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THE YORUBA OGBONI CULT IN OYO

PETER MORTON-WILLIAMS

THE Yoruba Ogboni cult has been referred to as a typical 'secret society' for over fifty years,¹ yet it has never been described in any detail, or analysed in accurate general terms. Frobenius² discovered its controlling importance in Yoruba religious organization in 1910 and promptly became initiated into the Ibadan Ogboni, but only to get information from the priests of other Yoruba cults. He made no attempt to study the beliefs of Ogboni members, whom he dismissed as 'mystery-mongering greybeards'.³ Two anthropologists have been initiated into the cult in the course of the last twenty-five years, but have declared themselves bound by its oath of secrecy, and so have published nothing about it.⁴

It has in fact three features which together seem to me diacritical for 'secret societies' as a type of association:

- (a) It has a secret in virtue of which its members claim mystical and hence secular power and privileges with regard to non-members.
- (b) It has a selected membership, to qualify for which some sort of achievement is necessary.
- (c) It has the right to impose sanctions over those who reveal its secrets and procedures to others.

Its political functions will be outlined first, and the beliefs and rituals which sustain them will then be considered, with a brief survey of the character of the metaphysical ideas that seem to be implicit in them.

OYO GOVERNMENT

It will be recalled that Yorubaland is made up of several hundreds of chiefdoms, each of which in general has consisted of a town surrounded by a tract of territory in which patrilineages and individuals hold permanent rights to the economic use of parcels of land. The formal head—both secular and ritual—of the chiefdom is the

¹ By, for example, Hutton Webster, in *Primitive Secret Societies*, 1909.

² Cf. *The Voice of Africa*, vol. i, cap. iii.

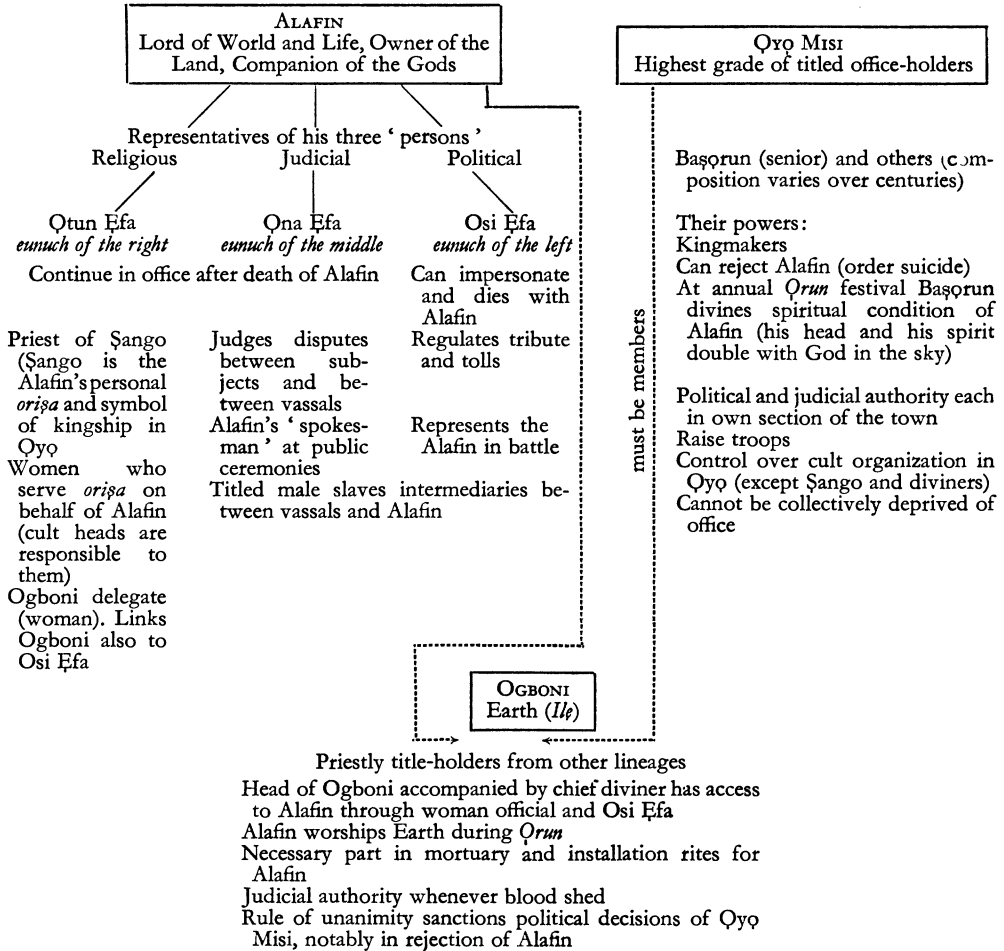
³ *Ibid.*, p. 174. He also characterized the Ibadan Ogboni as a 'Decapitation Company, Limited'. Ogboni, indeed, is hard to investigate. My inquiries in Oyo may have been made easier through Ogboni having been disbanded by Alafin Aderemi, a pious Muslim, in 1948 after his accession. But in Egbado, where I worked before going to Oyo, although its judicial functions had been taken over by the courts, and its political authority largely by new councils, it was still a going concern, with residual political and wide religious powers.

⁴ W. R. Bascom (in his early monograph *The Sociological Role of the Yoruba Culi-Group*) after saying that, because he joined Oro and Ogboni, he 'can only report what is common knowledge', does indeed

write: 'In Awe, the symbol of the Orisha of Ogboni is the earth, such as palm nuts are for Ifa or "thunderbolts" [i.e. neolithic celts and smooth pebbles, kept on Šango altars—P.M.-W.] for Šango, or small pots for Yemaja.' This is misleading: Earth is to the Earth Spirit more nearly as the thunderstorm and lightning are to Šango, or the River Ogun to Yemaja, though the analogy is not precise. Ifa can serve his worshippers as *oriša* do theirs, but Yoruba regard him as conceptually distinct from the class '*oriša*'. In his brief account, Bascom also writes, 'Ogboni has political functions, but no one joins just to acquire a voice in the affairs of the town', and he concludes that sociologically Ogboni is 'like other orisha groups'. He argues against using the term 'secret society' to characterize any Yoruba organization.

*Oba*¹ or king. Farming villages are usually scattered irregularly in the territory; rarely there may also be quite large towns that according to tradition have hived off from king's towns or have grown up from camps set up by followers of the founding *Oba* of the chiefdom. The population of capitals of chiefdoms today varies from about 500 to half a million. At the beginning of the nineteenth century the maximum may have been approaching 100,000, with 20,000 not uncommon.

SUMMARY OF OYO POLITICAL STRUCTURE



The towns in the western half of the Yoruba area had for some centuries been the vassals of one of the most northerly of the Yoruba *Oba*, the Alafin of Oyo. In the

¹ The orthography current among the Yoruba is used in this paper. The letters have the values of the *Africa* alphabet of the International African Institute, except that *e* is replaced by *ɛ*, *o* by *ɔ*, and *l* by *ɓ*, that *p* is the double plosive *kp*, and that when *n* follows

a vowel it serves only to indicate that the vowel is nasalized. Tones are not marked, but they may be found by reference to R. C. Abraham, *Dictionary of Modern Yoruba*, London, 1958.

eighteenth century his armies dominated a wider territory between the Niger to the north and east and the Ashanti states to the south-west; but it was in this western Yoruba area, containing the metropolitan Oyo provinces and the kingdoms on the trade route to the coast, that Oyo control was most closely exercised, and the greatest uniformity in traditional political religious institutions is to be found. Although Ogboni extends widely beyond this area (according to one tradition it originated in Ife), the discussion in this paper will be confined to it. Elsewhere Ogboni was also generally prominent in the political and religious organization, but its relationship to other institutions varied greatly.

In Oyo, the political authority of the Alafin (*Oba*) has traditionally always been checked by that of a powerful non-royal group of office-holders, the Oyo Misi,¹ which formed the Council of State. The Alafin's attributive titles are 'Lord of the World and of Life', 'Owner of the Land', and 'Companion of the Gods'. He is asserted to have had the power of life and death over his subjects. In fact, however, he could not easily coerce the Oyo Misi, and they had the power of life and death over him.

The diagram on p. 363 summarizes the main features of the system of government in Oyo. The ultimate power of the Oyo Misi over the Alafin appears to have been complete. At the annual *Orun* festival, the Baṣorun (leader of the Oyo Misi) can declare, after divination, that the king's fortune, as symbolized by his head, would be bad and that his *orun*—spirit double in the sky—no longer supports his stay on earth. Found unfit to rule, he must poison himself and die. On other occasions, in the presence of the other Oyo Misi, the Baṣorun can pronounce the sentence: 'The gods reject you, the people reject you, earth rejects you'—an order to the Alafin to commit suicide.

But the power of the Baṣorun and the Oyo Misi is in fact restrained by the Ogboni. Ogboni is a secret and ritually united corporation of political and religious leaders and its special priests.

THE OGBONI

The secret of the Ogboni, which has been closely guarded from other, uninitiated Yoruba as well as from outside inquiry, is that they worship and control the sanctions of the Earth as a spirit. Earth, they hold, existed before the gods, and the Ogboni cult before the kingship. Earth is the mother to whom the dead return. Earth and the ancestors, not the gods (*oviṣa*), are the sources of the moral law.

The Ogboni is thought of by the Yoruba generally as supporting the power of the Alafin. The Apena, one of the leading officials of the cult there, once said to me, 'Every *Oba* must have Ogboni so that people may fear him.' While the Baṣorun is celebrating the *Orun* festival in Oyo, the Alafin in the secrecy of the Ogboni lodge makes his yearly rite to *Ilẹ*, the Earth, and divines to verify that the Earth still supports his rule. The cult shrine is in a lodge (*iledi*—lit. 'tied house') in the forecourt of the palace, at a place called *Tapa Ogboni*. The association is known as *Ogboni Oba*,

¹ Oyo Misi. This is the form of the name most usually heard in Oyo, but they are also spoken of as the Oyo Mesi, which is the name used by Johnson in *The History of the Yorubas*. I do not know the etymology of either *misi* or *mesì*, which have different tone

structures, and can go no further in translation than 'the Misi of Oyo'. Johnson, curiously, does not mention the Ogboni in Oyo but only among the Egba.

'The King's Ogboni'. It is said to have this name because of the Alafin's perpetual right to own the whole land of the Yoruba, a right acquired by the founder of the Oyo dynasty from his ancestor, Odudua, king of Ife. But the Alafin only hears what is transacted at Ogboni meetings from the reports of a certain woman of the palace whose duty is to attend all meetings of the Ogboni on his behalf. He does not take part in the meetings, but the Oyo Misi do.

Like other cult groups, the Ogboni has its titled officials, the priests of the cult. Each title is the property of a lineage; the successor to a title is proposed by his fellow lineage members. The choice has to be submitted to the cult members, who put the selection, if it is in other respects acceptable to them, to the sanction of the Ifa oracle; and finally the Alafin must accept the appointment. When there is no suitable candidate for the title, in which case the duties of the office are carried out by a deputy, the lineage retains the right to propose a successor to the title in due course. The two leading officials of Ogboni are the Oluwo (Lord of the Mystery) and the Apena (Maker of the Way) who is in charge of the cult's judicial functions.

There are two grades of membership of Ogboni, *Wé-wé-wé*, the 'children', and *Ologboni* or *Alawo* (Owners of the Mystery or the Secret), which includes the titled officials. Members of the junior grade do not take part in the rites of the cult, though they may eat sacrificial meat. They are not, in Oyo, admitted to assemblies in the cult house. They are bound to secrecy over anything they may hear of the activities of senior members.

Each of the Oyo Misi must be admitted to the senior grade, but he cannot hold titled office in the cult; which means he cannot officiate at any of the Ogboni rites or conduct its judicial inquiries. He must attend the full assemblies of the cult, which take place at sixteen-day intervals, on the day (*Jakuta*) sacred to the worship of the Alafin's deified ancestor, Şango.

The Oyo Misi meet every morning in the house of the Başorun, and then go together to pay homage to the Alafin and advise him on the affairs of the day. On the sixteenth day they then take their seats in the *iledi* (lodge), in company with all other initiates of the senior grade. The meeting opens with a libation of gin to the Earth and to the spirits of the dead within it, but ordinarily no sacrificial rites take place. At the end of the meeting, kola nuts are split and eaten, an act reminding the members of their bond of secrecy. During these meetings, anyone may raise for discussion any issue of general concern whatever. Usually the discussion is informal—the exchange of views and gossip about events in the town, carried on over glasses of gin and during the eating of a meal. It is important nevertheless for the formation of a body of opinion and because this is the one place where they could meet and talk freely, without fear of being reported on, or having to conform to the prejudices of their supporters.

Not only do these meetings bring the Oyo Misi face to face with what, so the Yoruba assert, are the wisest people in the community, and under conditions where their policy can be discussed; the fact of their attendance necessarily means that the Oyo Misi are constrained by certain sanctions. They must from time to time share in the Ogboni ritual on equal terms with other initiates, unattended by their usual following. The strength of these sanctions will become obvious when we discuss the religious side of Ogboni. Their social effects are these:

- (a) The secrecy of the meetings at which doubts and disagreements may have been urged makes it hard for a minority of the chiefs to appeal to faction without breaking the condition of secrecy and inviting ritual sanction.
- (b) Ogboni priests in Oyo and elsewhere have made it quite clear to me that sanctions are imposed not only to guard secrets but also to protect agreements reached at Ogboni meetings. Attempts are made to reach unanimity, and sanctions come into force if it is afterwards broken. If unanimity cannot be reached, members bind themselves ritually to accept and uphold the majority decision. This must reduce the likelihood of an open split developing within the Oyo Misi.
- (c) Just when a man acquires political power and is confirmed in a position of leadership through the achievement of a high town title, a new obedience is imposed upon him.

The judicial functions of Ogboni are concerned with the shedding of blood. To shed human blood upon the ground, whether the wound is slight or grave, except in sacrifice is to profane the Earth. If blood is spilled in a fight, word will reach the Apena. The report may be passed on to him by the Alafin, or it may come to him directly. Immediately, he sends his messenger to carry a sacred object, the *edan*, and lay it beside the shed blood. This puts the parties under a complete religious ban, and requires them to go at once to the place where the *edan* are lying, and announce themselves to the messenger. The Apena summons other Ogboni officials and elders to a meeting in the *iledi*, where the fighters are brought by the messenger. The Apena hears the dispute and makes a judgement intended to reconcile the parties. They both pay a fine and provide animals for sacrifice, the blood of which is poured over the *edan*. If it is obvious that one of the parties must be lying and, because he is pressing false claims, the quarrel cannot be satisfactorily mended, an ordeal is imposed. The *edan* are placed in a bowl of water. In some towns a little earth is sprinkled in, too. The disputants are required to drink. It is confidently expected that the one who put his case falsely will die within two days. 'Earth has cast him aside', the Ogboni say, and once the ordeal has been administered, nothing can be done about it—it is irreversible. Yoruba quarrels are far less likely to entail bloodshed than those in many parts of Africa—among their neighbours the Bini, for a conspicuous example—and the force of the Ogboni sanction may well explain this.

Someone may seriously offend another in the town, and the other may not wish to be involved in a fight or in a long-drawn-out dispute involving many people and perhaps sorcery as well. He may appeal to the Ogboni. The Apena sends out his *edan*, summoning both parties to the *iledi*. The wrong-doer must pay heavily in money and animals to be sacrificed over the *edan* which have been brought out. If the matter is trivial the *edan* are not to be sent out, they are too important and powerful. Disputants will instead be told to refer to their ward chiefs or lineage heads.

Quarrels sometimes occur between individual senior Ogboni members. One may accuse his fellow of theft, or of pursuing his wife. In Oyo at the next Ogboni meeting the *edan* will be brought out and laid on the ground and the accused be asked whether the accusation is true. If he agrees it is, the Apena will try to restore good relations. If he denies the charge, he must declare in front of the *edan*: 'If I am innocent, I will come to no harm. If I did the thing they are inquiring into, may I die in two days.'

The Apena strikes a sacred brass bell and all present cry ‘*Ase!*’—‘So be it!’ In Egbado the parties are put through the ordeal of drinking water in which the *edan* are immersed.

As these judicial procedures have also been described to me in Egbado towns, in the extreme south of the old empire of Oyo, it is probable that they were in practice throughout the area and, perhaps, beyond it. The place of Ogboni in the political system, though, was a little different in the Egbado and Egba¹ towns. In the large Egbado towns such as Ilaro, with populations of the order of 10,000, the Oyo institution of a set of town chiefs as a council of state was reproduced, but their command of political force was smaller. The *Oba*, too, was without the large and elaborate palace organization of the Alafin; the Ogboni consequently were politically more powerful, and, because the office of *Olumo*, ritual head of the Ogboni, was doubled with that of head of the Ifa priests, who were the diviners, the Ogboni exercised minuter control in religious as well as in secular government. In the smaller Egbado towns the six leading Ogboni took over most of the functions of the Oyo Misi of Oyo, and were the kingmakers; the full Council of State included these six, the holders of the highest war titles, and heads of such specialist associations as certain cult groups, craft and hunters’ guilds, and the traders’ association. In these towns the Ogboni could cause the Apena to send his *edan* to the *Oba* when he had embarked on a course of action of which they disapproved. With the *edan* would go the message ‘Just as the two parts of the *edan* are chained together [see Plate I (b), (c)] so are the men and the women of the town united against you.’ This was a grave warning, for the Ogboni there had the power vested in Oyo in the Oyo Misi, of coercing the king to commit suicide. The Ogboni could also send *edan* to the compounds of other titled men in the town, whom they judged to have overstepped the limits of their rights and privileges. This would prevent anyone crossing the threshold of the entrance of the main gate into the compound—shameful as well as inconvenient to the inhabitants—and the *edan* would only be removed when the culprit had acknowledged his fault to the Ogboni and undertaken to pay a heavy fine to them and to provide many animals for sacrifice over the *edan*.

In addition to these uses in government, *edan* could be used for one private end. An elderly Ogboni who feared that a rival would try to suborn one of his wives to poison him, might marry a young girl, sending his other wives to live elsewhere, and require her alone to cook and care for him. He would take his bride to the *iledi* and there split a kola nut and with the prongs of the *edan* pick up one piece and give it to her to eat, then pick up a second piece for himself. The two would then be ritually bound together as the *edan* are linked, and she would be told that if she betrayed him in any way, she would surely die or become mad.

OGBONI RITUAL

Initiation rites are performed at entry into the senior grade only, with a further rite marking induction into a titled office. There is no initiation into the grade of

¹ The best accounts of the place of Ogboni in the political system of the Egba are by S. O. Biobaku: (i) *The Egba and their Neighbours, 1842-1872*, and

(ii) ‘An Historical Sketch of the Egba Traditional Authorities’, *Africa*, xxii.

juniors, this being really little more than a state in which potential membership of the higher grade is recognized. It indicates that an individual is a patrilineal descendant of an Ogboni and, because Ogboni are still recruited from the descent group, some spiritual protection is extended to him. It also entails the duty of contributing to the funeral expenses of lineage Ogboni members. Boys may accompany their fathers into the *iledi* when no sacrifices are to be made and no sacred images shown, but are threatened with death if they mention anything seen or heard there. When in the *iledi*, a boy is sometimes greeted as *omo awo* (child of the Mystery). The juniors never assemble as a group, but certain of them are carefully watched by the elders or senior grade, to discover whether they are suitable for initiation into the upper grade.

The elders are predominantly men, and it is these who are termed Ogboni or *Ologboni* (those who have Ogboni); a small number, usually six, are women, termed *erelu*, whose duty it is to represent the interests of the women of the town. Those who are selected from the junior grade must be what the Yoruba term *agbalagba*¹—‘adult having adult’—that is, old enough for the oldest of their children to have become adults. Those who, having attained a town title (this excludes office-holders in the warrior organizations), become members *ex officio*, will as a rule be of this age-status, too. The novice is required to bring animals for sacrifice with him to the *iledi* when he is summoned for initiation. He kneels before the *edan* and the animals he has brought, a he-goat, a sheep, and a pigeon,² are killed and the blood poured over the *edan*. He then bends forward and touches the *edan* with his forehead and with his lips. The assembled initiates hail the Earth: ‘Mother! Powerful, Old!’ The Oluwo instructs him: He must not quarrel over trifles. If a dispute should arise or he be angry, and should he see a third party capable of making a true judgement, he must accept it. ‘Ko gbodo ijakuja. Bi ija ba si wa, bi iyonu, t’o ba si ri eḷeketa lati da a looto k’o si gba beḷ.’ The Oluwo concludes the rite with a prayer for the town, as he must whenever a sacrifice is made over the *edan*:

May no harm come to the king,
 May the town not be spoiled,
 May no harm come to us ourselves,
 Nor the world see misfortune,
 Nor time be cut short!

Ma je ki nkan o se Oba
Ma je ki ilu baje
Ma je ki nkan so e awa naa
Ki aiye o roju
Ki igba o toro!

A cord with three cowries strung on it is tied round the left wrist and must be left there until the third day, when it will be taken off in the *iledi*. It is drawn so tight that

¹ *Ogboni* is derived from *gbo*, to be old, and *eni*, a person. An Ogboni once defined the word for me, saying ‘*Ogboni* means *agbalagba*. Each, or the most senior, *erelu* may have a distinctive title. In the largest lodges, the titled *erelu* may each have one or two initiated women as attendants. Cf. Frobenius, *The Voice of Africa*, i, p. 172: there were ‘usually only twelve of these ancient women’ who ‘were not real members in the days gone by, but only officials appointed by the bond’. They were ‘well versed in the most arduous and wicked arts, whose business was spying and eavesdropping and, if called upon,

handing the poisoned cup to the person destined. These gruesome hags were fitting adjuncts to the abominable system.’

² Frobenius, *ibid.*, pp. 60–61, describing his initiation-by-proxy, said that a duckling was killed over the *edan*, and that this duckling replaced the one to ten men slain at regular initiations. Both in Oyo and in Egbado trustworthy informants denied that human sacrifices were ever made at initiations, or that ducks could be offered in any proper Ogboni rite.

a permanent dark scar is left on the wrist, a sign of initiation. On the occasion when it is removed, the novice is taught the taboos (*eewo*): that he is to dance only to the left, to knot his cloth only on the left side, and never to use a chewing stick at an Ogboni vigil (i.e. not to anticipate the dawn). Now that his initiation is complete, he is entitled to obtain two brass images which when properly sacralized constitute the talisman called *ibowo* (Worship in the hand), which protects against witchcraft and sorcerers using power got from the ordinary gods (*oriṣa*).

When an Ogboni has been elected to one of the titled priestly offices, the *edan* are put into his hands by the Apena in the presence of the assembled initiates. While he holds them he is told that though he now has the title, he must never tell what was done at his installation. In areas such as Eḡba and Ijebu where Ogboni office-holders dress distinctively, he is further told he must never enter the *iledi* wearing the Ogboni hat.

The object known as *edan* (a word that, though to the Yoruba it has the immediate association 'Ogboni', seems strictly to denote 'anthropomorphic brass ritual staff') and also, in Oyo, as *ololo*, consists essentially of two brass (or bronze) images, the one of a naked man, the other of a naked woman, linked together by a chain, and each mounted on a short iron (rarely, brass) spike.¹ They represent, so I was informed, an *ogboni* and an *erelu* serving *awo*, their mystery. Each Ogboni lodge has at least two *edan*, and they are in the charge of the Apena; one pair of images, larger than the others and elaborately detailed in execution, never leaves the *iledi*; the others, which may be simplified down to nothing more than a pair of heads chained together and mounted directly on their spikes, are kept in the Apena's house and are those which his messengers carry. These are the only sacred objects ever seen by the public (except for Ogboni drums which, as will appear later, may be dimly seen at night). *Edan* are consequently thought to be the only *oriṣa* of Ogboni. Not only is the secret that Ogboni worship the Earth never to be disclosed; the images they have of other spirits emanating from the Earth are never seen by the uninitiated.

The most striking of the Ogboni images I have seen is that of the spirit Ajagbo (the name seems to be derived from *aja-ogbo* 'fighter with the old'). It may be brought out from the secret chamber in the *iledi* to end by ordeal a quarrel with bitter accusations between two Ologboni. Its more particular use is when a violation of Ogboni rules—perhaps the disclosure of some secret matter—has placed a number of them under suspicion. It is imperative that all Ogboni members should have confidence in the secrecy of their affairs and that, whatever personal feelings may exist between individuals, there should be no air of suspicion and hostility within the

¹ In Oyo, the *edan* were laid flat on the ground. In an Eḡbado town that claims its founders came from Ife and not, as the other Eḡbado towns do, from Oyo, I was told that they made their *edan* stand upright by sticking the prongs into the ground, and that this was characteristic of Ife Ogboni and of all lodges that traced their foundation to Ife people. But in Ife, the Ogboni priests denied this, and said that *edan* must always lie on the ground. This variation might, then, be a local innovation designed to preserve claims over neighbours who had immigrated into the Eḡbado area more recently than they, but it

might be an ancient practice, abandoned elsewhere, since the migration was asserted to have taken place when the Eḡba and Ketu tribes left Ife.

Three pairs of large *edan*, reputedly from Abeokuta, shown in the Arts Council exhibition of the Epstein collection (London, 1960) are unusual. Each of the linked members is a double image, of both a man and a woman. For the moment, I can only guess that these are a fairly recent development, matching in their exuberance the exceptional power enjoyed by the Ogboni in Abeokuta.

Ogboni lodge. When members arriving for a meeting see that the priests have brought out the image Ajagbo, they are filled with dread. They know that it is only to be seen when one of the group has broken their code and must forfeit his life. On these occasions Ajagbo is rubbed with certain herbs and fruit. Large forest snails are then cut open and the fluid pouring from them and running over the image is collected in a wide calabash. All drink from the calabash. A sheep and a pigeon are sacrificed and libations and food offered to the *oriṣa*. It is asserted that the body of the guilty will soon become swollen and that he will die in a few days. 'Ajagbo', it is said, 'is a justly harsh *oriṣa*.' This rite takes place only when the offender is not known. If he is known, the Ogboni will try to poison him, or to paralyse him by casting a spell on his footprints.

There is another mercilessly just spirit, which the Ogboni say eats blood. It is called Ikuku-oro and Aiwo-oro ('Spirit of Death' and 'Unseeing Spirit'). When the Ogboni have been deeply divided over some issue and unable to reach a unanimous agreement, it is laid on the ground with some broken kola nuts. A majority decision is made; and to bind everyone to keep it and not to rend the town into factions, a human sacrifice is offered over this image. The bloody kola pieces are then eaten, each as he takes his piece swearing to abide by the decision and to end the dispute. While I have not been given an account of a particular occasion when such a sacrifice was made, the rite was well known to my informants and I am satisfied that it would be regarded as a compelling sanction even in political issues. In comparison with their neighbours to the east or west, the Yoruba were not a bloodthirsty people, and regarded human sacrifice as very awesome. Ogboni priests spoke to me with fear of this spirit and of Ajagbo.

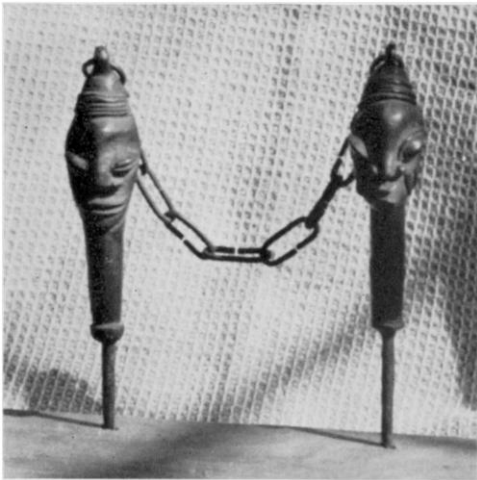
It is interesting to compare the three images *edan*, Ajagbo, and Ikuku-oro. Those that are concerned to assert or restore peaceful and co-operative relations combine male and female images into one symbol. Ajagbo, on the other hand, called upon to punish a crime that cannot be atoned, is a single figure. Informants in Oyo said that theirs had been male. (I could not trace its whereabouts; it may have been stolen after the Oyo Ogboni were disbanded in 1948.) The photograph in Plate II (*a*) of one from Ibadan is female, but a ferocious and, one might say, almost a phallic female. All Yoruba female deities can show a ferocious side. For the river goddess Oya, deity of the river Niger and the tornado, who is the wife of Šango, the image of her vengeful power is the buffalo horn. For Ošun, another river goddess, it is a brass staff. The goddess Yemaja, mother of Šango, is also the 'mother' of witchcraft. Yet all these goddesses bring the blessings of fertility and prosperity to the individual worshipper and to the Yoruba people.

Similarly, *Ilẹ*, the Earth, from whom these harsh spirits come, supports all life and receives the spirits of the dead; and the dead become the ancestors who work for the good of their descendants or collectively for the community. This aspect of the Yoruba Earth Goddess is of some importance for comparative mythology. One might add that Yoruba women too have this double nature, of being wives and mothers and also potential witches. The *erelu*, the women Ogboni, who represent the interests of all women at Ogboni meetings, are said to possess witchcraft.¹

¹ It is interesting to compare the office of *erelu* with that of the Nupe *lelu* described by Nadel (*Nupe Religion*, cap. vi).



(a)



(b)



(c)

PLATE I. Edan-Ogboni

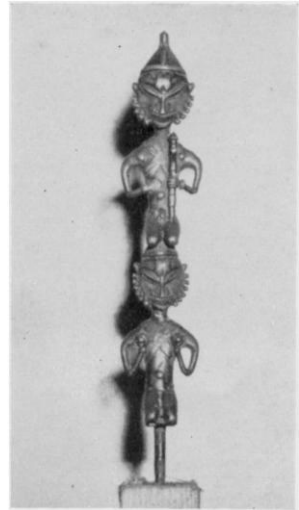
(a) An old specimen of the type kept in Ogboni lodges and used in the rites. The male image is on the left. The faces are fringed with decorative loops of brass; some such *edan* have brass bells hanging from the loops. (Property of Ernest Ohly, Esq., who kindly provided the photograph. Height *c.* 11½ in.)

(b) One sort of those carried by an *Apena's* messenger. (Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, Cambridge. Height *c.* 5 in.)

(c) A modern pair from Ijebu Ode. (Property of the writer. Height 8¼ in.)



(a)



(b)



(c)

PLATE II.

(a) Ajagbo

(The Nigerian Museum, Lagos. Photograph by the Curator, reproduced by permission of the Director of Antiquities, Nigeria. Height 30 in.)

(b) Ikuku-ṣṣṣ

(Property of E. Ohly, Esq.; reproduced with his kind permission. Photograph by Joan Wescott. Height c. 12 in.)

(c) Eru-Ogboni (the slave of Ogboni) devouring a deceiver
Wood carvings for Ogboni are rare: brass is the usual material for Ogboni effigies. This carving, collected in Qyṣ by the writer, is now in the Nigerian Museum, Lagos. (Height c. 24 in.)

Ogboni funeral rites are largely public, and are always costly for the bereaved (the young now beg their elders not to join Ogboni, and especially not to take Ogboni titles, because of this cost, which they no longer feel to be offset by comparable advantages). The expenditure has, of course, a social aspect, since wealth is a measure of importance to the Yoruba.

Word is sent to the Ogboni priests as soon as one of the Ogboni is dead. They come to pray over the body before it is prepared for burial. It is then washed and dressed and placed in a grave in the house in the ordinary way. After dark on the second day, the cult members assemble for obsequies either in the compound or in an open place near by. The drums they have brought beat out the Ogboni rhythm. When they have eaten and drunk well, and received gifts of money, very late in the night dancing begins. At that time certain of the titled Ogboni officials shut themselves for a short time in the room where the grave is. The eldest child of the dead one may be allowed in with them for only part of the rite. What they do in secret there has not been disclosed to me. When they have finished, the grave is filled. The dead one's hat and gown are hung on a post over the grave; they remain there for some days until his *egungun*¹ appears wearing them in a rite that assures his children and widows that he is now an ancestor, watching over them.

The Ogboni priests rejoin their fellows and the gathering sings a farewell song, 'We are bringing him home, to become an earth-dwelling spirit'.

As it begins to get light, the designs carved on the Ogboni drums are covered with a new cloth given by the bereaved; only cult members may see the Ogboni emblems carved on them. At dawn, if the dead man had held an important Ogboni title, other chiefs in the Ward and friends of the dead will come along to greet the Ogboni assembly, walking round the group to hand each a gift of money. The king himself (but only rarely and in the smaller towns) accompanied by his councillors may visit briefly an Ogboni funeral.

The Ogboni priests have a part in the ceremonies following the death of a king and during the installation of his successor. In Oyo they are summoned to the palace as soon as an Alafin has died and attend while the corpse is washed, then they cut off its head and take it to clean all the flesh from the skull. A palace official removes the heart and puts it in charge of the Otun Efa, the titled eunuch responsible for the Šango cult. During his installation the succeeding Alafin is taken by the Otun Efa to make a sacrifice to Šango and while with him is given a dish containing the heart of his predecessor, which he must eat. Later, he is taken to the Ogboni shrine where the Oluwo hands him the skull of his predecessor, which has been filled with a corn gruel which he must drink. This rite is said to enable his ears always to discriminate between the true and the false, and to give compelling power to his words. Thus, the death of an Alafin cannot be concealed from the Ogboni, and his successor cannot be properly installed without their acceptance and collaboration.

They play no less necessary parts in the rites of death and succession in other Yoruba kingdoms, but there are variations in detail that I cannot discuss here, except to say that in those southern kingdoms where the Ogboni are the kingmakers, the public coronation of the king is preceded by a secret one performed by the titled Ogboni.

¹ For a brief account of *egungun* and further references, see my 'Yoruba Responses to the Fear of Death', *Africa*, xxx, 1, 1960, pp. 34-40.

CONCEPTIONS AND SYMBOLS IN OGBONI

We turn now to a brief survey of part of Ogboni symbolism and the underlying conceptions.

The Earth itself is not represented by any symbol in Yoruba art, although it is personified. This corresponds to an absence of representations of its counterpart, the sky god *Ọlórún*. But facets of the Earth's meaning for the Ogboni are discernible in the rites and their symbolism.

The Ogboni are commonly called *awo* or *alawo*—those with a secret or mystery. Ogboni recruits itself from the elderly. Their mystery embraces the importance of the Earth as mother, as the abode of the dead. Ogboni symbolism is replete with the number three. Ogboni members distinguish themselves by their use of the left hand. They salute each other and hail the Earth with a gesture of bringing the clenched fists together three times, left hand uppermost and thumbs in palms, while they utter a spoken greeting (*Ajagbo* is making it in the photograph, and someone said of it to me '*O nkawo*'—'she is saluting the mystery').

In the rest of Yoruba religion, three is avoided; there is emphasis on dualism—in, for example, the pairing of many of the gods—and stress on the number four and its square, sixteen. These last numbers, four and sixteen, and also the square of sixteen, 256, are given especial significance in *Ifa*, the divination system, through which men and gods are brought into satisfactory relationship. To offer three objects to a god in ritual, or to a guest on secular occasions, is insulting and invites reprisal. The left hand is unclean.¹ The distinctions between polarities must be preserved, and the *Ifa* symbolism shows how the paired distinctions can be matched and balanced to form patterns based on the sign of completion and perfection, that is, the number four. In *Ifa* symbolism, the world picture shows four cardinal points each governed by an *oriṣa*; the Yoruba town has conceptually four gates; and the masked messenger of the ancestors is four-headed. A close relationship is maintained between *Ifa* and Ogboni: the Ogboni priests consult *Ifa* on behalf of the town—their threefold imagery concerns themselves, not the outer world. *Ifa* is probably a means of controlling the phenomenal world, which in Yoruba metaphysics is constellated by combinations of two and four.

Ogboni ritual is concerned with mystery and secrecy, which the Ogboni are at pains to preserve, not to interpret and manipulate as is done with *Ifa*. The Ogboni initiates are elders who have their worldly fate worked out, their social position achieved, and are therefore less concerned than they were with appealing to the gods for help in making their way. They now face the problems concerned with the later stages of their own lives and with guiding the community in accordance with Yoruba values. The prominence they give to the left hand² suggests that they perceive that they cannot reject one side of themselves, but must accept the unclean—that which is hidden and knowledge that is forbidden—and, further, it emphasizes the profound

¹ Left-handedness is cited along with albinism and such physical defects as loss of a limb as disqualifying a man from becoming an *oba* (king).

² The Ogboni of *Ijebu*, *Egba*, *Ibadan*, and parts of *Egbado*, except in their most casual or workaday dress, carry over the right shoulder a rectangular

piece of cloth (it looks like an embroidered hand-towel) called *ṣaki* (*Ibadan* and *Egba*) or *itaḡbe* (*Ijebu*), thus drawing attention to their membership of this powerful association by showing their left arm to be more free for use than their right.

nature of this transition; while their gesture of concealing the thumb in the palm they say shows that no one can hide secrets from them, any more than hiding the thumb prevents their knowing it is there.

One can see in the image of three, set against what we know to be the significance of four for the Yoruba, a sign of incompleteness and therefore a concern with process and time. It accords with the Yoruba conception of the stages in the existence of man: his departure from the sky (*orun*) to live in the world (*aiye*) and eventually to become a spirit in the earth (*ile*). A Yoruba has three spiritual components: breath (*emi*), a spirit that returns to the sky to be reborn (*ara-orun*), and the component that becomes an ancestor (*imole*).

The Ogboni express their metaphysical conceptions in the simple statement *Ogboni meji o di eta* 'Two Ogboni, it becomes three'. Pressed for an explanation, they give trivial answers of the form that they must do everything in threes—but they treat the statement as an important formulation of their mystery. The third element seems to be the mystery, the shared secret, itself. The union of the male and the female in the *edan* image symbolizes this putting two together to make a third.

The senior grade of Ogboni will collectively know all that pertains to the *oriṣa* cults. They will also have been active participants in them and many will have gone deeply into their esoterica. The ritual of the *oriṣa* ceases to captivate the most thoughtful of them and to be reduced to a technique for gaining magical power from the *oriṣa*; through their experience, age, and closeness to death they have transcended the ordinary *oriṣa* 'truth'—the conceptions expressed through the cults—leaving only Earth as the absolute certainty in their future.

In almost every small Yoruba town there is at least one of the Ogboni priests who, whether or not he has the highest title, dominates the others through his judgement and wisdom. Although he is closely involved in all the affairs of the town, and takes a supervisory interest in all public rites, he carries himself with an air of cool detachment. He knows that whatever is occupying his attention at the moment is important for the well-being of the community, but that his own self-assurance is founded on something deeper. I have observed a man of this sort—an Ogboni Oluwo responsible for all public ritual—attending with the same calm awareness the annual festivals of the *oriṣa* and sitting among the elders of the C.M.S. Church on Sundays.

In discussions of Yoruba religion, contemplative Ogboni men will often introduce such phrases as 'I know that everything must have its cause', meaning that whatever the *oriṣa* do for mankind is a consequence of human action; implicit is a denial of the ordinary man's conviction that there is an element of irresponsibility or of chance in events; implicit also is the awareness that *Èṣẹgbara*, the Trickster deity, cannot lead a man into misfortune unless he himself or an enemy provokes the event. On the one hand these men are led to look for an immutability behind the manipulable acts of the *oriṣa*, and this they find in the deified Earth; on the other hand they look for a human cause of misfortune—for the witch who kills children, for the fault of the king that has turned men against one another in the town. As a cult group concerned with the mystical aspect of Yoruba life, they successfully controlled as a third force the relationship between the Alafin and the Qyq Misi, the council of state.

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Résumé

LE CULTE OGBONI DES YORUBA D'OYO

DANS la ville Yoruba d'Oyo, à l'autorité du roi (*alafin*) s'oppose celle des *oyò misì*, qui sont des fonctionnaires titrés. Le chef des *oyò misì* (*başorun*) a pour tâche de déterminer par la divination, lors d'un rite annuel, si le roi est capable, du point de vue spirituel, de continuer à régner pendant l'année à venir ou si on doit lui demander de se suicider. En outre, le *başorun*, accompagné des *oyò misì*, a le droit, à tout moment, d'annoncer le rejet du roi et de lui donner l'ordre de s'empoisonner. Cependant, les *oyò misì* sont eux-mêmes soumis à des sanctions par une troisième association, celle du groupe culturel des *ogboni*. Celui-ci est une 'société secrète' qui adore la Terre en tant qu'esprit et en contrôle les sanctions. Les membres des *oyò misì* sont obligés d'adhérer à la société des *ogboni*, lorsqu'ils entrent en fonctions. Outre leurs attributions religieuses, les *ogboni* ont des devoirs judiciaires et politiques. Verser du sang humain sur le sol est une profanation de la Terre, un péché qui est examiné et puni par les *ogboni*. Les réunions plénières des *ogboni* ont lieu tous les seize jours dans leur loge située dans l'enclos du palais; lors de ces réunions, on peut discuter toute question concernant le bien public; en outre les *oyò misì* sont soumis aux règles de silence et d'unanimité des *ogboni* qui sont fondées sur la puissance des esprits en relation avec les morts.

Seules les personnalités de marque parmi les anciens, y compris certaines femmes, sont éligibles comme membres des *ogboni*. Les rites de cette société comprennent des enterrements fastueux pour ses membres, qui, croit-on, deviennent des ancêtres, habitent dans la Terre et continuent à veiller sur la communauté avec la même sollicitude que les *ogboni* vivants. Les *ogboni* comprennent des chefs d'autres cultes, mais tandis qu'ils connaissent, collectivement, les secrets des autres dieux, ils estiment que le mystère de leurs propres dieux est impénétrable, et ils le vénèrent.