágidi, ó láyá, ó sí bímò púpò*' (*Qḍéládé* was stubborn, he was bold, and he also had a great many children): *Odéládé* not only got the title, he later managed to get it converted into the senior title that accompanied the role of Baálé.

<sup>12</sup> If the title went with the role of Baálé, the holder was actually at the head of a large body of people who would refer their political and other problems to him and whom he could, to some extent, guide and mobilise. If the title did not accompany the role of Baálé, the holder still gained followers who hoped to go through him to the *qba*.

<sup>13</sup> For a full and clear exposition of Yoruba cosmology see (Abímbólá 1975).

<sup>14</sup> A few special ones who participated in the original creation of the world were said to have come down to earth from heaven and returned there: *Òrúnmilà*, *Qbátálá* and *Èṣù* were among them.

<sup>15</sup> Although the ancestors were addressed in a direct, personal fashion at the *ojú ọbí*, it cannot be said

that they are regarded simply as 'elders' (see Kopytoff 1971). Chants addressed to them stress the idea that after human invocation and sacrifice, they *return* to the world of their descendants from another world, and the journey is pictured as an arduous one covering an immense distance. Moreover, each stage of the funeral ceremony progressively separates the soul or spirit from the body, until on the seventh day it appears as an *egúngún* and is escorted to the place of its final departure.

<sup>16</sup> The *arugbá* Ọ̀tìn is a young girl whose office is to carry the *igbá* (calabash) of Ọ̀tìn on the festival days. She serves a seven year term. The calabash is said to contain sacred objects which the *oba* must not see, on pain of bringing ruin to the town.

<sup>17</sup> William Bascom, writing about Ifè almost forty years ago, says that most of the *ḍriṣà* belonged to particular compounds or quarters: those which could be worshipped by anyone in the town were exceptions. This was not the case in present-day Ọ̀kukù. Bascom's conclusion, that *ḍriṣà* belonged to families because they were thought of as ancestors, is surely a distortion. (Bascom 1944).

<sup>18</sup> I have been using the present tense because the description is based on observation of contemporary Ọ̀kukù. However, this account of how devotees are chosen is in part a reconstruction. Nowadays the cults are so short of members that it is often difficult for them to find an heir to a devotee when she dies. Sometimes they choose very young children or babies just to satisfy the requirement that the devotee be replaced; and sometimes devotees of other *ḍriṣà* are pushed into taking over a cult they have no interest in.

<sup>19</sup> Ulli Beier, for instance, writes perceptively about the importance of personalities in Yoruba religion but he tends to suggest that each individual will be drawn into the cult that suits his personality and will thenceforth be psychically fused with his *ḍriṣà*—as if the individual was completely free to choose the cult he liked. (Beier 1959). Bascom (1944) says that people who inherited *ḍriṣà* were free to abandon the lot if they so desired, and become "sceptics". Perhaps there *was* more freedom before the decline of traditional religion, but it is clear that there were also family and cult restraints.

<sup>20</sup> From a *Ṣòpònnòn* chant performed by Qyádọ́lá during the *Ṣòpònnòn* festival, Ọ̀kukù 1977.

<sup>21</sup> From the same chant.

<sup>22</sup> This story is also told in 'Òdṣà Qya ní ilú Ọ̀yó', B.A. long essay, University of Ifè, June 1978 by Bridget Mojisọ́lá Ọ̀kédíjì.

<sup>23</sup> Both humans and *ḍriṣà* are admired for being able to do outrageous things and get away with it. There are many examples in the *oríkì* of the *ḍriṣà*. Several of the *ḍriṣà* are called 'Ọ̀síkà a-namò-àna-rẹ̀' (Wicked fellow who beats his own in-laws' children). Ọ̀riṣà Ọ̀gìyán (a 'version' of Ọ̀bàtálá) mistreats his in-laws even more savagely:

*Jagunlabí bá jọmọ àna rẹ̀ sínú ọ̀tí*  
*Ó gbégi sónsó bojú olóoré*  
*Ó fẹ̀sẹ̀ eḗsẹ̀ bogiyàn èdùn*

Jagunlabí went and threw his in-laws' child into boiling guinea-corn beer  
 He sharpened a stick and thrust it into his benefactor's eye  
 One who shoved someone else's foot into an ant-heap

In-laws were the most respected of relatives. Enlẹ̀ is credited with attacking another highly-respected category of people, widows:

*Sá pónpó topó*  
*Fàtari opó nàpó*  
*Ó wáá rọ́tí lẹ́ọ́ opó*  
*Láwìn, èè san!*

Stands over the widow with a cudgel  
 Bashes the widow's skull against the house-post  
 He went and bought beer from a widow  
 On credit, he didn't pay!

*Ṣòpònnòn* is said to have killed someone else's goat and then got that man to grind the pepper to cook it in. The element of humour in these examples is characteristic: the Big Men's exploits are thought to be scandalous and amusing.

<sup>24</sup> The similarity between the *oríkì* of Ẓàngo and Èṣù, noticed by (Westcott and Morton-Williams 1962) is actually part of a much more general phenomenon. I have found the same units of *oríkì* in chants addressed to Ẓàngó, Èsilẹ̀ and Enlẹ̀; and some units of praise—e.g. those relating to the gift of children—can be applied to almost all *ḍriṣà*.

<sup>25</sup> Iṣowu (1962) tells the story of how a single, original arch-divinity called Ọ̀riṣà was smashed into fragments when his slave rolled a massive boulder down a hillside at him. Ọ̀rúnmilà collected the pieces, deposited some at the arch-divinity's town of Iranje and distributed the rest all over the world. Thus the differentiation of cults began. All the *ḍriṣà* were originally one.

<sup>26</sup> In a way, Ifá is an exception to this. The whole Ifá cult is hegemonic and countless Ifá stories present Ọ̀rúnmilà as succeeding where all the other *ḍriṣà* fail, being the only one who has solutions to problems, and so on. However, in character Ọ̀rúnmilà is not competitive—it is just that, according to the Ifá corpus,

he is by nature wiser than all the others. The continual emphasis on Òrúnmílá's superiority seems to be evidence in support of Robin Horton's theory that the Ifá cult was the ideology of an expanding political power and was imposed on the hitherto-existing òrìṣà cults from above. (Horton, 1979).

<sup>27</sup> From a *Ṣàngó pípè* chant performed by Àjtké, Iyá Ṣàngó Igbàyè, on the occasion of Baalé Ṣàngó's feast during the Ṣàngó festival, 1976.

<sup>28</sup> Èṣù pípè contained in a chant addressed to Enlè performed by Èrè-Òṣun, daughter of ilé Èlémòṣó Awo, 1977.

<sup>29</sup> According to Ulli Beier (1959), in Èdè the combustion of the bunch of dry grass is the method by which the devotee induces a state of possession. But in Òkukù festivals the moment of possession comes earlier and is marked by the priest's great shout of *Hòdò!* as he leaps up and strips off his ceremonial robes to prepare for the performance of his feats. At this moment members of the crowd will comment excitedly '*Òrìṣà ti gùn ún*' (The òrìṣà has possessed him).

<sup>30</sup> From an *egúngún* vigil lament performed by Èrè-Òṣun in 1976.

<sup>31</sup> This formulation is translated from the Yoruba which runs as follows: '*Bí a bá pe nńkan ní "awo" tí kò sí ní ohun tí fí fí pá ògbèrì láyá, e jé á yé perú won láwo; sùgbón bókúúta bá wonú agbè tán, táa sí fèwò mèjì tí yíyọjù wò rẹ̀ nídí, ó tí dawo. Torí i wí pé tí a bá sísọ lójú ará òrun a lè má bàà ará òrun níbẹ̀ nàà lójú ará òrun fí dī awo.*' It is taken from B.A. Degree Long Essay, University of Ifè, 1980, '*Òdún Èbèkùn ní ilú Iresi*, by Michael Oládèjọ Afóláyán. Although the author is not a traditional worshipper, enquiry has shown that this formulation (which is in highly proverbial language) is acceptable to traditional worshippers. Also relevant is the story told in Bascom (1944) about a man called Amályégún who is turned into a being with spiritual authority before the eyes of a crowd by being literally invested with secrecy: as he covers his legs and arms one by one with a special costume, the crowd sings *È wá wẹ̀ṣẹ̀ awo rẹ̀bè̀tè-rẹ̀bè̀tè'* (Come and see the foot, a fine secret) etc. and the mystery comes into being.

<sup>32</sup> Quoted by Rowland Abiodun in his paper 'Mythical allusions in Yoruba ritualistic art: *orí-inú*, visual and verbal metaphor', presented at the International Conference on the Relations Between Verbal and Visual Arts in Africa, October 10-14th, 1980, Philadelphia, Pa. The quoted lines are in Ifè dialect.

<sup>33</sup> The fact that Christianity and Islam were seen as additional choices in a system already full of alternatives is indicated in the passage of *Ṣàngó pípè* quoted above. The singer looks at the Òṣun cult, Christianity and Islam as equally plausible alternatives if she decides to defect from Ṣàngó.

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