

## Notes on Orisha Cults in the Ekiti Yoruba Highlands. A Tribute to Pierre Verger

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### Abstract

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Building and reflecting on the pioneering work of Pierre Verger, who undertook the first intensive comparison of Yoruba orisha worship in West Africa and Brazil, this essay examines the sociopolitical dimension of orisha cult organization and change in two Ekiti Yoruba kingdoms. Comparison of the politico-ritual configurations of decentralized Ishan kingdom with those of centralized Ayede king-dom, and their very different historical transformations from ca 1845 to the present, reveal political segmentation, not "family" or lineage, as the dominant principle of cult organization, even if it is cast within lineage ideology. The orisha cult "clustering" which thus occurs in the Ekiti Yoruba highlands, a ritual characteristic which Verger attributes to innovation in Brazilian candomble, suggests that West-African orisha worship is closer to its New World manifestations than has generally been acknowledged.

### Résumé

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Note sur le culte des Orisha dans les hautes terres yoruba: un hommage à Pierre Verger. — S'inspirant du travail pionnier de Pierre Verger relatif aux cultes orisha d'Afrique de l'Ouest et du Brésil, cette étude analyse les aspects socio-politiques et les transformations des cultes orisha au sein de deux royaumes yoruba de l'ensemble ekiti. La comparaison des schèmes politico-rituels dans le royaume décentralisé ishan et dans le royaume centralisé ayede, ainsi que l'analyse de leur évolution divergente au cours de la période comprise entre le milieu du XIXe siècle et aujourd'hui révèle que le principe majeur de la structure de ces cultes repose sur la segmentation politique et non sur la famille ou le lignage, quand bien même ce principe se coulerait dans une idéologie lignagère. L'existence d'une organisation des cultes orisha en faisceau (clustering) telle qu'elle existe sur les hauts plateaux yoruba (Ekiti), caractéristique rituelle que P. Verger réserve au candomblé du Brésil, suggère que ces cultes sont plus proches de leurs homologues du Nouveau Monde qu'on a généralement bien voulu le reconnaître.

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Andrew Apter

## Notes on Orisha Cults in the Ekiti Yoruba Highlands

A Tribute to Pierre Verger

Herbalist, diviner (*babaláwo*), orisha scholar and devotee, Pierre Fatumbi Verger has spent the better part of his venerable life on roads less travelled by. I am referring not only to the routes than have taken him throughout Yorubaland in Nigeria, Togo, and the Republic of Benin (then Dahomey), and across the Atlantic to Bahia in northeast Brazil, where he has diligently documented the Yoruba diaspora in what have become classic studies of orisha worship.<sup>1</sup> It is true that Verger's intellectual biography inscribes a cultural and historical geography, enriched by place-names, praise-names (*oríkì*), sacred centers and colonial archives which recall the secrets of the living and the dead. But beyond the avenues of extraordinary scholarship, and perhaps less visible to uninitiated eyes, are the roads (*ònà*) and pathways which can only be opened by privileged access to a hidden cartography, one which remaps space and time according to coordinates housed within orisha cults, and navigated by ritual specialists. On these roads Fatumbi is also a traveller, and for every tome of his published research, there are others which will never be written.

I open thus to praise a great elder who has opened the way for those of us who—in different ways—have followed his lead along the main roads and narrower byways of Yorubaland. The journey is of course endless, for Yoruba culture is, as I have argued elsewhere (Apter 1992), infinitely deep (*jìnlẹ̀*). And it is also regionally diverse. Within the singular designation of a “great civilization” exist subcultural variations (Oyo, Igbo-mina, Ijebu, Egbado, Egba and so on)—what Olabiyi Yai calls “many Yorubalands” (personal communication)—which trace a common geneal-

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1. See for example VERGER (1957, 1968, 1982).

ogy from Ile-Ife, the cosmographic locus of Yoruba kingship and modern ethnic identity. Within these subcultural groups, ritual pantheons vary, reflecting local sociopolitical relations and historical consequences of internecine warfare, the expansion of markets, and considerable internal migration. One of Verger's great contributions is his careful documentation of local cults, illustrating the historical dialectic between ritual archetypes and their diverse manifestations in different kingdoms and communities. Thus the archetypical Orishanla (Obatala) is variously reconfigured as Osalufon in Ifon, Orisha Oluofin in Iwofin, Orishagiyan in Ejigbo, Orishaoko in Oko, Orishawu in Owo, Orishaeguin in Eguin, Orishajaye in Ijaye, and Obatala in Oba (Verger 1982: 252), revealing how Yoruba deities are ritually incorporated into local kingdoms and centers of power. That the same revisionary dialectic unfolded in the New World, under very different historical conditions of slavery, class formation, ethnic pluralism and colonial culture is illustrated by Verger's careful comparisons of the orisha on both sides of the Atlantic, between the orisha cults of West Africa and their reincarnations in, for example, *candomblé* and *macumba*.

The aim of this essay is to supplement Pierre Verger's *Notes sur le culte des orisha . . .* (1957) with additional notes on orisha cults in the Ekiti Yoruba highlands, the northeastern domain of Yorubaland in Nigeria where I served my ethnographic and ritual apprenticeship.<sup>2</sup> In one sense my goal is simply documentary, for the religious and political associations of the Ekiti Yoruba region are relatively neglected in any systematic sense, with preference generally accorded to the imperial traditions of the Oyo ritual field,<sup>3</sup> to other subcultural groups,<sup>4</sup> or to Pan-Yoruba theological principles.<sup>5</sup> But if new data from Ekitiland add to the archive of Yoruba studies, they also suggest new ways of understanding "la place, occupée par l'orisha dans l'organisation sociale" (Verger 1982: 17), and the sociopolitical dynamics of the ritual process itself. In this respect, the Ekiti material has analytical implications which extend more generally throughout Yorubaland, and across the ocean to the Americas where the *òrìṣà/orixás/orichas* go marching on.

2. Fieldwork on orisha worship in Nigeria from October 1982 to December 1984 was funded by fellowships from Fulbright-Hays and the Social Science Research Council. A subsequent visit from August to October 1990 was funded by the American Philosophical Society and the American Council of Learned Societies. Support for this research is gratefully acknowledged.
3. E.g. AJAYI (1974), AGIRI (1975), ABIMBOLA (1976), BARBER (1991), BEIER (1959), JOHNSON (1921), MATORY (1994), BELASCO (1980).
4. See BASCOM (1944), OGUNBA (1967) DREWAL & DREWAL (1983) DREWAL (1992), OLUPONA (1991).
5. IDOWU (1962), AWOLALU (1979), THOMPSON (1976, 1983).

## Kingdoms and Cults

As Pierre Verger notes (*ibid.*), the variable positions of the orisha throughout Yorubaland are related to varieties of kingship and chieftaincy that have developed in different areas and towns. In the historically traditional kingdoms of ancient Ife and Old Oyo, for example, where authority is still vested in the office of the *oba* and is administered through different lines of civil chiefs and title-holders, kings have ruled their territories and subordinate towns with the support of their royal orisha cults. Since all Yoruba kings rule *ekéji òrìṣà* or “second to the gods”, it follows that those celebrated kings who shaped the political topography of Yorubaland are associated with the orisha which they served. The prominence of Shango as a Pan-Yoruba deity, reflecting the politico-ritual sovereignty of the former Oyo empire (administered as it was by *ajelè* and *ilàrí* Shango priests) is perhaps the best known spiritual refraction of imperial power. But the general principle holds that nearly all great orisha are associated with great kings, who enlist the support of the deities and embody their power (*àṣẹ*) in annual festivals. A glance at the iconographies of cult priests and priestesses reveals further associations between the orisha and kingship—the beaded fringe, calabashes (*igbá*), coral bracelets and ritual staffs of the devotees (so beautifully illustrated by Verger’s photographs) recall the king’s beaded crown and insignia of high office, for these ritual officiants are “kings” within their cults, and bring the power of their orisha to replenish the body politic.

In centralized kingdoms which boast powerful royal cults, such as Oshun in Oshogbo, or Shango in Oyo, there is a tendency to identify a single orisha as the patron of the town, much like the patron saints of Europe and Latin America. But the singularity of these orisha, like that of the kings, should not be overemphasized. If a king is singular, he is also multiple, embodying the town quarters (*àdúgbò*) and subordinate communities of his civil chiefs (*iwàrèfà*) and *baálè*, which together comprise the political and administrative units of his kingdom. These chiefs, in turn, worship their own specific orisha, mobilizing their devotees into distinct ritual communities. In a general sense, the distribution of political power is configured in the ritual domain, where authority relations are reproduced and transformed by the power of the cults.

What happens in communities that are politically less centralized, as in subordinate towns where the *baálè* wears the more modest *àkòró* crown, or in decentralized village-clusters which have no formal king, but rotate leadership between titled elders? It is to Verger’s credit that he identified the variable political frameworks in which Yoruba orisha worship is institutionalized—the centralized kingdom, the subordinate town, and the independent village (*ibid.*). But his energies remained focused on orisha cult practices, and he never really pushed the implications of this more sociopolitical observation. That the organization and distribution of

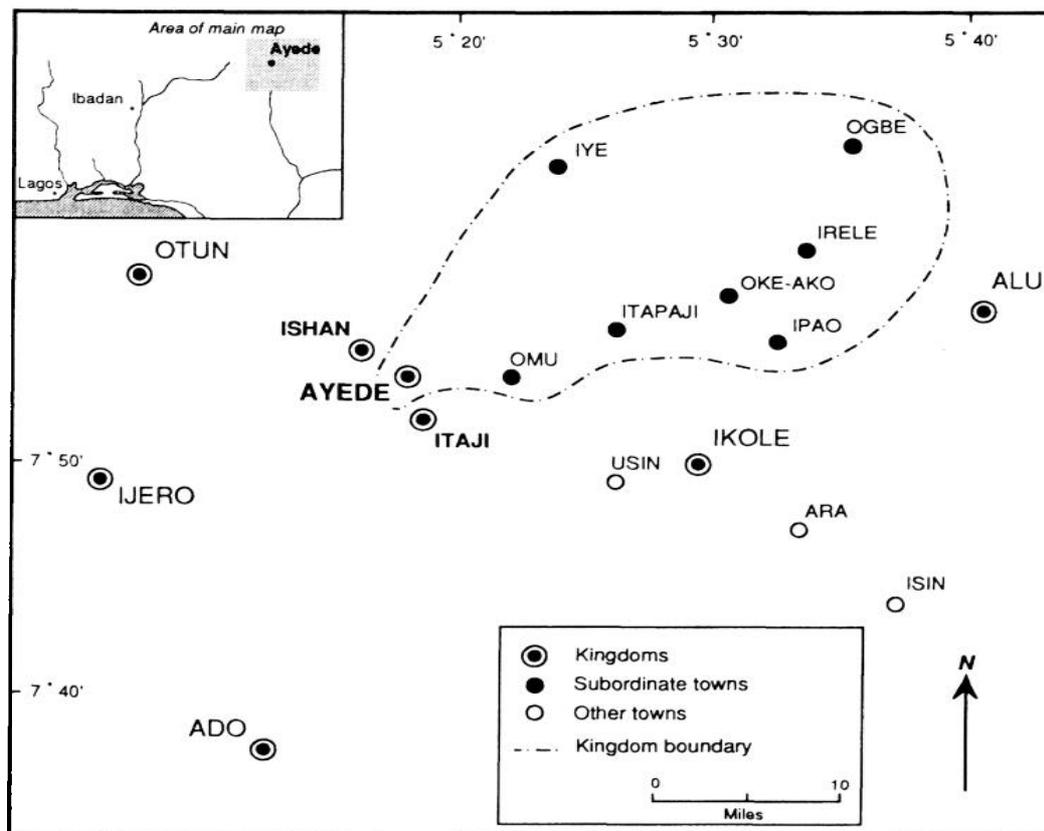
orisha cults throughout Yorubaland corresponds to variable degrees of political centralization and bases of social action, however, suggests a closer association between politics and orisha worship than has generally been recognized.

Classic studies of Yoruba religion, including Frobenius (1968), Dennett (1910), Farrow (1926), Talbot (1921) and even Idowu (1962), identify the family or lineage ("clan" in some terminologies) as the basic or "original" social unit associated with orisha worship. This is of course understandable since the orisha are in many ways conceived as "ancestors" who became deities after departing from earth, with their "descendants" serving as their devotees. In colloquial praises (*oríki*), a devotee can be identified as *omọ* ("child") of his or her orisha, as in "*omọ Ògún*" or "*omọ Yemoja*". Or in related usages, all members of a town quarter (*àdúgbò*) can be addressed as "child" of the orisha which is owned by their chief. But such expressions are metaphorical, deploying the language of ritual—as distinct from social—kinship, and should not be taken too literally. For example, the same devotee can be addressed as *omọ*, *iyàwó* ("wife") or *okọ* ("husband"), *iyá* ("mother") or *yeye* ("grandmother") of her orisha, depending on her position within the cult or even on the phase of the ritual process. Indeed, in the metaphorical language of ritual kinship, all cult members belong to a single "family", as agnates, affines, even as "slaves", but this does *not* imply that they are genealogically related, although of course they can be.

Thus Bascom (1944) noted in his more sociological study that devotees of the same orisha can marry, whereas descendants of a common ancestor cannot. He concluded his study by classifying orisha cults into two types: what he called "single-sib" (where by "sib" he means lineage or clan) and "multi-sib", observing that multi-sib cults could include a ward (*àdúgbò*) or even the whole town. The point should be clear that orisha worship differs significantly from classic patterns of ancestor worship found in "segmentary" societies such as Tallensi (Fortes 1945) or Lodagaa (Goody 1962), in that non-genealogical principles of recruitment are deployed, through divination and dreams. Moreover, had Bascom realized that corporate descent groups ("sibs" in his terminology) represent political segments of quarters, and that quarters represent the political segments of towns and kingdoms, he would have identified *political segmentation* as the underlying principle of orisha cult organization. Certain cult offices, like the *àwòrò* or *èyémọlẹ* may be vested in specific royal or civil lineages, but inclusive memberships recruit much more widely.

To illustrate the close association between politics and orisha worship, I will compare the cult organization and distribution of two northern Ekiti Yoruba kingdoms which differ along the dimensions outlined above. In the relatively decentralized kingdom of Ishan, which exemplifies the "mini-states" more typical of the region (Obayemi 1971: 205-209), elaborate age-sets organize corporate patrilineages into loosely federated vil-

lages and village-clusters (Forde 1951: 80). The articulation of orisha cults with these patterns of segmentation is quite striking. In the more centralized kingdom of Ayede, however, which was founded by the warlord Eshubiyi, who created a military autocracy *ca* 1845 (midway between the older towns of Ishan and Itaji), both royal and civil orisha cults take a correspondingly different form (Map). Elsewhere I have discussed



The Kingdom of Ayede, *ca* 1878.

this area in the 19th century as a “shatter zone” between Ibadan’s military encroachments from the west, Ilorin’s incursions from the northwest, and chronic Nupe raids from the northeast (Apter 1987: 28-75; see also Akin-toye 1971). My aim here is much more limited; namely, to provide a structural “snapshot” of the politico-ritual configurations of these two kingdoms in the “ethnographic present” of 1983-84. If this approach appears unduly synchronic, it is not to deny the complex history of this region or the impact of Christianity and British overrule, but to better grasp the dialectics of orisha worship as it both shaped and was shaped by these historical interventions (Apter 1992: 165-211).

## North Ekiti Polities

Although classic patterns of Yoruba government and town settlement do not conform to north Ekiti kingdoms devastated by warfare and reorganized into defensive enclaves (Lloyd 1954, 1960, 1962), they do illuminate underlying principles of resettlement. In the simplest model of the pre-colonial polity, a kingdom consists of a town ruled by an *oba* (king) with his council of *iwàrẹ̀fà* chiefs, and is surrounded by lineage-held lands and uncultivated bush. While the king, who is sacred, stands apart from the royal lineage to represent the kingdom as a whole, his chiefs represent quarters (*àdúgbò*), with their titles vested in specific lineages. Descent is agnatic, with lineages (*idílé*) internally differentiated into “children of one father” (*omọ̀ bàbá kan*) and “children of one mother” (*omọ̀ iyá*) who inherit different types of property and define potential lines of fission.<sup>6</sup> In a large lineage, title holders of lineage segments may serve as sub-chiefs of a town chief, while heads of smaller lineages may associate themselves with more powerful lineage chiefs, who come to represent lineage clusters which together constitute quarters. Virilocal residence groups agnates and their wives into compounds (*agbo ilé*) which represent lineages “on the ground” at depths of three to four generations.

According to this classic model of the precolonial polity, simple towns developed into complex kingdoms through lineage fission and out-migration to surrounding farm settlements (Lloyd 1962: 56). As lineages expanded and new land was cleared further and further from the town, men who wished to cultivate their own farms established temporary settlements and farm huts (*abà*) where they lived and worked for prolonged periods of time before returning to their town. Over time, these temporary farm settlements became permanent subordinate towns in relation to the capital town from which they sprang. This “organic” model of complex kingdoms entails a developmental cycle. When a “parent” kingdom reached a critical density, and competition for land and titles intensified, lineage segments peeled off to the periphery where they aggregated to found subordinate towns which reproduced the structure of the metropolitan center but on a smaller scale, and where ruled by a *baálẹ̀* rather than a sacred king. These subordinate towns, regarded as “children” of the capital, could continue to grow until, through similar processes, they too formed subordinate settlements of their own. However they could also rise up and “slaughter” their “parents”—Yoruba history is full of accounts of how subordinate towns asserted their independence through claims to a beaded crown. The most famous example is that of Old Oyo, which originated as Owu’s subordinate town (Mabogunje & Omer-

6. Important studies of Yoruba kinship and descent include SCHWAB (1955, 1958), LLOYD (1955a; 1962: 279-307; 1966), FADIPE (1970: 97-146), BENDER (1970) and EADES (1980: 37-64).

Cooper 1971: 31-41; Johnson 1921: 149; Law 1977:37) and broke away to establish a ruling empire. But according to Yoruba political ideology, subordinate towns must respect the authority of their father kingdom by virtue of its political seniority and dynastic connection with Ile-Ife.

There can be little doubt that subordinate towns did and do develop this way—their Yoruba terms *abúlé* and *eréko* also mean “farm shack” and “agricultural area”—but kingdoms acquired subordinate towns through conquest and intimidation as well as military alliances. Oral traditions of conquest, however, are generally “sweetened” by euphemisms, since Yoruba ideas of legitimate authority require an *oba* to rule by virtue of his royal genealogy and reputable judgment, and not by the military prowess of his ancestors. A common euphemism of conquest is that a town invited the conqueror to assume leadership, while the former *oba* stepped down to devote his attention to town rituals (Lloyd 1955b: 24). Thus if the organic model of subordinate town formation is rooted in the actual developmental cycles of kingdoms, it is also perpetuated by Yoruba ideology, which identifies the unity of the kingdom with the king, and traces its origin through his forebears. The centrifugal idiom of complex kingdoms developing from a common center and origin is in fact built into Yoruba creation myths, which tell how Oduduwa descended from “heaven” (*òrun*) to Ile-Ife, where he fathered the first Yoruba kings who then dispersed to found their own major kingdoms, except for the *Ọ̀ni* who remained at Ife.

If we accept the classic pattern of Yoruba settlement as a hypothetical base-line, then the effects of raids on the Ekiti “slave reservoir” and the more destructive 19th-century wars reversed centrifugal processes of subordinate town formation into centripetal processes of resettlement. Instead of subordinate towns growing out of simple kingdoms, the remnants of vanquished kingdoms came together to form nucleated defensive settlements. Survivors of devastated towns formed quarters (*àdúgbò*) within refugee kingdoms, reproducing their former social, political and ritual structures on a reduced scale and preserving their unique identities in praises (*oríkì*), rituals and histories of common provenance. Where towns remained intact but sought powerful allies, they became client towns of resettled kingdoms, relinquishing their kingship and providing soldiers and public service to their patron king in exchange for collective security. The northern Ekiti warfare state thus developed as an amalgam of different towns, with each quarter possessing its distinctive *oríkì*, chiefs and orisha. The kingdom of Ishan is in this respect quite typical of the region.

### Ishan Kingdom

Oral histories (*itàn*) relate how Ishan consisted of a number of small scattered settlements which combined into one town for mutual protection (see also Oguntuyi 1979: 94-96). Of five such “villages”, two are still

considered “strangers”—Ilusajumu, which migrated from Iye, and Irefin, itself a composite from Ipole (not to be confused with Ilesha-Ipole) and Ila, the famous Igbomina town (Johnson 1921: 423; Pemberton 1979), whereas Oke-Ishan, Ogilolo, and Adisa “villages” constituted the original core of settlers. Ishan also has two subordinate towns, Ilemesho and Ilafon, which according to palace histories migrated out from the father town. But the people of Ilemesho and Ilafon claim independent origins, the former from Ode-Ekiti and the latter from Ipole (where they broke from Irefin), and explain that their alliance with Ishan was protective. One wonders how much protection Ishan actually offered. The town was sacked first by the Ibadans under *Balógun* Aganigan, then a few years later, *ca* 1845, by *Balógun* Ali of Ilorin, and again *ca* 1875 by *Balógun* Ajayi Ogbori-Efon, the lieutenant of the infamous *Àrẹ̀-ònà-kakaṅfò* of Ibadan.<sup>7</sup> In the idiomatic language of Ishan’s historical memory, only “eight people and a dog” survived.

The *oba* or *Onísàn* of Ishan is among the sixteen Ekiti kings who trace their descent from royal Ife princes who wear beaded crowns, bead slippers, and carry ceremonial staffs of office. Like other Ekiti kingdoms, Ishan is small and compact, with a population of roughly 5,000 organized into semi-autonomous quarters in the metropolitan capital or its subordinate towns. Whereas the *Onísàn* represents the unity of the kingdom as a whole, his town chiefs (*ighàrẹ̀* in northern Ekiti dialect, *iwàrẹ̀fà* in standard Yoruba) represent the autonomy of its *àdúgbò* (quarters), whose interests they serve during periodic meetings in the palace (*áòfin* in northern Ekiti dialect) with the king. Hence the proverbial wisdom, *Oba kù pe méjì l’áòfin, Ìjòyè l’épe mēfà l’áòfin* (“There can never be two kings in the palace, but there can be six chiefs in the palace”), which not only states the constitutional relationship of a king to his chiefs in council, but alludes to the fissiparous danger of a chief who aspires to become “king” of his quarter.

The rank order of Ishan’s six town chiefs and their quarters is as follows: the *Onírẹ̀fin* of Irefin, the *Arunsin* of Ogilolo, the *Olú* of Ilusajumu, the *Adàrà* of Adisa, the *Ejimọko* of Oke-Ishan, and the *Obàisà* of Ilale, which latter is also a sub-quarter of Irefin quarter (Fig. 1). Each of Ishan’s quarters forms a distinct political and ritual community, internally organized into agnatic land-holding groups and stratified into age-sets. In Irefin quarter, the *Onírẹ̀fin* presides over three sub-quarters (also called *àdúgbò* within this narrower political field); these are Ilale, Iroyi and Alewa, each with its own chief and sub-chiefs. Whereas the *Onírẹ̀fin* meets with his sub-chiefs to discuss the affairs of Irefin as a whole, each of his sub-chiefs also meet regularly to discuss the affairs of

7. A. C. C. Swayne, *Intelligence Report. Ayede District of Ekiti Division*, 1936, p. 3. Ondo Province, Nigerian National Archives (Ibadan).

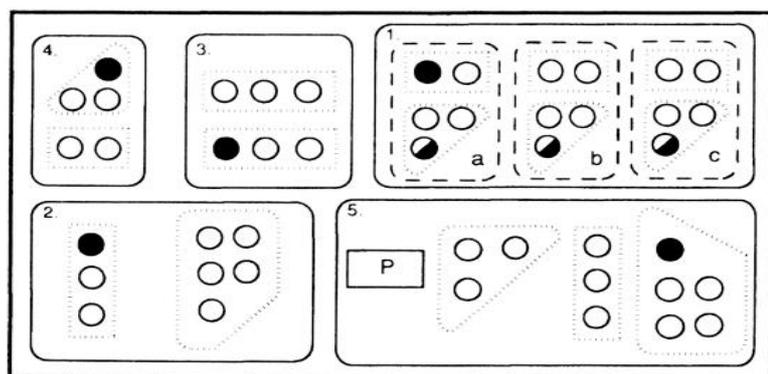


FIG. 1. Quarters in Ishan town ranked according to the senior chiefs (for clarity the number of lineages is reduced).

| Quarter      | Chief           | Key               |         |
|--------------|-----------------|-------------------|---------|
| 1. Irefin    | <i>Onírèfin</i> | Quarter           | ————    |
| 2. Ogilolo   | <i>Arunsin</i>  | Sub-Quarter       | - - - - |
| 3. Ilusajumu | <i>Olú</i>      | Lineage           | .....   |
| 4. Adisa     | <i>Adàrà</i>    | Household         | ○       |
| 5. Oke-Ishan | <i>Ejímọko</i>  | Quarter Chief     | ●       |
|              |                 | Sub-Quarter Chief | ◐       |
|              |                 | Palace            | □ P     |

| Sub-Quarter | Sub-Chief      |
|-------------|----------------|
| 1a. Ilale   | <i>Ọbaísà</i>  |
| 1b. Iroyi   | <i>Ọbasólò</i> |
| 1c. Alawe   | <i>Ọdòfin</i>  |

the sub-quarter. As chief *Ọbaísà* explained: “If there is a dispute within Ilale, other members of Irefin [*i e* Iroyi and Alewa] will not hear of the matter”. Within Ilale sub-quarter, the *Ọbaísà*, who is always selected from Inisa lineage, meets with the *Ọbańlá* of Abudo lineage, the *Ategeno* of Egeno lineage, and the *Ọbajemo* of Ijemo lineage. Within Iroyi and Alewa sub-quarters, similar patterns of political segmentation exist between lineage elders and their sub-quarter chiefs (Fig. 2).

The sub-chiefs of these three sections of Irefin quarter represent the top grade of elders (*ẹgbẹ àgbà*) in Ishan’s age-set system as a whole. Below this senior grade of elders rank the *àrẹ mètà*, a fusion of three junior age-sets which organize younger males for communal work, and for military service in the past. Although the *ẹgbẹ àgbà* and *àrẹ mètà* of Ilale, Iroyi and Alewa sections convene separately as political units to regulate their internal affairs, they join together as one body in Irefin’s dominant Yeyerefin festival, or to represent Irefin’s collective interests to the *Onísàn*. And whereas chiefs *Ọbaísà*, *Ọbasólò* and *Ọdòfin* represent the *ẹgbẹ àgbà* (titled elders) of their sub-quarters to the *Onírèfin*, he in turn represents these elders as one body to the king. Below the *ẹgbẹ àgbà* in the age-set system, the *ẹlẹgbẹ*—who served as warriors in the 19th century and as tax collectors under the British—are organized in a similar fash-

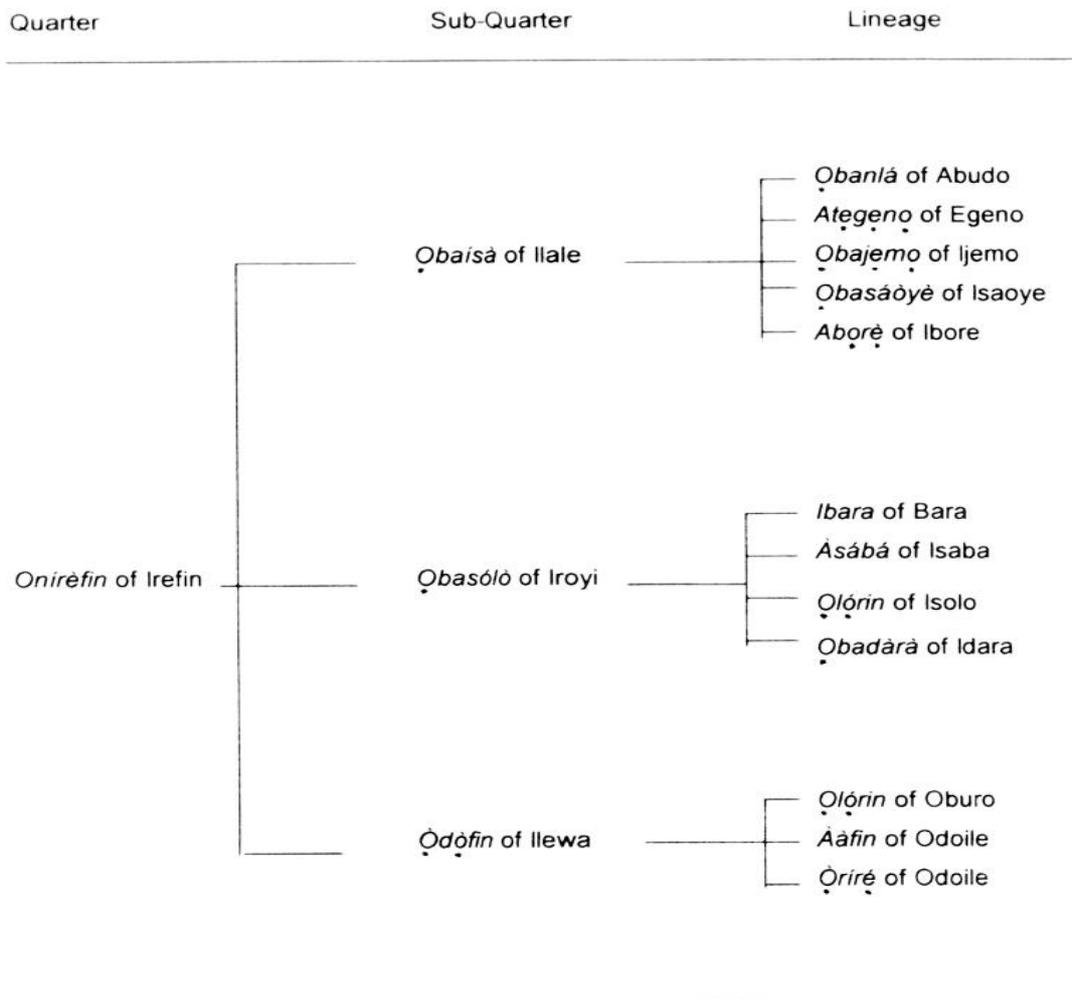


FIG. 2. The political morphology of Irefin quarter.

ion. Whereas Ilale, Iroyi and Alewa sub-quarters each has its own *ẹlẹgbẹ* grade led by its senior member, called the *Ológun*, collectively they are led by the senior *Ológun* of Irefin quarter, who, together with the senior *Ológun* of Ishan's remaining quarters mobilize as a single group under the *Olóro* of Ishan (Fig. 3). If, in the past, the *ẹlẹgbẹ* of Ishan convened as one body to defend the town, today they do so to undertake major public works, such as palace and road repairs, or to help finance town development projects and cooperative unions. Assemblies of the *ẹlẹgbẹ* within each quarter, however, regularly occur every fourteen days.

The same pattern of political segmentation and age-stratification obtains in Ishan's other quarters, with minor variations. In Ogilolo quarter, the *Arunsin* heads the *ajọ àghà* or elders of the major lineages, while the *Ológun* represents the *àrẹ mètà* of two more junior grades. The *Arunsin* title is vested in the Irunsin lineage, and rotates between its three lineage segments, whereas the *Ológun* rotates between two separate lineages (Ipara and Irasa), whose members can marry each other (Fig. 4). In Ishan's other quarters, the *Ológun* title is vested in a single lineage or "ruling house".

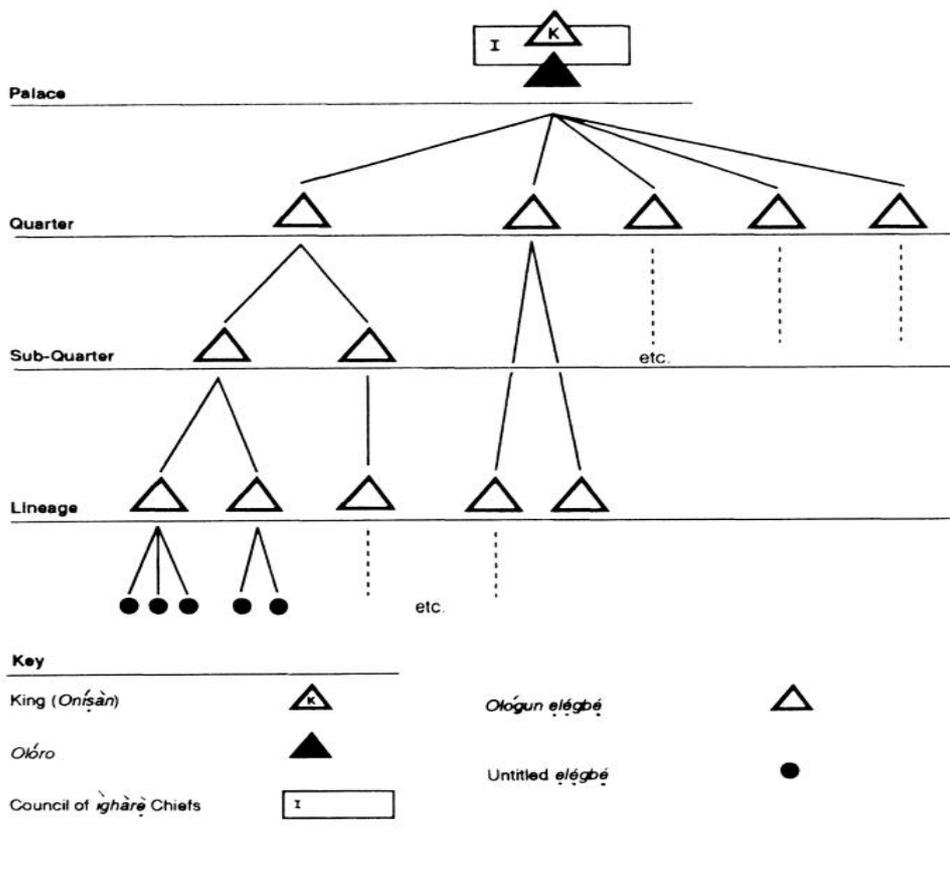


FIG. 3. The ẹlẹgbẹ age-set organization in Ishan town.

Ishan's two subordinate towns—Ilafon and Ilemesho—are each headed by *baálẹ* who are subjects of the *Oniṣàṅ* and thus cannot wear the beaded crowns (*adé olókun*) of independent kingship, at least in the official public gaze. However, both of these *baálẹ*, the *Aláfòn* of Ilafon and the *Ọbadu* of Ilemesho, claim independent origins from Ife as charters of their political autonomy, whereas the *Oniṣàṅ*'s palace historians insist that they migrated out from Ishan. Ilafon's Ife connection appears at least partially corroborated by its Iro cult, which came from the town of Ijumu and, in the past, sent delegates to the Iro cult in Ife's Ijumu quarter (Bascom 1944: 31). In any case, the *baálẹ* of both subordinate towns regard themselves as "kings," and resent the *Oniṣàṅ*'s overrule. They have never met with the *Oniṣàṅ* on a regular basis, but appeal to his authority to solve problems—usually land disputes—which they cannot settle themselves, or which involve relations with other towns. In the past, Ilafon and Ilemesho were client towns of Ishan, providing warriors, tribute, and public labor in return for military protection. After the Pax Britannica they provided public labor and tax in exchange for political and judicial exchange in the District. Thus their official subordinate status may well be a consequence of British colonialism, which ossified the more flexible relations alliances between Ekiti kingdoms into more hier-

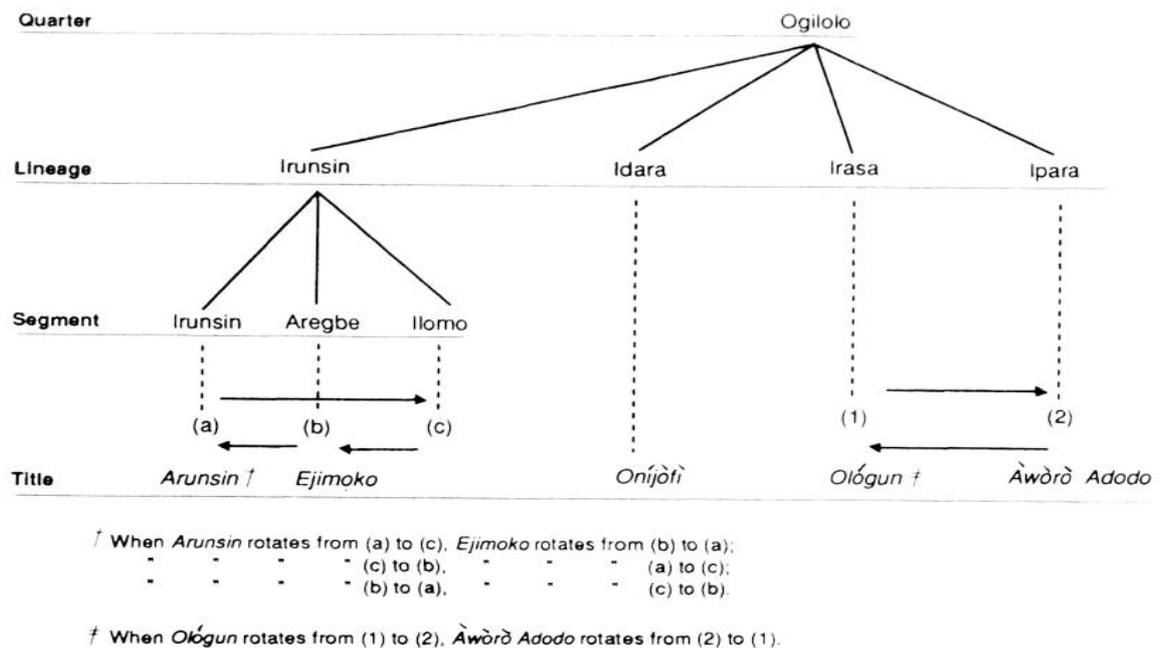


FIG. 4. Rotating titles in Ogilolo quarter, Ishan kingdom.

archical structures of administration (Akintoye 1971: 223-224). Today, both towns have their own markets (*oja*) and farm their own lands. Their relations with Ishan are based more on webs of kinship and affinity that have developed over the years, rather than on political protection and support. The succession of a new *baálè*, however, is still subject to the *Onisàn*'s approval.

The sociopolitical organization of Ifafon and Ilemesho resembles those village-clusters ("mini-states" in Obayemi's terminology [1971]) found among the Akoko and Yagba Yoruba further northeast. In Ifafon, the *baálè*'s title of *Aláfòn*, and that of his senior chief, the *Ejimoko*, rotate between the two major lineages of the town, while chieftaincy titles are vested in lineage segments (Fig. 5). Four age-sets, which in descending order are Kejido, Kemote, Kemeyo and Eyokiti articulate with Ifafon's two maximal lineages and join together during town festivals to proclaim their unity. Whereas Ifafon's four lineage chiefs represent the elders of Kejido, representatives (*olóri eghé*) of the more junior grades are elected by their members. The village of Ilemesho exhibits similar principles of political segmentation and age-set stratification but on a larger scale, with eleven lineages in the town.

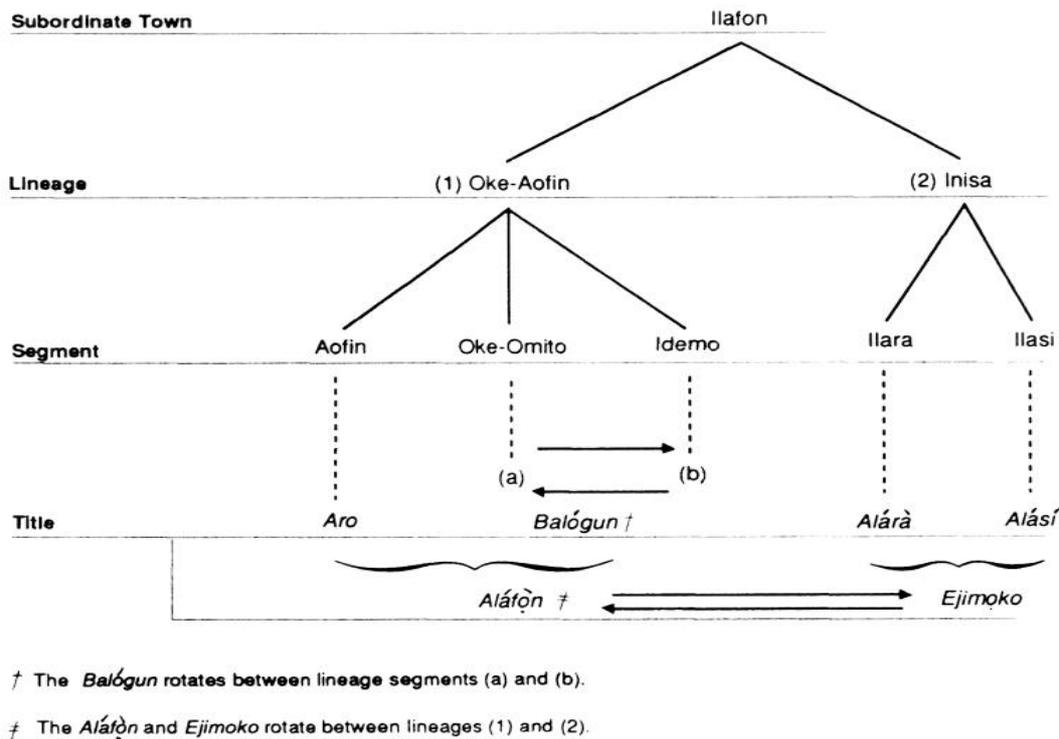


FIG. 5. Rotating titles in Ilafon.

Cults in Ishan

In decentralized kingdoms like Ishan, each quarter (*àdúgbò*) forms a distinct ritual community, with at least one cult embracing all members of the quarter and several cults articulating with its sections, whether they are sub-quarters, lineages or even lineage segments and compounds. Referring to Ishan’s five major quarters and two subordinate towns, one *ìghàrẹ* chief said: “Every town [*ilú*] does its own festivals differently, and there is no combinations of towns”. In other words, no two quarters combine within the same orisha cult (the term “town” [*ilú*] can refer to “quarters” [*àdúgbò*] in order to emphasize their relational autonomy, although a king would never use the term in this fashion). In Ishan kingdom, each of the five major *àdúgbò* has a dominant deity which represents the unique identity of the quarter and protects its members with spiritual powers. These are:

| <i>Àdúgbò</i> | <i>Òrìṣà</i> | <i>Oríkì</i> (of all members) |
|---------------|--------------|-------------------------------|
| 1. Irefin     | Epa          | Ọmọ Epa                       |
| 2. Ogilolo    | Alakua       | - Alakua                      |
| 3. Ilusajumu  | Babatigbo    | - Agan                        |
| 4. Adisa      | Yeye-ewu     | - Yeye-ewu                    |
| 5. Oke-Ishan  | Olua         | - Olua                        |

Membership in these quarter-based cults is exclusive, since members of one quarter cannot belong to the orisha cult of another, although they can attend its festivals as affines and matrilateral kin. The close association between the quarter and its dominant cult is expressed in idioms of common descent, as in "X (the orisha) is the father (or mother) of us all", or "Y is the ancestor who brought us here", but such claims are not intended as statements of filiation. It is only metaphorically, in the idiom of ritual kinship and descent, that the members of each quarter and its dominant cult are "of one blood". The corporate identity of each quarter is further marked by the *oriki* (praises) of its members, which include the appellation "child" (*omo*) of the deity which they worship together, and also by a collective taboo against eating new yams or selling them in the market, which is not lifted until the following season during the orisha's annual festival.

Orisha cults own property and control ritual power. Ritual paraphernalia such as masks, effigies, staffs of office, medicines, iron rattles, knives, and instruments used to contact the orisha, and sacrificial altars (*ojú ẹbọ*) are housed within a town shrine (*ipara òrìṣà*) located in its associated quarter, generally close to the quarter chief's house. Here the initiated members meet every two markets (that is, every nine days) to feed the deity with sacrifices, discuss cult finances and affairs, and to treat private clients who "beg" the orisha for personal assistance. Quarter cults generally have a bush shrine (*igbó imọlẹ̀*) where the orisha dwells. This area lies beyond the residential bounds of the town and remains off-limits to outsiders because it is the locus of the orisha's spiritual power. More important than the shrines themselves, however, is the ritual power (*àṣẹ*) which they house, and the body of techniques which control it. The most highly valued cult property consists of secrets (*awo*), such as incantations and specialized sacrifices which harness the orisha's power and direct it toward specific ends. Such property is not only restricted to the cults, but is differentially distributed within them according to ritual offices and levels of seniority.

This preliminary sketch illustrates how the quarter and its cult are distinct corporations, and that the former does not "reduce" to the latter. The cult does not consist of the quarter as such, but performs its ritual on behalf of the quarter. This distinction is important because it underlies the complementary relationship between political and ritual domains. Whereas the *ìghàrẹ* chief heads the quarter, the high priest, or *àwòrò*, heads its dominant cult. Both offices cannot be fused because they control complementary sets of resources. A holder of both titles would simply wield too much concentrated power. Within Irefin quarter in Ishan, I was told that the *Onírẹfin* could not be the *àwòrò* of either the inclusive Epa cult or the more limited Aku cult because he was a civil chief.<sup>8</sup> Chief *Ọbaísà* of

8. Although civil chiefs are barred from high ritual office, military chiefs in the past were not. At Ijaye in the mid 19th century, the *Arẹ-ona-kankanfo* "bolstered

Ile quarter (actually a sub-quarter within Irefin) explained his own distance from the Epa cult in the following terms:<sup>9</sup>

"In my own quarter we have specialists in Epa worship, but I am not a specialist myself, just chief of the quarter. There is nothing that concerns a chief about the worship of Epa, just that I must attend the dancing after worship in the bush. Anytime people in the quarter wish to worship Epa, they will come to me and ask for objects of sacrifice: dog, salt, palm oil, *àkàrà* [bean cake] and *orógbó* [bitter kola]. I must give it to them but cannot go myself to the bush."

A chief must provide for a sacrifice to ensure the safety and prosperity of his quarter, but he cannot officiate. He must avoid the bush sacrifice because it lies beyond his jurisdiction. The *àwòrò* is "chief" in the bush.

Although high ranking chiefs cannot assume the priestly office of an *àwòrò*, the *àwòrò* themselves are not without political position and influence, for they occupy nodal links between political and ritual domains. Within each quarter the *àwòrò* of the dominant cult is also a sub-chief, combining the patrimonialism of lineage headship with the gerontocracy of age-set elderhood. In most Ekiti kingdoms, the *àwòrò* is also the *Ológun* or representative of all age-sets in the quarter, described as "the eldest of us all" in terms of social (rather than "actual") age. He is thus involved in three sets of meetings (*ipàdé*): those of the quarter chief with his sub-chiefs, those of the senior age-set within the quarter and town at large, and those of all *àwòrò* of a quarter, in which the head priests of lesser cults form a council which meets three times a year with the senior *àwòrò* to calibrate festival dates. These *àwòrò* are also "king-makers" (*afobajé*) within the quarter, for among their ritual duties is the installation and burial of quarter chiefs.

The articulation of *àwòrò* with formal political arenas is not limited to town quarters, but extends to the kingdom at large. Just as the town chiefs lead their *àdúgbò* and meet with the *oba* to regulate town affairs, so the dominant *àwòrò* of each quarter meet with the king's *àwòrò*—in Ishan he is called the *Ejimọko*—to regulate the ritual affairs of the kingdom. Here the political and ritual domains of the kingdom intersect, for the *Ejimọko* fuses several roles in one office. He is at once the leader of all age-sets in the kingdom, the head of the *Oníṣàn*'s kingmakers, the *àwòrò* of his own quarter cult, and represents the *àwòrò* of other cults to the king. If, for example, the *àwòrò* of the Ogun cult in Irefin quarter prescribes a special sacrifice for the town, he must send a message to the *Ejimọko* who deliver it to the *Oníṣàn*. If the *Oníṣàn* complies he will tax the town through age-set representatives to purchase the required sacrifi-

---

up his power not only by judicious feasting of the masses every fifth day but also by usurping the headship of the different cults, particularly that of Sango" (AJAYI 1964: 67).

9. Interview with Chief *Ọbaisà*, 18 Dec. 1983, Ishan-Ekiti.

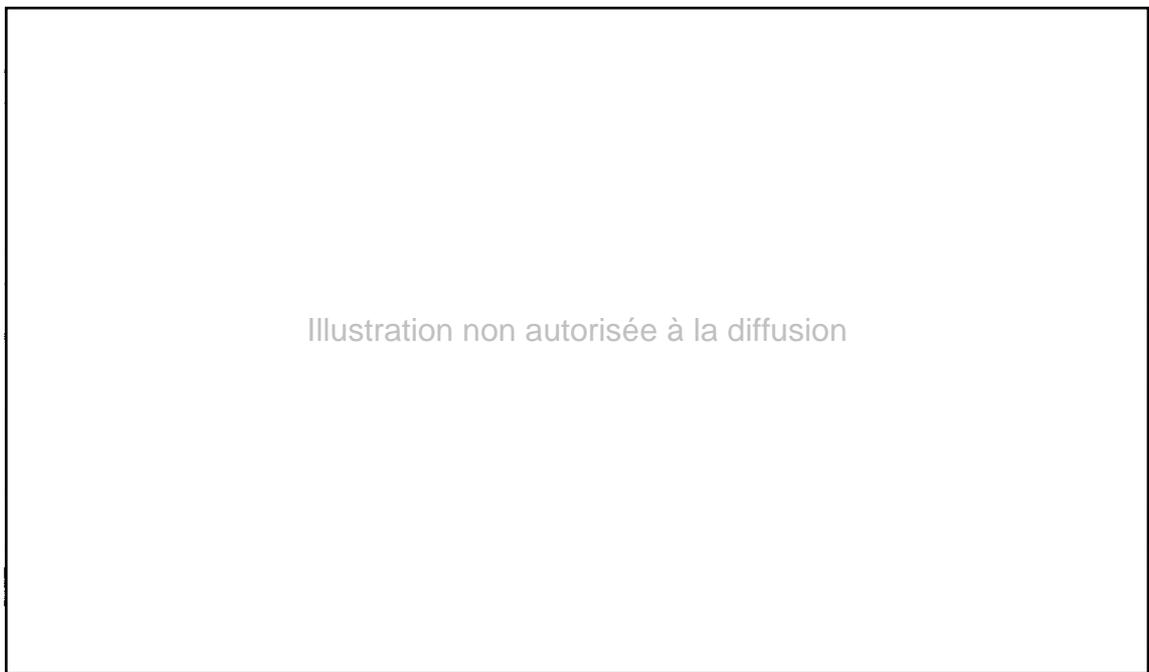
cial animals and offerings, including kola nut and palm wine, which he will then send to the Ogun priest. The *Ejimoko* also meets with the quarter *àwòrò* to organize festival dates and collective sacrifices for the entire town. He officiates at the Ojo-Apapo festival when Ishan's five quarters and two subordinate towns convene to worship Olua, the *Onísàn*'s orisha. He will also prepare the *Onísàn*'s corpse with the other kingmakers, and will lead the rituals of succession for the next incumbent. In the precolonial era, the council of *àwòrò*—called the *ejio*—was empowered to try cases of incest and offenses against the orisha. It could also mediate disputes between civil chiefs. Even today the ritual authority of the king's *àwòrò* affords him certain privileges and immunities. Unlike any chief or townsman, he does not have to prostrate (*dòbálè*) for the king; he can, like the king, sit on a leopard skin; and he can even override the king's jural authority in unusual circumstances. Town historians relate how, in the past, a defendant could escape the king's adjudication by running into the *Ejimoko*'s compound or by grabbing hold of his leg. However guilty the offender or serious the crime, the king, at least in principle, was required to “forget the matter”.

Having sketched the general pattern of politico-ritual organization within Ishan kingdom, we can now zoom in with a more powerful lens to focus on the specific arrangements of orisha cults within the complex quarter of Irefin, the simple quarter of Ogilolo, and the subordinate towns of Ilafon and Ilemesho.

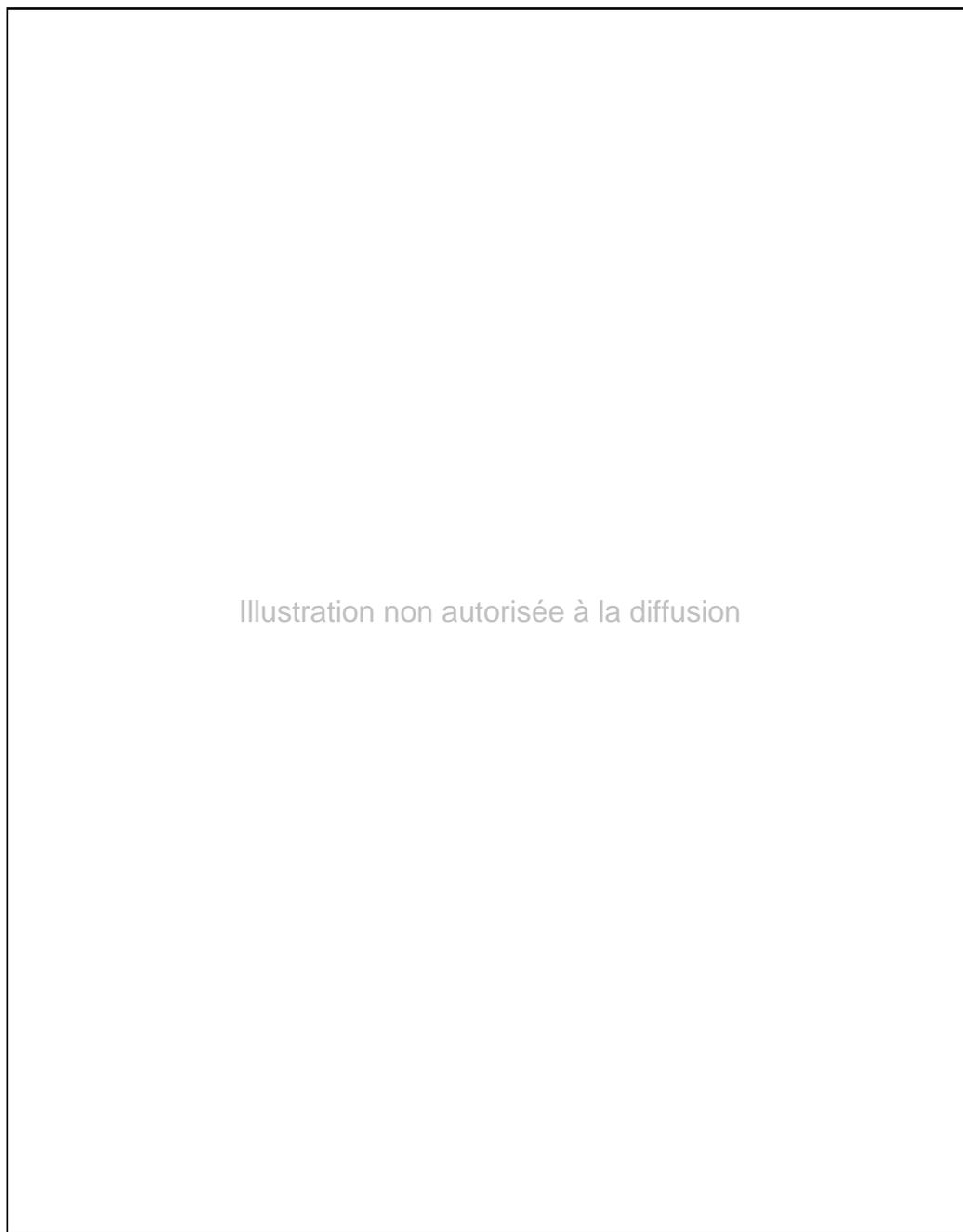
Irefin quarter has three major cults—Epa, Aku and Ogun—which embrace the quarter as a whole but divide into branches which align with its three sub-quarters: Alewa, Iroyi and Ilale (see Fig. 2). In the Epa cult each sub-quarter has its own masqueraders, organized by age-sets and lineages (Ph. 1). If all Irefin patrikin are praised as “*Ọmọ Epa*” (‘children of Epa’) in reference to their common spiritual power, each of the sub-quarters owns specific Epa masks with associated *oríkì*. Alewa sub-quarter, where the *Onírèfin* resides, owns Yeyefin or “grandmother” (*yeye*) of Irefin quarter as the dominant Epa mask (Ph. 3). Iroyi sub-quarter owns Epa-Iroyi with its associated *oríkì* and iconography, while Ilale owns Epa-Ilale (also called Ekunrin) who, according to oral traditions, brought the Ilale immigrants from Ila (an Igbomina town, see Pemberton 1979). Thus the Epa cult in Irefin represents the unity of the quarter as an identity-in-difference. Although the subquarters trace different origins—Ilale from Ila, Alewa and Iroyi from Ipole—they have fused to form a single Epa cult with a common shrine. The high priestesses of Epa reflect this fusion in clearly gendered terms. Beneath the *àwòrò* Epa in the cult's hierarchy, three women bearing the title *Ìyá Epa* (‘mother of Epa’) officiate for the women, including wives and daughters of Irefin quarter, and represent its three sub-quarters which they serve as female chiefs. The first *Ìyá Epa* comes from Idofin lineage in Alewa, the second from Idara lineage in Iroyi, and the third from Isaoye lineage in



PH. 1. The Epa Ekunrin mask of Ilale subquarter in the kingdom of Ishan.



PH. 2. The town shrine (*ipára*) of Orisha Iyagba in the kingdom of Ayede.



**Pl. 3.** The Epa Yeyerefin mask of Irefin quarter  
as a whole in the kingdom of Ishan.

Ilale. If Irefin's Epa cult represents a "multi-sib based cult" (Bascom 1944: 35), its worshippers liken it to a hand (*owó*) with fingers (*ika*).

Irefin's Aku cult is another such "hand" with "fingers", but unlike the Epa cult's public displays, it unites the quarter in hidden ritual. Aku is a mystery of the bush, a type of Oro or bull-roarer cult which excludes women and confines them to their compounds during its annual seven-day performance. Although this cult "belongs" to the *Onírèfin*, the spiritual power (sometimes called *ebora*) "chose" the *Obańlá* of Abudo lineage in Ilale sub-quarter as its *aworo*. I was told:

"Aku is too big to protect only one man [*i e* the *Onírèfin*] and for only one man to control it, so the *awòrò* has to come from Ilale. The person who owns Aku is at Irefin and the person who Aku chose as his *awòrò* is at Ilale, so that should there be a dispute between them they should not split (*pín*) apart."<sup>10</sup>

The Aku cult safeguards against fission of Irefin quarter. Its three top ranking priests come from Irefin's three sub-quarters; the *Obańlá* of Ilale, the *Orírẹ* of Alewa, and the *Àsábá* of Iroyi, who represent the elders. They bring Irefin's civil chiefs—the *Onírèfin*, the *Obaísà*, the *Obasólò* and the *Òdòfin*—to Aku's bush shrine where they sacrifice a goat, although in the past they sacrificed a stranger prepared with medicines. The *Obańlá* then interprets the voice of Aku through kola nut divination for each chief, advising them of additional sacrifices and temporary taboos which they must observe and extend to their followers. The *awòrò* of other cults in Irefin also sacrifice to Aku, for Aku is conceived as their "king", and as a powerful deity who protected Irefin people from slave raids during the 19th century, and from smallpox sent by rival quarters and towns. All *awòrò* in Irefin meet in Aku's bush shrine to set the festival dates of their respective cults.

In addition to the Epa and Aku cults which embrace Irefin quarter at large, there are lesser cults which serve its sub-quarters (*ògbón*) and lineages exclusively. Thus each of the *Onírèfin*'s three sub-chiefs has an orisha vested in their lineages which performs rituals on behalf of their more limited jurisdictions. In Ilale chief *Obaísà* "owns" the Oshun cult, with the head (*olóri*) of Ilale's age-sets presiding as its *awòrò*. Today, however, the priesthood is vacant, and chief *Obaísà* complains that his "quarter" is subsequently weak. Chief *Obasólò* of Iroyi sub-quarter owns an orisha known simply as Orisha-Iroyi, designating the close identification between sub-quarter and cult, while chief *Òdòfin* of Ilewa owns Ogun. These sub-quarter cults are like any lineage cult which performs rituals on behalf of its members, with one important difference. Since they belong to chiefly lineages, their ritual powers and congregations

10. Chief *Obaísà*, 18 Dec. 1983, Ishan-Ekiti.

extend beyond the lineage as such to embrace the chief's political jurisdiction. A quarter or sub-quarter cult is deemed more powerful, in the ritual sense, than a simple lineage cult because its owner is politically more powerful and commands more followers. As with quarter cult, ritual and political offices in sub-quarters are kept apart. Just as the *Onírèfin* cannot serve as the *àwòrò* of deity Yeyerefin, so the sub-quarter chiefs are barred from high ritual office. In simple lineage cults, however, the political and ritual roles of lineage elders are fused. The *baálé* or lineage head may sacrifice to the lineage orisha, but he is not considered an *àwòrò* in this more limited ritual capacity. Thus in Ilale sub-quarter, while the Oshun cult vested in chief *Obáísà*'s lineage requires a separate *àwòrò*, the cults of its remaining lineages—orisha Obanifon for Isaoye lineage, orisha Alagba for Egenon lineage, and the orisha Atoru and Ogun for Ibore's two lineage segments (indicating incipient lineage fission)—combine political and ritual roles in their lineage heads (*baálé*). These lineage heads serve as "kingmakers" (*afòbajẹ*) for their sub-quarter chiefs, evaluating eligible candidates for succession and performing limited installation rites.

Thus far I have discussed the politico-ritual morphology of a single, albeit complex, quarter in Ishan. Ishan's remaining quarters exhibit the same principles of orisha cult organization and distribution with the exception of Ogilolo quarter (see Fig. 4), which structures political and ritual domains through its rotating title system, a feature found in Ishan's subordinate towns of Ilafon and Ilemesho as well. In Ogilolo quarter, the *Arunsin*'s Irunsin lineage owns orisha Alakua, while orisha Adodo is owned jointly by Ipara and Irasa lineages. Idara lineage also possesses its own orisha, called orisha-Idara. According to its pattern of serial rotation, when the *Arunsin* rotates from (a) to (c), and the *Ejimòko* rotates from (b) to (a), the *àwòrò* of Alakua rotates from (c) to (b). Similarly, as the *Ológun* is also the *àwòrò* of orisha Adodo, the priestship rotates between Ipara and Irasa lineages. The only non-rotating title in Ogilolo quarter is that of the *Oníjòfi*, which is perpetually vested in Idara lineage.

A similar system of titular devolution occurs in Ishan's subordinate town of Ilafon. There, if the *Aláfòn* (the *baálẹ* of Ilafon) comes from Oke-Aofin lineage, then the *àwòrò* of Ilafon's dominant Iro cult must come from Inisa lineage (see Fig. 5). Since the next *Aláfòn* must be selected from Inisa lineage, the *àwòrò* of the Iro cult must succeed from Oke-Idofin lineage. Even though Inisa lineage professes to own the Iro cult, and claims that it invited Oke-Idofin to join, the *àwòrò* of Iro must rotate against the incumbent *Aláfòn* in complementary succession. Within both lineages, however, lower political and ritual titles remain fixed. Inisa's two lineage segments—Ilara and Iasi—own the orisha Oshun and Osanyin respectively, while Oke-Aofin's three lineage segments—Aofin, Oke-Omito and Idemo—own the orishas Oshun-Aofin,

Olokun and Orishanla. The *àwòrò* of these three cults are also leaders of the age-sets within their lineage segments, and serve as the *Aláfòn*'s kingmakers.

The subordinate town of Ilemesho exhibits a slightly different pattern of titular rotation linked directly to its political organization. Although roughly the same size as Ilafon with a population of about 800, Ilemesho is a cluster of eleven patrilineages organized into six "quarters," each with its political and ritual responsibilities. The *baálè*, entitled the *Èlémèşò*, is *primus inter pares*, rotating between the six *ìghàrẹ* chiefs of each quarter. Each of these chieftaincy titles rotates, in turn, between the lineages of their quarter. The lineages of these quarters own their orisha collectively, with the *àwòrò* rotating against the quarter chief. Thus Oke-Ade quarter worships orisha Oloroke as its dominant cult. When the quarter chief comes from Oke-Ade lineage, the *àwòrò* comes from Iwolobo lineage; when chief's successor comes from Iwolobo lineage, the *àwòrò* will succeed from Iwoyo lineage (Fig. 6). This complementary rotation of political and ritual titles binds the lineages of each quarter together.

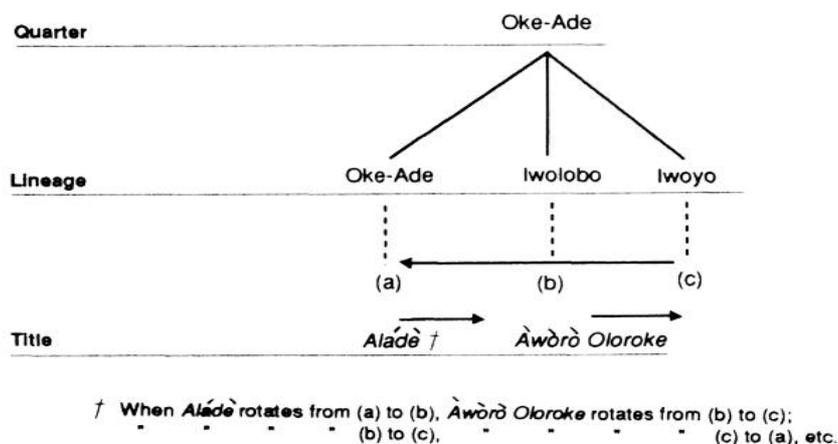
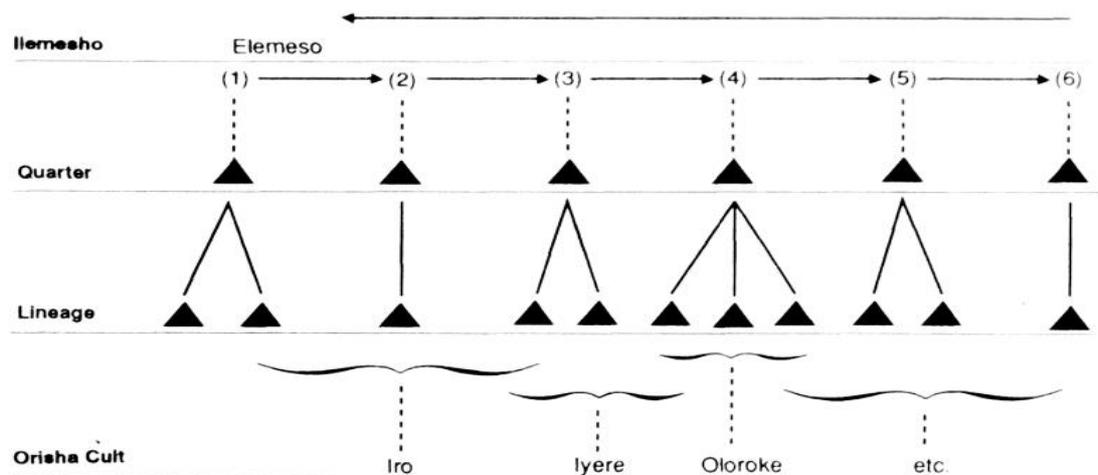


FIG. 6. Rotating titles in Oke-Ade quarter, Ilemesho.

What makes Ilemesho so interesting and unusual are its *overlapping* politico-ritual jurisdictions which further bind the quarters to each other within the town. Cults of the orisha Iyere, Iro, Iroko and Oloroke are in fact owned by lineages of *different* quarters, militating against the ritual autonomy of each quarter as a discrete political unit (Fig. 7). Thus the orisha Iyere is owned by three lineages—Oke-Ade, Aofin, and Ile-Iya—whose members not only have different duties within the cult but also belong to two different quarters. Whereas Aofin and Ile-Iya are two lineages within Aofin quarter, Oke-Ade is a lineage within a quarter bearing the same



#### Ighare Chiefs and Quarters

- |                                |                                  |
|--------------------------------|----------------------------------|
| 1. <i>Qbadára</i> of Ilesire   | 4. <i>Aládè</i> of Oke-Ade       |
| 2. <i>Qbandoga</i> of Oke-Otun | 5. <i>Qbanikorowo</i> of Ilorowo |
| 3. <i>Qbadu</i> of Aofin       | 6. <i>Qbale</i> of Oke-Baru      |

FIG. 7. Cross-cutting cults in Ilemesho.

name. The Iro cult cuts across three different quarters—Oke-Otun, Ilesire and Aofin. When I asked if there were any connection between the Iro cults of Ilemesho and Ilafon, devotees in Ilemesho maintained that the two cults were separate, and that theirs was “original” since “time” (*láláí*). Devotees in Ilafon, however, claimed that their Iro cult secrets were “stolen” by the people of Ilemesho to establish the cult on their own.

In Ilemesho, orisha cults which cut across different quarters militate against political fission and political centralization by uniting them in shared ritual obligations. In such a small village hamlet with a weak and decentralized headship which rotates between all six quarters, each quarter is apt to break away over succession disputes. In a town with no official royal lineage (*pace* Nigeria’s Morgan Report), where each quarter enjoys the prerogative of eventual headship, competition for high office precipitates open contests for power and influence between chiefs. Since every chief is a prospective “king”, each quarter can invoke its rights to form a prospective kingdom. A town of Ilemesho’s small size and limited resources, however, cannot afford political fission and out-migration. Cross-cutting political and ritual corporations sustain ties of mutual interdependence. As one Ilemesho man explained with reference to the entire town, “We worship (*hò*) the orisha because we are one family”, a statement

which, in strict genealogical terms, is false, but which represents, in the idiom of ritual kinship, the cohesive role of Ilemesho's cults. When I asked which orisha cult was in fact the most powerful, the *baálẹ̀* explained: "In Ilemesho, no one orisha is more powerful than another. Every one has its own power".

### Cult Transformations in the Kingdom of Ayede

I have examined the intricate relationship between Ishan kingdom and its ritual associations in what may seem like a tedious and sterile exercise because it demonstrates the systematic complementarity between ritual power and political authority in a little studied area of Yorubaland, where classic models of Yoruba kingship and political hierarchy give way to more decentralized "mini-states" and village clusters, and where age-sets and rotating titles figure prominently as mechanisms of politico-ritual organization and devolution.<sup>11</sup> What appears complementary from an institutional perspective, is of course dialectical from the standpoint of political competition and ritual practice, since there is much maneuvering around the fixing of festival dates (*e g* Apter 1992: 115), the allocation of ritual roles, the execution of ritual procedure and the recognition of ritual reciprocities. Indeed, it is often during orisha festivals that a civil chief signals his fission from the kingdom, by avoiding the king's palace, withholding ritual tribute, and even crowning himself king. Similarly, the *àwòrò* of major orisha cults can signal public disaffection with the king, by performing their rituals on a drastically diminished scale and thereby depriving him of their regenerative powers. If in principle ritual is mandated to follow the same routines from time immemorial (*láláí*), in practice it changes dramatically, reflecting and even precipitating the revision of authority structures, such as the ranking of civil chiefs or the emergence of new political cleavages. But the conflicts and contradictions which ritual mediates and instantiates are governed by a logic of co-implication, whereby kings, chiefs, sub-chiefs, quarters and age-sets are ritually reproduced and reconfigured every year. If orisha cult titles are vested in specific lineages, the lineage as such does not establish the social framework of orisha worship, as is so commonly maintained. The precise calibration of political and ritual titles and memberships establishes political segmentation as the underlying principle of orisha cult organization within kingdoms and their subordinate towns. So basic and profound is this underlying politico-ritual complementarity that it has persisted throughout the history of Islamic and Christian conversion as well as colonial overrule, and has in fact shaped popular responses to these external interventions.

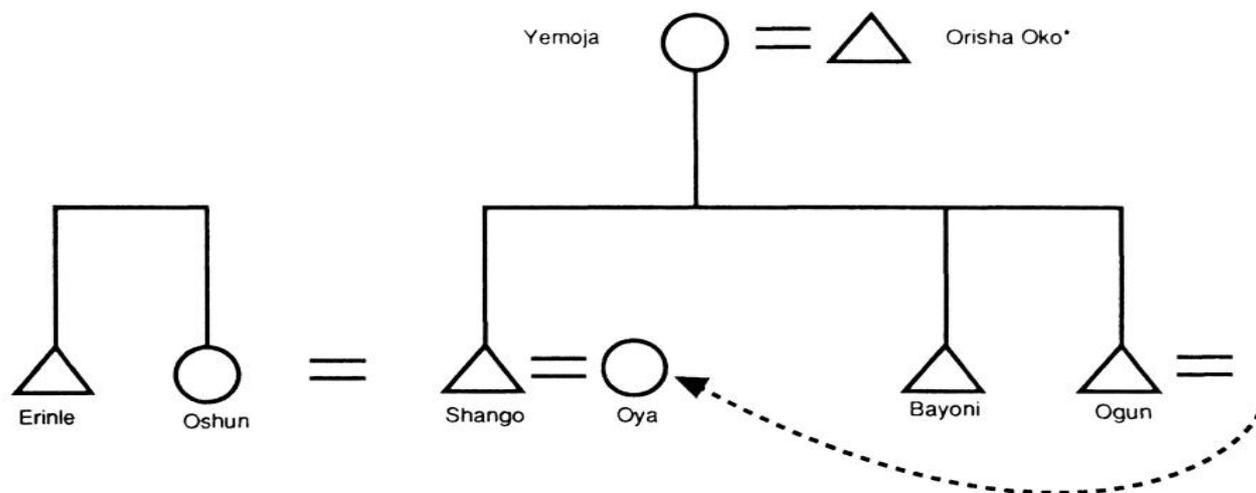
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11. Elaborate age-sets and rotating title-systems are generally identified as Bini influences among the Ekiti Yoruba (*e g* FORDE 1951: 15).

It is with this politico-ritual dialectic in mind that we can travel two kilometers south on the narrow road, once tarred but now reduced to dirt and stubborn pot-holes, which connects with the neighboring kingdom of Ayede, an historically significant military stronghold which stands out among northern Ekiti kingdoms for its unusually centralized government and elaborate orisha cults.

The kingdom of Ayede was founded *ca* 1845 by the warlord Eshubiyi who migrated about twenty five kilometers southwest from the village of Iye to establish an important refugee settlement and military base for Ekiti resistance against the Ibadans. Listed by Johnson (1921: 23) among the sixteen "traditional" Ekiti kings, and described by his *oríkì* as "Lord of the Yagba and Akoko tribes" (*ibid.*: 403), the *Àtá* of Ayede attracted settlers from a variety of Yagba towns together with a core of Iye indigenes who today comprise six "quarters". The first four quarters represent the "original" migrants from Iye, organized into Ejigbo, Owaiye, Isaoye and Ilaaro. Two additional quarters, Omole-Akodi and Egbe-Oba represent "strangers" from Iyagba and Ikole towns, who allied with Eshubiyi during his military campaigns and settled to form the "other half" of Ayede, with chiefly representatives in the palace. Since I have described the history and politics of Ayede kingdom elsewhere (1992: 35-93) in considerable detail, documenting the displacement of the former Iye dynasty, the centralization of political power and the social history of its orisha cults, I will limit my present discussion to a single transformation which occurred in the ritual domain: namely, the consolidation of different orisha within Ayede's dominant cults.

Eshubiyi's rise to power was based on military prowess, political cunning and the promotion of two orisha cults: Yemoja, which he received from the *Olúlòyè* military chief of Ibadan in what proved to be an unsuccessful attempt to secure Eshubiyi's loyalty, and Orisha Ojuna, a cult from Ikole which Eshubiyi received through his patriline in Iye and developed into a royal cult within Ayede. Local historians (*òpitàn*) and Yemoja devotees relate how it was during a Yemoja festival that the warlord Eshubiyi proclaimed himself a "traditional" king, producing a beaded crown as his supporters announced "Kabiyesi, *Àtá* Ayede!" to herald his paramount status. To this day, the Yemoja cult remains the guardian of the *Àtá*'s Olokun beaded crown, which is housed in the town shrine (*ipara* Yemoja) and invested with *àṣẹ*. Although the senior cult offices with the Yemoja cult belong to the king's Idomogun ruling lineage (the depth and span of which are subject to continuous dispute and litigation), devotees have been recruited through cognatic ties from all of Ayede's quarters, consolidating ritual support throughout the town. As a result, devotees of different orisha within their quarters combined to form a complex cluster of different deities within the Yemoja cult itself. Thus beneath Yemoja, who remains paramount, represented by the *Yeyeolókun* priestess, are Shango, Orisha Oko, Oshun, Erinle, Olokun, Ogun, and Bayoni, each with a domi-



\* Orisha Oko's affinal relationship to Yemoja is emphasized in Ayede over and above patrilineal relations to her children.

FIG. 8. Kinship and affinity in Ayede's Yemoja cult pantheon.

nant priestess and subordinate "line" of titled devotees. The relationship between these clustered orisha is configured by imputed ties of kinship and affinity (Fig. 8), and are spatially represented by the relative positions of altars within Yemoja's town and bush shrines. The priestesses of Yemoja are thus priestesses of many deities, which are honored, praised, fed and incarnated during Yemoja's annual festival.

A similar clustering of deities around a central orisha exists in Ayede's royal cult of Orisha Ojuna, which also cuts across different quarters. To consolidate politico-ritual support from the "stranger" quarter of Egbe-Oba in addition to the Iye quarters of Owaiye and Ilaaro, which previously worshipped their respective orisha (*i e* Oloke, Olua and Osanyin) separately, Eshubiyi reorganized Orisha Ojuna's town shrine to house separate "chambers" for each of these deities, and established ritual networks with smaller shrines in different quarters (Fig. 9). Thus the Oluacult of Owaiye and the Oloke cults of Egbe-Oba can no longer assert their former ritual autonomy, but must participate in the worship of Orisha Ojuna, which officially contains them. Although each of these quarters has a recognized civil chief, they do not form distinct ritual communities, but have fused their cults within Orisha Ojuna's inclusive field of ritual command.

In contrast to the royal cults of Yemoja and Orisha Ojuna, the civil cult of Orisha Iyagba belongs to the *Balógun Ààfin*, chief of Omole-Akodi quarter and representative of Yagba towns within the broader king-

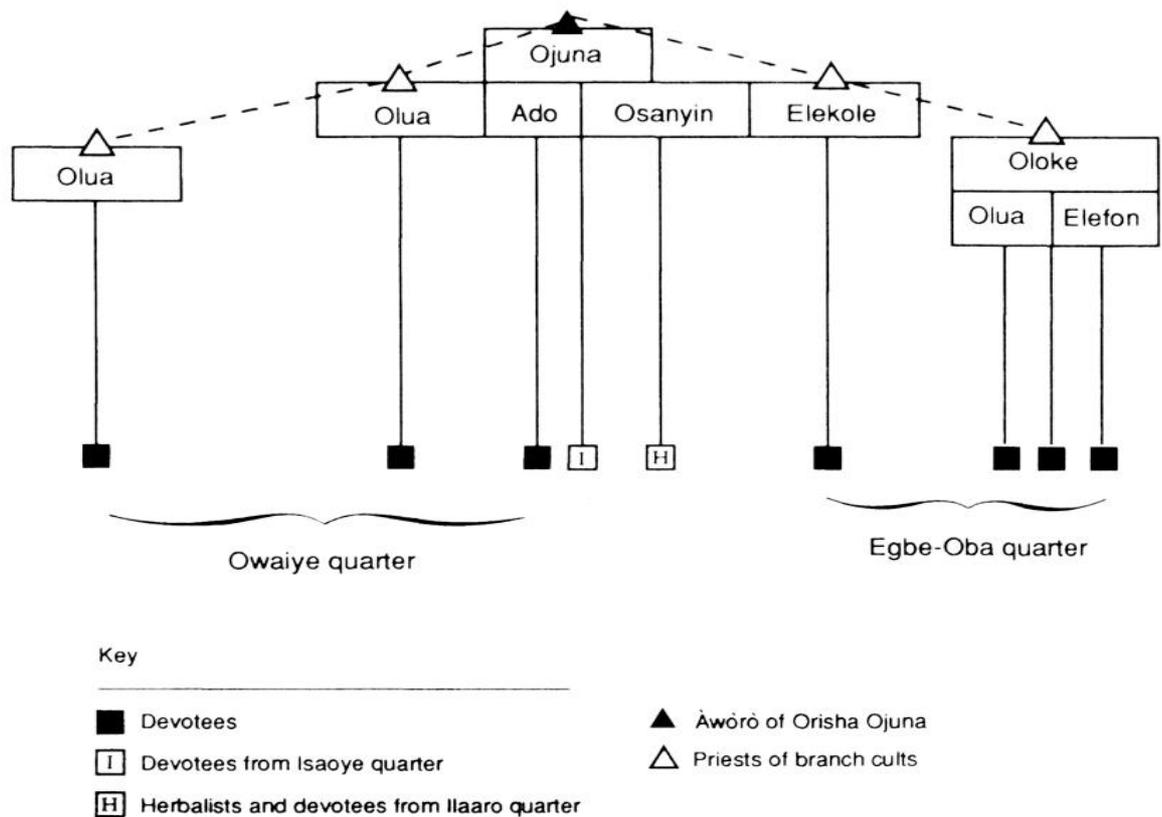


FIG. 9. Centralized recruitment to the Orisha Ojuna cult in Ayede.

dom. Worshipping in a distinctive Yagba dialect and attended by *ibèmbé*, *agèrè* and *ikòkò* talking drums, Orisha Iyagba's devotees recall the honor and glory of Eshubiyi's former war lieutenant and mobilize the Yagba "strangers" in an uneasy alliance with the palace. Playing with the tensions of potential usurpation, the devotees represent ritual "warriors" who brandish cutlasses and spears which both uphold and threaten the *Àtá*'s authority (*ibid.*: 156-161). During the reign of the *Àtá* Omotosho II (1948-1991), the female head (*Ológun*) of ritual warriors was also the king's fifth wife, bringing Orisha Iyagba into the palace and binding the cult to the king through affinity. But like marriage, ritual alliance is prone to annulment, and the cleavage between Orisha Iyagba and Ayede's royal cults represents a division of the town into two "sides", with the Yagba "strangers" comprising "the other half". As a result, the cult of Orisha Iyagba has fused a cluster of its own subordinate orisha owned by different lineages and settlers of Omole-Akodi quarter. Beneath Orisha Iyagba proper (also called Iyelori) we find Ireo from the *Balógun Ààfin*'s Iletogun lineage, Ogbon-Iele and Oloye from the Yagba town of Ipao, Ore from Irele, Iroko from Ejuku, Olooke and Okutaaro from Itapaji, and Agiri

from Ogbe, each with its ritual representative and associated *oríkì*. Thus organized like a ritual kingdom within a kingdom, the cult of Orisha Iyagba actually replicates the pattern of cult fusion and consolidation found in Yemoja and Orisha Ojuna. If Orisha Iyagba is a singular deity, its cult houses a multiplicity of lesser gods and goddesses representing immigrants from towns of Yagba origin (Ph. 2).

\*

The comparison of Ishan and Ayede kingdoms and their politico-ritual configurations suggests a few new lines of inquiry into Yoruba orisha worship. First, at the level of empirical description, it documents a number of deities and orisha cults in a relatively “neglected” region of northeastern Yorubaland, cults associated with specific kingdoms and quarters that were caught in the cross-fire of the 19th-century wars. The distribution of cults, their ritual practices and iconographies recall the devastation of towns, the resettlement of refugees, and the political and military alliances which the people of Ekiti formed. Local cults of this specific region may seem like minor additions to the growing archive of orisha studies, but their significance lies precisely in their peripheral status on the margins of Yoruba identity. I would suggest that future studies of orisha and *ẹbọra* in the Akoko, Yagba and Kabba regions will not only improve our understanding of the politico-ritual topography of Yorubaland, but the historical processes of Yoruba ethnogenesis itself (Peel 1989), as peoples of the periphery came to see themselves as Yoruba. In addition, they will provide a broader body of evidence for documenting local migrations and the role of ritual in generating multiple allegiances, identities and historical memories in complex kingdoms and quarters.

Second, on a more analytical level, our study suggests a powerful if limited method of controlled comparison which can be deployed between kingdoms or even subcultural regions to disclose the specific modalities of cult organization and the underlying principles which govern its variations. Within the decentralized kingdom of Ishan, we saw how the cults of complex quarters and subordinate towns articulated with political segmentation, serial devolution and age-set stratification with a calibrated precision that underscores the co-implicative dimensions of Yoruba religion and politics and the underlying dialectic which their variations manifest. In this connection, comparison with Ayede provided a significant contrast, revealing the correlative developments of political and ritual centralization in the founding of a military autocracy. If the “family” or “lineage” remains a salient idiom for extending ritual identities to broader political jurisdictions within kingdoms, it is as an idiom only. As such, it can be accounted for in ideological terms, but should not be mistaken for the

dominant framework of orisha cult organization as such, since the lineage itself is a political and administrative unit within the more inclusive kingdom.<sup>12</sup>

Third, evidence from Ayede's dominant orisha cults illustrates an important indeterminacy built into the ambiguous identities of the orisha themselves. If Yemoja, Orisha Ojuna and Orisha Iyagba represent singular deities, their cults house a multiplicity of different orisha clustered within the three town shrines and worshipped by different lines of devotees. The consolidation of different deities within Ayede's major orisha cults represents what may well be a common characteristic of orisha cults throughout Yorubaland (e.g. Barber 1990), wherein principal deities fragment into multiple spiritual manifestations with associated sacrifices and *oriki*. The notion that every Yoruba orisha has a discrete and singular cult is entrenched in earlier Yoruba scholarship, but must be abandoned to account for the complex clustering of different orisha around a principal deity.

The revision of these last two misconceptions—that lineages establish the social framework of cults and that the relationship between orisha and cult is discrete—has implications which extend beyond Yorubaland proper to illuminate religious developments in the New World. Here we can return to Pierre Verger's commitment to the broader reaches of the Yoruba universe, primarily within the mysteries of Brazilian *candomblé*, which he has studied as a scholar and practitioner. I do not wish to belittle Verger's painstaking research in sifting through all available historical documents and reconstructing the histories of the *terreiros* by drawing attention to one misleading contrast which he establishes. Comparing the worship of orisha in Yorubaland with *candomblé* ceremonies in Bahia, he states (1982: 72):

“La différence entre les cérémonies pour les orisha en Afrique et dans le Nouveau Monde vient surtout de ce qu'en Afrique on évoque, en principe, un seul dieu au cours d'une fête célébrée dans un temple réservé à lui seul, alors que sur le Nouveau Monde, une gamme très étendue d'orisha sont appelés dans un même *terreiro* au cours d'une même fête. De plus, en Afrique, une telle cérémonie se célèbre généralement pour la collectivité familiale et un seul *elégun* [possession priest or priestess] est normalement monté par le dieu, alors qu'au Nouveau Monde, cette collectivité familiale n'existant plus, l'orisha a pris un caractère individuel et il arrive qu'au cours d'une même fête, plusieurs *iaôs* [*iyàwós*, or 'wives' (priestesses) of the orisha] soient montés par un même dieu, et ceci, tout à la fois pour le réconfort particulier d'un individu déterminé et la satisfaction additionnelle de tous ceux qui font le culte de cet orisha.”

Evidence from the Ekiti Yoruba highlands suggests that this contrast is overdrawn, since orisha cults are not characteristically discrete—housing

12. See SMITH (1956) for the path-breaking political analysis of lineage segmentation within a general theory of government.

one deity only—but like their Bahian counterparts, can consolidate clusters of orisha within town shrines. Furthermore, as the detailed examination of politico-ritual configurations in Ishan and Ayede kingdoms reveals, orisha cults in Africa are by no means limited to “collective family” members, but embrace the dominant political segments of kingdoms and town quarters. Moreover, within such cults, as in the Bahian *terreiros*, different priests and priestesses can be possessed by multiple deities.

The implication developed by Verger is that the destruction of the African lineage or “collective family” in the New World, following from the inhumanities of slavery, created new principles of orisha cult recruitment and thus novel forms of cult organization and religious practice by combining different deities within the *candomblé* cults. My point is not to deny the radically different social conditions in which Brazilian *candomblé* developed, but rather to emphasize the more continuous dialectic of orisha cult clustering in Bahia and beyond. The Yoruba ethnohistorical record reveals that orisha cults were not necessarily singular or discrete in the first place, but performed a critical role in reconfiguring local political relations by consolidating different deities within town shrines. That such similar transformations occurred in Bahia, recreating Yoruba “kings” and their spiritual subjects under radically different conditions of politico-economic subjugation, suggests that the West African baseline of Yoruba orisha worship is much closer to its New World transformations than has generally been acknowledged. It is with such global issues in mind that detailed studies of local orisha cults at the historic peripheries of Yorubaland can inform the development of Yoruba religion as a truly transnational phenomenon.

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#### ABSTRACT

Building and reflecting on the pioneering work of Pierre Verger, who undertook the first intensive comparison of Yoruba orisha worship in West Africa and Brazil, this essay examines the sociopolitical dimension of orisha cult organization and change in two Ekiti Yoruba kingdoms. Comparison of the politico-ritual configurations of decentralized Ishan kingdom with those of centralized Ayede kingdom, and their very different historical transformations from ca 1845 to the present, reveal *political segmentation*, not "family" or lineage, as the dominant

principle of cult organization, even if it is cast within lineage ideology. The orisha cult "clustering" which thus occurs in the Ekiti Yoruba highlands, a ritual characteristic which Verger attributes to innovation in Brazilian *candomblé*, suggests that West-African orisha worship is closer to its New World manifestations than has generally been acknowledged.

#### RÉSUMÉ

*Note sur le culte des Orisha dans les hautes terres yoruba: un hommage à Pierre Verger.* — S'inspirant du travail pionnier de Pierre Verger relatif aux cultes orisha d'Afrique de l'Ouest et du Brésil, cette étude analyse les aspects socio-politiques et les transformations des cultes orisha au sein de deux royaumes yoruba de l'ensemble ekiti. La comparaison des schèmes politico-rituels dans le royaume décentralisé ishan et dans le royaume centralisé ayede, ainsi que l'analyse de leur évolution divergente au cours de la période comprise entre le milieu du XIX<sup>e</sup> siècle et aujourd'hui révèle que le principe majeur de la structure de ces cultes repose sur la *segmentation politique* et non sur la famille ou le lignage, quand bien même ce principe se coulerait dans une idéologie lignagère. L'existence d'une organisation des cultes orisha en faisceau (clustering) telle qu'elle existe sur les hauts plateaux yoruba (Ekiti), caractéristique rituelle que P. Verger réserve au candomblé du Brésil, suggère que ces cultes sont plus proches de leurs homologues du Nouveau Monde qu'on a généralement bien voulu le reconnaître.

*Key words/Mots clés :* Yoruba religion/religion yoruba, candomblé/candomblé, political segmentation/segmentation politique, Ekitiland/Pays ekiti, syncretism/synchrétisme, historical ethnography/ethnographie historique, diaspora/diaspora, Orisha/Orisha, Nigeria/Nigeria.