

A final major cluster of meanings associated with the vulva relates to its association with wealth. Such an association expresses itself in a broad variety of cultures and in different ways. Shells in general have been and still are symbols of the vulva; the earliest known example is a Magdalenian (Upper Paleolithic) fragment of bone from Arudy in southwestern France depicting a horse's head in the act of licking a yonic shell. However, the link between the vulva and wealth has been represented perhaps most prevalently by the cowrie shell, which has served as a medium of economic exchange in several cultures, particularly in West Africa and India. This smooth univalve bears in its shape and coloring an unmistakable resemblance to the vulva, which undoubtedly accounts for the association in as widely separated regions as West and North Africa, South Asia, Japan, and the Pacific Islands.

The complex of ideas relating wealth and fertility to the vulva is further illustrated by an example from the West African Tiv culture. One of their most sacred objects, symbolizing the fertility of their tribal land and the well-being of its inhabitants, is a human tibia, decorated and ornamented in the shape of a woman, with cowrie shells for the eyes and sometimes on the front of the body as well. It has a hole at the place of the navel; the decorations around it are the same as the scarifications produced on women's bodies at puberty. When disaster threatens or has taken place, and also in annual renewal ceremonies, this object, called the *imborivungu* ("owl pipe") is used ritually. In a secret ritual the elders pour blood from a miscarried fetus into its navel hole. The *imborivungu* is then shaken over fields and in wells to ensure the fertility of the land and of the women. In this example, the yonic cowries, along with the abdominal designs, identify the sacred object as a fertile woman. The ritual is intended to bring about both material abundance—since good crops are the primary source of wealth in agricultural societies—and the fertility of women. Here again one finds the nearly universal equation between the fertility of the earth, the source of wealth, and the fertility of women.

SEE ALSO Caves; Feminine Sacrality; Paleolithic Religion; Prehistoric Religions, article on Old Europe.

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FRÉDÉRIQUE APFFEL-MARGLIN (1987 AND 2005)

YORUBA RELIGION. The twelve to fifteen million Yoruba people of southwestern Nigeria, the Republic of Benin (formerly Dahomey), and Togo (topographically the area is defined as that between 6°0–9°5' 2°41'–6° east longitude) are the heirs of one of the oldest cultural traditions in West Africa. Archaeological and linguistic evidence indicate that the Yoruba have lived in their present habitat since at least the fifth century BCE. The development of the regional dialects that distinguish the Yoruba subgroups and the process of urbanization, which developed into a social system unique among sub-Saharan African peoples, took place during the first millennium BCE. By the ninth century the ancient city of Ile-Ife was thriving, and in the next five centuries

Ifẹ artists would create terracotta and bronze sculptures that are now among Africa's artistic treasures.

Both Yoruba myth and oral history refer to Oduduwa (also known as Odua) as the first king and founder of the Yoruba people. Some myths portray him as the creator god and assert that the place of creation was Ile-Ifẹ, which subsequently became the site of Oduduwa's throne. Oral history, however, suggests that the story of Oduduwa's assumption of the throne at Ifẹ refers to a conquest of the indigenes of the Ifẹ area prior to the ninth century by persons from "the east." While it is increasingly apparent that the sociopolitical model of a town presided over by a paramount chief or king (*oba*), was well established in Ifẹ and present among other Yoruba subgroups, the followers of Oduduwa developed the urban tradition and enhanced the role of the king. In later years, groups of people who sought to establish their political legitimacy (even if they were immigrants) were required to trace their descent from Oduduwa. Such people were known as "the sons of Oduduwa," and they wore beaded crowns (*adenla*) given to them by Oduduwa as the symbol of their sacred authority (*aṣẹ*).

Origin myths, festival rituals, and oral traditions associate the indigenous peoples with Ọbatala, the deity (*oriṣa*) who fashions the human body. And because he too was an *oba*, his priests wear white, conical, beaded crowns similar to those reserved for "the sons of Oduduwa." The myths and rituals also refer to a great struggle between Ọbatala and Oduduwa at the time of creation, following Oduduwa's theft of the privilege granted by Ọlórún (Olodumare), the high god, to Ọbatala to create the earth and its inhabitants. In the town of Itapa, the sequence of rituals that composes the annual festival of Ọbatala reenacts a battle between Oduduwa and Ọbatala, Oduduwa's victory over and the banishment of Ọbatala, and the rejoicing that took place among the gods and humankind with the return of Ọbatala at the invitation of Oduduwa. And there is the tradition among the Ọyọ Yoruba of the unwarranted imprisonment of Ọbatala by Ẓango and the thunder god's release of the wandering, ancient king after famine and barrenness threatened field and home.

In these myths and rituals there is a historical remembrance of a usurpation of power and the acknowledgment that a violent conflict and a tenuous reconciliation gave birth to modern Yoruba culture. The remembrance, however, has not only to do with a past time, with historical and cultural origins; it is also a statement about the nature and limits of the authority of kings in defining the moral basis of Yoruba society. It is also about the importance of Ile-Ifẹ as the symbol of Yoruba cultural homogeneity, while acknowledging the distinctiveness and the independence of other Yoruba subgroups.

There are approximately twenty subgroups, each identifiable by its distinctive variation in linguistic, social, political, and religious patterns born of the history of the region. Among the principal groups are the Egbá and Egbado in the southwest, the Ijẹbu in the southern and southeast, the Ọyọ

in the central and northwest, the Ifẹ and the Ijẹṣa in the central, the Owo in the eastern, and the Igbomina and Ekiti in the northeast regions. Throughout Yorubaland, the social system is patrilineal and patrilocal, although among the Egbá and Egbado there are elements of a dual descent system. The extended family (*idile*), which dwells in the father's compound so long as space and circumstance permit, is the essential social unit and the primary context in which self-awareness and social awareness are forged. Thus, Ọdun Egungun, the annual festival for the patrilineal ancestors, is the most widespread and important festival in the Yoruba liturgical calendar. Elaborate masquerades (*egungun*), are created of layers of cloths of dark colors with white serrated edges. The costume covers the dancer, who moves about the compound or town with stately pace, occasionally performing whirling movements, causing the cloths to splay out in constantly changing patterns. In movement and appearance the masquerade depicts the presence and power (*aṣẹ*) of the ancestors. The ancestors are those persons who established the "house" (*ile*) and the family and who continue to stand surety for its integrity and survival against threats of witchcraft and disease, so long as their heirs acknowledge the ancestral presence.

While masquerades for the patrilineal ancestors are found among all the Yoruba, there are other masked festivals that are distinctive to particular areas, reflecting the regional history that has shaped the Yoruba experience. The Yoruba peoples of the southwest (the Anago, Awori, Egbado, Kẹtu, and Egbá) celebrate the Gẹlẹdẹ festival at the time of the spring rains. The festival honors *awon iya wa* ("the mothers"), a collective term for the female power (*aṣẹ*) possessed by all women but especially manifest in certain elderly women and in female ancestors and deities. It is the awesome power of woman in its procreative and destructive capacities that is celebrated and acknowledged. Among the Ijẹbu peoples of the south the annual festival for Agẹmọ, an *oriṣa* whose power is represented by the chameleon, brings sixteen priest-chiefs famed for their magical or manipulative powers from towns surrounding the capital city of Ijẹbu-Ode into ritual contests of curse and masked dance with one another and then into the city, where they petition and are received by the Awujale, the *oba* of Ijẹbu-Ode. The secret power of the priest-chiefs meets the sacred power of the crown. Each is required to acknowledge the role of the other in the complex balance of power that constitutes Ijẹbu political life. The Eḽefon and Epa festivals are masquerades performed in the towns of such Yoruba subgroups as the Igbomina and Ekiti in honor of persons and families whose lives embodied the social values by which Yoruba culture has been defined in the northeastern area. The helmet masks with their large sculptures are balanced on the dancers' heads and are the focus of ritual sacrifice (*ebọ*) and songs of praise (*oriki*) throughout the festival. They are images of the sacred power of those who founded the town or contributed to its life in important ways. Thus, while individual masks are associated with particular families, they also refer to the roles of hunter,

warrior, king, herbalist-priest, and leader of women, roles that transcend lineage ties and express in their collectivity cultural achievement. Their powers are akin to those of the *oriṣa*, the gods of the Yoruba pantheon.

According to the Yoruba, there are 401 *oriṣa* who line the road to heaven. All of them are thought to have been humans who, because they led notable lives, became *oriṣa* at the time of their death. For example, Šango, the god of thunder, was a legendary king of Oyo before he became an *oriṣa*. The extraordinary number of *oriṣa* reflects the regional variation in their worship. Šango is the patron deity of the kings of Oyo, and his shrines are important in those towns that were once part of the old Oyo empire (c. 1600–1790). But in Ile-Ife, or in communities to the south and east, the role of Šango and the degree to which he is worshiped diminishes markedly. As one moves from one part of Yorubaland to another, it will be Oṣun, goddess of medicinal waters, or Oko, god of the farm, or Erinle, god of forest and stream, or Qbatala or Agemo whose shrines and festivals shape the religious life of a people. Furthermore, the *oriṣa* have multiple names. Some call Šango Qba Koso (“king of Koso”); others greet him as Balogunle Ado (“leader of warriors at Ado”). Šango is also addressed as Abinufarokotu (“one who violently uproots an *iroko* tree”), Qko Iyemonja (“husband of Iyemonja”), or Lagiaoogun (“he who is mighty in the use of magical powers”), names that reveal the varied and distinctive experiences of his devotees and their relationship to the *oriṣa*. The multiplicity (or fragmentation) of the *oriṣa* is also a consequence of the historical dislocation of peoples that occurred during the intertribal wars of the nineteenth century. When persons and groups were forced to move from one area to another, their *oriṣa* went with them, shaping and being shaped by the new world of their devotees’ experience.

Of all the *oriṣa* it is Ogun, god of iron and of war, whose worship is most widespread. It is said that there are seven Ogun, including Ogun of the blacksmiths, Ogun of the hunters, Ogun of the warriors, and Ogun Onire. Ire is a town in northeast Yorubaland where Ogun was once the leader of warriors and where he “sank into the ground” after killing persons in a great rage, having misunderstood their vow of ritual silence as a personal affront. As with other *oriṣa*, Ogun expresses and shapes a people’s experience with respect to a particular aspect of their lives. In the case of Ogun, it is the experience of violence and culture: His myths and rituals articulate for the Yoruba the irony that cultural existence entails destruction and death. One must kill in order to live. And such a situation carries with it the danger that the destruction will go beyond culturally legitimate need, destroying that which it should serve. Thus, to employ Ogun’s power, one must be aware of Ogun’s character (*iwa*) and be cognizant that the beneficent god can become the outraged *oriṣa* who bites himself.

As with Ogun, each of the *oriṣa*, in the diversity and individuality of their persons and attributes, may be understood as providing an explanatory system and a means of

coping with human suffering. Rarely does only one *oriṣa* lay claim to a person. Ogun or Šango or Oṣun may dominate one’s life and shape one’s perception of self and world, but other *oriṣa* will have their artifacts on the shrine, as well as their claims and influence upon one’s life. Just as the Yoruba dancer must respond to the multiple rhythms of the drums, so must the soul attentive to the powers of the *oriṣa* respond to their diverse claims. The complexity of the response may overwhelm one. But as in the ability of the dancer to be conscious of and respond to every instrument of the orchestra, so in sacrificing to all the *oriṣa* who call, the worshiper (*olusin*, “he who serves”) can know the richness of life and its complexity and can achieve the superior poise, the equanimity of one who possesses *ase* amid the contradictions of life. Thus, when one considers the configuration of *oriṣa* symbols on a devotee’s shrine or the cluster of shrines and festivals for the *oriṣa* in a particular town or the pantheon as a whole, as a total system, one discerns that the total assemblage of *oriṣa* expresses in its totality a worldview. And it is in the reality of this worldview that Yoruba experience, at the personal and social levels, is given coherence and meaning.

In addition to the *oriṣa* of the pantheon, there is one’s personal *oriṣa*, known as *ori inun* (“inner head”), which refers to the destiny that one’s ancestral guardian soul has chosen while kneeling before Qlorun prior to entering the world. It is a personal destiny that can never be altered. Birth results in the loss of the memory of one’s destiny. But one’s “*ori*-in-heaven,” which is also referred to as *ekejimi* (“my spiritual other”), stands surety for the possibilities and the limits of the destiny that one has received. Hence, one must make one’s way in life, acknowledging one’s *ori* as an *oriṣa* who can assist one in realizing the possibilities that are one’s destiny. One can have an *ori buruku* (“a bad head”). In such a case a person must patiently seek to make the best of a foolish choice and seek the help of the other *oriṣa*.

In *oriṣa* worship it is the wisdom of Qrunmila, the *oriṣa* of Ifa divination, and the work of Eṣu, the bearer of sacrifices, that stand for the meaningfulness of experience and the possibility of effective action. The vast corpus of Ifa poetry, organized into 256 collections called *odu* (also known as *oriṣa*) is a repository of Yoruba cultural values. It is the priest of Ifa, the *babalawo* (“father of ancient wisdom”), who knows Ifa and performs the rites of divination. Using the sixteen sacred palm nuts or the *opele* chain, the priest divines the *odu* whose verses he will chant in addressing the problem of the suppliant and determining the sacrifices that must be made. For the Yoruba, every ritual entails a sacrifice, whether it is the gift of prayer, the offering of a kola nut, or the slaughter of an animal. In the Ifa literature, sacrifice (*ebbo*) has to do with death and the avoidance of such related experiences as loss, disease, famine, sterility, isolation, and poverty. It is an acknowledgment that human existence is ensnared in the interrelated contradictions of life and death. But sacrifice is also viewed as the reversal of the situation of death into life. Sacrifice is the food of the *oriṣa* and other spirits, and one sacri-

fices that which appropriately expresses the character (*iwa*) of the particular *oriša* or spirit of one's concern. Hence, Ogun receives a dog, the carnivorous animal that can be domesticated to assist the hunter and warrior. Sacrifice is the acknowledgement of the presence of powerful agents in the world, and the sacrificial act brings the creative power of the *oriša*, the ancestors, or the mothers to the worshiper; sacrifice can also temporarily stay the hand of Death and ward off other malevolent spirits (*ajogun*). Such is the power of Eṣu, the bearer of sacrifices, the mediator and guardian of the ritual way, the "keeper of *ase*."

Those who have observed the ritual way and achieved the status of elders in the community may also become members of the secret Oṣugbo (Ogboni) society. Although Oṣugbo is found throughout Yorubaland, its role and rituals vary from one region to another. Oṣugbo members, who come from various lineage groups, worship Onile ("the owner of the house"). The "house" (*ile*) is the image of the universe in its totality, of which the Oṣugbo cult house is a microcosm. The *edan* of the Oṣugbo society, which are small, brass, linked staffs that depict male and female figures, are the sign of membership and the symbol of the Oṣugbo understanding of reality. The secret of the Oṣugbo appears to be that its members know, and are in touch with, a primordial unity that transcends the oppositions characterizing human experience. Expressing the unity of male and female, the *edan* and their owners possess the power of adjudicating conflicts among persons or groups; when blood has been shed illicitly (as in a murder) it is the Oṣugbo members who must atone for this "violation of the house."

The worldview of the Yoruba is a monistic one. The universe of their experience is pervaded by *aṣẹ*, a divine energy in the process of generation and regeneration. *Aṣẹ* is without any particular signification and yet invests all things and all persons and, as the warrant for all creative activity, opposes chaos and the loss of meaning in human experience. Thus, for the Yoruba the universe is one, and it is amenable to articulation in terms of an elaborate cosmology, to critical reflection, and to innovative speculation.

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YOSE BEN HALAFTA' (second century CE), Palestinian tanna. Born in Sepphoris, Yose was a student of Yoḥanan