Résumé
H. Drewal — L’art et le concept de féminité dans la culture yoruba. La conception de l’essence féminine chez les Yoruba est dominée par la notion d’intériorité (ori inûn), à laquelle se rattachent les notions de secret, de calme, de froid et la couleur blanche, qui s’opposent terme à terme aux notions symétriques caractérisant la masculinité. Les femmes ménopausées (et, dans une moindre mesure, impubères, enceintes ou allaitant) sont chargées d’une force magique, àše, supérieure à celle des ọrịṣa. Ces caractéristiques et ces pouvoirs sont symbolisés dans le masque barbu et voilé de blanc de la Grande Mère, Ìyánlá, personnage central du culte Èfè-Gèlèdé, à la fois secret et accessible aux membres de la communauté.

Citer ce document / Cite this document :

doi : 10.3406/cea.1977.2430

Document généré le 02/06/2016
Art and the Perception of Women in Yorùbá Culture*

The female is one of the most pervasive motifs in African art, yet despite its apparent importance, little research has been done to elucidate its true significance.¹ In Yorùbá art, females appear as young girls, marketwomen, gift-givers, wives, mothers-to-be, nursing mothers, priestesses, etc. Disparate motifs—various body positions, arrangements of figures in genre scenes, and regalia—cluster within sculpture to define female states of being. In order to analyse and comprehend these images of women, almost always created by males,² it is necessary to understand male beliefs and attitudes concerning females. The first section discusses Yorùbá perceptions of the differences between men and women. These perceptions coalesce in an image that epitomizes the essence of womanhood, the mask for the Great Mother, Ìyánlá. The second part considers the iconology and ritual context of Ìyánlá, the most sacred and secret form of the Èfè/GeVêde masquerade complex.

---

¹ This study, based on fieldwork conducted in Nigeria and République Populaire du Bénin (Dahomey) in 1970-71, 1973, and 1975, is a revised and expanded version of a paper presented at the 1974 Third Triennial Symposium on Traditional African Art, Columbia University. I gratefully acknowledge the generous financial support for field research provided by the Institute of African Studies, Columbia University (1970-71), the Institute for Intercultural Studies, Inc. (1970-71, 1973, and 1975) and Cleveland State University (1975); the research affiliations provided by the Federal Department of Antiquities and the University of Ife in Nigeria; and the assistance provided by IRAD and the Musée Ethnographique, Porto-Novo, Bénin. I wish to thank Edna Bay for a field photograph of a Mother mask at Cové; Oladele Olabisi for checking Yorùbá translations and orthography; Rowland Abiodun for his perceptive comments about Yorùbá concepts of orì; Samuel Akinfenwa and Raimi Akaki Taiwo for their valuable research assistance; the Yorùbá elders who courageously discussed sensitive topics; and Margaret Thompson Drewal for editorial suggestions and insights.

² One of the first works on the topic is Odugbesan (1969). Robert F. Thompson's excellent study of Abatàn (1969) focuses primarily on the woman as artist. Anita Glaze has done related research among the Senufo (1974) and recently published an article on female roles in various Senufo religious/aesthetic institutions (1975). The recent symposium on the Image of Woman in African Art, Harvard University, suggests that future research will begin to explore the many dimensions of this topic.

³ For the Yorùbá, women are designers of àdùírẹ cloth, muralists, and potters. Elder potters, generally those past menopause, create figured ritual pots (gãlùn) for the gods which may contain images of women. See Thompson (1969).
The Yorùbá conceive of the self as having both exterior (òdè) and interior (ìnùn) aspects. A person’s exterior reveals little or nothing about his true being, character, or intentions. It is simply his outward physical appearance. The inner aspect controls all thoughts and actions. The character, personality, and potential of an individual are believed to reside in the spiritual head or orí inùn (lit. ‘inside head’) to distinguish it from the outer or physical head (orí òdè). An expression of this belief occurs in possession trance, when a worshipper assumes the character of a deity. Informants specifically state that the spirit of a deity ‘mounts’ (giùn) the inner head (orí inùn) and causes it to swell (wùi) as the medium enters possession. To express the altered inner self, the possessed person is led away and dressed in the regalia of the deity, sometimes including instruments evocative of power and aggression (swords, cudgels, whips) or coolness and composure (fans). The medium then returns to develop the character of the deity via formal dance, thus harmonizing inner presence with outer performance.

In non-ritual situations, however, individuals make a conscious effort to conceal the nature of the inside head as a means of self-protection, for this unknowable quality of a person is revealed only when thoughts are uttered or acted out. Utterances, as expressions of the spiritual, inner self, can possess a force known as ìsè, the power to make things come to pass. This belief is apparently ancient for a number of Ife terra-cotta heads depict sacrificial victims who are gagged to prevent them from uttering a fatal curse upon their executioners (Willett 1967: 49; Awolalu 1973: 88). Revealing orí inùn can bring repercussions. Informants explain that ‘if someone voices out something which is bad, then people will be thinking bad of the person and the person can be poisoned [. . .] What is voiced out comes from inside and that is what we Yoruba call orí inùn’. A well-known prayer conveying the same

3. Dos Santos (1967: 41) explains orí inùn as ‘what is inside the head, the essential, what constitutes the “personal essence”’. See also Lawal (1974: 239) for a discussion of inner/outer concepts related to beauty and character. The Yorùbá orthography used in this paper generally follows Abraham (1958). However, I have retained the original dialectic form for oral texts collected among the Oho Egb and Anág. The translations of these texts are based on the explanations and interpretations provided by those who performed them.

4. The concept of ìsè is fundamental to Yorùbá belief. Various defined as ‘power, authority, command’ (Abraham 1958: 71), ‘a coming to pass, effect, imprecation’ (Crowther 1852: 47), ìsè has important metaphysical dimensions as well. ìsè is vital force, energy, mystical power and potential present in things and in utterances (Prince 1966: 66; Beier 1970: 49). T. J. Bowen (1858: 173-174) appears to be among the first to describe it without mention of the Yorùbá term, while Vergér (1964: 15-16) gives the fullest published exposition of the concept. ìsè encompasses both the expression ìsè which follows prayers or invocations and means ‘so be it, may it come to pass’ as well as ìsè ‘shrine’, the site of concentrated substances (like leaves, roots, foods, blood of animals) containing vital force that constitute the power of a god (òrǐsà).
concern for concealing and controlling the inner self requests ‘may my inner head not spoil the outer one’ (*ori inún mí kò mā bà ti ọđe jé*).

The Yorùbá perceive a fundamental difference between females and males in the ability to conceal *ori inún*. Male informants stress this distinction in such words as ‘women are more secretive than we. Before any woman can leak out any secret, I doubt it. But we men usually open our secret to anybody’ and ‘women have many secrets that they will never tell [. . .] except their mothers’. Secrecy is believed inherent in femaleness. A myth from the *ogbe wori* verses of the Ifá divination system illustrates this (Ogundipe 1975). The myth, which describes how a king lost his life for revealing the mysteries of the Oró cult to his wife, warns males that exposing secrets will bring destruction. Men, because of their professed inability to keep secrets, create elaborate procedures to maintain cult mysteries, supposedly from women. Yet recent research indicates that all Yorùbá cults, even those described as male cults, have at least one powerful female official in recognition of women’s superiority in matters of secrecy. For example, the Aláágbà and Ìyá Ágò̀n (male and female titles respectively) share ultimate authority in the Egúngún cult, and in certain instances, according to testimony in Iláró, Ègbádò, the Ìyá Ágò̀n may overrule the Aláágbà. The Oró cult, usually described as an exclusive male secret society, has a female elder known as Ìyá Orò. Although she may not be present at all functions, she is considered to ‘know all’ and has authority in most matters. The Ògbóni also contains a hierarchy of female titles headed by the Ìyá Èreélù. Men, explaining that ‘women must take part before a ceremony can be successful’, intimate that their efforts can be negated both physically and spiritually by female opposition.

Secrecy is sometimes explained in terms of the physical attributes of the genitalia. The penis projects outward, obviously exposed while the vagina, a dark, small orifice remains concealed in pubic hair. Witness these verses from oral literature honoring Òguùní, god of iron and war, who epitomizes masculine power.

\[\text{Honor, honor, honor today, honor to the òrisà}\\
\text{Honor to Òguùní Oniré, my husband}\\
\text{Òguùní the brave one in firing, in firing}\\
\text{Òguùní hid his wife in the bathroom}\\
\text{Òguùní killed the swordsmen}\\
\text{He destroyed them at one stroke}\\
\text{Òguùní, I love you very much, I will give you bones to lick}\\
\text{Honor to the father whose penis stood up to give birth to a child}\]

---

5. This comment, which reveals male Yorùbá uneasiness about women being part of a sisterhood united by blood, has been noted by Beier (1958: 6). A potentially destructive woman (*djé*) who gives birth to only females is accused of intentionally producing more *djé*. Using bird imagery associated with *djé*, the Yoruba say *eyé ni èyé ti eyé ‘bird is rolling on bird’* (Abraham 1958: 358).


7. Recorded at Emado Quarter, Aiyétòrò, Ègbádò, March 27, 1971.
He made his penis lengthen to give birth to a child in the house of Ijanna.
We heard how the penis struck those in the market
[Oguns] the one who saw the queen and did not cover his penis . . .

Contrast these images of overt masculine aggressiveness with the covert powers of women contained within the same text:

Honor o o o o, honor today o o o o
Odulebe [female] I, I honor you today
Old bird did not warm herself by the fire
Sick bird did not warm herself in the sun
Something secret was buried in the mother's house
Wizard's secret agreement ni jenjejenne
Honor o, honor today o o o o
Honor my mother opake na nakhe nakhe e
Opake na nakhe nakhe
Mother whose vagina causes fear to all
Mother whose pubic hair bundles up in knots
Mother who set a trap, set a trap . . .

The ability to be self-contained emerges in the concept of irojú, believed to be possessed by all women. *Irojú* is defined as 'patience' and 'perseverance' (Crowther 1852: 157). It connotes the control of self, control of orí inún and is matched by another feminine attribute attested to in the saying *owó érò lowó obinrin*, 'soothing are the hands of a woman'. The cool feminine exterior masks inner strength.8

8. Yorùbá dance often reflects the restraint of females and aggressiveness of males. In Gêlédé, male dancers masquerading as males and females act out the vital force or aṣẹ of the sexes; males move in an active, explosive manner,
The inscrutable nature of women’s secrets intensifies their power in the minds of men. According to Yorùbá belief, the concentration of vital force (àṣé) in women creates extraordinary potential that can manifests itself in both positive and negative ways. The terms olójú méjì (‘one with two faces’), àbáàra méjì (‘one with two bodies’), alááwọ méjì (‘one of two colors’) aptly express this duality and allude to the alleged powers of transformation attributed to certain women which allow them to ‘turn’ to such nocturnal creatures as bats, snakes, rats, and especially birds. As one informant explains in English: ‘You will see her one way during the day and at midnight she will turn to another thing.’

The Yorùbá term for these special powers and a woman possessing them is àjé, which is usually translated as witchcraft or witch (Morton-Williams 1956; Abraham 1958; Prince 1961; Thompson 1971). Ulli Beier (1958: 6), however, points out that the English word ‘witch’ is not a very accurate translation of àjé since àjé ‘... represents rather the mystic powers of womanhood in their more dangerous destructive aspect’. Any elderly woman, her longevity implying secret knowledge and power, may be regarded as an àjé as are all those who hold important titles in cults for the gods or ancestors. Elderly women and priestesses among the Yorùbá are neither antisocial nor the personification of evil as are ‘witches’ in European belief. Rather, they form an important segment of the population in any town and tend to be shown much respect and affection. Àjé, being a generally pejorative term, is used rarely and with caution. No one would address a woman suspected of possessing such power—virtually all elderly women past menopause—as àjé. Instead they are called awon iyá wa (‘our mothers’) and addressed personally by iyámi (‘my mother’), iyánlá (‘great mother’), or iyá ìgbà (‘old and wise one’) in recognition of their positive dimension as creative and protective progenitors, renowned healers (MacLean 1969: 37), and moderating forces within the society to assure a just apportionment of power, wealth, prestige and to maintain moral laws and conduct (Verger 1965: 159).

When angered, the mothers operate surreptitiously to seek out and consume their victims. Their attacks are believed to result in stillbirth flaunting unrestrained strength while females are portrayed through movement that is controlled, directed yet powerful. For a detailed analysis of Gélelé dance see Drewal M. T. and H. J. (1975).

9. The actions and comments of many informants confirm this judgement. In one interview, a divination priest requested we move out of sight of a priestess’s house before beginning our discussion, even though physical removal did not prevent his nervousness since as he explained ‘they [àjé] are hearing everything we are saying’. His only protection was to speak with respect. In another incident, I was warned that leaning against a wall or uttering a particular priestess’s name might provoke her anger and result in grave consequences. Finally, testimony regarding two figures on a particular Gélelé mask identified them as iyáàsé, senior female officials of the cult who were also called awon iyá wa, our mothers, a term referring to àjé (Drewal 1974b: 63).

10. To reflect Yorùbá usage, the terms ‘mother’ or ‘the mothers’ replace àjé in most of the following discussion.
and conditions such as elephantiasis, impotency, infertility, and false pregnancy which ‘turns to water’ at parturition or debilitating diseases which slowly destroy the victim without outward sign. Operating invisibly, they freely destroy in the middle of the town or farm as one of their praise poems proclaims:11

My Mother Òṣòròngà, arrogant dove that eats in the town
Famous bird that eats in a cleared farm who kills an animal without [sharing with anyone
One who makes noise [famous one] in the midnight
Who eats from the head to the arm, who eats from the liver to the heart.

Iyámi Òṣòròngà, aṣìnjú àdábà t'ìnje lárín ilú
Aṣìnjú èye t'ìnje ni gbangba òko òp'eron mahagun
Olókikí orú
A ti ori je apá, a lèdò je ọkònb

The likelihood of female possessing such power varies according to age and personality type (the nature of orí inún). Young girls who are impatient, lack self-control and exhibit anger are not generally thought to possess aje for their temperamental or fickle natures would expose and dissipate a power which must remain a mystery. In other words, ‘they don’t have secret minds, cool minds’. Very gentle, quiet, calm women are most suspect. Informants say that when slandered, cursed, or slapped, women possessing aje will ‘just look at you and beg you. Then some time later another thing will happen’. The power is so covert that women may not themselves realize that they possess it.12 Women of child-bearing age may be ‘mothers’ but—as the case may be—the loss of menstrual blood and/or lactation are believed to deplete vital life force (aše) (Parrinder 1951: 21; Awolalu 1973: 90-91). Thus the elder women (iýá agbà), those passed menopause, are most likely to possess the power, not only because of their cool, covert, secretive characters, but because they retain the vital force in their blood.13 A praise name for the aged mothers in an Egúngún invocation states ‘honor the one with the vagina that turns upside down without pouring blood’ (ìbá òbò to do ri kò do ti ko ṣe ẹjé).14 Composure and containment are thus essential qualities. ‘If you offend them, they won’t be annoyed. They will just be laughing together with the person, but what they will do to the person is inside [orí inún].’ Their very restraint communicates

12. At Sala-Orilé, Ègbádó, I was told several stories of women who unknowingly were aje. Morton-Williams (1956: 322) cites a similar experience while collecting confessions from old women accused of being aje.
13. The same considerations apply among Yorùbá potters, all of whom are women. While females of any age may make pots for everyday use (ìkikó), only the aged women may create ritual pots (ọtún). Their post-menopausal condition, evidence of spiritual power, allows them to safely manipulate an object destined for ritual use. Proximity to such spiritual forces might cause amenorrhea in a younger woman according to an elderly Ohorí potter (Ikwútan 1975).
complete control of awesome qualities unequaled by the most commanding male. The relationship between these elder women and their male counterparts (ósó) is illuminating in this regard. According to informants, every ‘mother’ must have a male ósó to carry out her work. She conceives the plan and he acts on it, confirming an operational pattern of covert versus overt behavior expected of females and males respectively.15

These powerful females occupy a position which is subordinate to that of the supreme deity Olódūmarè and Òrùnmílä, god of the Ìfá divination system, and equal to or superior to that of the gods, òrisà. As one informant explains:

‘If there is an epidemic we sacrifice to all the gods of the town. We try to conciliate them. All the mothers are the owners of all these gods. After making sacrifices to the gods, the mothers would know that we had begged them. After giving them something to eat there would be no more trouble [. . .] Our forefathers told us that these were òjè, that we must not look down on them. If we despise them it means death. We must pamper them and be living’ (. . . Awoñ babanla wa ni nwọn ti nṣo fún wa pe òjè niṣi o. A o si gbódó fojú di wọn o. Bi a ba fojú di wọn ikú ni o. A o si ma tọ wọn ao si yè) (Babalọla 1971).

Another states in English: ‘The mothers hide under all these idols.’ And a priestess confirms: ‘Ìfá is senior to them (alágbára wọn) [the mothers], but aside from Ìfá, nothing is elder to them [. . .] They are more powerful than any òrisà’ (Edun 1975). ‘The mothers’ are frequently addressed with the honorific ‘owners of the world’ (oni lori aiyé) in recognition of their omnipotence and the fact that ‘we all came out of a woman’s body’. Verger (1965) provides a number of Ìfá verses attesting to feminine suzerainty at the very creation of the world. In one of these myths (ọsa mọjì, p. 204), Òlódùmarè gave woman (Òdù) control on the condition that she use her enormous power with care, calm, discretion (máa rọra lọ rẹ̀lọ agbára)—expressive of male expectations of female behavior.

These notions of women reappear in Òrùbà cosmology. The òrisà are often categorized on the basis of their personalities as òrisà fun-fun/òrisà títù, the ‘white gods’/‘cool gods’ or òrisà ogbọnọn/òrisà lìlè, the ‘hot’ or ‘hard’ gods. Most òrisà fun-fun are female while òrisà ogbọnọn are generally male.16 The concepts of fun-fun (whiteness) or títù (coolness) as they apply to the gods, like those traits which characterize elderly women, encompass both destructive as well as constructive action. As discussed above, the cool nature of the mothers serves to conceal awesome power that is potentially constructive as well as destructive. Similarly a hot god like Shòngó or Òguñ may act constructively to give a woman children as witnessed in such names bestowed on newborn babies as Shòngodipè (‘Shòngó-consoled-us-with-the-birth-of-a-child’) or Ògúnmuyiwa (‘Ògún-brought-this-child-to-us’). On the other hand

15. Verger (1965: 143) notes the same concept.
16. However, in certain areas, Òbátála/Òrisánlà and Òrisà Oko, òrisà fun-fun, are regarded as males with generally calm, covert, restrained characters.
Sôngó, ‘if he is annoyed, pulls down the *araba* tree’ (*abínú, fá àrò́bà wó*). The concepts of coolness and hotness characterize demeanor and countenance of a person or god rather than inherent positive or negative traits.\(^{17}\) Ýánálá, a deity and one primary manifestation of feminine power, is described as cool (*oníítúù́*) and patient (*onííṣùù̀́*) despite her destructive potential as one who ‘kills without striking’. Coolness/whiteness then refers to a calm exterior which masks enormous inner strength utilized surreptitiously or covertly, while hotness refers to the overt actions of the *òríṣà ogbónón*. These terms indicate distinct operational modes, each of which can result in both destructive and constructive action. The following discussion considers one of the *òríṣà funfun*/*òríṣà túnú*, Ýánálá, who is central to the art and ritual of Èfè Gèlèdè, and epitomizes Yorùbá beliefs and concepts about the nature of women.

*Èfè*/Gèlèdè and the Ýánálá Mask

The Èfè/Gèlèdè cult,\(^{18}\) found principally among certain western Yorùbá sub-ethnic groups (Kétu, Òhó.mi, Ànàgò, Òwó.rí, Ègbá.dó, Ìbárà.pá, Sá.bé), honors the special powers of women (whether elders, ancestors, or deities) in elaborate masquerade performances. Èfè Gèlèdè annual ceremonies generally occur at the start of the new agricultural cycle (March-May). Other performances may occur throughout the year at the discretion of the female cult head (*ìyálá.sè*), usually as funeral commemoration for a cult member or in especially distressing circumstances affecting the entire community such as drought or epidemic. Performances traditionally take place in or near the main market-place—a major setting of social, religious, and economic activity involving everyone especially women. It is thus most appropriate for a ritual which seeks to gather all segments of the society (referred to as ‘children of the mothers’) in order to pay homage to female power.

The ritual consists of nocturnal (*Èfè*) and diurnal (*Gèlèdè*) performances (Drewal 1974a; 1974b; Drewal M.T. & H.J. 1975). During the course of Èfè night, Ýánálá, the Great Mother, the most sacred and generally inaccessible mask of the Èfè/Gèlèdè corpus, makes its appearance.\(^{19}\) She is *òríṣà funfun* and constitutes the very ‘foundation’ (*ìpìlè*) of the cult, the central focus of worship.

---

17. Robert F. Thompson (1973: 41), however, points out that in many African societies the concept of ‘cool’ embodies the idea of purity of mind and character as a metaphor for ‘moral aesthetic accomplishment’.

18. This ritual complex is frequently called simply Gèlèdè in the literature and by some informants. Nevertheless the Yorùbá clearly distinguish between Èfè and Gèlèdè ceremonies while recognizing their unity. Elderly informants claim ‘there can be no Èfè without Gèlèdè, and no Gèlèdè without Èfè’. The shorthand expression Èfè/Gèlèdè reflects these beliefs.

19. The Ýánálá mask analyzed in this paper occurs among the Kétu, Òhó.mi, Ànàgò, Òwó.rí, Sá.bé, and some Ègbá.dó Yorùbá. Èfè/Gèlèdè cults among the Northern Ègbá.dó have Mother masks (generally associated with female riverain divinities) whose form and performance, while different from that of Ýánálá, contain many of the same themes. See Drewal 1974c.
Preliminary masqueraders prepare the entrance of Ìyànlá, who comes in total darkness. While she is abroad, all lights must be extinguished for no one must gaze upon the face of the mother. As she moves in a gentle, slow dance (*ijó féjé*), matching her steps with the drum rhythms, the elders of the Èfè, Gèledè cult flock around her in a tight impenetrable circle that limits the audience’s view of the headdress. The headdress, carried in an almost horizontal position, is partially or totally obscured by a long white cloth which trails on the ground. Emphasizing the horizontality of the mask, the performer plunges his torso forward and maintains this crouched position throughout the performance. The elbows and knees are bent and spread laterally. This posture evokes hoary age according to Ibàiyun sources. Ankle rattles (*iku*) echo the Gèledè drum rhythms as Ìyànlá slowly advances and then retreats in a series of small amplitude jumps barely leaving the ground. She does not speak. A series of songs and drum rhythms accompany Ìyànlá creating layers of messages. At Ibàiyun,²⁰ for example, the community sings:

Ìyànlá come to the world, our mother
Kind one will not die like the evil one
Ososunu come to the world
Our mother the kind one will not die like the evil one

Ìyànlá e so wáiyé o, ìyá wa
Olóré ka kú sípo [
Ososomu e so wáiyé o
Ìyá wa olóré ka kú sípo

And:

Ososomu e e e
Honored ancestor *apahe e e e*
Mother, mother, child who brings peace to the world
Repair the world for us
Ìyànlá, child who brings peace to the world o e

Ososomu e e e
Olájogún *apahe e e e*
Ìyá, ìyá, òmọ atún aiyé ṣe
Ba wa tún aiyé ṣe
Ìyànlá, òmọ atún aiyé o e

As the songs praise the Mother, the drums by approximating the tonal patterns of Yorùbá speech, simultaneously offer another message:

Mother, Mother, the one who killed her husband in order to take a title
Come and dance, the one who killed her husband in order to take a title,
[come and dance

Stand up, stand, come and dance
One who killed her husband in order to take a title, come and dance

²⁰ Recorded at Ibàiyun, Òhòrí, November 1975. Repetition of some verses has been eliminated for brevity.
Chewing stick, come and dance
Rope from the forest, come and dance
Anthill, come and dance
Dust from the road, come and dance
Honored ancestor apake, come and dance
Come home immediately
One who killed her husband in order to take a title, come home immediately
One who has given birth to many children, come home immediately, come home now
I made sacrifice, I received glory, the day is proper
I sacrificed, I sacrificed, I sacrificed, I sacrificed
A woman will not describe what happened during travel
A woman will not tell what we have done
A woman cannot have Ajanon [title] in Orò
In this world, in this world, in this world

Yé yé, Apokodosù
Wa ka jó, Apokodosù, wá ka jó
Nde, nde, wá ka jó
Apokodosù, wá ka jó
Oringbó, wá ka jó
Okān ıgbó, wá ka jó
Bodipe, wá ka jó
Kukubole, wá ka jó
Olajogin apake, wá ka jó
Wanle wara, wara, wara
Apokodosù, wanle wara, wara, wara, wanle wara
Abiamo didé, wanle wara, wara wara, wanle wara
Moṣebo, mọgbaiyin, ọjọpé
Moṣebo, moṣebo, moṣebo, moṣebo
Obinrin ki royi in ajo
Obinrin ki ọgbun wa ọgbe
Obirin ki jé Ajanon Orò
L’aiyé, l’aiyé, l’aiyé

In darkness and completely surrounded, Ìyànlá circles the performance area and returns to the shrine where the mask remains and serves as the focus for worship.

The creation of an ìyànlá mask is attended by specific procedures. Lawani Olupọna (1975), a woodcarver from Ohumbe, explains that he does not obtain the wood for the work. This is the responsibility of all the elders in the town, regardless of cult affiliations. The proper wood is described as a ‘rare’ type.21 The elders bring it to the carver. Before any work is undertaken, an elaborate sacrificial ceremony must take place to ensure success. A white goat, white cock, white dove (eiyelé), oil, kola, and one piece of white cloth with ten pounds (typical gifts of órisà funfun) are offered. Upon completion, the elders immediately take the mask to the shrine where the final application of medicines endows the mask with spiritual force as the embodiment of Ìyànlá.

21 According to one informant, the wood is iroko. Interestingly, the iroko tree is believed to be the abode of spirits associated with the mothers and to serve as their nocturnal meeting place.
The shrine which houses Ìyánlá may vary from town to town, but certain consistencies regarding the maintenance of the mask are significant.²² At the Ketu Geledé house, Ìsálé-Ékó, Lagos, Geledé masks hang openly on the walls or rest on rafters. Ìyánlá remains in the shrine or aṣẹ, a small white house with a locked door. Palmfronds (mariwò) over the doorway serve an apotropaic function while they signal an area restricted by the presence of spiritual forces. The babalásẹ (male cult leader) murmurs a greeting to the Great Mother and carefully knocks three times before opening the door. In the center of the darkened room, raised on a concrete dais, is Ìyánlá. A spotless white cloth called oloya or aso funfun envelops her completely, barely revealing the form. Only the babalásẹ and his assistant are permitted to see the mask.

In small Òhórí, Ketu, and Ànàgó Yorùbá communities, the aṣẹ is usually located in a small clearing within a sacred forest linked by a narrow path with the Èfé/Geledé performance area. At Ibaiyun, an Òhórí village east of Pobe, the shrine is a small thatched shelter in the center of a clearing enclosed by a palmfrond fence with mariwò spanning the entrance to the grove. The thatched roof covers the remnants of an earthen mound which probably served as the altar. In the darkness of the eaves, resting upon the rafters is Ìyánlá. Before Ìyánlá could be brought out into the open, elaborate arrangements were made to prevent certain people from seeing her countenance (fig. 4), primarily young girls and women of child-bearing age who, informants explained, might ‘see the face while dreaming’, i.e. be visited or attacked by the mothers in nightmares. Several males stretched long bolts of cloth in front of the grove entrance, completely blocking the view of those who might be endangered.

A more complex shrine context exists at Iwoye in Òhórí country. A thatched structure stands in a small clearing some distance from any compound. Beside it at the end of the path is a small shrine for Èṣù/Ègégbá, messenger and confident of the mothers. A bamboo enclosure at one end of the roofed area contains a rectangular earthen mound. Three logs placed on the mound provide a platform for three Ìyánlá masks (fig. 2). These masks probably represent three generations. My informant, the Bálé of Iwoye and priest of Ìfá, Ìsegbe Osubi (1971), carved the newest Ìyánlá mask, shown in the foreground, c. 1955 (fig. 1, 2). The mask in the middle (fig. 2), almost certainly by a different hand, appears to be the second oldest of the three masks. The informant states that it was carved by an unidentified forefather (babánlá). The oldest (fig. 2, background) was made by another ancestor that he did not know. The Bálé was born c. 1890, so it is not unreasonable to assume that this oldest mask may date from the latter half of the 19th century.

²² Some small communities of limited resources may not have Ìyánlá masks. However, in most cases, a grove and/or shrine are maintained in her honor.
A carefully draped white cloth veils the two older masks. Despite their age and loss of pigment, they have been carefully maintained within the shrine. They are no longer used in performance but remain upon the dais to serve as a focus of worship. Only the newest emerges from the shrine to perform at night and only on certain occasions—annual Òfè Gèlèdè ceremonies, during reparation of the shrine, or in times of serious communal distress such as epidemics or drought. In shrine context then, Ìyànlá remains partially or completely concealed whether being in an inner shrine, locked in a room, wrapped in cloth, or veiled by a curtain.

The Ìyànlá mask, despite its central importance to the whole concept of Òfè Gèlèdè, has received only brief mention in an otherwise sizeable body of literature on the cult.\(^{23}\) Perhaps because of its inaccessibility. The first mention of the form occurs in notes on Òfè Gèlèdè in Lagos by K. C. Murray (1946) which state that in the cult house (probably at Ìsèlè-Èkò, founded by Kétu immigrants) is kept ‘the secret part of Gèlèdè which non-members may not see. This is a very “beautiful” carving of a woman about four feet high which is called Ìyalá—the great mother’. It is not clear whether the ‘secret part of Gèlèdè’ is a statue or mask since apparently Murray had to rely on verbal testimony rather than visual evidence.\(^{24}\)

Ulli Beier (1958: 10), based upon Kétu and Porto-Novo sources, gave the first published account of the mother mask: ‘The mask “Iya” is the only secret mask among the Gelede masks. It represents Ìyáláshe [female head of the cult] [. . .] Iya must not be seen by anybody [. . .] the dancer’s face is uncovered but the mask itself is covered from sight with white cloth and the dancer carries a long trail of white cloth behind him.’

Northeast of Kétu in the town of Ìjió (town of Òyó, Kétu, and Sábé people), Ìyànlá is also known as Onìlè (owner of earth) and Ódúà.\(^{25}\) Peggy Harper (1970: 75) notes that a ‘large black mask behind a curtain in the darkness of the inner shrine is the embodiment of Ìyànlá. Only Ìyáláshe may enter to pray and place the sacrifice on a raised sphere moulded out of the earthen floor next to the mask which is raised on a mud dais. This is the only mask which survived a fire in 1951 and is never removed from the shrine.’

None of the above works illustrate the mask. The first published illustration of an Ìyànlá mask (although not identified as such) appeared

---


\(^{24}\) According to Thompson (1974b), he was told of but not permitted to see a mask for the Great Mother in the Gèlèdè shrine at Ìbutè Metta, Lagos, which serves as a focus for the devotions of cult members.

\(^{25}\) Despite variations in the deities honored in different places, they all embody the same fundamental attributes of female power. Thus in some areas the Great Mother is personified as Onìlè (Earth Mother) while in others she may be Ódúà/ Ódudua, Ìrisànìa/Obàtálá, or Ìyànlá/Ososonmu.
in Clouzot and Level (1926: pl. 38) with the information ‘Dahomean mask or headdress, height 60 mm’\textsuperscript{26} (fig. 5). The only other example was published by William Fagg (1968: pl. 117) and subsequently by Robert F. Thompson (1974a: 129, pl. 165). Fagg, although uncertain of its exact identity or function, suggests that ‘it is probable [ . . . ] that it is a rare mask representing the Gelede spirit (Orisa Gelede), with a board carved below the chin; it is brought out only at night.’ He states that he saw one at Pobè in 1950 while the mask illustrated was collected in the village of Banigbe Poro-Poro near Pobè. The ‘Gelede spirit’ is in fact the face of the Great Mother, Òyánlá.

Thomas Moulero, in a 1970 manuscript entitled ‘Le Guèlèdè’, discusses the Great Mother mask and illustrates one (fig. 6) from a village near Kétu. Moulero writes: ‘The enormous mask which precedes the night performance is the personification of the “creative nature” that people call “ososomu” (Orisanla), or Obatala, the great goddess of the Yoruba’ (Moulero 1970: 5). He continues: ‘. . . the performer wears a large mask to which people sacrifice chickens and other things in the shrine called Obatala/Orisanla. It [the mask] is covered with a large white cloth. [ . . . ] People put out all fires and the masquerader performs . . . ’ These few brief references continue to stress the aura of mystery which surrounds the form.

\textit{Iconology}

Simplicity, boldness of motif, and scale distinguish Òyánlá from other masks in the Èfè/Gèlèdè corpus\textsuperscript{27} (figs. 1-6). It has two parts: the head and a long flat board-like extension below the chin. Together the head and projection (between 15 and 36 inches in length) are significantly larger than almost all Èfè and Gèlèdè masks. The head follows Gèlèdè masking traditions, basically hemispherical in shape to fit over the upper portion of the performer’s head and forehead. The features are strong, massive and clearly defined. The deep-set, bulging eyes often dominate the face. Treatment of the upper head varies but never approaches the complex superstructures common in Èfè and Gèlèdè masks. Some depict shaven heads while others indicate simply a hairline or a variety of hairstyles, the most persistent being a prominent tuft of hair (ôṣù) crowning the center of the head (fig. 4). The only other motifs are a snake encircling the head or bird perched on top. Ears are sometimes absent. When shown, they vary from the standard Yorùbá style and position to small pointed animal-like ears placed high on the temples. Standard cicatrization (âbàja or pèlè) may appear although several Òyánlá masks have no marks at all.

\textsuperscript{26} I am indebted to William Fagg for this reference.

\textsuperscript{27} The following description is based on a corpus of fourteen Òyánlá masks: two from published sources, eight photographed in the field, two from drawings by artist informants who have carved the mask, and two from verbal descriptions by specialist informants (priests and artists).
The second part, probably the most distinctive feature of the head-dress, is a long, flat or slightly curved projection which emerges from the jawline or chin of the head and generally extends one to two feet. In some, the projection engulfs the lower face and extends downward and expands outward terminating in a straight or slightly curved lower edge (figs. 4, 5, 6). In other examples the projection emanates from a more narrow connection at the chin or lower portion of the face and expands to form an overall keyhole shape (figs. 1, 2, 3). Several have a series of dark blue or black vertical lines (3 to 7) painted on the surface while others are left unmarked. Only one example (fig. 3) exhibits a more elaborate painted design consisting of three waving vertical lines bisected by five horizontal bars terminating with the word yèyé (a term of endearment meaning ‘mother’) painted across the bottom of the projection. Aside from these few designs, surfaces are plain, somewhat rough in texture, and almost always white in color.

The iconographic simplicity of the Ìyànålá mask and the secrecy attending it in performance and shrine context may be related to the practice of endowing the object with vital force. As noted above, upon completion of the form, the elders apply certain invisible substances or ‘medicine’ to the mask. The insertion or application of substances possessing àṣẹ, together with invocations, activate ritual objects and ensure efficacy.\(^{28}\) The concentration of these substances in an object or at the shrine or face (ọjùbọ) of the ọrìṣà constitutes that deity’s power or essence. The medicines invested in the Ìyànålá mask are an essential part of the image and determine, as much as any visible motifs, people’s ideas, attitudes, and reactions concerning the form. What is unseen, yet intellectually and emotionally acknowledged by the spectators, must be considered part of the work of art. In the case of Ìyànålá, the relatively uncomplicated iconography in fact underscores the invisible substances which are as effective in evoking a response as forms with accumulated visual substances and complex imagery.

Elaborate procedures of extinguishing all lights and encircling the masquerader with an impenetrable circle of cult elders together with the ‘medicine’ known by all to be concealed in the mask assure Ìyànålá’s secrecy. As an informant explains: ‘She cannot come out without medicine. That is why they don’t like people to be near it [the mask].’ The radiating power of these same medicines is believed to cause amenorrhea, infertility, insanity, or blindness.\(^{29}\) These same medicines allow

---

\(^{28}\) PRINCE (1960: 67) notes the use of images, medicines and words in the practice of curse and invocation.

\(^{29}\) VERGER (1965: 224-227) records a myth about the primordial mother, Odù, who prohibits anyone from seeing her ‘face’. Odù’s ‘face’ refers to secret, powerful medicines kept in a closed container/calabash which, if seen, would cause instant blindness. The face also refers to the shrine, ọjùbọ (the face of the offerings) or ọjù ọrìṣà (the face of the deity). It is the closed container placed on the shrine which serves as the focal point for prayers, divinations, and sacrifices and literally encloses the vital force of the deity.
Fig. 3. — Ìyànlá mask, wood, white, blue, red, green. Photographed in Bénin (Dahomey), 1975. Probably from the Kétu area.

Fig. 4. — Ìyànlá/Ososomu mask, wood, white, flanked by two Gèlèdè masks. Photographed in Ibyiyan, an Òhòrfí village east of Ìpòbè, 1975. Carved by Ògùnyìmò́kà. Note prominent tuft of hair (òṣù) crowning head.
Fig. 1. — Ìyànlá mask on the shrine at Iwoye, Oṣòfí, carved by Ìgbẹbẹ Osubí, c. 1955. Photographed, 1973.

Fig. 2. — Three Ìyànlá masks, wood, white, on the shrine at Iwoye, Oṣòfí. A white cloth veils the oldest (background) and second oldest (middle). The newest mask (foreground) was carved by Ìgbẹbẹ Osubí, c. 1955. Photographed, 1973.
rush of the people’, although he could hear the songs and drums. What has the greatest impact upon all present is the invisible—the obstructed view and concealed medicine—that gives the mask a special aura of power. Òyánlá’s awesome power resides in its unknowableness. Like women, as perceived by men in Yorùbá culture, Òyánlá is secretive.

The depiction of a tuft of hair (òsù) on three Òyánlá masks evokes the hidden dimension. An initiate who dedicates himself to an ọrìṣà will have certain substances rubbed into incisions cut on the cranium to allow the deity to ‘mount’ his inner head or possess him (Verger 1954: 394; 1957: 71). A tuft of hair or òsù is allowed to grow over the incisions to mark the place where medicine has been inserted and to signify the bond between devotee and deity. The òsù announces ritual commitment and endows the bearer with the spiritual force of his deity. Òyánlá depicted as wearing an òsù declares her position as arch priestess possessing spiritual power. Ògündipẹ (1975), a diviner and carver, when asked if there was anything else besides the òsù on the head replied ‘yes, there is something else but I don’t know what it is . . . ’ Pointing to a closed container, he said ‘Do you see this? Can you tell me what is inside? We can only see the outside of Ososomu but we cannot say anything about what is prepared inside except the elders. [. . .] Ososomu is prepared with medicine.’ The òsù indicates the presence of medicine.

The full significance of Òyánlá’s òsù emerges in the context of her nocturnal performance. While the community hails her with songs, the drummers approximate the tonal patterns of spoken Yorùbá and offer the phrase ‘apokodosù’ (a pa ọko di ọsù) meaning ‘the one who kills her husband in order to take a title’ (symbolized by the òsù). Another variant from Pobe (Ogündipẹ 1975) elaborates further: Apokodosù, agbokù ọko fi ko boletì ‘The one who kills her husband in order to take a title, the one who hears of her husband’s death and shows no concern’.

The òsù itself is evidence of ritual obligation and of the link between man and the gods as well as a visible sign of invisible substances. In the context of Òyánlá, a woman who killed her husband to have an òsù also evokes avaricious power.

The color white (funfun) pervades the imagery of Òyánlá. In the realm of the gods, it will be recalled, whiteness (funfun) is synonymous with outer composure (tútù) and covert action—supremely feminine attributes. White may also suggest the state of purity or cleanliness ascribed to elderly women past menopause for it is said that ‘Ososomu is clean. She doesn’t like anything that is dirty. [. . .] When women are passing blood it is a bad thing.’ Yorùbá males, who regard menstrual blood as impure or polluting, explain that its purpose is to ‘wash out all

31. Two variations on this should be noted. At Ìjú, the mask is described as ‘black’ (Harper 1970: 75). This may be explained by its condition after the fire noted by the author and also the fact that it no longer leaves the shrine. At Ohunmbe, the carver, Lawani Olupọna (1975) states it is not painted with any color, which may in fact constitute ‘white’.
that has been happening between a man and a woman.' More importantly, menses, which by definition contains ìşẹ, can bring misfortune to a man (Prince 1961: 798) and neutralize any medicinal preparations. Thus an owner of an ancestral masquerade (Egúngún) containing protective amulets prevents his menstruating wife from entering the room in which it is stored because 'it is contrary for the medicine to come into contact with the odor of menstruation'. By the same token, the strength of the medicines applied to Ìyànlà's image can 'dry off' a young woman's menstruation. Keeping young girls and women at a distance from Ìyànlà protects them from her radiating powers. Ìyànlà embodies the composure and covertness of the ìrísà funṣun and the ritual purity of one beyond the age of menstruation.

The use of white cloth adds a further dimension to these themes. In shrine context, cloth heightens the mystery of the mother's face or conceals it completely. At Iwoye, a sheer white curtain partially covers two Ìyànlà masks, softening the impact of the bold forms (fig. 2). At Ìjíó, Ìyànlà is kept behind a curtain in the inner recesses of the shrine (Harper 1970: 75). At the Gèèçèè shrine at Ìsálè-Èkó, Lagos, the mask is completely wrapped in a spotless white cloth. Only the general outline of rounded head and projecting board can be perceived.

In performance, a large white cloth makes up the costume of the dancer representing Ìyànlà. Attached to the wood mask, the cloth extends more than eight to ten yards in length. It is intended to trail along the ground behind the masquerader. The length of the trailing garment implies at once the generosity of the community and the great age of the eternal Mother. A comparable situation exists in Egúngún. Masqueraders representing the collective ancestors of various lineages, Baba Parikoko, have enormously long trailing cloths, often described as being up to 100 yards in length. Before each yearly appearance of the masqueraders, lineage members contribute money to lengthen the garment. Lineages compete to display the longest Baba Parikoko, because length is evidence of the seniority and status of the father and, in addition, the status and generosity of the descendants who have spent for the cloth. In contrast to the purchase of the Egúngún cloth as an expression of lineage allegiance, the mother's cloth represents extra-lineal or communal unity and cohesion. When Ìyànlà appears the community sings: 'The cloth of others is sweet to trail on the ground.' Ososum has none. The cloth of others is sweet to trail on the ground' (Aṣò alaṣọ dún ìgbalè. Ososum ó ni kọ. Aṣò alaṣọ dún ìgbalè). The song stresses the fact that each member of the community is expected to make a small contribution toward the purchase of the mother's cloth. Every year the community provides new cloth as a gesture of renewed support. As is the common practice in Yorùbá compounds, children bathe and clothe elderly women, who have grown so old that they have lost the physical strength to care for themselves. By contributing
toward the purchase of a new cloth, the community takes care of its ancestral mother fulfilling a social obligation.32

The emphasis on communal cohesion becomes evident again after the appearance of Ìyànlná. A masked soloist, Òrò Èfè, appears and offers songs which contain social commentary (Drewal 1974a). These songs are then repeated by a chorus of male and female cult members. The chorus, supported by the rhythms of the drum ensemble, continues to sing until the entire audience learns the song and joins in the performance in a united and joyful manner. These songs, like all utterances in Yorùbá belief, contain àṣẹ, the power to make things come to pass (Beier 1970: 49; Prince 1960: 66-67). Èfè songs are in effect the public equivalent of private invocations directed toward deities, ancestors, and the mothers. The communal voicing of public opinion initiated by Òrò Èfè assures their efficacy. So too the communal act of purchasing Ìyànlná’s cloth is in a sense a visual prayer to ‘the mother of us all’ that has the combined àṣẹ of individuals to maintain health, wealth, and stability.

Scale is a significant feature of the Ìyànlná mask. The suffix ̀nlá in Ìyànlná meaning ‘big’ or ‘great’ implies both physical size and importance (Abraham 1958: 444). Size in costuming reinforces notions of social importance (Drewal 1976). The size of the head suggests spiritual strength. The Ìyànlná mask at Lagos was ‘about four feet high’ (Murray 1946: 3). At Ìjìó it was described as ‘large’ (Harper 1970: 75), and Moulero (1970: 47) writes ‘the enormous mask’ and includes the following song:

Oriṣanla [Ìyànlná] a e! She has come
With her enormous head
Ososomu [Ìyànlná] must not be late
It is her pride that makes her do it

Size distinguishes the Mother mask from the rest of the Gèlèdé corpus (fig. 4) and suggests her awesome powers. At Igbemee-Ile, the head man, in describing Ìyànlná masks he had seen at Isele and Pobe stressed the size with words such as ‘she is very big’ and ‘enormous’. A carver and priest of Ifá, Ogúndípẹ, remarked that when Ìyànlná comes out ‘the [young] women must not see her because she is too huge (tobinu)’. The scale of the mask recalls the inner head (orí inúnl), source of covert power. Proximity with this radiating force is believed to terminate a woman’s menstruation. The prominence of the forehead recalls descriptions of possession in which the head ‘swells’ (wú) with the spiritual

---

32. See Bascom (1951: 496) for a discussion of the social importance of spending money.
presence. This stress upon size is an expression of awe for something that cannot be encompassed, a power that is omnipotent.

The most distinctive feature of the Ìyànlá mask is a board-like projection from the chin. This feature is consistently identified as a beard (îrùngbôn). At Ìlărò, the 'bottom' of the mask is explained as a 'long beard'. At Ohumbe, an Òhòrì Yorùbá town east of Pobé, the carver of an Ìyànlá mask, Lawani Olupọna (1975) states that 'it has no arms or legs, only the head and it should have a beard which should be long'. Every Ìyànlá mask observed and discussed with informants or sketched by artists possesses a long beard. A beard defines an elder (àgbàlàgbà) with all the connotations of knowledge and wisdom that such status implies. But in the feminine realm the beard takes on additional meanings for, by definition, a bearded woman possesses extraordinary spiritual power. She is àjé. Beards depicted in other Yorùbá sculptural contexts (i.e. on males) are much more reduced in size and are darkened. The exaggeration and elongation of the mother's beard emphasizes her extraordinary nature, for the beard on a woman 'will not be like a man's own'. The length of the beard, like the size of the headdress and the length of the cloth costume implies longevity and commanding status. The additional element of whiteness emphasizes these qualities for the Yoruba say, 'ewù logbó, ìrùngbôn lágbá', meaning 'age (wisdom) is shown by white hair while maturity is simply indicated by a beard' (Abraham 1958: 169). The beard also suggests the transformation powers of the mothers. An informant remarked: 'If you see any woman with a bearded chin, she is abáàra mèjì [one possessing two bodies]. You will see her one way during the day and at midnight she will turn to another thing.'

Other icons either suggest or depict transformations. In two Ìyànlá headdresses, the ears are decidedly non-human (figs. 1, 2, 6). Placed high on the temples of Ìyànlá's forehead, they are small, slender and vertically oriented, coming to a sharp point at the top. They are unlike any ear forms on Èfè or Gèlèdè masks depicting humans and can only be interpreted as animal-like in conception.

In a more explicit reference to transformation, described by Olupọna (1975), a bird surmounts the head of Ìyànlá. Birds, it will be recalled, are a common symbol of the mothers in transformed state. A song offered by the community at Ibaiyun toward the close of Ìyànlá's appearance invites the mothers to dance:

Honored elder apake, come dance with us
All birds, come dance with us

Olájogún apake ko ba ni jó
Gbogbo èye ko ba ni jó

33. For other references to bearded females in Yorùbá myth and art, see Idowu (1962: 91), Williams (1964), and Thompson (1971, ch. 6).
And another informant says ‘... in the midnight, when the drums are playing, the mask [Iyãnlä] can turn to a bird’. 34

Concealment is the dominant theme of Iyãnlä in performance, shrine context, and iconography. The striking feature of Iyãnlä’s performance during Ò̀ṣè is that its impact is based upon what is unseen rather than what is seen. In shrine context, the wrapped, veiled or guarded image of Iyãnlä sustains an aura of mystery. Through the invested interest of the community, each member having contributed to the purchase of her cloth, Iyãnlä remains accessible although visually restricted. The austere quality of the mask enhances its visual power: outer simplicity stresses inner presence. The pervading whiteness of the masquerade conveys antiquity, ritual purity, and a composed exterior that masks covert action. Bulging formidable eyes and forehead crowned by a tuft of hair (òsù́) suggest a state of possession, an inner head swollen (wú́) with spiritual presence. Images of transformation—beard, animal-like ears, snakes, and birds—‘emerge’ from the head, giving partial definition to the personal essence or ori inún of Iyãnlä while emphasizing a covert character. By ritually caring for their mother, the community derives benefits from an enigmatic force. As an elder succinctly declared, ‘we must pamper them [the mothers] and be living’.

*  

This paper analyses male perceptions of the nature of women as they emerge in the ritual and form of the mask for Iyãnlä, the Great Mother. Iyãnlä, as an example of beliefs about women translated into a visual form, concentrates on the mystical aspects of womanhood. Other images of females, combining disparate symbols and created by men, may focus on other aspects although most define specific states of being determined primarily by the presence or absence of menstrual blood. Caryatids in the form of kneeling or seated female figures (arugbá) carry receptacles containing the vital force of an órìṣà to serve as shrine sculpture. The arugbá suggests virginity or a pre-pubescent state required for the ritual task of carrying powerful medicines. Mothers shown nursing or carrying children represent the long weaning period (approximately two years), a time of sexual abstinence and suppressed menstruation (Matthews 1949: 271) which is seen as a state of purity or ritual cleanliness. Depictions of female aboré, those who present offerings to the órìṣà, communicate similar ideas. Pregnant females and market-women appear in the body plates and headdresses of Gèììèìè masqueraders to portray another state of being as well as the important role played by women in the economic system of the Yorùbá. Finally, regalia such as necklaces, bracelets, garments, rattles, fans, or staffs define priest-

34. BIEER (1958: 16) describing a nocturnal appearance of Iyãnlä, notes that when the mothers are asked to join the assembled crowd ‘... their answer can be heard coming from the trees in the form of birds’ cries’. 

esses—a role usually reserved for those past menopause. These few examples only hint at the variety of female images. Only detailed analyses of male attitudes, beliefs, and practices regarding women can reveal the full significance of depictions of the female in ritual art and, in the process, improve our understanding of African cultures generally.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

ABRAHAM, R. C.  

AWOLALU, J. O.  

BASCOM, W. R.  

BEIER, H. U.  


BERNOLLES, J.  
1966 ‘Note sur les masques de la société Guèlèdè de Savè (Dahomey central)’, *Études dahoméennes*, no spéc.: 23-35.

BOWEN, T. J.  

CLOUZOT, H. & A. LEVEL  
1926 *Sculptures africaines et océaniennes* (Paris).

CROWTHER, S. A.  
1852 *Grammar and Vocabulary of the Yoruba Language* (London).

DOS SANTOS, D. M.  

DREWAL, H. J.  


DREWAL, M. T. and H. J.  

FAGG, W.  

1968 *African Tribal Images: The Katherine White Reswick Collection* (Cleveland).

GLAZE, A.  
1974 ‘Staff for a Sambali: The Champion Cultivator Ideal in Senufo Art and

HENRY DREWAL


HARPER, P.

IDOWU, E. B.
1962 Òlòdùmarè, God in Yoruba Belief (London).

KERCHACHE, J.

LAWAL, B.

MACLEAN, U.

MATTHEWS, D. S.

MORTON-WILLIAMS, P.

MOULERO, T.

MURRAY, K. C.
1946 'Notes on Gèlèdè', unpubl. ms. (Lagos).

ODUGBESAN, C.

OLABIMTAN, A.

PARRINDER, E. G.

PRINCE, R.


THOMPSON, R. F.


1974a African Art in Motion (Los Angeles).

1974b Personal communication, March.

VERGER, P.

1957 'Note sur le culte des Orisha et Vodun à Bahia, la baie de tous les Saints au Brésil et à l'ancienne Côte des Esclaves en Afrique (Dakar).


**Interviews**


OGUNIDIPE, R., Babalawo and carver (lláró, Nigeria): October and November 18, 1975.


**H. DREWAL** — *L’art et le concept de féminité dans la culture yoruba*. La conception de l’essence féminine chez les Yoruba est dominée par la notion d’intériorité (*órí imín*), à laquelle se rattachent les notions de secret, de calme, de froid et la couleur blanche, qui s’opposent terme à terme aux notions symétriques caractérisant la masculinité. Les femmes ménopausées (et, dans une moindre mesure, impubères, enceintes ou allaitant) sont chargées d’une force magique, *àṣe*, supérieure à celle des ìdìṣà. Ces caractéristiques et ces pouvoirs sont symbolisés dans le masque barbu et voilé de blanc de la Grande Mère, Ìyánlá, personnage central du culte Òfè-Gèlèdè, à la fois secret et accessible aux membres de la communauté.