

# Icons & oracles across the confluence

## (or, Metaphysical migrations)

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## 0.1 ABSTRACT

About five centuries ago, virtuosi of two artistic techniques—*cire perdue* copper-alloy casting and a hermetic-poetic oracle that calls and interprets duplex 4-bit binary strings—crossed the Niger-Benue confluence and left phonetic footprints in the Ìgbo-, Èdó- and Yorùbá-speaking zones. Without inferring this transmission route, it would be hard to explain a list of independent observations of directed diffusion, collated here. Sixteen salient vocabulary items of Èdó (alias *Bìní*, “Benin”), all semantically opaque in that language, unscramble with Ìgbo loanword etymologies, including:

### two prominent genres of ritual sculpture and the names of two reputed pioneer copper-alloy sculptors

*ìkẹ̀ẹ̀ga* [òbó] ‘altarpiece representing an individual’s enthroned wrist/hand/arm/tools’ (Bradbury 1961, Ezra 1992)

< *ìk(h)éng(h)a* ‘horned, seated altar figure representing an individual’s right arm/hand/dexterity/agency’ (Ònwẹ̀jìògwù 1975, Bentor 1988, Ígwè 1999, 252), cf. Ígàlà “*okega*” (Boston 1977, 2, no tones in source)

[*ùkùrbè*] *òhó* ‘*Detarium microcarpum* or *senegalense*, botanical model for carved icon used in convoking ancestors’ also known as *àkhuẹ̀khuẹ̀* > Yorùbá *apèpè* ?> Yorùbá *òpèlẹ̀* (Melzian 1937, 15, 213, Keay 1989, 206, Èhigiamusoe 2013, 188-90, Ekhosuẹ̀hi 2014, cf. Ben-Amos 2007, 153, 410, Gore 2007b, 133f.)

< *òjọ́* ‘*Detarium microcarpum* or *senegalense*; bundle/model of its node-segmented twigs, used in convoking ancestors’ (Dalziel 1937, 188, Meek 1937, 63, Keay 1989, 206, Aka[h] & al. 2012, cf. Boston 1977, 48, Bentor 1988, 66)

“*Igue-Igha*” or “*Iguegha*” (proper name as spelled by Egharhevba 1936b/1953 vs. 1960/1968, no tones)

< \**ìgwé ìhìba* ‘oozing/glittering/molten metal’ or ‘the burning of metal with a hot instrument’ (Williamson 1972, 175, 446f; Ígwè 1999, 227, 245)

“*Ahammangiwu*” (proper name in garbled transcription reproduced by Read & Dalton 1899, 5, no tones)

< \**Abà-m-a-jú-nwa* ‘My [family] name doesn’t refuse child[birth]’ (canonical proper name)

### two unique items of *Ìba Ominìgbòn* metalanguage and the primary name of its reputed introducer

*òguẹ̀ẹ̀ga* ‘*Detarium senegalense* or *heudelotiana*; oracle strings formed from its linked half-endocarps’ (Melzian 1937, 137f., Èhigiamusoe 2013, 189f., *pace* abridged tones and syllables of Aghẹ̀yisi 1986, 105)

< \**òkwe ẹ̀ja* ‘oracle seeds’ cf. *òkwe* ‘*Ricnodendron africanum*; its seeds’, *àja/ẹ̀ja* ‘sacrifices, oracle’ (Williamson 1972, 17, 373f.; Keay 1989, 152f., Ígwè 1999, 32, 270, 601), cf. Èdó *òkhuẹ̀n<sub>1</sub>* (Melzian 1937, 155)

*n’áàbe* ‘doubled oracle sign’

< *n’áàbo* ‘double’ (Williamson 1972, 359; Ígwè 1999, 456, cf. Èzikéojìakú 2000, 73, *pace* Nabofa & Elugbe 1981)

*Òminìgbòn* (Egharhevba 1936a, 3, Melzian 1937, 144)

< \**òmi-n’ìgbo* ‘someone who delves into the community’ or ‘concealed, general knowledge’

< *òmi* ‘one who delves, depth/secret’, *ìgbo* ‘general community’ (Ígwè 1999, 123, 456, 573, 607f., Williamson 1972, 89, cf. 1984a, 173, 235), cf. Ùrhobo *Òminìgbo* (Erivwo 1979, Nabofa & Elugbe 1981, Prof. T. Ojaide *p.c.*)

Because their single probabilities are multiplied, the conjunction of these garbled but unmistakable, independent Èdó echoes of an Ìgbo oracular and sculptural past is already statistically sufficient to dismiss the fond notion that either Yorùbá *Ifá*, or a few dozen conjecturally attributed fine-art castings scavenged and salvaged from secondary contexts in 20th century Ilé-Ifẹ̀ by Frobenius, Murray and Willett attest to “the birth of the Yorùbá-Èdó world system” in “the 13th century... Classical period” (Ògúndìran 2003, 51, cf. Burton 1863a, 222, Egharhevba 1936a,b, Willett 1967, Garlake 1977, Horton 1979, Ògúndìran 2002a, Àjàyí 2004). The romantic fancy to extrapolate a cultural ‘big bang’ indefinitely backwards in time and impose Yorùbá-Èdó linkages of modern *Ọ̀ja*—the British “Nàìjá area” enclosed as “Nigeria” in 1914—on Èdó prehistory betrays the susceptibility of present ethnic consciousness “to secondary reasoning and to reinterpretations which... obscure the real history of the development of ideas” (Boas 1911, 67, 71, cf. Bradbury 1959, Beidelman 1970, Ífemésìja 1976, 88, Hobsbawm & Ranger 1983, Erim 1993, Eisenhofer 1995, *pace* Vansina 1971). The same kind of instrumentality is more blatant in more recent, popular riffs (e.g. Ògúnwùsi 2019a). Non-selfie forensics instead support a contrary scenario, as follows.

Neolithic savanna skill-sets, thriving in rainforests cleared with post-Nok iron tools, evolved rapidly on pathways shaped by mental “superstimuli” of the “genius of paganism” and by the mnemonic cognitive modules for number, folk biology, folk sociology and theory-of-mind (Augé 1982, Boyer 1998, Sperber & Hirshfield 2004, cf. Verger 1977a, Donald 1991, Foley 2004, Assmann 2008). As migratory mutations accrued in feudal Ifẹ̀, stoked by profits from the production of cobalt *sẹ̀gì* beads (Elúyemí 1987, Lankton & al. 2006), *Ajá*’s stringed geomantic detector of underground ancestral advice flipped to become *Ifá*’s divining chain of clairvoyant authority dangling from the sky—no matter that this inversion effectively “confused Odùduwà with Òrúnmilá” (Èrediauwá 2004, 206) and redefined an old word for ‘death’ (Verger 1966, Abímbólá & Miller 1997, 22, cf. Ryder 1965, Bámgbósé 1972, Law 1973, Ònwẹ̀jìògwù 1978, Obáyemí 1979a, Emọ̀ṣon 1984). As tropical Africa exited its “geographical accident” of medieval isolation and became “coeval” with Eurasian seaborne trading spheres under asymmetric economic and symbolic value régimes (Mbembe 2002, 631, Fabian 1983, cf. Emmanuel 1969, Amin 1973, Wallerstein 1974, Augé 1994, Beaujard 2012, Green 2019), theologizing trends of local “belief” electively converged with heavenly doctrines of the globalizing “Axial Age”—enabling elite-led “culturalization” (Sansi 2003, 82) and stranding in the process an unassimilable residue of stubbornly terrestrial, irreligiously enchanted metaphysics on the distal side of syncretist dualism, now exotically labeled *fetish*, *mitchcraft*, *voodoo*, *jùjú* and *art* (Jaspers 1949, Idòwú 1962, Iacono 1985, Bellah 2011, Peachey 2012, Swidler 2012, MacGaffey 1998, cf. Goethe 1809, Feuerbach 1841, Weber 1920, Horkheimer & Adorno 1947, De Martino 1948, Tambiah 1990, 17, Graeber 2001).

## 0.2 Dedication

To four departed mentors:

“Ígwé” [‘sky’] Ben Àkùnné (1924-2006), curator, Òḍinani Museum, Nri  
 Dòná Nwàòga (1933-1991), professor of English, University of Nigeria, Nsùkà  
 Mike Ònwùejìògwù (1934-2008), professor of anthropology, University of Benin, Benin-City  
 Adé Qbáyemí (1943-1998), professor of history, University of Ilorin

In 1976, Ònwùejìògwù shared his draft dissertation on *Áfá* (1978/1997) and ferried me in his antique German sedan across Ònichá bridge to Àkùnné, counsellor of Nri palace and organizer of the *Áfá* oracle session transcribed in §3.1. In 1984-85, Nwàòga and Qbáyemí shared their written critiques of ethnic consciousness east and west of the Niger.

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## 0.4 Prosodic bifurcation transcribed

‘Tones’—categories of perceived pitch distinguishing strings that translate graphic words of European languages—optimise differently across the Benue-Kwa (BK) clade of Niger-Congo (Elugbe & Williamson 1977, Manfredi 2009a). In **BK2**—an innovative subgroup comprising the Gbè, Yorubá, Nupe and Ídòmà clusters—finite inflection is suffixless (‘isolating’), pitch scales are ternary {H/M/L} and tonemarking economy has to be *paradigmatic*, with each syllable labeled individually H [ˈ] or L [ˉ] leaving M as the unmarked, neutral value (Siertsema 1958, 583, Akinlabí 1985). In **BK1**—the archaic elsewhere set including Akan, Èdó, Ígbo, Tiv and Cross clusters plus a remnant area known by the “traditional” and “irrelevant” (Greenberg 1963, 37) name of *Bantu*—finite inflection is suffixal (‘agglutinative’), local pitch contrasts at most binary {H/L} so a simpler, *syntagmatic* tone spelling can apply: an unmarked syllable copies the preceding pitch and successive H marks are cumulatively downstepped (Christaller 1875, 15, Winston 1960, Swift & al. 1962, 49f, Williamson 1962, 54 *fn* 2, Welmers & Welmers 1968, *iv*, Nwáchukwu 1976, 20, 1995, 2f, Tucker 1964, 600f, Roberts 2011, 84).

Downstep—a ~10Hz drop, transcribed [ˈ]—occurs at phrasal junctures that syntacticians call cyclic nodes (Chomsky & Halle 1968, Bresnan 1971, D’Alessandro & Scheer 2015). In BK1, unrecoverable downsteps are folded inside graphic words like Ígbo *gí ní* (HˈH) ‘what?’, *bík(h)ó* (HˈH) ‘please!’, *átulú/áthurú* (HHˈH) ‘sheep’, *ńkítá* (HHˈH) ‘dog’ and Èdó *Èwéka* (HˈHH) [‘dynastic name’], *Ólokún* (HHˈH) [‘tutelary supernatural’] (Williamson 1972, 56, 67, 126, 312, Ígwè 1999, 84, 97, 181, 487, Melzian 1937, 57, 144 *pace* Aghèyisi 1986, *xiv*, 44, 110). Throughout BK, regular vowel elision traps recoverable downsteps in phrases written conjunctively as ‘words’. In Yorubá (BK2), an elided vowel with L, spelled as a full stop [ˌ], has two complementary effects: (i) downstep before M as in *Olá.kun* (MHˈM) ‘possessor/epitome of *òkun* (LM) [‘ocean’] vs. *olókun* (MHM) ‘possessor/epitome of *okun* (MM) [‘energy’] and (ii) blocking a preceding H from lagging (‘spreading’) to the syllable of a following L as in *oló.dù* (MHˈL) ‘possessor/epitome of an *òdù* (LL) [‘clay cauldron’] vs. *olódù* (MHL) ‘possessor/epitome of an *odù* (ML) [‘oracle sign’]’ (Bámgbóşé 1966b, 1972, cf. Armstrong 1968 for similar effects in an Ídòmà variety). In Èdó (BK1), elided L blocks H-lag (H-spread) as in *ígho òkpè* (pronounced ígho.kpè HHˈL) ‘money for a palmwine tapper [LL]’ vs. *ígho okpè* (íghokpè HHL) ‘money for a flute [HL]’ and it lowers a final H to the level of L (while also blocking H-lag) as in *nó.dè* (HˈL) ‘yesterday’ cf. *òdè* (LH) ‘road/way’ (Amayo 1976, 168f., 179, *pace* Aghèyisi 1986, 101). Downstep reset—misleadingly called “upstep” as if it could cumulate, contrary to fact—is optional at clause boundaries but obligatory in a list of cyclic, clause-internal contexts (Manfredi 1992, *pace* Pike & Wistrand 1974, Meir & al. 1975).

## 0.5 Other conventions

Colonial spellings are fixed by “quiet copyediting” ([chicagomanualofstyle.org/qanda/data/faq/topics/Quotations/faq0035.html](http://chicagomanualofstyle.org/qanda/data/faq/topics/Quotations/faq0035.html), cf. Capó 1981, 1984, 2008). For convenience, some historical versions are supplied parenthetically in the text.

Aspirated [Ch] is written *Ch* as distinct from dotless *Ch* which is a fricative like *gh* [ɣ] (Green & Ígwè 1963, 2 *fn* 6).

Unreleased (‘lenis’) stops carry a leading apostrophe ˈC (Stewart 1973).

In multilingual datasets, nonroman *ŋ* replaces orthographic *ñ*, *ñ*, *ñ* and *ng* for a prevocalic or prepausal velar nasal.

Nonroman *ε*, *o* of Àkan and Gbè are replaced by subdotted *ε*, *o* (Surgy 1988a, 7, cf. Lepsius 1854, Àjàyí 1960).

Unicode’s “combining dot below” (U+0323) is used under duress. Unicode’s “composite characters are aesthetically unacceptable and lead to technically unpredictable data. They are therefore in direct conflict with the aims of the International Standards Organization” (Mueller 2006).

Binary oracle arrays: ◊ = ‘open’ i.e. concave surface facing up, ◆ = ‘closed’ i.e. concave surface facing down, left side of page = top of array from the oraclist’s perspective, seated 180° opposite the client.

Items preceded by \* (asterisk) are either ill-formed (in fluent speech) or hypothetical (claimed to have once existed).

Unattributed English translations, added in square brackets after original text, are by myself.

Quotation marks align by logical scope: [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Quotation\\_marks\\_in\\_English\\_-\\_Logical\\_quotation](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Quotation_marks_in_English_-_Logical_quotation).

Material in single (‘scare’) quotes is not verbatim but either abbreviated, paraphrased or quoted secondhand.

To preserve listing prosody (Wagner 2005), the ‘Oxford’ listing comma ([en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Serial\\_comma](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Serial_comma)) is avoided.

Cited URLs have been ‘waybacked up’ at [archive.org](http://archive.org) as much as possible.

This manuscript is posted online with its working subtitle: [people.bu.edu/manfredi/MetaphysicalMigrations.pdf](http://people.bu.edu/manfredi/MetaphysicalMigrations.pdf).

## 1. The *Fá*-mily tree is a medieval wave

### 1.1 The creation of Yorùbá creationism

Sapped by amnesia and enthralled by ethnicity, retrospective social consciousness is prone “to secondary reasoning and to reinterpretations which... obscure the real history of the development of ideas” (Boas 1911, 67, 71, cf. Hobsbawm & Ranger 1983, *pace* Vansina 1971). Moderns can’t resist ventriloquizing mute, excavated things like the brass head that Frobenius took from a secondary context in Ilé-Ifè’s Oló.kun Grove and baptised “the Oló.kun, Atlantic Africa’s Poseidon”—not minding that it was “named ‘*Mia*’ [= *Ọ̀r̀nm̀yàn?*] by the natives” (1913, 98, 313, plate facing 308), still less that “most Yorùbá images are not representations of any particular deities” (Adépegba 1983d, 23, cf. 1981/1983a). Colonial archaeologists kept Frobenius’ *Oló.kun* tag but dropped his saltwater exoticism, guessing that this and a few dozen kindred metal trophies “could not have been made far away” from Ifè’s “delicate terracottas in an identical style” (Murray 1941, 73) but rueing that the search for “evidence of bronze-casting... was not achieved” (Willett 1960, 239f). A fog of “predisposed continuity” (Williams 1977, 116) also cloaks *Ifá*, a binary ‘oracle’ (information processor) whose present-day initiates know no origin for their patron saint *Ọ̀r̀nm̀l̀á* other than *Ọ̀run*—a place ambiguously identified as “heaven”, “the skies” or “another territory... But *Ọ̀run* later moved away skywards” (Abimbólá 1977, 1, 37 *fn.* 6).

Pie in the sky won’t solve Ifè’s cultural mysteries. Creationism should have died when the science of prehistory debunked the Bible’s fables of Eden and Babel (Schleicher 1848, Darwin 1859, cf. Pfeiffer 1976, Alter 1999, Cavalli-Sforza 2000, *pace* Trubetsky 1923, Baker 1995). In principle and many well-worked examples, cladistic comparison detects events beyond the reach of oral and written memory. Given two separate outcomes of remote development, any nonuniversal, nonaccidental similarity between them is either a trace of passing contact or a relic of initial unity. If these reconstructions are then replayed in a thought experiment running “forwards in time” (Watkins 1962, 7), the conserved inheritance maps onto temporally ‘vertical’ (inter-generational) taxonomic trees representing phylogenetic lineages or literary textual *stemmata*, while mutation events traversing a population on ‘horizontal’ (intra-generational) time paths are graphed as intersecting waves of borrowing (Cayley 1857, Schmidt 1872, Meillet 1922). These changes are amplified by ecological niche feedback through “unselected consequences of selection” (Levins & Lewontin 1985, 41, cf. Eldredge & Gould 1972) and Lamarckian leakage from horizontal to vertical modality—a.k.a. constructive transmission, directed variation or group selection (Boyer 1999, Jablonka & Lamb 2005, Kronfeldner 2007, Koster 2008, Nowak & al. 2010).

In ethnic selfportraits however, stigmata of cultural contagion (Sperber 1984, 1999) are airbrushed out. Just as classical Hellenists diss Bernal’s lists (1987, 1997) of Egyptian and Levantine influence on Aegean culture three millennia ago, most Yorùbologues disregard the possibility that all of the *cire perdue* artefacts ever found in modern Ifè—numbering from “only 21” (Éyò 1977, 114) to “[a]round 40” (Blier 2015, 93)—came from somewhere else. A leading art critic doubts every other attribute—“Who do these heads represent, why were they made and how were they used? We may never know...”—but still assumes the objects’ “autochthony (regardless of ethnic or lineage identity)” and fails to note that three leading archaeologists queried their provenance (Connah 1968b; Shaw 1970b, 83; Éyò 1977, 122), instead she supposes that “Ìgbo-linked artisan groups... and ritual experts... have come to [Ifè]... and made it their home... Over time associated language differences fell away, with only fragmentary evidence of these groups being retained through enduring names and rituals” (Blier 2015, 41f, 233, 254). She intuitively her immigrants’ ethnicity from equivocal clues: subjective resemblances of Ifè *terracotta* keloids to Ìgbo *ọ̀zọ́ ichi* initiation scars, plus two Ìgbo-sounding names in the quasibiblical myth of Mòrèmi (Blier 2015, 40f, cf. Fábùnmi 1969, 17f). On closer examination these indices evaporate. (i) Facial decorations of random *tchotchkes* feed confirmation bias à la Frobenius (1926, *xvii* = 1949, 32 fig. 8). (ii) The Ifè toponym “*Ès̀inm̀ir̀in*” could derive from Ìgbo *Ọ̀shim̀il̀=Ọ̀rim̀il̀* ‘Niger river, *lit.* big water’ (Williamson 1972, 384) but close variants of this tag occur all around the confluence (Baikie 1856, 426), the riverbank is 200 km. from Ifè and mere mention of a ubiquitous tradeword says nothing about anybody’s birthplace. (iii) To equate Ifè’s hostile “*Ìgbo*” indigenes with modern Ìgbo-speakers is a colonial fancy (Jeffreys 1935a, 350, Beier 1959, 14f) that got fresh legs in 1966 amid the Biafra crisis when Dúró Ládípò had Àgbò dancers shout the shibboleth “*Ìgbo, kẹ́wé nù!*” in his stage musical *Mòrèmi* (Beier 1957; 1994, 58, 160, Ọ̀gúnléyẹ 2002, 69). Now the story fuels “race” fancies (“Ìgbo migrated from Ife —Ooni”, [www.vanguardngr.com/2023/10/igbo-migrated-from-ife-ooni](http://www.vanguardngr.com/2023/10/igbo-migrated-from-ife-ooni)) although older Ifè residents preferred more poetical imaginings (“These ‘wild’ men called themselves ‘Ìgbòs’ because of... behaving like a hawk-like wild bird... called ‘Ìgbò’... well-known... for its... aggressive nature” Fábùnmi 1969, 23 cf. Abraham 1958, 28, 287). Modern descendants of legendary Ifè autochthones more plausibly include the residents of *Ugbò*, an Ikálẹ́ fraction 100 km. south of Ifè in Okitipupa, Ońdó State (Sheba 2002, 29; 2007, 463, cf. Ọ̀lóm̀l̀á 1976, 48, Oyèl̀.àr̀án 1977, 646, Ọ̀ş̀únt̀ó.kun 2004, Adéyẹ̀m̀i 2018).

Notwithstanding the allure of “Myth Ìgbo” (Northrup 2000) as a “floating signifier... loadable with any arbitrary symbolic content” (Lévi-Strauss 1950, *xlif*), Ìgbo speakers did play a nonmythic role in the prehistory of icons and oracles west of the Niger (§2). Ìgbo decodes seven opaque lexical items of Èdó alias “*Bini*”—only three of them proper names—related either to cuprous metallurgy or to *Iba Ọ̀miǹigh̀on*, the Èdó version of the duplex 4-bit oracle. On Blier’s scenario, these clues could make charitable sense of Egharheva’s claim that both artforms came from “*Uhè*” (1936a,b), but other ‘Ìgbonisms’ (= Ìgboisms in Èdó, cf. §2.5) including ‘dog’ and the four ritual market-days are less likely to be echoes of vanished Ìgbo-Ifè *X-men* than reflexes of quotidian exchange between Èdó- and Ìgbo-speaking neighbors who share broad sociocultural foundations like primogenitural inheritance (Bradbury 1964, 154, Iduùwẹ́ *ms.*, Okpewho 1998). Although a ritual road from Ìgbo to Èdó probably never ran through Ifè, medieval Ifè did verifiably impact the entire region in a potentially relevant way: costly *sègì* beads of cobalt glass, smelted in quantity in the aforementioned Oló.kun Grove (Willett 1960, 237, Horton 1979, 146, Elùyẹ̀m̀i 1986, Lankton & al. 2006, Babalólá 2015), could have financed the import of a few dozen yellow-metal masterpieces from places currently unknown (Shaw 1970a, 238f) which then became models for countless Ifè knockoffs commissioned in the less exacting but no less beautiful medium of local *terracotta* (*pace* Murray 1941, cf. §2.8). As for *Ifá*, its official story of self-fashioning elicited forthright Ìgbo pushback:

Bascom has inferred the political supremacy of Ifè among the Yorùbá kingdoms and the spread of *Ifá* from Ifè to other parts of West Africa. Both inferences are controversial, however. ...As often happens in such matters, it is usually the first example to be widely known and studied that is readily accorded primacy. But the results of progressive investigation in various fields in West Africa, such as those obtained about *cire perdue* art after the Ìgbo Ukwu investigations, should warn us about premature attributions and interpretations. (Ifemésia 1976, 88)

Ifemésia’s critique is vindicated by comparative data diagnosing oracle transmission from the *Apá* (“Jukun”) empire some five centuries ago (§1.2). Intervention is urgent when an essay titled “The diffusion of some Yorùbá artefacts and institutions” can slyly delete thirteen directly contrary words—boldfaced below—from a relevant citation:

...in his [=Shelton’s] 1971 monograph on the Ìgbo-Ìgálá borderland (Ǹs̀úká village region), he quoted Talbot that the method of divination in Ǹs̀úká “may have derived from Yorùbá *Ifá*”. (Ojó 1976, 382)

...*Afa*—the method of divination common in Ǹs̀úká—“may have derived from Yorùbá *Ifá* or vice versa” (Talbot 1926, 187), or both systems may have derived from an aboriginal method. (Shelton 1971, 201, boldface added)

Tendentious or mendacious, Ifè's immaculate conception story masks a hybrid pedigree. The comparisons below show that *babaláwos*—Ifá initiates—disconnected the old-school 'geomantic' Benue valley intercom addressing ancestors in subterranean "Deads' Town" (Tùtùqlá 1952) and replaced it with a high-tech hotline 'divining' misty messages from an Old Testament-like CEO of Odùduwà, Incorporated (Morton-Williams 1964, 249). In modern Yorùbá, the epithets *Oló.run* and *Èdìmàrè/Oló.dùmarè* are near synonyms, roughly 'owner/epitome of the sky' and 'immensity of heaven', but when *òrun* replaced *\*imàrè*—"the original word for 'sky'" as Bámgbóšé speculates (1972, 30)—it did not thereby cease to be a nominalization of *-run* 'perish' (Abraham 1958, 579), "associated with the idea of death" (Verger 1966, 35), cognate to Igbo *-nwú, ònwú*, 'die, death' (Ígwè 1999, 550f., 688). The impetus for such a radical revision is unknown, but a good guess is "the monotheistic bridgehead Islam had created within Yorùbá culture" (Peel 2016a, 543, cf. Talbot 1926, 268, Matory 1994, 496). Two details point to Islamic inspiration for the semantic change: (i) Abraham treats the phrase *-kí.run* as if built on a *bapax* (otherwise unattested) noun *\*irun* 'Muslim prayers' (1958, 319, 374), but if the root is *-kí* 'greet, salute' then the expression can be plausibly parsed as *-kí òrun* 'salute òrun' (Wenger 1983, 60). (ii) A poem of ♦♦♦♦/♦♦♦♦ describes "Muslims" descending from the sky on a rope to rob Òrúnmilá's farm. When Èšù caught them by burning the rope, they shouted *Salama ké'kàn!* 'Salama (?) has cut (ké) the rope (okùn)!' (Maupoil 1943a, 488f.).

Ifá's cosmological acrobats performed a classic Feuerbach flip: "the secular foundation detaches itself from itself and establishes itself in the clouds as an independent realm" (Marx 1845, 70f./1941, 83).<sup>1</sup> But this great leap upward was not monotheism-*manqué*, despite constant claims that "the role that Yorùbá pagans ascribed to their *òrìṣà*" was one of mere "mediators who transmitted blessings whose ultimate source was God in heaven", "*Òrúnmilá*, the *òrìṣà* of Ifá, became an anticipation of Christ" and Ifá "became 'the Yorùbá Bible'" (Peel 2016a, 542, 544f., cf. Ayéjina 2010, Cox 2010). Such a notion sounds like blowback from missionary prospectors who searched for African gods and were nonplussed to find "fetishism"—their looking-glass projection of doctrine onto African minds (de Brosses 1760, 20, Iacono 1985, 1989).<sup>2</sup> Insiders say different: "Most of the sacrifices that Ifá priests ask their clients to offer are usually offered to particular gods" (Abímbólá 1976, 37) and Canon Ìdòwú, echoing old coasters (Ellis 1894, 36f., Macgregor 1927, 9), concedes that "the Yorùbá do not erect temples for the cult of Oló.dùmarè, neither are images dedicated to Him [sic]" (1962, 141).<sup>3</sup>

A sky-based *deus òtiosus* 'lazy god' is as vacuous as a spandrel in a cathedral ceiling vault (Gould & Lewontin 1979), but *Oló.run* showered down some real blessings of evolutionary "exaptation" (Gould & Vrba 1982) upon the *Fá*-ithful. (i) *Babaláwos* gained a *téṣé*-coms monopoly to charge sacrificial rents for sending invisible data packets up and down the cosmic cable.<sup>4</sup> (ii) *Sàrí* (ex-Sierraleonean) "Black Englishmen" immunized themselves to the intended insult of paganism by embracing a Yorùbá version of the *Jehovah-Allah* literary character and joining a "cultural nexus with the non-Nigerian world" (Ayándélé 1969, 25). (iii) Participants in "the Lagosian cultural renaissance of the 1890's" (Matory 1999, 74) midwived *santerian* syncretism in the Americas (Sansi 2003) and qualified "the religion of Yorùbáland and its diasporas" for its current membership in the spiritual G8 club—"the eight rival religions that run the world" (Prothero 2010, 220).

Every evolutionary breakthrough presents a downside to antiquarians, because any system upgrade makes old data that much harder to read. Enough traces nonetheless persist to recover outlines of a sequence of events by which lost-wax copper-alloy icons and the duplex 4-bit oracle moved, not outward from Ifè to the east and north (Brenner 2000, 160) but in the opposite direction, namely south and west towards Ifè via the Niger-Benue confluence. Whether the two techniques diffused together or independently—and propagated by which particular blend of state sponsorship and social marketing—is unknown and perhaps unknowable, but the parallelism of their respective paths is no surprise, given the Benue valley's gateway role in transmitting iron age culture from the savanna to the rainforest zone.

## 1.2 Historical *Fá*-netics

*Il est temps de prendre nouveaux risques et d'élargir la perspective comparative.*<sup>5</sup>  
(Heusch 1986, 295)

Comparison of the 16 array names across localities (cf. Fig. 1) convinced Armstrong that "the spread of this particular divination institution was a relatively recent historical event?" (1964b, 137). As the paper's French blurb further clarifies,

La linguistique montre que la diffusion de ce culte sur la côte de Guinée est bien plus récente que la séparation des divers langages Kwa entre eux. [Linguistics shows that the spread of this initiation society along the West African coast is much younger than the original divergence of the respective Kwa languages from each other.] (1964b, 143f.)

A half century on, Armstrong's basic finding is reconfirmed, and can be made more precise, on several points:

- (i) By now the labels *Kwa* and *Benue-Congo* have succumbed to "legitimate doubts... concerning the validity of the division between them" (Greenberg 1963, 39 *fn* 13, cf. Mukarovsky 1977, 240). The null hypothesis is to treat the aggregate area, including the traditional "Bantu" zone, as a "dialect continuum" called Benue-Kwa (BK) or East Volta-Congo (Williamson & Blench 2000, 17f., cf. Elugbe & Williamson 1976, Stewart 1976).
- (ii) "Lexicostatistics" (Swadesh 1952), once an Africanist mainstay (Armstrong 1962, Bennett & Sterk 1977, Schadeberg 1986, Williamson 1989), is observed to generate "objectionable" results (Armstrong 1983, 146) and so "should be rejected" (Campbell 1998, 186). Raw percentages of quickie wordlists may heuristically approximate some of the phylogeny deducible from comparative reconstruction (Embleton 2005, 437), but the time calculations of "glottochronology" fail to converge with calendrical dates obtained by archaeology's grittier techniques, to the point that even a Swadesh apologist must grudgingly concede that "the method is unfortunately least useful for situations we would most like to determine" (Lehmann 1993, 37, cf. Alinei 1991).
- (iii) Talk of "diffusion" and "spread" begs to know from where to where. Phonetic differences in oracle jargon show predictable effects of loanword adaptation, pointing to a geography of prehistoric transmission that strikingly matches up with shifts in semantic and ritual repertoires (§1.3) and supporting metaphysics (§1.4).

1 Thesis 4: "...daß die weltliche Grundlage sich von sich selbst abhebt und sich, ein selbständiges Reich, in den Wolken fixirt" ([de.wikisource.org/wiki/Thesen\\_über\\_Feuerbach](http://de.wikisource.org/wiki/Thesen_über_Feuerbach)), cf. Feuerbach (1841, 442), Marx (1842, 393), Mauss (1923-24) and Gèdègbè:

Par leurs prières et leurs sacrifices, les hommes «donnent de la force aux *vodun*». Plus les offrandes sont nombreuses et magnifiques, plus les divinités ont de force. ...si leur nombre décroît, les *vodun* s'affaiblissent. (Maupoil 1943a, 57)

2 Terms like *polytheism* and *panteon* have been similarly mystifying in the field of Greco-Roman studies (Scheid 1985, 2010).

3 Today *Oló.dùmarè* is venerated in the "Indigene Faith of Africa Temple" ([www.youtube.com/watch?v=EGGVeZpPBK8](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EGGVeZpPBK8)), recalling the neo-Jesuit *Ari Osa* cathedral on Àkpakpá.và Street, Benin-City ([thenationonline.net/church-where-oba-of-benin-is-general-overseer](http://thenationonline.net/church-where-oba-of-benin-is-general-overseer)) cf. Melzian 1937, 148, Bradbury 1968, 245). Èdó presence on Lagos Island—called *Èkó* in Yorùbá—began as a 15th century *èkó* 'camp/outpost' (Melzian 1937, 34, Agíri & Barnes 1987, 18-20 citing Jones 1983, 24, 40 = Creelius 1879, 101, 118 = Ulsheimer 1616, cf. also Ryder 1969, 14, Law 1983, 328f., Mann 2007, 27). Lagos *babaláwos* of Èdó heritage included Cromwell Osamaro Íbié (1986, 1993).

4 "*Agbèrù* (the receiver of sacrifices)" (Abímbólá 1976, 36f.) is phonetically not far from *agbèrò*, the taxi-tout who lives on tips!

5 [Now is the time to take new risks and expand the scope of comparison.]

The following chart, updating Armstrong (1964b, 139) and Peek (1982, 189), samples the spoken names of the oracle's sixteen simplex 4-bit<sup>6</sup> signs across a dozen localities between the Bight of Benin and the lower Benue valley.<sup>7</sup>

	<i>Fṛn-Gbè</i>	NW <i>Yorùbá</i>	NE <i>Yorùbá</i>	<i>Nuṣe</i>	<i>Ngas</i>	Èdó ♁180°	Ùrhobo ♁180°	<i>W'Ìgbo</i>	<i>N'ri-Igbo</i>	<i>Nsúkà-Ìgbo</i> ♁180°	<i>Ìgálà</i>	<i>Ìdomà</i>
← top of array			no tones in source	no tones in source	no tones in source		no tones in source			no tones in source		
◇◇◇◇	Gbè	Ogbè	[Oṣika]	[Sikan]	[Shi]	Ógbi	Ogbi	Ógbi	Óbi/Ógbù	Obi	Èbí	Èbí
◆◆◆◆	Yèkú	Òyèkú	Oyèku	Eyako	Kum	Àkó	Ako	Àkwú	Àkwú/Ahwú	Akwú	Ákwù/Oyèku	Ákwù
◆◆◆◆	(W)óli	Ìwòrì	Ogori	Gori	Guiri	Òghoi	Oghori	Ògoli	Òyeri/Ògori	Ogoli	Ògòli	Ògòli
◆◆◆◆	Dí	Èdí/Ódí	Ojì	Ejì	[Nwa]	Òdín	Edi/Odi	Òdí	Òdí	[missing]	Òjì/Ódí	Òjì
◇◆◆◆	Ab(á)là	Òbàrà	Obara	Bara	Mbara	Ò(v)ba	Ò(v)bara	Òbaí	Òbala	Obara	Òbàrà	Òblà
◆◆◆◆	Aklán/Akaná	Òkànràn	Okona	Kana	Gina	Òkan	Òkanran	Òkaí	Òkala	Òkara	Òkàrà/Òkòṅò	Òklà
◇◆◆◆	Lósò	Ìròsùn	Orosun	Rusu	Lusu	Òrúuhu	Urhur(h)u	Úlúshù	Úrúru	Uhu	Òlòrù	Òlò
◆◆◆◆	Wòlín/Wèlé	Òwònrín	Oga	Ega	[Chiyong]	Ògháe	E/Aghare	Ògá(ì)	Áyári/Ágári	Ègali	Ègálí	Ègálí
◇◆◆◆	Gúdá	Ògúndá	Ogunta	Guta	Kura	Ìghítan	Ighite	Èjíte/Ògúte	Ìjíte/Ògúte	Ijite/Ogute	Èjítá/Ogwute	Èjítá
◆◆◆◆	Sá	Òsá	Osa	Esa	Saa	Òhá	Orha	Òshá	Òrá	Oha	Òrá	Òlá
◇◆◆◆	Leṭe	Ìreṭe	Ireṭe	Etia	Lete	Ète	Ete/?Eke	Ète	Ète/Èke	Ete	Ètè/Òleṭe	Ete
◆◆◆◆	Túlá	Òtú(r)á	Otura	Turia	Toro	Ètúre	Erhurè	Ètúle	Òtúre	Oture	Òtúlá	Òtlé
◆◆◆◆	Trúkpè	Òtúrúpòn	Otaru	Rakpan	Matpa	Èrhóxuà	Erhokpo/a	Àtùtkpà	Àtùrukpà	Ètùrukpa	Àtúnúkpà	Ètùrukpà
◆◆◆◆	Ká	Ìká	Oyinkan	Yikan	Mishpa	Èká	Èka	Àká	Àká	Èka	Èká	Èká
◆◆◆◆	Ché	Òsé	Okin	Arikin	Kye	Òsé	Ose	Òsé	Òsé	Ose	Òché	Òché
◆◆◆◆	Fú	Òfún	Ofun	Efu	[Kapla]	Òhún	Ophu	Òfú	Òhú	Ohu	Òfú	Òfú

Figure 1. Comparison of the names of the sixteen 4-bit oracle arrays across a dozen localities

All the above items are morphologically opaque, lacking etymologies in any known human language.<sup>8</sup> No phonetic or semantic match exists to any oracle of the sahel or Indian Ocean (Trautmann 1939, 149, 155, cf. Maupoil 1943b, Nadel 1954, 55-64, Kassibo 1992, Eglash 1997, 116, Colley 2005, Sow 2009, Jansen & Kanté 2010), therefore except for the visual arrays alone, it's false to assert that "Ifá, Fá and 'Sixteen Cowries'... derive directly from the Arabian prototype" (Binsbergen 1997, 230). Secondary accretions do occur in locales where both traditions are practiced side-by-side, but these are isolated therefore they can't be reconstructed to an early stage. In *Ìgálà* for example, seven signs of *Ifa-anwa* the seed oracle share glosses with geometrically congruent signs of *Ifa-ebutu* the sand oracle: *Alubiala*=*Atunukpa* 'mother', *Ateliki*=*Ebi* 'journey', *Alekwumola*=*Eka* 'maiden', *Inachaja*=*Oloru* 'laughter', *Atamain*=*Ogoli* 'quadruped', *Ajema*=*Oyèku* 'meeting', *Enikiladi*=*Otula* 'quarrelling' (Boston 1974, 352-59 no tones), but none of the seven semantic overlaps repeats outside *Ìgálà*, and *anwa* and *ebutu* labels share no phonetic content at all. Another candidate for a late sahelian overlay is the consonant string *r-m-l*, found in *Òrúnmilá* the name of the *Ifá* protagonist and in the Arabic phrase *er-reml* '[writing] on sand' borrowed in *Yorùbá* as (*batì*) *ramlì* alias *yanrìn títè* 'sand pressing' (Ògúnbiyí 1952, Hébert 1961, 117, Morton-Williams 1966, 407, Bascom 1969, 8, cf. Odúuyoyè 1971, Gleason 1973, 15, Parés 2016, 379 fn 83). *Ifá* and its successors use a sand-like transcription where the *babaláwo* manipulates *ikin* seeds eight times in an odd-even lottery so as to press two columns of four binary bits in *iyèrè osùn* powder on the *opón* tray (Abimbólá 1976, 28f., Trautmann 1939, 33, Maupoil 1943, 193f., 244).<sup>9</sup> The joint presence in *Ifá* of these two demonstrably sahelian features is simpler to explain as a single complex borrowed once than as two unrelated borrowing events, moreover both traits are limited to *Ifá* and its direct successors further west, therefore *Ifá* acquired them from late contact with local sahelians. Otherwise, had either *Òrúnmilá* or finger-tallied lots been part of the Benue-valley oracle, vestiges of one or both ought to show up in some oracle sites which are geographically separate from *Ifá* and its direct descendants—contrary to observation.<sup>10</sup>

Secondary features aside, all the array names in Figure 1 (minus a handful of apparent intrusions, in square brackets) are closely similar in sound across all 12 oracle localities. As Armstrong perceived, the phonetic mutations between these places are smaller for the oracle terms than for non-oracle vocabulary, leading him to rightly conclude that the oracle's presence across this area is much younger than the historical divergence of the host languages among themselves (1964a,b). This inference can be further focused by more detailed and comprehensive evidence currently available.

Adétúgbò (1967, 201) maps two sound shifts affecting NW *Yorùbá*—roughly, the *Òyó* kingdom—that reduce a *g*-like (voiced velar) consonant to *w* (bilabial glide) as in *ògbe* > *òwe* 'proverb', *àgha* > *àwa* '1 pl', *Ògbò* > *Òwò* '[a town in Onḍó]' and in *gwi* > *wí* 'say', *gwo* > *wó* 'collapse', *ègwá* > *èwá* 'ten'. The forms in Figure 1 indicate that *Ifá* jargon was caught up in one or both of these mutations. Comparison with Èdó *Òghoi* and *Ògháe* suggests that the NW forms *Ìwòrì* and *Òwònrín* attest *gh* > *w* develarization.<sup>11</sup> *Ìgálà* and Nupe, lacking such a rule, gave a different treatment to oracle words with *gh*, strengthening the sound to *g*. An imaginable reverse scenario, with *Ùrhobo* and Èdó weakening original *g* > *gh*, flunks the simplicity test, since a language already possessing indigenous *g* has no reason to tamper with a borrowed one.

6 A bit is a binary digit, taking a value of either 0 or 1. ...Eight-bit bytes, also known as octets, can represent 256 values (2<sup>8</sup> values, 0-255). ... "Word" is a term for a slightly larger group of bits, but it has no standard size. ([en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bit](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bit))

7 Sources given in §3.2 below. The ♁180° rotations are shown in Figure 3 below. An earlier version of Figure 1 was pirated (sans diacritics) in a blog by *omo-oba* Justice Fálóyé [web.archive.org/web/20180717191653/http://asbejournal.org/perspectives](http://web.archive.org/web/20180717191653/http://asbejournal.org/perspectives) and appears repeatedly in a video blurb of a 2018 summit of Ifè creationists [www.youtube.com/watch?v=p4BnWY6icns](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=p4BnWY6icns) bankrolled by *Qòmí* Ogunwùsi the current *Oba* of Ifè. Fálóyé ignores the difference between inherited chromosomes and borrowed culture in order to support Ogunwùsi's paternalistic Igbo-philía (2019a,b), rightly denounced as "fallacious history and pseudoscience" by the Yorùbá nationalist Oyècèyemí (2019). But Oyècèyemí's standard-issue ethnic chauvinism is not a viable remedy for Fálóyé's *Fá*-ntasies.

8 Despite *Qbáyemí*'s view that "the etymology of the sixteen basic *odù* of *Ifá* are entirely meaningful [sic] in current Nupe" (1979a, 175).

9 In both *Fá* and *Ifá* but in neither *Ati* nor *Yanrìn títè* (Maupoil 1943a, 244, 1943b, 21, Bascom 1969, 8), the finger-marking tally reverses the even/odd polarity of the binary lots. In 1948, Rouch filmed an example of the sahelian sand calculus in *Les magiciens de Wanzérbé Niger* [www.youtube.com/watch?v=8eV/B-9j-fg](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8eV/B-9j-fg). A recent recording of Togolese *Afá* shows the numbers inscribed sahel-style on the ground while a square-frame *opón*-like tray sits unused to one side: [culturerealm.com/new-blog/2016/3/22/lepisqqol3rxspqd0mnlkizbbmfaa](http://culturerealm.com/new-blog/2016/3/22/lepisqqol3rxspqd0mnlkizbbmfaa).

10 Egharhevbá (1936a, 3) names *Òrúnmilá* as the teacher of *Òminigbón*, founder of the *Iba* oracle alias *ògúééga*, but fails to mention that *Òrúnmilá* is also the name of the Yorùbá-speaking *Ifá* oracle operating in Èdó separately from *Iba* (Melzian 1937, 159, Gore 2007a, 36).

11 The *Ìlòrín* transcription "Gwònrín" (Clarke 1939, 255) could show a middlebelt source or improvised spelling of phonetic *ṽwònrín*.

It follows that the names of  $\blacklozenge\blacklozenge\blacklozenge$  and  $\blacklozenge\blacklozenge\blacklozenge$ , repeated in (1a) below, were already present in the Òyó area by the time that NW develarization had gotten into gear. But when was that? A successful sound change needs two generations to convert from a socially marked, restricted style to an unconscious, general communal norm (Labov 1963, Akéré 1982) and this intrinsic timelag adds a margin of error of tens—but not hundreds—of years. Adétúgbò regards develarization as “one of the oldest characteristic differentiating factors between SEY and NWY” (1967, 201) and an Òyó tradition held to be “essentially historical” correlates “the introduction of... the cult of Ifá... from the Àwóri town of Òtá” with “Aláàfin Ajíbóyèdè’s victory” in the late 16th century over “the Nupe threat” (Law 1976, 43f).<sup>12</sup> The resulting inference that Ifá is at least 400 years old in Òyó is consistent with separate evidence that develarization ceased soon thereafter: Portuguese *goiaba* [gwoyáβa] ‘guava’ was adopted as *gúròbà* ~ *gúròfà* ~ *gólòbà* ~ *gílòbà* and did not become *\*wúròbà* ~ *\*wúròfà* etc., just as English *guava* became *gúfà* ~ *gúáfà* and not *\*wáfà* ~ *\*wófà* (Abraham 1958, 257; Awóyalé 2008).

Ifá’s array names in NW Yorùbá are thus older than an early European loanword, but they are younger than basic (inherited) vocabulary as shown by the contrast between the oracle terms in (1a) and ordinary lexical roots whose bilabial consonants in Yorùbá come from velar stops of the Benue-Kwa protolanguage (1b). Two considerations show that the sound shift in (1b) is the older. (i) It’s more extensive, covering not just a Yorùbá subregion but the whole of the Yorùbá-Ígálà (Macro-Yorùbá) cluster, as shown by the *b* in Ígálà ‘hunger (n.)’ versus the *g* in Ígálà  $\blacklozenge\blacklozenge\blacklozenge$ . (ii) It’s also more intensive: more phonetic features are affected by changing a velar stop to a bilabial stop or glide,  $g > b > w$ .<sup>13</sup>

		Benue-Kwa								
		BK2					BK1			
		Gbè	NWYorùbá	Ígálà	Nupe	Ìdòmà	Àkan	Èdó	Ìgbo	Proto-“Bantu”
(1a)	$\blacklozenge\blacklozenge\blacklozenge$ $\blacklozenge\blacklozenge\blacklozenge$	(W)ólì “Anlọç”/ŋólì/Wèlè	Ìwòrì Òwónrín	Ògòlì Ègálì	“Gorì” “Ega”	Ògòlì Ègálì		Òghoi Òghác	Ògori/Òyeri Àgári/Àyári	
(1b)	{ ‘hunger (v.)’ ‘hunger (n.)’ ‘journey’ { ‘needle/thorn’ ‘pierce/split/sew’ ‘bend/bent’ { ‘cowry’ ‘buy’	-wù ebi ebi àbí -bẹ́ -bọ́ -hó/-wó	ebi ébi àbẹ́bẹ́ -bẹ́ -wọ́ owó	ébi èkin -gà ewó	-gùn -ŋmú ezi èyẹ́ -gá ewó		òkòm -chwá kótów ígho		-g(h)ú ág(h)ù/ó íj(h)è àg(h)íjg(h)á -g(h)á -gọ́/-g(h)ọ́ ég(h)ó -g(h)ó	*-guid ‘seize’ *-gend *-gua *-gòb *-gud

The inference that NW develarization predated the Portuguese entails that the names in (1a) were already pronounced with *w* before Ifá reached the 18th century palace of Àgbómẹ́ (alias “Abomey”) from Òyó (Herskovits 1938, 104 *fn* 1).<sup>14</sup> This is consistent with the Fòn treatment of Yorùbá words borrowed presumably around the same time: Yorùbá *g* was transmitted to Fòn intact (2a) whereas *k* was labialized (in nasal syllables) and *b* and some *w* were weakened to *v* (2b).<sup>15</sup>

#### Fòn-Gbè < Yorùbá

(2a)	‘ <i>Cola nitida</i> ’ ‘[name of supernatural]’	gólò Gún	górò (cf. Hausa <i>gwòrò</i> ) Ògún
(2b)	‘seeds of <i>Elaeis guineensis idolatrica</i> ’ <sup>16</sup> ‘oracle casting lots’ [cult headship title] ‘secret/concealment’ ‘ <i>Dialium guineense</i> ’	kwin vo-de duwo àwo aviní	ikin ìbò olúwo awo àwín

Other data indicate that the oracle arrived earlier, further east. In the Macro-Èdó cluster (alias “Èdoid”), the phonetic pattern of oracle-specific terms (3a) matches some items of basic vocabulary (4a), suggesting that the oracle’s arrival in Èdó proper (alias *Bini*), Ísóko and Ùrhobo was relatively near in time to the differentiation of these languages from each other. The date of Macro-Èdó separation is indeterminate, but unlikely to be less than 500 years ago.<sup>17</sup>

- 12 Àhòrì (“Àwóri”) is a southern Ègbá group adjoining Lagos (Abraham 1958, 178 citing Blair 1940). The story that “the Ifá oracle was brought [to Yorùbá] by a Nupe man” (Beier 1956, 27) may telescope the Ajíbóyèdè tradition due to ambiguous translation of the Yorùbá word *tápà*, which can indeed refer narrowly to Nupe as in poetic lyrics—*Ayèè gba Tápà, ó kólé Igunnu* ‘As soon as a Nupe gets comfortable, a towering house [i.e. dance mask] sprouts up’ (Abraham 1958, 83, Owómoyèlà 2005, 154)—but which can also denote the wide savanna zone known as *Kákànda* including, other language areas such as Ebira and Ígálà (Obáyemí 1980, 158f., 1983).
- 13 The labels BK1/2 are defined in §0.4 above. In (1a), “Anlọç” is Adzá [A]já (Kligue[h] 2011b). *ŋólì* is Èuè (Surgy 1981a, 43) as are all Gbè data in (1b) except the second form of ‘cowry’ which occurs in Fòn *èkẹ́-wó* ‘cowry’ (Segurola & Rassinoux 2000, 488). In Àkan,  $g > k/ch$  devoicing is regular (Stewart 1993, 34; 2002, 219) as is palatalization in Nupe and Igbo ‘journey’. The nasal stop in Ídòmà ‘hunger (v.)’ matches nasal prosody in Nupe and aspiration/murmur in southern Igbo, where dotted *ChV* is the outcome of *\*CnV* (Williamson 1973a, Ladefoged & al. 1976). Èdó *ígho* ‘cowrie’ demands a separate explanation. In Agbò—adjacent to Èdó at the west edge of Macro-Ìgbo—the root ‘buy’ is *-ŋó* whose consonant is a possible source for the voiced velar spirant *gb* [ɣ], however *gb* can’t be the unique source of Yorùbá *w* in (1b), given the nonspirant *g* in Èdó ‘bend’.
- 14 In Èuè “an initial arrival of *Afá* from Ajá (Tádó) was followed by a second one, from Òyó” (Surgy 1981a, 22 cf. Herskovits 1938, 104, Kligue[h] 2001, 199). The Tádó route may explain the oracle tray obtained at Alàdà c.1650 from a “vassal of the Great King of Benin” (Jones 1994, 29, 36, Parés 2016, 115). “Ifá” and “Yorùbá” identifications of this item, divined by Drewal & al. (1989a, 70, 1989b, 21), are as arbitrary as their “nonsense... dating” and “amusing... attribution” (Jones 1994, 37, 93) of ivory bracelets in the same collection (1989b, 106). Èdó (“Benin”) inspiration is no less likely on formal grounds for any of the tray’s carved icons, all of which are *mute* (*pace* Abiódún 2016). Moreover, direct Èdó-Alàdà trade is widely held to have been ongoing already at the time (e.g. Curnow 1983, 177).
- 15 Cf. Maupoil (1943a, 218f.). The second element in *vo-de* may denote ‘amulet’ (Höftmann & Ahohunkpanzon 2003, 143).
- 16 The tree is also known in Yorùbá as *òpẹ́ Ifá* (Abraham 1958, 275, 523, Verger 1997, 601, Ehigiamusoc 2013, 210, Abiódún 2014, 14).
- 17 In (3a), the Èuè forms are from Hamberger (2011, 602) and Westermann (1905, 130, cf. Bertho 1936, Kligueh 2001) while the Mìnà and Ebira forms are from Gaillard (1907, 119 via Maupoil 1943a, 4 *fn* 2) and Wilson-Haffenden (1927, 29) respectively. In (3b), the Ígálà form is from Clifford (1936, 398). The Ísóko form in (3a) is vague between bilabial and labiodental articulation, whereas ‘urinate’ (4a) is labiodental in Ísóko but bilabial in Uvbie (Nabofa & Elugbe 1981, 15 *fn* 4; Elugbe 1989, 63, 219). For ‘breeze’ (4b), Elugbe (1989, 170) gives only a reconstructed Macro-Èdó protoform without citing modern reflexes.

	Benue-Kwa														
	BK2						BK1								
	Gbè			Y-I		N-E	Macro-Èdó				Macro-Ìgbo		Proto-“Bantu”		
	Èùè	Mínà	Fòn	Yorùbá	Ígálà	Nupe	Ebira	Ìdòmà	Èdó	Ùrhobo	Ìsòko	Uvbiè	Macro-Ìgbo	Proto-“Bantu”	
(3a) [oracle name]	Afá/Afǎ	Iphá	Fá	Ifá	Ifá	Eba	“Eba”	Èpa/Èba	Ìha	Èpha/Èvwa	Èva		Áfa/Éfa/É(p)ha		
◆◆◆◆	“Fu”		Fú	Òfún	Òfú	“Efu”		Ófú	Òhún	“Ophu”	“Ovu”		Òfú/Òhú		
(3b) [place name]				Ifè/Ùhè					“Ife”				Úhè		
(4a) ‘debt-pawn’ ‘urinate’ ‘fly/blow [wind]’	àwòbá			iwòfá		swàfá			iyòha	(-phà ‘pay’) ijova					
						-bóli			-hiò	-phé	-vǎ	-vbé			
						-bè			-hie				-fé/-phé/-hé	*-pep	
(4b) ‘wash [cloth]’ ‘breeze/wind’	...fáfe			-fò	-fò	-fo			-hò	-fò	-hò	-fò			
						efe			[	*fè...			]	úfère/iuhuè	*-pepo

Also deducibly, the items in (3a) did not move from Yorùbá to Èdó. Not recently, because Èdó fails to change *f* to *b* in modern loans, else a Catholic padre in Benin-City should be \**èbadá* not *èfadá* (Melzian 1937, 28). Likewise Ìsòko and Ùrhobo have no reason to alter *f*—a sound that they already possess—in a borrowed word. The remaining possibility is that the items in (3a) reached Macro-Èdó in time to undergo older sound shifts in the cluster, and that the donor was not Yorùbá-speaking. Elugbe (1986) reconstructs the [h=ph=v] correspondence (4a) as \**p*—a consonant produced with light (unreleased) constriction—in contrast to \**f* for the [h=f=h] set (4b). If the words in (3a) had *f* when they entered Macro-Èdó, Ùrhobo and Ìsòko should have *f* and *b* respectively, not *ph* and *v*. Therefore the source for (3a) in Macro-Èdó did not contain \**f* at any time, ruling out a Yorùbá source for the Èdó *Ìha* oracle, *pave* Egharhevba (1936b).

(3a) helps to narrow down where Yorùbá obtained the array names and the name *Ifá*. Yorùbá shifts *p* to *b* in modern loans like *béba* ‘paper’, *sòbù* ‘shop’, *bèbùsi* ‘Pepsi™’ and *Bickering* ‘Pickering’, but *v* becomes *f* as in *fidio* ‘video’ and *f* is also the fate of \**p* (unreleased/light/lenited *p*) as in *káfinítá* ‘carpenter’.<sup>18</sup> Therefore Yorùbá—or Ígálà, having the same inventory of labial consonants—could have acquired the names in (3a) from a language that pronounced them with any labial consonant except for *b* or released (non-light) *p*.<sup>19</sup> Such a language is neither Nupe nor modern Èdó, but could have been another language in the Èdó cluster or an older stage of Èdó itself. The latter probability is increased by the match of nasality in the name of ◆◆◆◆, the matching initial vowels of *Ifá* and *Ìha*, and the fact that Èdó imperial “rule undoubtedly extended, at least from the 16th century” across the Yorùbá-speaking coastal fringe (Bradbury 1957, 21).<sup>20</sup>

Reconstructing the oracle name with \**p* fits the middle belt reflexes. Ìdòmà has *Èpa* and *Èba* in the Àkwéyà and Òtùkpó dialects respectively (Abraham 1951, 132; Amali & Armstrong 1968, 43; Kasfir 1989, 87 *fn.* 19 and *p.c.*). Both places have indigenous *p*, *b* and *f*, and both lack *v* (Armstrong 1983, 140) but it would be odd to borrow *v* as *p* and easier for \**p* to become *p* or *b* indifferently.<sup>21</sup> Speakers of Ngas (alias “Angas”) call the oracle either “Pa” or “Peh” (Danfulani 1995, 88, no diacritics) and it’s unlikely that the source had a *b*, *f* or *v* because Ngas has all three sounds (Burquest 1973). Modern *b* in the oracle name also lacks internal motivation in Nupe, which natively has both *p* and *f*, so unless the *b* is a random event, it also points to a source like \**p* which is halfway between *p* and *b* on the phonation (VOT) scale.<sup>22</sup>

In the Macro-Ìgbo cluster, correspondence sets in the oracle name (5a), ritual terms (5b) and general vocabulary (5c) show weakening (lenition) of reconstructed \**f* or \**p*. The irregularity of the Nri reflexes in (5b) with *b* not *f* points to horizontal transmission (borrowing) of these items, versus the inherited pattern (5c) that includes (5a).<sup>23</sup>

	Macro-Ìgbo					
	Ágbò	Ònichá	Nri	Nsúká	Mbàisén	Èhùgbò
(5a) [oracle name]	Èfa	Áfa/Áva	Áfa/Áva	Èha	Áfa	
(5b) ‘patrilineage icon’ ◆◆◆◆	òfò	òfò/òvò	òhwò	òhò	òfò	òfò
			Òhú	“Ohu”		
(5c) ‘sauce’	ófe	ófe/óve	ófe/óve	óhe	ófe	óhe
‘stomach’	éfo	áfò/ávò	áfò/ávò	éhò	áfò	éhò

These phonetic facts converge on an etymology for the oracle name based on a “regional identity which... in the 16th century... linked the peoples producing and trading salt in Nigeria’s Benue river valley” (Shain 2005, 246, cf. Áfùgbo 2005b, 71). The salt funded a state whose epithet—*Kwàràràfáá* or *Kororofa*—combined Jukun *apá* ‘person’ with a term for woven grass parcels, in Hausa *kwàróorò* (Àjàyí & Alagoa 1980, 232, cf. Abraham & Mai 1946, 593, 986, Hodgkin 1960, 31, Shimizu 1971, 2, Adamu 1984, 281 *fn.* 59). In the 17th century, Borno expelled this salt polity from “the upper Gongola valley” to “south of the Benue” (Webster 1975, 11, 17) and a “region... known as *Apá*” (Erim 1981, 15). The

- Abraham (1958, 357), Baniño & al. (1991, 181, 287), Awóyalé (2008, *p.c.*), Fálána (2001). Other outcomes are possible in case of more extreme simplification like *sábúkèèni* ‘certificate’ (Baniño & al. 1991, 43). Yorùbá-English bilinguals can say “*pépa* (not *béba*) ‘conference paper’” (Bámgbòsè 1986, 60) and even play with spelling meta-pronunciation so that a *piece of paper* becomes a *kpís* of *kpékpá*.
- Some Hausa speakers borrow *p* as *f*, e.g. *silifa* ‘slipper’, *fasinja* ‘passenger’ (Greenberg 1941, 322; Jaggar 2001, 50, 53), others turn a *ceiling fan* into a “sailing pan” (É. Omólúábí *p.c.*). Linguistic evidence apart, Hausa speakers can’t be excluded from the oracle history, given the importance of *Abakwa-riga*, “pagan” (nonmuslim) Hausa-speaking refugees from the Fulani *jihād* in the Benue valley in the early 19th century (Ruxton 1907, 381 via Rubin 1970a, 141). Erim calls them “the Abakpa people (Hausa)” (1981, 23, no diacritics).
- In the 17th century, Èdó hegemony reached the Àkan-speaking area via coastal routes (Jones 1983, 68 citing Brun 1624, 38), cf. *fn.* 3 above). Gbè folklore (Bertho 1936, 360) links the personified “Afa” oracle to Agbádárigi [“Badagri”] which was “populated mainly by Awóri who settled there at the time of the [Èdó] domination” (Abraham 1958, 157). Èdó agents followed this route to traffick eastern Yorùbá speakers, who they called *Olùkù mi*—a shibboleth meaning ‘my buddy’ and pronounced *Unúkumi* in western Igbo (Thomas 1914a). In modern Èdó, the expression proverbially signifies incomprehensible speech (Prof. U. Usuanlele *p.c.*). The “alternative etymology” of *Olùkù mi* floated by Lovejoy & Ojó (2015, 364) is pure postmodern fancy.
- Thus English speakers may parse French unaspirated initial *p* as a token of *b*, turning *Paul* into a *ball*. Armstrong (1983, 142) finds no [p=b] correspondence within the Ìdòmà cluster, and 4 out of the 11 Macro-Ìdòmà varieties surveyed fail to contrast *p* and *f*.
- Cf. Ladefoged (1972). In Nupe, the phonetic split between *Eba* and “*efu*” separates *-bè* ‘blow [wind]’ (4a) and *efe* ‘breeze’ (4b) and divides the loanword *áfátá* ‘Cola acuminata’ (Banfield 1914, 22) from its presumed source, Yorùbá *ábátá*. Okene Ebira lacks *f* though it has *v*; a more southern dialect “has *f* or *sh* in place of [Okene] *b*” (Ladefoged 1964, 33, 1968, 58).
- Èhùgbò (5b) is also irregular. The evolution of \**f* and \**p* in Macro-Ìgbo (“Igboid”) is inconclusive because Williamson (1973, 2000, cf. Williamson & Ohirí-Aníché 1996) adopts the Neogrammarian fallacy that a reconstructed protolanguage reflects all irregularities of all daughter languages so as to enjoy the luxury to need only simplification rules to explain attested outcomes (cf. Anttila 1972, 188f).

Benue commodity may echo in  $\diamond\diamond\diamond$ / $\diamond\diamond\diamond$  where *egbínrín iyò* ‘bags of salt’ are used in *òrun* ‘heaven’ to bribe the *onibodé* ‘gatekeeper’ on the road to Àjàlá who molds *orí*-destinies for reincarnation on the earth (Abímbólá 1975, 178-207).

The bare Jukun autonym persists with varied geographic meanings. In Ígálà legend, the *Ifá* oracle was used against “*Apa*” invaders, where “*Apa* and *Ichi* frequently stand for East and West in everyday speech” (Boston 1968, 24, 200 correcting Seton 1928, 270, no tones in source). Present “Ídòmà, Ebira and Ígálà often describe themselves as being related to the Jukun and are sometimes jointly referred to as *Apa people*” (Ọbáyemí 1980, 160). In 2009 a wealthy Ídòmà-speaking ‘militician’ (general>senator) unsuccessfully lobbied his colleagues to create an Ídòmà-majority “*Apa State*”.<sup>24</sup>

Any appeal to Jukunology rests upon a notoriously speculative literature, consumable with some grains of *kenáróórò*.<sup>25</sup> However, evidence for *Apà* (“Jukun”) as the oracle’s remote geographic source goes beyond mere phonetic resemblance to the reconstructed *\*A’pa* ethnic name. A terse colonial report summarizes legends describing *Apà* hegemony as

a theocracy of some sort, with temporal and spiritual power vested in the *Asum* or king. One is led to suppose that they were not numerous, but owed their power to the possession of an oracle deemed infallible. Owing to this superior “juju” they kept a loose hold over numbers of pagan states who paid them a voluntary tribute... (Ruxton 1907, 379f.)

It’s unclear if Ruxton had in mind a stationary judicial shrine like “Yaku” (Meek 1931, 276-84), analogous to *Chí ukwu* of Àrù (alias “Arochukwu”) or *Ọgwugwu* of “Ọkíja” (Díké & Èkèjìyá 1990, Ellis 2008), as opposed to a guild of itinerant psychotherapists like *Ifá*. Both types reportedly coexisted in *Apà* as well as in the roughly contemporaneous Ñrì, and these two polities displayed another functional parallel: the use of a “secret” argot by their respective agents.<sup>26</sup>

A colonial source reports that the Ebira version of the oracle was “learned from the [Ì]gbo tribe south of the Benue” (Wilson-Haffenden 1927, 27), and other phonetic details suggest that Ñrì was the oracle’s gateway across the confluence. (6) shows that the sound written “gb” in the name of  $\diamond\diamond\diamond$  is limited to a contiguous area including Gbè, Yorùbá, Macro-Èdó, western Ígbo and one Ñrì variant; elsewhere it has plain *b* or else is a phonetically unrelated item. In the standard Ígbo orthography of 1961, the digraph “gb” spells phonetic [ɓ], a bilabial implosive (Ladefoged & al. 1976) as reflected in well-intentioned, improvised colonial spellings like “Ibwo” and “Ib’o” (Thomas 1913b). Èdó, Yorùbá and other nearby languages that lack implosives regularly borrow Ígbo [ɓ] as labiovelar plosive [gɓ], as in their pronunciation of the ethnonym *Ígbo* itself (Baikie 1856, 288). Nonesoteric Ígbo has no *b* ~ [ɓ] alternations, but the Ñrì *dìbja* recorded in the Appendix saying the name of  $\diamond\diamond\diamond$  consistently produced *b* before *i* and [ɓ] before *u*. Secondly, it’s remarkable that the geographic split between orthographic “gb” (plosive or implosive) and plain *b* in the name of  $\diamond\diamond\diamond$  matches the distribution of continuant *gb/y* versus stop *g* in the names of  $\diamond\diamond\diamond$  and  $\diamond\diamond\diamond$ . For both these patterns (6) and (1a+), Ñrì is the point of greatest internal diversity, and thus, by the logic of demographic drift (Cavalli-Sforza 2000, 42f.), the presumptive diffusion point from conservative to innovative zones.<sup>27</sup>

		area of innovations										
		Fòn-Gbè	NWYorùbá	Èdó	Ùrhobo	W Ígbo	Ñrì-Igbo	Ígálà	Ìdòmà	NE Yorùbá	Nupe	Ngas
(6)	$\diamond\diamond\diamond$	Gbè	Ogbè	Ógbi	Ogbi	Ógbi	Ógbù/Óbi	Èbí	Ébì	[Ošika]	[Šikan]	[Ši]
(1a+)	$\diamond\diamond\diamond$	(W)óli	Ìwòrì	Òghoi	Oghori	Ògoli	Òyeri/Ògori	Ògòli	Ògòli	“Ogori”	“Gori”	“Guiri”
	$\diamond\diamond\diamond$	Wèlé	Ọwónrín	Ọgháe	E/Aghare	Ọgá()i	Àyári/Àgári	Ègálí	Ègálí	“Ọga”	“Ega”	[Chiyyong]

Variants of  $\diamond\diamond\diamond$  and  $\diamond\diamond\diamond$  attest a distinct, intersecting wave: Ngas, Nupe and Gbè have *s* versus Ídòmà *l* while the Ígbo, Èdó and Yorùbá-Ígálà clusters are each internally split between *s* and *r* (7a). The same pattern appears in general vocabulary (7b). Akínkugbé (1978, 176, 545-60) explains Yorùbá vs. Ígálà as rhotacism *s* > *r* as in the lenition of Latin *\*flōs-is* ‘flower *gen. sg.*’ > *flōris* (Meillet 1924, 74, Buck 1933, 133, 192), cf. the Yorùbá-internal doublets *-yò/-rò* ‘descend, dangle’ and *orí.sun/orí.run* ‘source (of flow), origin’ (Abraham 1958, 574, 595, 600, Fábùnmi 1969, 4, Bánjọ 1991, 262). For the Ígbo cluster, Williamson reconstructs a “voiceless tap” that “could perhaps have developed from *sh*, a sound in which the blade of the tongue is necessarily retracted. (I have been told that such a voiceless tap occurs in some dialects not far from Ọnìcha...)” (1973b, 13). This tap shows up in the colonial spelling of Ñrì as “Ndrì” (Jeffreys 1935).<sup>28</sup>

		area of rhotacism										
		Fòn-Gbè	NWYorùbá	Nupe	NEYorùbá	Èdó	W Ígbo	Ígálà	Ùrhobo	Ñrì-Igbo	Ìdòmà	Ngas
(7a)	$\diamond\diamond\diamond$	Lósò	Ìròsùn	“Rusu”	“Orosun”	Òrúúhu	Úlùshù	Òlòrù	Urhur(h)u	Ùrúrù	Òlò	“Lusu”
	$\diamond\diamond\diamond$	Sá	Ọsá	“Esa”	“Osa”	Ọhá	Ọshá	Ọrá	Ọrha	Ọrá	Ọlá	“Saa”
(7b)	‘hang, tie’		so	so				ro			lò	
	‘seed, fruit’		èso					èro				
	‘noonday’		Ọsọn					Ọrọ(ka)				
	‘roast, ooze’		sun				shù	ro	rho	rù		

24 See [www.idomanationalforum.org.ng/inf.php](http://www.idomanationalforum.org.ng/inf.php), [www.tmcnet.com/submit/2009/12/22/4544995.htm](http://www.tmcnet.com/submit/2009/12/22/4544995.htm).

25 Jukun is enmeshed in the mythic “Hamitic” conquest (Meinhof & v Luschan 1912, Palmer 1931, cf. MacGaffey 1978) which, race fantasies apart, presumes “unwarranted extension backwards in time of 19th-century Fulani political and military structures” (Rubin 1970a, 189, cf. Law 1984). Other mixups are phonetic. When Meek wrote variously *Wapá*, *Apa*, *apa-Jukú* and *apa-Jukun* (1931, 14-17), the circumflex of nasality on “*Wapá*” may be contagion from the distinct ethnonym (*Akpa* = (*Dkpan*) (Shimizu 1971, 2) enhanced by dim European perception of *kp*. Conversely, Baikie omits the nasal in his own *Akpa* (1856, 433), an oversight that probably birthed Meek’s wild etymology of the name of the Cross River seaport as “Atakpa, or ‘king of the Akpa’ or Apa” (1931, 28). Meek’s phonetic fuzziness in turn begat Àfígbò’s carelessly twinned “name *Apa* or *Akpa*... to refer to the Jukun” (1977, 137) and Alagoa’s assured citation of “[t]he name *Akpa* by which the Jukun are identified in the Cross River region...” (1980, 60), cf. Nwàùwa (1991, 309 *fn* 10).

26 The *nám bene* argot of “Jukun” was “spoken by *bábebe* ‘priests, kingmakers’” (Storch 2004, 344). Ñrì *òlu* argot (literally ‘neck’ i.e. concealed voice) was used by *ọ̀yọ́ ichi* men acting as “eyes and ears” of the Àgbàlà stationary oracle and by *Afa* specialists “employed... by the Àgbàlà” (Ọnwùjẹjọgùwù 1981, 142, Manfredi 1991, 269f. cf. §1.4 below). The Ñrì network may have operated in Ígálà in medieval times (Oguagha & Ọkpoko 1984, 215, Oguagha 1989, 46f) and was active in north Ñsúkà c. 1900 (Shelton 1965a, 123) and at Umùlèrì and Agulèrì in 1967 (Ọnwùjẹjọgùwù 1981, 166). In 1977, Nkàma Ọkpánì my host in Èhùgbò (“Afikpo”) pointed out two tall visitors with *ìbí* (forehead keloids) standing in Èké market and described them as Ñrì mediators invited to arbitrate a local dispute.

27 In (1a+), Western Ígbo has *g* not *gb* (Bradbury *p.c.* via Armstrong 1964b, 139), entailing that the oracle arrived after Western Ígbo shifted *gb* > *y* as in *-gbá* > *-yá* ‘scatter’, *-gbé* > *-yé* ‘fry’ and *-gbó* > *-yó* ‘sharp/clever’ (Thomas 1914c, 6, 149ff). Eastern BK cognates of all three roots have a voiceless plosive onset (either palatal or velar) and a nasal coda: *-can*, *-kang*, *-cong* ([www.metajro.be/blr/](http://www.metajro.be/blr/)).

28 For Èdó *b* = Ùrhobo *rh* correspondences, Elugbe reconstructs a light (“lenis”) stop (1989, 103). In every other branch of Macro-Èdó, only *s* occurs in the items in (7b), but proto-BK probably had a stop, in view of the “Proto-Bantu” forms *\*ton* ‘hang’ and *\*tumb* ‘roast’.



1.3.3 Retrieval key (lookup table)

*Le devin est un peu «comme un dictionnaire»...<sup>33</sup>*  
(Maupoil 1943a, 222)

Meek observed a “Jukun” oraclist retrieve, for each individual 4-bit array, one out of 16 lexical glosses such as ‘woman’, ‘health’, ‘evening’ or ‘unhappiness’ and then interpret these creatively by combining them in pairs (1931, 326f. and facing plate). A similar procedure appears to be sketched in Ìsóko (Welch 1934, 166). By contrast, in Ñri, Ñsùkà, Nupe, Ígàlà, Úrhobo and Èdó the oracle lookup table returns a unique semantic domain (minus accidental duplicates) for each of the 256 duplex signs. Appendix 4.3 below compiles the full index for Ñri and Èdó and the biggest available set for four other sites. The matching rate between Ñri and the other five localities is given below and illustrated with 30 cases.<sup>34</sup>

← top, left \ right	<i>Áfa</i> (Ñri-Igbo) n=256	<i>Éba</i> (Ñsùkà-Igbo) n=12, match=50%	<i>Èpba</i> (Úrhobo) n=64, match=35%	<i>Ìba</i> (Èdó) n=256, match=41%	<i>Eba</i> (Nupe) n=32, match=25%	<i>‘Ifá amwa’</i> (Ígàlà) n=20, match=50%
◇◇◇◇\◇◇◇◇	<i>reappear/ twice</i>		<i>double</i>	<i>doubled/ repeated</i> [ <i>make sacrifice</i> ]	[ <i>smallpox</i> ]	
◆◆◆◆\◆◆◆◆	<i>go</i>	<i>ram or sheep</i>	[ <i>ears/ dry season</i> ]	<i>journey</i>	<i>pleasant trip</i>	
◆◆◆◆\◆◆◆◆	<i>abandon home</i>			<i>rotten crops</i>		
◆◆◆◆\◆◆◆◆	<i>animal sacrifice</i>			<i>animal sacrifice</i>		
◆◆◆◆\◆◆◆◆	<i>cow</i>			<i>duke who eats cow</i>		
◇◇◆◆\◇◇◆◆	<i>stomach illness</i>			<i>stomach illness</i>		
◇◆◆◆\◇◆◆◆	<i>oracle priest/ Agwá<sup>35</sup></i>			<i>oracle priest</i>		
◆◆◆◆\◆◆◆◆	<i>common sense</i>			<i>wisdom</i>		
◇◆◆◆\◇◆◆◆	<i>prepared medicine</i>			<i>medicine/ poison</i>		
◇◆◆◆\◆◆◆◆	<i>cleanse evil</i>			<i>overcome evil</i>		
◆◆◆◆\◆◆◆◆	<i>mother, pregnancy</i>	<i>alcoholic drink</i>		<i>mother</i>		
◆◆◆◆\◆◆◆◆	<i>alcoholic drink</i>			<i>alcoholic drink</i>		
◇◆◆◆\◆◆◆◆	<i>said/ decided</i>		<i>advice, counsel</i>	<i>messenger</i>	[ <i>quarrel</i> ]	
◇◆◆◆\◆◆◆◆	<i>watchfulness</i>			<i>heart/ confidence</i>		
◆◆◆◆\◆◆◆◆	<i>alcoholic drink</i>		<i>alcoholic drink</i>	<i>alcoholic drink</i>		
◇◆◆◆\◆◆◆◆	<i>pay a debt</i>		<i>debt</i>	<i>vomit back</i>	[ <i>happiness</i> ]	
◇◆◆◆\◆◆◆◆	<i>refusal/ crazy talk</i>			<i>mischievous</i>	<i>anger/ [gifts]</i>	
◆◆◆◆\◆◆◆◆	<i>shame/ billygoat</i>			<i>shame/ billygoat</i>		
◆◆◆◆\◆◆◆◆	<i>money</i>		<i>money, [male child]</i>	<i>money</i>		
◇◆◆◆\◇◆◆◆	<i>thing outside</i>			<i>visitor</i>	<i>highway/ visitor</i>	
◇◆◆◆\◇◆◆◆	<i>close door/ night</i>		<i>night</i>	[ <i>war</i> ]		
◇◆◆◆\◇◆◆◆	<i>sworn oath</i>		[ <i>destiny</i> ]	<i>sworn oath</i>		
◇◆◆◆\◇◆◆◆	<i>pleading</i>			<i>request</i>		
◆◆◆◆\◆◆◆◆	<i>bad talk</i>			<i>bad talk</i>		
◆◆◆◆\◆◆◆◆	<i>taboo</i>			<i>turn away from</i>		
◆◆◆◆\◆◆◆◆	<i>patrilineage</i>		<i>relative/ brother/ sister</i>	<i>patrilineage</i>		
◆◆◆◆\◆◆◆◆	<i>bad-death ones</i>		<i>spirit world/ the dead</i>	<i>bad companions</i>		
◆◆◆◆\◆◆◆◆	<i>chí (procreative force)</i>			[ <i>mother</i> ]		no ancestral staff <i>ojo</i> (≈ Igbo <i>chí</i> )
◆◆◆◆\◆◆◆◆	<i>see</i>		<i>eyes</i>	<i>eyes</i>		
◆◆◆◆\◆◆◆◆	<i>meeting/ forest</i>		<i>crowd/ public</i>	[ <i>monkey sacrifice</i> ]		
◆◆◆◆\◆◆◆◆	<i>eat poison</i>			<i>poison</i>		

Figure 2. Semantic translations of 30 of the 256 eight-bit oracle arrays across six localities, sampled from §3.3 below

By inspection, the correspondence among the six is well above chance, even assuming that most of the glosses come from a limited set of stereotypic oracle message tags like ‘journey’, ‘quarrel’, ‘sacrificial animal’ and ‘alcoholic drink’.<sup>36</sup> Figure 2 therefore diagnoses common origin on the semantic side just as Figure 1 does for phonetics, although semantic space is larger and its vectors of shift are less predictable (Campbell 1988, 115, 272f.). In the absence of semantic data from the Benue valley, it’s unknown if this table was invented there or in a confluence locality such as Ígàlà.<sup>37</sup>

Figure 2 (drawn from §3.3 below) simplifies the glosses in the source documents, whether by translation, abbreviation or abstracting from diverse storage formats. In *Ìba Ominigbon* alias *òguééga*, for example, each duplex address cues not just a single phrase as in *Áfa*, but potentially an entire proverb or other “fixed sentence” that can be further elaborated as a “folktale” or *èria nó òmínwín* ‘deep explanation’ (Emovon 1984, 4, 7, Egharhevba 1936b/1965, 90-168). Similar elasticity is reported in Ígàlà (Boston 1974) and Gbè (Maupoil 1943a, Surgy 1981a; Kligueh 2001, 2011b) and *Ifá* goes further, with each one-byte address returning multiple alternate texts, from which the client and *babaláwo* can choose based on situational factors. Compensating for the extra memory load imposed by such narrative richness, all *Ifá* texts are tailored to an eight-part stylistic template called *esé Ifá* (Abimbólá 1976, 43-62) and the alternative texts returned by any one array (*odù*) may share a general thematic “character” (Abimbólá 1976, 33, cf. Clarke 1939, 255; Maupoil 1943a, 430-572).<sup>38</sup>

In the less professional oracles of the north and east, interpretive freedom is obtained less arduously, by mechanical procedures multiplying the number of arrays that can be read from one cycle of the processor (oracle apparatus). In Ñri for example, four 4-bit strings are thrown in two successive pairs, then the four outcomes are paired off in all possible right-to-left permutations, returning as many as six distinct duplex (8-bit) signs minus chance duplicates (cf. §3.1). The

33 [An oracle-priest is rather like a dictionary...]

34 In Figure 2, non-Ñri glosses with no clear semantic similarity to the Ñri interpretation of the same sign are cited in square brackets.

35 *Agwá* is represented as the *dìbì a áfá*s supernatural familiar, an equivocal force mediating with the invisible world, see §1.4 below.

36 The usual motives for consultation are “illness, fear of death, fear of enemies, lack of a wife, lack of children and lack of money” (Abimbólá 1976, 47, cf. Maupoil 1943a, 222).

37 Downes (1933) gives 14 of the 256 translations in Tiv with no match to any of the six localities in Figure 2, but Bohannon may go too far in declaring “proof that the univocal readings that were given by Captain Downes were on the wrong track” (1950, 684).

38 For five individual signs, Egharhevba’s second edition (1965, 19, 22, 33, 38) adds a Yorùbá phrase:

◇◇◇◇\◆◆◆◆	<i>Òkan Ogbi</i>	<i>Omodé kò pé àgbà</i>	‘A small child doesn’t summon an elder’
◆◆◆◆\◆◆◆◆	<i>Ògbáa n’ aàbe</i>	<i>Yeye irè omọ</i>	‘Mother the child-comforter’
◇◇◇◇\◇◇◆◆	<i>Ìgbítan Ogbi</i>	<i>awo</i>	‘Ifá initiate’
◇◆◆◆\◆◆◆◆	<i>Èrbóxunà Osé</i>	<i>Olùkùmi màà dì ilé</i>	‘A close companion is not like a member of one’s family’
◇◇◆◆\◆◆◆◆	<i>Èkà Ogbi</i>	<i>ori imọlẹ</i>	‘ancestral/earth altar’

It’s presently unknown whether the first edition (Egharhevba 1936a) already contained these or similar Yorùbá tags.

same permutations are described in Nsúká, with most of the multiple alternatives filtered out as “non-functional” noise, against whose background a contextually appropriate signal is discerned (Shelton 1965b, 1449-51).

A different flexibility is afforded by the option to read the arrays “from the side of the client sitting opposite the diviner” (Emoṣon 1984, 4f). This is noted in Nupe (Nadel 1954, 42), Ígàlà (Boston 1974, 351) and Èdó (Egharheba 1936b, 54-86). In Ùrhobo, Eriwwo the oraclist “says that when the seeds are cast, there are two ends from which the reading can be taken viz: the *Àkèpò* end and the *Èrímwín* end” (Nabofa & Elugbe 1981, 8). In that case, the observers expressed personal “doubts about Eriwwo’s explanations as regards the reading of the Épha” (1981, 6) and decided to reinterpret his statement as referring, not to a 180° rotation of the array, but to a polarity switch of each binary digit, as if the array was being scanned from a virtual underground position looking up:

[I]n Ùrhobo thought forms, *Àkèpò* is the abode of the living—both plants and animals—and this is believed to be on the surface of the earth. Conversely, *Èrímwín* is the permanent [sic] abode of the dead, and it is thought to be under the earth, although the living-dead are said to show up occasionally in *Àkèpò*. ...When the whole divination element is read from the surface, it is then said that its *Àkèpò* end is being read. However, when the diviner imaginatively goes under the earth and reads the Épha from there, it is then regarded that its *Èrímwín* end is being read...  
(Nabofa & Elugbe 1981, 10)

Indeed the *Èrímwín* (ancestor’s eye) versions of two symmetric arrays are derived by polarity switch, as if seen from below: *Oghori* ◆◆◆◆ > *Odi* ◆◆◆◆, *Ogbi* ◆◆◆◆ > *Ako* ◆◆◆◆ (Nabofa & Elugbe 1981, 10). To locate the ancestors underground is consistent with most West African ethnography, apart from orthodox Ifá that puts them in the sky, but this does not disprove planar rotation in other cases, for a mechanical reason already noted for Nupe:

Certain slabs, for example, have symmetrical markings, so that their ‘upper’ and ‘lower’ halves coincide; in this case, the second name, which corresponds to the reversed throw, refers to the (blank) back of the slav, Again, two strings in their standard position... show the same pattern when reversed; here the ‘reversed pattern’ is obtained by counting open shells and closed and *vice versa*.  
(Nadel 1954, 42)

Thus, *pace* Nabofa & Elugbe, polarity switch and planar rotation are complementary—not mutually exclusive—forms of interpretive license. Planar rotation is apparently the first choice, and polarity switch only a last resort to handle linearly symmetrical arrays, when the result of planar rotation would be string-vacuous.

The occurrence of optional interpretive 180° rotation in four dispersed localities helps to explain how two of these oracles and one other (*Èpha* of Nsúká-Igbo) have been described with a 180° mutation of the mapping between names and visual arrays. Unaware of this context, Bascom was plainly flummoxed by Shelton’s description of Nsúká and felt compelled to “seriously question his description of the method... unless one reads all the figures from the bottom up” (1966, 420 and *fn.* 1). On closer examination, however, Shelton’s report is internally consistent: the string held in the *dibìá*’s right hand appears on the left side of the diagrams and photos (1965b, 1449ff.), proving that the illustrations and the names do in fact take the client’s-eye view. The same name rotation is found in Èdó and Ùrhobo:<sup>39</sup>

		180° rotation				
←top	Ifá	Ìha	Èpha	Èha	Áfa	
◆◆◆◆	Òbàrà	Òkan	Òkanran	Òkara	Òbara	×
◆◆◆◆	Òkànràn	Òvba	Ò(v)bara	Òbara	Òkara	×
◆◆◆◆	Ìròsùn	Ògháe	Aghare	Egali	Ùrùrù	×
◆◆◆◆	Òwónrín	Òrùhù	Urhur(h)u	Uhu	Àg(h)ári	×
◆◆◆◆	Ògúndá	Òhá	Orha	Oha	Ìjíte/Ògúte	×
◆◆◆◆	Òsá	Èghítan	Ighite	Ijite/Ogwute	Òrá	×
◆◆◆◆	Ìrètè	Ètùrè	Erhure	Oture	Ète/Èke	×
◆◆◆◆	Òtù(r)á	Ète	Ete	Ete	Òtùre	×
◆◆◆◆	Òtùrùpòn	Èká	Èka	Èka	Àtùrùkpà	×
◆◆◆◆	Ìká	Èrhóxwà	Erhokpo	Ètùrùkpa	Àká	×
◆◆◆◆	Òsé	Òhún	Ophu	Ohu	Òsé	×
◆◆◆◆	Òfún	Òsé	Ose	Ose	Òhú	×

Figure 3. Comparison of the twelve asymmetric 4-bit arrays across five West African localities

180° rotation in three roughly contiguous localities is less likely to show three independent mutations than one connected transmission wave, whose timing with respect to other changes is difficult to evaluate because it has no interpretive consequences. Figure 2 shows that semantic content is keyed to the verbal address not to the visual one: despite visual rotation, semantics hold constant with respect to audible array names. Thus in *Áfa*, the gloss of *Òrá Àghári* ◆◆◆◆/◆◆◆◆ is “patrilineage” (Ònwùejìògwù 1997, 143) and this fits the meaning of its verbal cognate in *Ìha*, despite visual inversion: *Òhá Ògháe* ◆◆◆◆/◆◆◆◆ is “believed to indicate enmity from a brother by the same father... It seems, however, that the term can also be used without any connotation of enmity, only to denote paternal relatives” (Melzian 1937, 32f.). If on the contrary interpretations were keyed to visual arrays (as is the case in sahelian sand oracles), the *Ìha* equivalent of *Òrá Àghári* ◆◆◆◆/◆◆◆◆ should have been *Èghítan Òrùhù* ◆◆◆◆/◆◆◆◆ glossed “*òbè* [gift]” (Egharheba 1936b, 25), a completely unrelated meaning. Similarly in *Èpha*, *Orhaghare* ◆◆◆◆/◆◆◆◆ means “relation, brother, sister” (Nabofa & Elugbe 1981, 17), predictable from the verbal address not the visual one.<sup>40</sup> Thus the oracle works like normal writing systems: interpretations are derived primarily from auditory signs and only secondarily linked to visual representations. That’s why one language (Hindi-Urdu) can be written alternatively in two unrelated syllabic scripts (*devanāgarī* and Arabic) and why Japanese is successfully biscriptal, blending syllabics (*kana*) with Chinese characters (*kanji*). The choice of visual form affects processing but not denotation.

*Ifá* adds its own flexibility, not by rotating the arrays but by linking alternative, multiple texts to an individual *odù* (duplex 4-bit address). As noted, corpus expansion imposes a bigger learning task on the *Ifá* initiate, and the heavier memory burden helps in turn to explain *Ifá*’s extreme preoccupation with mnemonic devices, including

39 In western Gbè, the middle of the 8-bit chain is thrown inward/towards the oraclist yielding a ‘hollow’ U-shape (“face creuse”), but elsewhere falls outward/away from the oraclist in a ‘bulging’ U-shape (“face bombée”), e.g. in Nàgò (eastern Gbè) and Ifè (Maupoil 1943a, 201, Bascom 1969, 29, Surgé 1981a, 49). In Ígbo and Èdó, unlooped 4-bit strings are thrown outward so their ornamented bottom terminals fall pointing back towards the oraclist (Shelton 1965b, 1449, Emoṣon 1984, 6, Ònwùejìògwù 1997, 46).

40 The gloss of Ùrhobo *Ighite Urhur(h)u* ◆◆◆◆/◆◆◆◆ is not mentioned in available sources.

...verbal links between names of plants, names of the medicinal and magical action expected from them and the *odù* or sign of Ifá in which they are classified by the *babaláwo*. Those verbal links are essential to help them to memorize notions and knowledge transmitted by oral traditions, having so a collective character and not an individual one.

We must mention first that verbal transmission of knowledge is thought in Yorùbá tradition to be the vehicle of *àṣẹ*, the power, the strength of the words which remain ineffectual in a written text. ... A plant alone may be compared to a letter which is part of a word. Alone it is without signification; associated with other letters it contributes to the meaning of the word. ... We must keep in mind that in [the] Yorùbá language there is often a direct relation between the name of the plant and its qualities, and it would be important to know if the plants bear those names according to their virtues or if it is because the plants bear those names that they have received in attribution [of] the said virtues by a kind of play on words (that again more respectfully we could call *ofò*, incantation). Those ‘play of words-incantations’ have an enormous importance in the oral-tradition civilizations. Being pronounced in solemn traditional texts and incantations, they may be considered as definitions. They are often the bases on which reasoning is built up. In the same way, they serve as conclusion and final proof in the traditional stories transmitted from generation to generation by *babaláwo*, and express at the same time the philosophical point of view of the Yorùbá culture and the common sense of its people.

... Among the Yorùbá, *ofò*, the incantatory formulas accompanying the preparation of remedies and magical works are short sentences in which very often the verb which defines the anticipated action, the ‘acting verb’, is one of the syllables in the name of the plant or the ingredient employed. ... All the recipes and ‘works’ made with the plants are classified by the *babaláwo* into the 256 signs, *odù* of Ifá and verbal links, which often established links between the names of the *odù* of Ifá, but more specifically with the second names given to each *odù*. A *babaláwo* seldom uses the name of an *odù* in its original form, but [rather] a name proceeding from it phonetically with adjunction of prefix and suffix giving them a particular signification, which helps the *babaláwo* to find out more easily the symbolism and the context of the stories, *itàn*, and remedies classified into this *odù*...

(Verger 1977a, 242f., 245, 248f., 254, 268, cf. Bascom 1941, 47; Bastide 1970c; Olóròdé 1993, 60; Souty 2007, 345ff.)

(8) lists some of the “second names given to each *odù*” as collected by Verger (1977a).<sup>41</sup> In (8a), the link to a medical or ritual recipe is phonetically cued by the syllables *in bold italics*. In (8b), the motivation is the accident that the array name *Ìròsùn* has a homophone in ordinary Yorùbá vocabulary denoting ‘camwood’ (also called *igí osùn*), a material of reddish hue. In (8c), no obvious phonetic or lexical similarity links the array name to its canonical semantic domain.

- (8a) Ogbè *Ìwòrì* → *w'èhìn* ‘look [*wò*] back [*èhìn*]  
 → *w'èhìn* ‘wash/cure [*wè*] back [*èhìn*]’ → *ewé j'ómó ruke* ‘let-child-grow-well leaf, a backache remedy’<sup>42</sup>  
 Ogbè *Òdí* → *dí'ná* ‘block the road [*óná*]  
 → *dímú-dímú* ‘that which siezes by grasping’  
 Ogbè *Òtúrá* → *hárhá* ‘sheath... enveloping the maize cob’ → *aláṣo funfun* ‘owner of white cloth’  
 Ogbè *Òtúrúpòn* → *tún* omo *pòn* ‘again [*tún*] carry a child in a sling [*pòn*]’ i.e. on the parent’s back → *avè bí* ‘birth medicine’  
 Ogbè *Òsé* → *ṣé* ‘gun ‘win the war [ogun]’ OR *ṣé*.*té* ‘quell the rebellion [*òtè*]  
 Oyèkú *Ìròsùn* → *alásùn* ‘without sleep’  
 Oyèkú *Òtúrúpòn* → *Ikú* *yé* n jó! ‘[personified] Death, allow me to dance!’ → *idáábòbò l'òwó ikú* ‘protection from death’  
 Ìròsùn *Ògúndá* → *gún'dá* ‘pound bush-rat [*edá*]  
 Ìròsùn *Òtúrúpòn* → *tútù* ‘fresh’  
 Ìwòrì *Ìròsùn* → *olòsùn* ‘owner of sleep’  
 Ìwòrì *Òwónrín* → *èhín* omodé ‘tooth of a young child’  
 Ìwòrì *Ìrètè* → *wèrè* ‘madness’  
 Ìwòrì *Òfún* → *fún* ‘white’ → *ewé àgbàdo* ‘leaves of [white West African] maize’ (“used for *avùre orí ire*, to have good luck”)  
*Òdí* *Ìròsùn* → *idin ò sùn* ‘maggot does not sleep’  
*Òbàrà* *Ìwòrì* → *àkó'yèè* ‘collector of understanding [*òyè*]  
*Òbàrà* *Òsé* → *aláséé* ‘owner of power’  
*Òwónrín* *Òfún* → *fún* ‘white’ → *ewé avè fún* ‘leaves that wash white’ (“used to wash [images of] *òrìṣà*”)  
*Ògúndá* *Ogbè* → *egbò ogbé* ‘ulcer of knife-wound’ → *ewé p'ogbé-p'ogbé* ‘leaf, antidote [*pa*] for knife-wound’  
*Ògúndá* *Oyèkú* → *ikú* ‘death’  
*Ògúndá* *Òdí* → *gè* *dí* *igbín* ‘cut the base [*idí*] of snail’ (“which alludes to the notion of calm”)  
*Ògúndá* *Ìròsùn* → *Mo sùn* ‘I sleep’  
*Òsá* *Ìròsùn* → *lè sùn* ‘can sleep’ OR *ò lè sùn* ‘cannot sleep’  
*Ìrètè* *Òsé*<sup>43</sup> → *tè* *ṣṣé* ‘press down on soap’ → “medicament composed of a leopard’s tail [*irù*] pounded [*tè*] with soap”  
 → *èkùn fìrù* *nà'lè* ‘leopard beat the ground with its tail’ (“showing its dangerous, restless, personality”)  
 → *fa tútù tó yinyin* ‘as cold as a hailstone’ (“not much encouraging”)  
 → *alájé* ‘owner of wealth’ (“things are ambivalent and ... may also... have their beneficent sides”)  
*Òtúrá* *méjì* → *eléjò* ‘litigant in court’  
*Òsé* *méjì* → *onjá* ‘quarrelsome’ → *pòpòrò àgbàdo* ‘maize cob without its grains’ (“to be victorious in wrestling”)  
*Òsé* *Òwónrín* → *oniwò* ‘owner of poison’  
*Òfún* *Ìwòrì* → *wò re* ‘look well upon’
- (8b) *Ìròsùn* *méjì* → *odidéré* ‘parrot’ (“whose tailfeathers are very red”)  
*Òsá* *Ìròsùn* → *elépo* ‘possessing red palm oil [*epo*]  
*Ìròsùn* *Òsé* → *èjè* ‘blood’
- (8c) Ogbè *Òdí* → *káká* ‘strong’  
 Ogbè *Ìrètè* → *aláhéré* *owó* ‘owner of storehouse for money’  
 Ogbè *Òtúrá* → *àgbàdo sùnsun* ‘roasted maize grains’ → *kò l'èjò* ‘has no court-case’  
*Òbàrà* *Ògúndá* → *èpè tán* ‘curse finished’  
*Òtúrá* *Ogbè* → *olójò* OR *eréjì* ‘owner of rain’  
*Òfún* *Òtúrá* → *olómọ sọ* *àdà* ‘parent throw cutlass’

The extreme puns in (8) also enable a larger stock of texts—whether *itàn* ‘stories’ or *ofò* ‘magic spells’—to be indexed to and retrieved from a given *odù* (digital address). The primary use of the coincident syllables was to “activate” the names

41 Among others e.g. “*Òtúrúpòn* *Ìròsùn* [is] better known as *Òtúrúpòn* *Ṣokùn*” [sc. ‘tie a rope’] (Lóngé 1983, 24), cf. also Maupoil (1943a), Kligueh (2011b), Babáyemí & Adékòlá eds. (1987-1991). Presumably more are recorded in Verger’s own manuscripts, now archived in Salvador. In one anonymous typewritten *libreta* of Cuban *Ifá* I’ve seen, 69 out of the 256 *odù* include phonetic aliases of type (8a).

42 “Of the 19 recipes I have for this *oògùn* [= backache remedy], 12 are classified in Ogbè [*Ìwòrì*→] *wèhìn*” (Verger 1977a, 273f.).

43 This *odù*, “too dangerous to be pronounced”, is “formed by the fourteenth and fifteenth simple signs” (Verger 1977a, 277). According to Maupoil the reverse combination—*Òsé* *Ìrètè*—is equally “innommable” [forbidden to explicitly name] (1943a, 411f., 669).

of herbs in their active function and then, Verger (1995) suggests, *Ifá* binary metalanguage was applied to index and access these syllables at second order.<sup>44</sup>

Command of a larger repertoire boosts the reputation of an individual oraclist (Bascom 1941, 51f.). Verger (1972) and Abimbólá (1976, 18–25) review how *Ifá* initiates—like *brāhman* maestri of Sanskrit grammar and Vēdic verse (Staal 1989)—hone shamanic tradecraft (*àṣẹ*), enhance powers of recall (*ìṣòṣẹ*) and perform a “coefficient of weirdness, strangeness and unusualness” (Malinowski 1935, 221f., cf. Tambiah 1968). These expert skill-sets, reaching beyond the daily communicative needs and abilities of ordinary language users (Marcus 1993), require and reward “lifelong learning” and periodic public tests of virtuosity (Abimbólá 1973, 48f., cf. Awórindé 1965).<sup>45</sup>

More than a memory aid, *Ifá* coding grants *babaláwos* poetic license to coin new Yorùbá words like *eníyán* MHH “witch” (Abimbólá 1976, 166), carrying opposite tones from *eniyàn* LLL ‘human being’ (Abraham 1958, 160) so as to convey the opposite connotation, namely alleged nonhumanity.<sup>46</sup> Prosodic counterpoint operates freely at the margins of Yorùbá grammar, in ideophones (Awóyalé 1978), versification (Oyèláràn 1975) and stylistic figures like the proverb *obun tí a ñ wá ló sí Sòkótó tí a bá l’á.pò ùkótó* ‘something that we go looking for all the way to Sòkótó [HHH] but that we find in the pocket of our own trousers [ùkótó LLL]’—where the difference between HHH and LLL iconically contrasts distal and proximate deixis respectively (Bámgbóṣé 1968, 83, cf. Bascom 1941, 47, 130, Owómoyèlà 2005, 8).

The foregoing helps explain how *Ifá* grew features (ii) - (v) in the course of transmission and adoption. The scenario can’t be reversed, as if an originating *Ifá* was reduced in dispersed localities by ‘degeneration’ (defective copying). Any claim by *babaláwos* to historical priority over their Nupe, Ígálá, Èdó and Ígbo counterparts—blaming them for clumsy plagiarism, in effect—faces the improbability that the same information set could be lost in multiple, spatially disparate amnesias, but no conspiracy is required if *Ifá* added unique secondary innovations. Proverbially: *Èwé ñlá kii padà rú wéwé* ‘A big leaf doesn’t go backward to become smaller’ (Wenger 1977, 50), organic growth can’t run in reverse.<sup>47</sup>

Behind *Ifá*’s rhetorical inventiveness, political-economic factors propelled its innovations and encouraged Kantian *Wahlverwandtschaften* ‘elective affinities’ (Goethe 1809, Howe 1978) by a new social class embracing new ideas.

#### 1.4 The rise of heaven

In Westafricanist discourse, wherever English speakers speak of *divination* the more specific Francophone diction is *géomancie* (Maupoil 1943a, Jaulin 1957, Surgy 1987, 279, Colleyn 2005, 9). For Surgy, for example, any random-number procedure qualifies as *divination cléromantique* (< *klēros* ‘lot’, Liddell & Scott 1940, 959) whereas *géomancie* has “référéncie essentielle au monde souterrain de l’origine... par les ancêtres aimant secourir l’humanité” (1988a, 218, 221).<sup>48</sup> This conceptual contrast conserved in current definitions follows straightforwardly from the terms’ respective etymologies:<sup>49</sup>

- (i) *ge-ō-man-t-ēia* ‘geomancy’ < *ge-ō-* ‘earth, land’, *mán-t-is* ‘scer’ cf. *mén-os* ‘force, spirit, passion’  
→ *geomancy* ‘divination by means of signs derived from the earth... usually... by means of lines or figures formed by jotting down on paper a number of dots at random’
- (ii) *div-in-ātiō* ‘miraculous foreseeing, predicting’ < *div-in-* ‘belonging to a deity’  
→ *divination* ‘soothsaying, augury, prophecy’ (calquing Greek *mantikē* cf. Santangelo 2013, 47f.)

*Geomancy*’s atrophy in Anglophone scholarship leaves in its wake an ambiguity as wide as the cosmic void separating “enjoy-for-heaven” from Félé’s “underground spiritual game” (Aníkúlá.pò Kú.ti 1977, 1989). Therefore in practice, English *divination* covers a wide range of oracle types, including descriptions as divergent as the following:

- (i) *Áfa* = normative memory buffer  
The *dibì a áfá*’s [oracle priest’s] interpretation... is based on the person’s past and present actions in relation to those of his ancestors, in short [on] his biography and [the] history of the social structure. The *dibì a áfá* reconstructs the social reality of his disorganized client... (ỌnẀẹjìọgwù 1978/1997, 19)<sup>50</sup>
- (ii) *Ifá* = infallible supernatural clairvoyance  
Ọrúnmilá is... believed to have complete knowledge and understanding about all matters both on earth and in heaven. His knowledge covers the whole range of time and space. He is completely informed about the past, the present and the future. (Abimbólá 1973, 41)

Ọrúnmilá’s imagined ascent to omniscience (ii) accompanied the real rise of Yorùbá feudalism, when a hieratic cult expropriated public folklore to amass “religious capital (as accumulated symbolic labor)” (Bourdieu 1971b, 304f., cf. 1971a).<sup>51</sup> This move recalls the ‘enclosure’ of agrarian commons by 16th-century landed English lords (Thompson 1968). Thanks to analogies of spiritual and temporal authority, the heavenly claims of Yorùbá priests and kings came to be conflated in one “topological figure” (Mary 1988, 236), an *inverted descending queue* (IDQ) or *last-in-first-out* memory stack where the relative seniority of sixteen arriving extraterrestrials up-ends their sequential touchdown order:<sup>52</sup>

- 44 Second-order coding can also occur in visual media. Thus, a triple-cowrie row embedded in an entranceway floor—whether in 17th century Ìjẹ̀ṣà or modern Ońdó—can be interpreted as “warding off evil eyes” thanks to syllabic homophony between *ẹ̀ta* ‘cardinal 3’ and the predicate root *-ta* meaning ‘shoot/propel away’ (Ogúndiran 2000, 243, 2002b, 453 cf. Abraham 1958, 627).
- 45 Mnemonics are key in oral civilization, but weren’t neglected by European Renaissance mystics either. Galileo’s forerunner Giordano Bruno sought “[b]y applying his art of memory... to call the whole world to attention within his head” (Rowland 2008, 138). Both the Yorùbá and Italian enlightenments aggregated folktales into the composite meta-narratives—*Odù Ifá* and *il Decamerone* respectively—but with a difference: the *babaláwos* became a wealthy clerisy while the *liberi pensatori* were silenced by the Holy Inquisition through martyrdom or other terror in defense of social stoicism (Hroch & Skýbová 1988, Finocchiaro 1989cf. Gellner 1988, Wilson 2008).
- 46 At the 2008 Harvard *Ifá* conference, Professors Oyècèwùní and Abimbólá publicly debated the dictionary status of *eníyán* MHH.
- 47 Hubert Ọgúndé sang one version of the aphorism: [www.youtube.com/watch?v=XNtYXXys9Ks](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XNtYXXys9Ks). In biology, genetic innovation need not increase phenotype complexity: both secondary simplification and parallel development occur in plant and animal phyla (Taylor & Taylor 1993, Dunn & al. 2008, 748) but the general case is for cladistic and functional traits to accumulate in parallel.
- 48 [Indispensable reference to the underground world of origin... by ancestors desiring to help humans out of trouble]
- 49 Liddell & Scott (1940, 346f., 1080, 1103), Lewis & Short (1879, 602), *Oxford English Dictionary* (1933 v. 3, 554, v. 6, 126).
- 50 Cf. the Epicurean concept of anticipatory *prōlēpsis* (πρόληψις), “a memory of what has appeared often from outside” (Diogenes Laertius 10.33 cited by Konstan 2011 61, [www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=urn:cts:greekLit:tlg0004.tlg001.perseus-eng1:10.1](http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=urn:cts:greekLit:tlg0004.tlg001.perseus-eng1:10.1)).
- 51 Here *feudalism* does not refer to a particular form of *demesne* rent defined by European medievalists (Wolf 1982, 81 cf. Hilton 1976, 30) but rather to a plurality of local institutions across diverse social ecologies (Bloch 1940, 603, 610) united abstractly as the mode of production organized for “political extraction of surplus” (Moore 2003, 106). Equivalently: “feudalism was driven by rents extracted outside of markets” (Varoufakis 2022) glossing “Mehrarbeit... durch ausserökonomischen Zwang abgepresst” (Marx 1894, 324). Violent extraction by the Ifẹ̀ palace of hereditary ground-rent from Mọ̀dẹ̀kẹ̀ peasants (see §2.8 below) is a perfect example of this.
- 52 On LIFO memory see [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Stack\\_\(abstract\\_data\\_type\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Stack_(abstract_data_type)).

Oòduà [= Odùduwà] descended from Heaven... with the reputed 16 elders and their followers. ... Òrànmiyàn was the youngest of Oòduà's sons but he eventually became the most powerful among them... (Fábùnmí 1969, 3f., 15)

When 16 principal *Odù* were coming down from heaven... when they came to the frontier gate separating heaven from earth, they reversed their order of procession so that the 16th and the most junior... went through the frontier gate first... until the first *Odù* came last. (Abímbólá 1976, 26f.)

IDQ also defines the *ibé.jì* (or *ibejì*) cult.<sup>53</sup> Once upon a time, according to *Ìròsìn Òbàrà* ♦♦♦♦/♦♦♦♦ and other *odùs* of *Ifá*, multiple human gestation was a taboo monstrosity (Bascom 1969, 346-51, Abímbólá 1981, Lawal 2011, 87-89) as also more widely across West Africa (Denham 2008, 14) then in Yorùbá the anomaly became exemplary and twins are prodigially auspicious (cf. Sperber 1975, Heusch 1980).<sup>54</sup> When newborns are welcomed from their “long journey... to the earth” (Abímbólá 1975, 178f) with an ascribed *orúké a-mú-t-òrun-wá* “name... brought from heaven [*òrun*]... the most important [such omen] is twin-births” (Johnson 1897, 80). The obligatory formula—twin #1 addressed as *T[ó]-ayé-wò* ‘Test-life/Taste-the-world’ and #2 as *K[ó]-è-hìn-dé* ‘Arrive-lagging-behind’—entails rhetorically that “the second born... is regarded as the elder of the two” (Babalólá & Alàbá 2003, 433) by virtue of possessing sufficient seniority to send the ‘younger’ (i.e. first-born) to scout the road ahead. The same trope expands to include a subsequent neonate as well.<sup>55</sup>

The child born next after twins is called *Ìdòwú*... When there is an *Ìdòwú*... any sacrifices offered for [the] twins must also be offered for the *Ìdòwú* and the offering must be made prior to that of the twins... (Abraham 1958, 266f.)

Adoption of the LIFO/IDQ spatial metaphor dragged folk-semantic changes in its train. Today “the word *òrun* is used by some people to refer to ‘sky’ as well as ‘heaven’” (Bámgbóšé 1972, 30 fn. 35) as in the aphorism *Ayè.sè.yo màrìwò, ó ní òn ó .kan òrun*... ‘The freshly sprouted palmshoot said that it would touch the sky...’ (Owómoyèlà 2005, 57), and a leading *Ifá* specialist affirms that “*Òrun* moved skywards” (Abímbólá 1973a, 74, cf. 1977, 1, 37 fn. 6).<sup>56</sup> But still *òrun*’s etymological starting point as ‘death’ is anchored externally by the *Ìgbo* cognates *-nwú* and *ònwu* (9a), whose historical relevance to the Yorùbá term is ensured by parallel sound shifts in three independent lexical correspondence sets (9b).<sup>57</sup>

	NW Yorùbá	NE Yorùbá	Ígálá	Èdó	Ìgbo	Proto-“Bantu”	Jarawa
(9)a. ‘perish/die’ ‘death’	-run/[-kú] [ikú]		[-kwú] [úkú]	[-wu] [ùwú]	-nwú ònwu	[-*kú]	-wúm, -wón
b. ‘sunshine’ ‘neck’ ‘four’	òrùn òrùn èrìn	onù	ólù ólò èlè	ònwè ùrhu ènè	ánwu ónu ànó	*tángua  *nài	

Whenever it was that *òrun* was borrowed into Èdó as *òrùn*, it meant the “same as *èrínmwin*” i.e. the “world of the dead and the unborn” with no recorded linkage to *ìsò*, Èdó’s indigenous term for ‘sky’ (Melzian 1937, 55f., 101, 168).

*Òrun*’s original denotation of ‘death’ also crops up in numerous textual fossils of Yorùbá orature itself. (i) The predicate roots *-run* and *-kú* are used as effective synonyms in a lyric vaunting the immortality of *Ifá* initiates:

<i>Awo kii kú, awo kii run, awoó pa’pò dà ni.</i>	An <i>awo</i> doesn’t die, doesn’t perish, but is merely transformed.
<i>Kí awo má yèdàrò awo.</i>	An <i>awo</i> should never mourn the death of another <i>awo</i> .
<i>Bí ó pé títi, awo á tún rí awo be.</i>	Sooner or later, the <i>awo</i> will be reunited with his colleague once again.

(Adéoyè 1979, 10 cited by Awóyalé 2008)

(ii) The idiom *òrun eni* means “someone’s ancestors” not ‘somebody’s sky’ (Bánjò & al. 1991, 15 *pace* Babalólá 1975, 105).

(iii) The fixed phrase *ìsè tí èfúfú lè lè ñ se òrun* ‘what the wind does to the sky’ (Owómoyèlà 2005, 351) is very close to *ìsè tí èfúfú lè lè ñ se sí òkè l’òrùn* ‘the action of the strong wind against the top of the mountain’ (Dé.lànò 1966, 80 cited by Awóyalé 2008), suggesting that *òrun* substituted for *òrùn*, an unrelated lexical item meaning ‘neck’ and referring in context to what English calls a hill-crest (literally ‘head plume’, cf. ornithological *crested*). (iv) In an *Oyó* ceremony called *Òrun*, the *Alááfín*—styled *Oba ayé* ‘king of the living’—“worships [the] Earth” and his death is invoked by the ancestral priest titled *Oba Òrun/Osòrun/Başòrun* (Morton-Williams 1960, 363, Babáyemí 1973, 121, cf. Abraham 1957, 83).<sup>58</sup>

At the annual *Òrun* festival, the *Başòrun*... can declare, after divination, that the king’s fortune, as symbolized by his head, would be bad and that his *òrun*—spirit double in the sky [sic]—no longer supports his stay on earth. (Morton-Williams 1960, 364)

At this festival the King and the *Başòrun* worship together the *Orí* or god of fate. The *Òrun* from which it appears the *Başòrun* derives his name and title is a curious if not rather a mystical rite. ... The emblem of worship is said to be a coffin made or paved with clay in which he is to be buried. (Johnson 1897, 48)

- 53 In the compound *ibé-jì* ‘double birth’ > *ibé.jì* > *ibejì*, loss of the L-sandwiched H before a cyclic boundary is regular, given productive parallels like *òrò-ké-òrò* ‘any utterance whatsoever’ > *òrò.ké.rò* > *òròkòrò* (Bámgbóšé 1966b, 8f., 1972, 28, Oyèlà.ràn 1970, 94f.).
- 54 In the past century, twin infanticide was practiced in northeast Yorùbá (Forde 1951, 28, Renne 2011, 308). *Òjó* dismisses such cases as “influenced from outside” (1966, 178) but cites no evidence of external origin. From all indications, the Èdó zone fails to apply IDQ ideology to twins, so for example the Èsán (“Ishan”) birthnames *òdíjón* and *àkèbèrè* are biologically as well as socially older and younger, respectively (Dr. O. Omonkhua, Prof. A Omonkhua p.c.). Melzian notes a twin taboo at Usen in western Èdó (1937, 103).
- 55 Application of IDQ to twins and continued to the subsequent birth is also found in Èwè-Gbè *vodú* (Gilli 1982, 123, Surgy 1988, 276).
- 56 This *Sachmandel* may seem ‘natural’ because it’s not isolated in cognitive evolution. The source of Modern English *heaven* originally denoted a bending arc, cognate to Greek *kamára* ‘vaulted cover of a carriage/bed/tomb/sewer’ (Liddell & Scott 1940, 871) and metaphorically referring to the astronomical sky conceived as an arched roof (< \**hibin*, Watkins & al. 1969, 1520). Eventually the architectural image became extraneous to the ‘religious’ dogma of an invisible, abstract and completely imaginary location. The shared ideological *télos* of the two semantic changes, Yorùbá and Germanic respectively, is of a piece with others as discussed in §1.5 below.
- 57 Ígálá from Armstrong (1965) and Akinkugbé (1978). Jarawa and Proto-“Bantu” from Williamson & al. (1973) and Bastin & al. (2005). NE Yorùbá is the “Uyere/Iyere” of Struck (1911, 53). Square brackets indicate noncognate forms based on an unrelated root. As a matter of cosmology, Èdó *-wu* “mostly” can’t refer to a person with living progeny (Melzian 1937, 60, 221).
- 58 Heusch switched the glosses: “Johnson nous dit que le roi et le *başòrun* forment en quelque sort de couple, le *başòrun* étant en rapport avec la terre, le roi avec le ciel” [Johnson tells us that the king and *başòrun* are paired, with *başòrun* corresponding to the earth and the king to the sky] (1987, 120, cf. 2009, 106). In *Oyó* the skygod is rather *Şàngó*, whose earthly avatar is the *alááfín* ‘palace occupant’. “Molè”, the annual *Ifá* festival (Johnson 1897, 48, tone omitted by Law 1977, 65), truncates *ì(rún)mólè* ‘earth spirits’ (Abraham 1958, 19, 21, 307, 319, 699) thus indicating a geomantic orientation by the *Òrinnmílà* cult. Veneration of *ilè* ‘earth/ground’ is otherwise conducted by *Ogbóni*, a conclave ritually opposed to the palace (Morton-Williams 1960, 363, Dobbmann 1976, *pace* Drewal 1989).

Verger connects many of these dots to draw a sharp contrast between Abrahamic and Yorùbá philosophies:

[I]n Yorùbá vocabulary *òrun*, the sky, is associated with the idea of death and the *ará òrun* [inhabitants of *òrun*]... are the dead; whilst *àyé* means world, earth, lifetime and the *aráyé* [dwellers in *àyé*] are mankind, living people. The same opposition exists between a religion of salvation based on the expiation of individual sin and directed to preparation for a good death, and the religion of the *òrìṣà* and *àṣẹ*, ... a religion of exaltation turned toward life and its continuance. 'Life on earth is better than life in the beyond,' declared Gẹ̀dẹ̀gbẹ̀ to Maupoil. (1966, 35)<sup>59</sup>

As Verger implies, Yorùbá sky-worship did not amount to otherworldly orientation of the “Axial” type (Jaspers 1949, Unger 2014). Concerted injections of “Chrislam”—late Professor Òmó Òmórúyí's wry tag for the dual hegemony in West Africa of both imported West Asian creeds—failed to eradicate the idea of subterranean residence by the ancestors—*àwọn ará ilẹ̀* (Awóyalé 2008)—otherwise we couldn't read explicit modern reports like the following:

*Èrínmwin* is the permanent abode of the dead, and it is thought to be under the earth... (Nabofa & Elugbe 1981, 10)

The village of souls, *òbyo ekpò*... is located beneath the earth and is entered through a giant anthill. (Messenger 1957, 158)

The idea of heaven in the sky probably came from Egypt [to Èdó] via the Yorùbá... though it may be a relic of the old Roman Catholic missionary teaching. That the dead were originally thought to dwell beneath the earth seems probable from the fact that the entrance to this, in the old story of [the Èdó monarch] Èwúarè, was by a hole in the ground. Unless badly treated in this world, all people prefer it to the next. Life in 'heaven' cannot be pleasant, otherwise people would not come back so quickly—sometimes the next year—while many live to such a great age on earth. ... Bad people are punished by being kept long in 'heaven' and are detained there till they 'learn sense'. Good and wise people are reincarnated very quickly. (Talbot 1926, 268)

I believe that for the Ìgbo, the artistic meaning of life is a unity of earth (*Àla*), man and death: earth as the environment for life, man as society—the meaning of life—and death as the infiniteness of life. ... *Àla* has a mythological essence: genies and cosmological elements of folktales and masquerades emanate from beneath the earth or from its nether limits. (Nzewí 1978, 74)

Aux yeux des Evhé, tout ce qui prend forme au dessus de terre a pour fondement une réalité invisible située elle aussi dans les profondeurs de la terre or du nadir. C'est là que l'âme humaine, originaire du ciel, est d'abord précipitée; elle y fait choix d'un lot de caractères naturels, d'orientations et d'idéaux qui déterminent très largement à l'avance la suite de ses expériences vécues, puis y fait normalement retour après la mort et reste y séjourne assez longtemps, en remplissant des fonctions d'ancêtre, avant de regagner les hauteurs d'où elle était venue. Au lieu d'élaboration de cette réalité ils donnent le nom d'*amedzofé* signifiant 'lieu d'origine de la personne humaine... Les géomanciens... le nomment de leur côté *Fetume* ou *Fedome*, ce qui signifie 'dans le cour même ou dans le trou de la cité d'Ifè'... (Surgy 1988b, 60)<sup>60</sup>

Since the *Òrìṣà* first entered the earth's crust before re-emerging on the surface as a force of the physical environment, *Ilẹ̀*, the Earth herself became a second *òrun* (heaven). The first heaven which is in the sky and from where the original 400+1 *Òrìṣà* descended is known as *òrun okè* (heaven above). It is the permanent abode of *Olúdumare*, but the High God also visits the second heaven, known as *òrun odò*, from time to time. *Òrun odò*, which literally means “heaven below”, is also the abode of the ancestors (i.e. all departed humans). (Abimbólá & Miller 1997, 22)<sup>61</sup>

Rewriting *òrun* on the blank canvas of the sky did not erase its original inscription down below. Contexts of “social pluralism” (MacGaffey 1990b) favor not “conversion”—the fond missionary conceit of reformatting human brains—but accretive “adhesion” (Nock 1933, 7) “with one foot on either side of the fence, adopting the new worships as useful supplements” (Fisher 1973, 330). Cuban *santería* and Brazilian *candomblé* “use the mechanisms of bricolage... consistent with the prevailing situation... to construct a new and semantically Black culture by deploying signs obtained from other, non-Black social groups” (Bastide 1970a, 108 cited by Mary 2000, 890, cf. Ortiz 1940). *Ifá* syncretism, ongoing since medieval time, brings new blends like *òrun apáàdì* lit. 'heaven of potsherds'—a term glossed without embarrassment as “the nearest to the Christian hell in our own [sic] belief” (Abimbólá & Miller 1997, 35 fn. 6, cf. Hallgren 1988, 68).

A second key lexical item became entangled in this change. Current authorities divide benevolent invisible agents into “two types: the gods (*òrìṣà*) and the ancestors (*òkú òrun*)” literally ‘cadavers of *òrun*’ (Abimbólá 1976, 151).<sup>62</sup> If so, *òrìṣà* should refer narrowly to “any Yorùbá deity apart from *Olórun*” (Abraham 1958, 483) but such tidiness is scattered by multiple anomalies. (i) “The *òrìṣà* cult is addressed jointly to the tamed natural force and to the deified ancestor” (Verger 1966, 37). (ii) The slogan *Wón di òrìṣà* “They are become an *òrìṣà*” is proclaimed—with a plural of respect—on the death of any heroic individual.<sup>63</sup> (iii) In 1997 in the northeast Yorùbá town of Ùhè-Ìjùmú, I saw annual *egún* masks publicly greeted as “*Ò-ò-òrìṣà!*” (cf. Obáyemí 1976, 231 fn. 61) and comparable overlap is much reported in the Yorùbá southeast (Poynor 1978, 65f.). (iv) Bascom cryptically alludes to further reasons to be sceptical about nonancestral divinity:

Among the Yorùbá, the worship of the immediate ancestors and of the compound founder are set apart from the worship of the *òrìṣàs*... Nevertheless it should be noted that the worship of the *òrìṣàs* is conceptually ancestor worship, and that in many respects the elaborate Dahomean cult of the ancestors resembles the worship of the *òrìṣàs* more closely than it does the Yorùbá ancestor cult. (1944, 39)

Any cosmological tremor powerful enough to launch *òrun* into the sky, dissociate *òrìṣà* from earthly ancestors (residually represented by *ògbóni* and *egún*) and mediate the resulting stratospheric gap by systematically resorting to the IDQ format, inevitably also reshuffled the historiographic deck and turned oral kinglists into chronological mysteries:

It has been my contention that the figure called Odùduwà and all that are associated with such a figure constitute one of the most formidable obstacles to an advancement of our knowledge of the history of the Yorùbá-speaking peoples. (Obáyemí 1981, 9 cf. Aṣiwájú 1976, 125 fn. 45)

<sup>59</sup> “La vie terrestre, poursuit Gẹ̀dẹ̀gbẹ̀, est préférable à la vie dans l'au-delà” [Life is better on earth, Gẹ̀dẹ̀gbẹ̀ continued, than in the hereafter] (Maupoil 1943a, 402, cf. Heusch 1962). Bámgbósé “cast some doubt” on Verger's idea but reached substantially the same result from independent considerations, indeed he added support by conjecturing that Yorùbá's “original word for ‘sky’” was *\*imàrè* derived from *arè* a dialectal item referring to departure from the earth at ‘the point of death’ (1972, 30ff., 31 fn 36, cf. Oyétádé 2000).

<sup>60</sup> [In the Èvè view, everything materialised on top of the earth reflects an invisible reality deep underground or at the lowest point. That's where the human soul, originating from the sky, first landed and chose its destiny from assorted characters, directions and goals that largely predetermine its subsequent experiences, where it normally returns after death and where it resides for a long time as an ancestor before eventually regaining the heights whence it came. Where this happens is called *amedzophé* ‘the origin of human person’... The oracle priests... call it either *Fetume* or *Fedome* ‘in the heart or hollow of the city of Ifè...]

<sup>61</sup> A more literal gloss for *odò* is ‘depth’, accounting for its typical reference to rivers and lowland streams (Abraham 1958, 450).

<sup>62</sup> “*Ará òrun* is the designation for masqueraders who are supposed to be the spirits of dead ancestors” (Owómoyèlà 2005, 105 fn 43).

<sup>63</sup> Cf. “*Wón d'òrìṣà*” by Tùndé Oṣófìsàn & His Rhythm Fádákàs (= Track 16, *Azagas & Archibò[n]gs; the Sixties Sound of Lagos Highlife*. Original Music, Tivoli New York, 1991) and the lyrics of “*Abàmi*” by the performance artist known as Lágbájá (Bello 2016, 214).

Episodic memory, being an “adaptive constructive process” (Schacter 2013), tends to telescope sequences of events or even to flip them teleologically, e.g. by making “traditional genealogies... functions of political relationships rather than *vice-versa*” (Law 1976, 129 *fn.* 34, cf. Heusch 1966). But revisionism can’t perfectly cover its own tracks. Oyèláràn finds

...a contradiction in the postulate that the Yorùbá institution of *Ọba* and the growth of an urban setting constitute the prerequisites for the emergence, the promotion and the preservation of Yorùbá civilization and culture, while at the same time suggesting that the pre-Odùduà group... was responsible for this civilization (Ìgè 1974, 1976). If the Ọwọ̀rọ̀, Idáísà-Mánígrì and Ilàjẹ descended from a Yorùbá-speaking group who had neither *ọba* nor cities... then we may have to rest content that the pre-Odùduà Yorùbá group gave us only the values and not the political organization that made Yorùbá civilization possible. (1977, 646)

To exit ethnic doublethink, Ọbáyẹmí insists that “history... is a game of probabilities” (1979a, 169, cf. Bernoulli 1713, Greenberg 1952) not a public opinion poll. His naturalistic account rests on observations like the following. (i) Unique similarities of the oracle between Nupe in the northwest and *Ọokun* Yorùbá in the northeast entail that “Ilé-Ifẹ... belongs *with* other places in the diffusion of the knowledge of *Ifá*; it could not have been ‘central’ nor a ‘headquarters’ in any chronological sense” (1979a, 175, original italics, Ọlómọlà 1976, 62). (ii) Any “evidence for the actual manufacture of the... thirty or so brass objects” that have been recovered in Ilé-Ifẹ up to date “is yet to be shown” (1979a, 175f). (iii) A “crisis of legitimacy” and break in royal succession in Ifẹ “perhaps after 1600 AD” has been scrubbed from oral tradition by “ingenuous devices... at the centre of an un-historical pan-Yorùbáism” (1979a, 182f).

East of the Niger, chiefdoms may be less centripetal or hierarchical than in the west, but the cultural codes are no less prone to presentist refashioning. Achebè recalls how missionaries “unfortunately” misparsed the phrase *Chí-nà-ékè* (lit. ‘*chí* and *ékè*’) “as the creator God of Christianity” (1975, 171). Nwáọga deploys literary criticism to identify *Chí ukwu*, the capricious figure of Igbo folktales, not with “God” the cloud-based tyrant of Biblical imaginative literature, but with the slaving shrine of the town of Àrù (known to colonialists as “Arochuku”), and he affirms that “[a]ny appearances of reference to the Judeo-Christian concept must be seen as accretions due to the dynamism of oral tradition” (1984, 48).

At Ñrì, the imagery is more intricate. Sacrifices are performatively dedicated to *Chí ukwu* ‘big *chí*’ by pointing a whole kolanut at *anya amwú* ‘the eye/orb of the sun’ (Ọnwẹjìógwù 1981, 31). This gesture has been interpreted to enact a belief that “a person’s *chí* normally resides with the sun, bringer of daylight” (Achebè 1975, 161), echoing the quotidian fact that *chí* means ‘sunlight’ in plain Igbo phrases like *Chí èjìgo* ‘Day has darkened i.e. It’s time to go home’ and *Kà chí fool* ‘Let dawn spread out, i.e. See you tomorrow!’<sup>64</sup> Daylight imagery has also been plausibly read into *íchí*, a likely cognate expression denoting parallel keloid lines carved like solar rays on the foreheads of titled *ọ̀zọ* initiates (Jeffreys 1951, cf. Shaw 1970 plates 272, 512) thereby branding them as *ndị́ gbúru íchí* ‘persons incised with *íchí*’—in effect, *illuminati* of the *Chí ukwu* mysteries.<sup>65</sup> However, Ñrì ritualists also define *chí* in a second way: as an invisible “procreative force” of “prosperity, fertility, health [and] longevity” that determines “the course of a person’s life history” symbolized for a man by an *ọ̀gbú* tree—top row of photos, below—planted at the birth of his first child and “cut down the day he dies”, and for a woman by an *ọ̀rá* tree—bottom row of photos (Ọnwẹjìógwù 1981, 33, 1997, 17f., 89).<sup>66</sup>



[www.figweb.org/Ficus/Subgenus\\_Urostigma/Section\\_Galaglychia/Subsection\\_Galaglychia/Ficus\\_saussureana.htm](http://www.figweb.org/Ficus/Subgenus_Urostigma/Section_Galaglychia/Subsection_Galaglychia/Ficus_saussureana.htm)



[www.africanplants.senckenberg.de/root/index.php?page\\_id=78&id=1320,...1321](http://www.africanplants.senckenberg.de/root/index.php?page_id=78&id=1320,...1321)

- 64 Diurnal significance is reinforced by the apparent cognate *échi* ‘tomorrow/the morrow’, measuring one daylight cycle forward or—in dialects where it also means ‘yesterday’—backward from speech time (cf. Ígwè 1999, 140). Unpalatalized *éki*, the Àgbò version of this item, is one step closer to the reconstructed Niger-Congo items \**k(y)án* ‘day(light)’ and \**k(i)a* ‘to dawn’ (Mukarovský 1976, 146, 152).
- 65 Kidnapped *ọ̀zọ* initiates sold to the Americas were called *brecche/briche/embrenché* (Adams 1923, 134, Ortiz 1924, 66, Edwards 1962).
- 66 The name *ọ̀gbú* may contain the root *-gbú* ‘ooze/squirt (sap)’ as a metaphor of the fluid of Y chromosome transmission. The female counterpart *ọ̀rá*—species not specifically identified among the redwood genus *Pterocarpus*, illustrated here by *lucens* and *santalinooides*—has large ‘winged’ fruit (not shown) and abundant yellow flowers, suggesting that its name is built from the predicate *-rá* (*nnwá*) ‘bear (offspring)’ (Williamson 1972, 154f., 407, 429, Ígwè 1999, 210, 227, 634, 720, cf. Keay 1989, 267, 296, Èhigiamusoe 2013, 384-87).

The question occurs whether *chí*'s two meanings—visible daylight, invisible reincarnation—are linked by anything besides homophony (randomly identical sound, like English *toe* and *ton*). It's tempting to derive both senses from one root *-chí* 'return, reverse, repeat' as in *-chí azú* 'retreat', *-kwú-chí-gha* 'reimburse', *-kwú-ghá-chí* 'speak yet again', *-yó-ghá-chí* 'return' (Manfredi 1998, 175 *fn* 22, cf. Williamson 1972, 80, 249, Ígwè 1999, 119, 838). This guess is not disproved by the opposite tones of predicate *-chí* L vs. nominal *chí* H because Ígbo has three solid examples of L↔HH: *-dù* 'advise' ↔ *ódù* 'advice', *-gwù* 'play' ↔ *égwù* 'play, n.', *-rò* 'imagine' ↔ *író* 'dream, n.' (Williamson 1972, xxxixff.), but it crashes out on the simple fact that the 'return' root is aspirated (spelled by linguists *-chí* or *-ch'í*) in any Ígbo dialect possessing aspirated consonants, whereas nominal *chí* (sometimes spelled *ci*) is never aspirated in any locality (Green & Ígwè 1963, Swift & al. 1962, 495, Armstrong 1967, ##124, 394, 433, S389, Ígwè & Green 1970, 137, Williamson 1973, Ladefoged & al. 1976, Ígwè 1999, 110, 118, 363, 838). It follows that neither of the two senses of nominal *chí* shares a history with the predicate of 'return', no matter how attractive this may at first appear on semantic grounds (*meā culpā* 1998).

Nevertheless, the perceived daylight aura of *chí* the 'procreative force' is more than a fortuitous pun, because the same two ideas also cohabit in the Èdó word *èhi*, despite the fact that *èhi* rhymes neither with Ígbo *chí* nor with any Èdó word for sunshine. Instead, *èhi* has a plausible derivation internal to Èdó from the predicate *-bi*:

*èhi*. (1) one's personal guardian spirit; *èhi* is believed to live in the *èrinnwìn* ['world of the dead and the unborn']; it "prays in *èrinnwìn* for our long life" and it is also responsible for any lucky or unlucky happenings. It is believed to be "with a man all the day" and at night it gives account to *Òsa* ["the Biní high god"]. The *èhi* is represented by an object near a man's sleeping place... The *èhi* does not want any blood sacrifices. *Úbimwìn*, the head, is believed to be the *èhi*'s helper and to render account of the happenings during the day to it; *òb-èhi nó* 'it is the *èhi*'s work (lit. 'hand'): this is said whenever a man has achieved anything extraordinary, or has had outstanding luck. ... (4) *èhi n-ákòhè* region at the back of the head; the hole is explained by the belief that during his stay in *èrinnwìn* a man has to pay something for his food, and that a part of his skull is cut out in order to serve as a payment; cf. *bi*... (Melzian 1937, 51f., 55, cf. 201)<sup>67</sup>

*-bi*. to pray [to] *Òsa* and *Èbi* for one's well-being during the next reincarnation (*àri-avbèhé*)... (Melzian 1937, 76)<sup>68</sup>

Despite lacking a common etymology, *chí* and *èhi* do share cognitive history because they're exact calques in Ágbò—a bicultural Ígbo-related kingdom on the eastern Èdó border—where *èhi* automatically replaces *chí* in countless personal names like *Èbi-edú* < *Chí-nà-edú* 'Èbi/Chí guides or escorts [an individual life journey]' & c.<sup>69</sup> The cults of *chí* and *èhi* coexist in parallel at Àhaba (the colonial "Asaba"), an Ígbo town on the *òfèst-ímmilí* (right) bank of the Niger river:

In addition to *chí* a man has also *èhi* and two forms are distinguished, *èbi únò* ['of the house'] and *èbi ófá* ['of the forest']. Both the name and the belief are curiously reminiscent of the Èdó belief in *èhi owá* ['of the house'] and *èhi obá* ['of the forest']. (Thomas 1914b, 19; cf. 1910, 40)

The lack of phonetic resemblance between the functional analogues *chí* and *èhi* shows that what was shared by Ígbo and Èdó ritualists was not a word but an extralinguistic—encyclopedic/poetic/ritual—association between daylight and personal guidance. Such a folk belief obtains plausibility from the privileged role in subjective experience of the sense of sight, as well as from the objectively obvious causal relationship between solar radiation and biological growth:

During the period of the rising and setting of the sun, its rays radiate to all the corners of the world (*íwa*), disclosing all things and enhancing fertility. ... Light promotes knowledge and darkness limits it. (Ọnwuejiógwù 1997, 88)

*Chí*'s (and *èhi*'s) ritual ambiguity recurs in Gbè, west of Yorùbá. In Èvè-gbè *vodú*, *dzò-gbè* literally 'birth-day' also means 'fate' (Westermann 1905, 85, 89, 168) and it names the precise facet of the 'plural' human psyche treated by *Afá* therapy (Surgy 1988a, 30-35, cf. Mary 2000, 187). The Fòn-gbè localisation of *vòdún* has an equivalent of the *chí*↔*Chí ukwu* dyad, expressed as *sé* with the alternative senses 'soul/destiny' and 'God' distinguished by notional size: "Il existe un grand *Sé*, qui est *Máwú*" (Maupoil 1943a, 388, cf. Segurola & Rassinoux 2000, 440, Höftmann & Ahohunkpanzon 2003, 339).<sup>70</sup> Èvè *vodú* has a 'big' *sé* of its own: *Sé-Kpòlì*, *Sè-Lìsà* and *Máwú Se-Gbo* (Westermann 1905, Surgy 1988b, 64, 74).<sup>71</sup> Fòn *sé* and Èvè *sé* may derive from Yorùbá "*isese*" (tones unknown), a borrowed shrine icon of

... the head, the father, the mother and *Ifá*... Every year we sacrifice a ram to the *isese* of a deceased elder. People say that *isese* is a little fragment of the power of *Oló.dúmarè* remaining in the home. (Verger 1973, 64)

The identification of Fòn-gbè 'big *Sé*' with *Máwú* can be blamed on 19th-century Jesuit catechists who enlisted *Máwú* to translate the name of the Biblical skygod, replacing *Lìsà* (< Yorùbá *òrìyà*) in this role (Yáí 1992).

Rather than pursue these clues, some of which he was the first to print, Àchebé demurs from "even... preliminary" conclusions, disqualifying himself as "one whose primary love is literature and not religion, philosophy or linguistics" (1975, 160). His possibly tongue-in-cheek namecheck of "the Supreme Deity *Chí Ukwu* Himself" (1975, 161) perfectly suits someone schooled by High Church Anglicans in "Religious Knowledge" and subjected to the notorious colonial "No Vernacular Rule" (Ọchíàgha 2015, 69-71).<sup>72</sup> His English gloss of *chí* as small-*g* "personal god" (1958/1962, 16), evidently a back-formed diminutive of the missionary *Chí Ukwu*, sounds suspiciously "similar to the Christian religious

<sup>67</sup> The mentioned functional association of *èhi* with *ùbimwìn* 'head' may show the influence of Yorùbá *orí* 'head' regarded as the seat of personal destiny according to *Ọgúndá Mèjì* ◊◊◊◆/◊◊◊◆ (Abímbólá 1975, 158-77, 453f., cf. Abiódún 1987).

<sup>68</sup> Èdó *Ò(ò)sa*, an apparent loan < Yorùbá *òrìyà* in the reign of *Ọmọ n'Ọba* Èsìgìe alias *Òsavé* (Melzian 1937, 148f.; Read & Dalton 1899, 5) became *òlisa/e/è* in western Ígbo (Williamson 1966, 1972, 376f.). The tone of Èdó predicates is fully predictable from syllabic skeleton plus inflectional context (Melzian 1937, xii, Wescott 1962b, 25, Ogierakhi 1973, Elugbe 1973, 171, Amayo 1975, 21-23, 1976, 230).

<sup>69</sup> In Ágbò, *chí* is implied in the borrowed name *Chúku* < *Chí uk(ù)u* found in *Íkenchúku* 'Strength-of-Chúku' (Manfredi 2013a, 127). In inherited vocabulary, Ágbò regularly has nonpalatal *k* before high front vowels where Ígbo has palatal *ch*, e.g. *éki=échi* 'tomorrow', *-kéj=chí* 'gather, govern'. In Ígbo, the *k* of *híkítá* 'dog' (Ágbò *hítéń*) may have preceded a historic back vowel (< *-chú* 'chase, pursue' Clark 1989, 245), the *k* of dialectal *kétaà* 'now' may have preceded a nonhigh vowel in a phrasal contraction (?< *kè táà*) and the voiced counterpart *g* is nonexistent before *i* apart from one antique, fixed compound *-gíd(h)e* 'against' cf. *-jí* 'hold' (Ígwè 1999, 181, 271).

<sup>70</sup> [There's a big *Sé*, which is *Máwú*]. The same dualism replicates in the *Fá* of Fòn-gbè:

On peut donc distinguer un *Fá* de tout le monde... et un *Fá* (ou signe) individuel, objet d'un culte privé rendu par chaque initié au symbole de son âme extérieure. [Thus we can distinguish between the *Fá* that belongs to everyone... and the individual *Fá* (or sign) ritualized by each initiate as the visible symbol of his/her soul.] (Maupoil 1943a, 14)

<sup>71</sup> The unexpanded-pharynx (non-ATR) vowel of Fòn-gbè *sé* corresponds to an expanded (ATR) vowel in Èvè (western Gbè) varieties, where the items reconstructed \**gbè* 'life' and \**dé* 'tongue' (Capo 1991, 66) show up with either undotted *e* or else with *ə* (schwa).

<sup>72</sup> "In those days, it was a serious offence for a secondary school boy or girl to speak in the 'vernacular' within the school premises" (Fáfúnwa & al. 1989, 5). The edict gave Professor Fáfúnwa his famous anecdote of the student accused of 'laughing in vernacular'!

idea of guardian angel” (Ọnwụejìógwù 1997, 18).<sup>73</sup> Threads of Biblical hybridity are also woven into the Hebrophilic drag modeled by Biafra’s current runway mascot who drapes an orthodox Judaic *tallis godoil* over his Àrù-style *ísi ag(h)ú* jumper printed with *ótùsí* totems and stylishly accessorized with a Zikist fez, an *ózo* ivory tusk and an *ògbú éjì* leather fan emblazoned with Lt. Colonel Òjúkwù’s sun-ray flag motif (photo below, cf. Melie & Waas 1983, Harnischfeger 2012).<sup>74</sup>



“Nnamdi Kánu, leader of the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB) movement, wears a Jewish prayer shawl as he walks in his garden in Òmàáhíá [“Umuhia”], Nigeria before meeting veterans of the Nigerian civil war on May 26” (Marco Longari/AFP, [www.newsweek.com/war-nigeria-biafra-nnamdi-kanu-686961](http://www.newsweek.com/war-nigeria-biafra-nnamdi-kanu-686961))

Viewing the annual Nri enactment of “the drama of *chí* and *ágwù*” (Ọnwụejìógwù 1997, 19), Orientalist eyeglasses may see avatars of good and evil, but the participants themselves decode a less Manichean message: they report that *Afa* is consulted by someone who feels deserted by his or her *chí* and left exposed to the anomic caprices of *ágwù*,

a supernatural being and also a force that reveals the secret ‘actions’ of *álu sí* [invisible supernatural agents] and *mmúó* [ancestors] to the visible world [*élu ñwa*, literally ‘up-world’] through *Afa*... [E]very living being is constantly under the influence of *ágwù* which can take possession of a person temporarily. When this happens... he becomes unpredictable. His actions alternate between frenzy and calmness, disorderliness and orderliness, destructiveness and creativeness, insanity and sanity, violence and peacefulness, ignorance and wisdom. Such personality traits are generally described... as ‘bad *chí*’ [*ájo chí*] or using the specific concept of saying that *ágwù* has taken possession of the person’s actions, *Ágwù atú ya*. Where has one’s *chí* gone during the period one is under the influence of *ágwù*? ...When a person is defiled, for example on breaking a taboo, his *chí* abandons him and dwells in the *chí* tree until the ritual of purification is done, after which his *chí* returns to him to direct him along creative lines. Occasionally it happens that a person remains in a state of defilement for a long time... In that case, it is believed that the person’s *chí* has gone from the *chí* tree to the sky, *anya anwú* [‘orb of the sun’]. ...The *dibí a áfa* refers him to the *dibí a ája* who specializes in the performance of all types of sacrifices to the supernaturals, in purification rituals, in exorcism of *ágwù*, in chaining of *ékewésu* [bad deaths, coopted by missionaries as the Igbo name for “Lucifer, Satan” (Igwe 1999, 157)] and *ákalá-ógoli* [‘halfway’ spirits i.e. the unfulfilled and nonreincarnating dead] and in preparing protective charms. ...The alternating relationship in which *chí* and *ágwù* are conceived, namely predictability and non-predictability, is annually displayed in the ritual drama of *ágwù*. ...[Y]oung men who have taken the *mmánwú* title perform mask dances. ...[T]hey are violent and turbulent at one time, constructive and calm at another. (Ọnwụejìógwù 1997, 13, 18f)

To access *Afa*’s psycho-social therapy, no clairvoyant intercessor like ‘heavenly’ *Ọrúmmílá* is called upon. Instead, if *ágwù*—the *dibí a*’s invisible familiar—has any Yorùbá analogue at all it’s *Èsù*, insurgent personification of ambivalence and nondeterminism.<sup>75</sup> To clear his client’s mental entropy the *dibí a* summons not an omniscient angel but *ndí mmúó*, the client’s real human ancestors retrieved from collective memory. Although the term *ancestor worship* is bandied about by colonial and missionary writers (Frazer 1890, Addison 1924), no mysticism is necessary in order for the living to discuss their individual and collective antecedents—not, at least, according to the founder of modern sociology:

La société, pour Comte, se compose dans tous les hommes vivantes et de tous les hommes disparus qui vivent dans la pensée de leurs descendants et y développent une action égale à l’ascendant de leur souvenir. Car elle est formée par l’accumulation d’une expérience et d’un savoir constituant une donnée spirituelle objective et reliant les unes aux autres les générations. (Bouthoul 1950, 57, original italics)<sup>76</sup>

Accordingly, when the *Afa* oracle is employed to access past, lived experiences for decisionmaking in the present,

‘old’ social reality is transformed into ‘new’ social reality. The transformational process is expressed in the idiom of mysticism and religion, though it is achieved through a complex communication network... Ideally, Nri traditional philosophy is based on the relationship linking the past, present and future. ...This conception is expressed in the genealogical structure that models the collective actions of contemporaries (the living) in terms of predecessors (ancestors) and successors (the unborn). In this system of belief, fathers under certain conditions are expected to reincarnate in their grandchildren... (Ọnwụejìógwù 1997, 2, 121)

Gramscian “‘common sense’ (i.e. philosophical folklore)” (1935, 2311) also informs the *Afa* oracle of Èwè-gbè *vodì*:

<sup>73</sup> Another instance of the whole/part relation between skygod and ‘soul’ discussed immediately above for Gbè catechist caques.

<sup>74</sup> Before the makeover in Fendi™ cuffs: [cdn.vanguardngr.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/IPOB.jpg?width=756&auto\\_optimize=medium](http://cdn.vanguardngr.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/IPOB.jpg?width=756&auto_optimize=medium), [www.premiumtimesng.com/news/beatlines/511921-just-in-why-nnamdi-kanu-wont-be-allowed-to-wear-clothes-with-lion-head-image-sss.html](http://www.premiumtimesng.com/news/beatlines/511921-just-in-why-nnamdi-kanu-wont-be-allowed-to-wear-clothes-with-lion-head-image-sss.html), but either version is cooler than this “Finland-based” thrift-shop fashion victim: [tribuneonline.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/07/Simon-Ekpa.jpg](http://tribuneonline.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/07/Simon-Ekpa.jpg), cf. [tribuneonline.com/simon-ekpa-declaring-second-biafra-war-deploy-soldiers-to-south-east-obanaze-tells-tinubu/](http://tribuneonline.com/simon-ekpa-declaring-second-biafra-war-deploy-soldiers-to-south-east-obanaze-tells-tinubu/).

<sup>75</sup> Translation of *Èsù* as ‘Satan’ (Dòpámú 1986) has met resistance: Oyèláràn (2011), [alamojayoruba.com/esu-is-not-satan-who-esu-is-and-who-he-is-not](http://alamojayoruba.com/esu-is-not-satan-who-esu-is-and-who-he-is-not), [www.youtube.com/watch?v=C984zjL6R0s](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=C984zjL6R0s), [twitter.com/hashtag/esnistsatan](https://twitter.com/hashtag/esnistsatan), [blogs.bl.uk/asian-and-african/2020/05/esu-at-the-bl.html](https://blogs.bl.uk/asian-and-african/2020/05/esu-at-the-bl.html).

<sup>76</sup> [According to Comte, society comprises all living persons plus all the departed who live on in the thoughts of their descendants with an impact relative to the persistence of their memory. Society is constituted by the accumulation of experience and knowledge, amounting to an objective mental datum that links successive generations to each other.]

The expression *spirituelle* here is evidently to be understood in the non-theistic idiom of Cartesian mind/body dualism.

La divination [sic]... ne prétend nullement prédire l'avenir, mais consiste à "deviner" ce qui se passe ici et maintenant, c'est-à-dire à identifier les forces invisibles à l'oeuvre en l'homme, en train de modeler le cours des événements. ... [I]l y a, à la base de la divination [sic], le souci d'intervenir dans le cours normal des événements, tels qu'ils affectent intérieurement les gens, et de le faire sciemment, après une analyse de ce qui les conditionne et en provoque l'apparition. C'est là une préoccupation très proche d'une préoccupation scientifique... (Sury 1981a, 8)<sup>77</sup>

In contrast to both Ìgbo *Àfá* and Èwè *Afá*, Yorùbá *Ifá* is vaunted as being "completely informed about... the future" (Abímbólá 1973, 41) and has accordingly been described less as a source of sage advice based upon precedent than as a morale-boosting psychosomatic ritual *placebo* wrapped up in a verbal Rorschach blot:

[A]n accurate prediction is not simply a matter of coincidence, because the questions themselves are loaded; and since the alternatives proposed are neither wholly good nor wholly bad, it frequently makes little difference which answer is given. But it is important to realize that this does not mean that nothing is gained by consulting the diviner. As Herskovits has indicated in discussing the same system among the neighboring Dahomeans, a conviction that the choice is in the hands of deities who have much greater knowledge and foresight than human beings gives the individual confidence in the decision... Certainly the elimination of fruitless hesitation and indecision would seem to enable the individual to concentrate his entire energy, without distraction, upon the task in hand. (Bascom 1941, 45, cf. Herskovits 1938, 217, Bastide 1971b, 352)

The Westafrican distinction between remembered underground advice and free-floating futuristic faith was salient enough to endure the Middle Passage and register in centenarian recollections in a 19th century Cuban labor yard as the contrasting ritual styles of Congo-heritage *Palo-Nganga* and Lucumí-Yorùbá *Ifá*—showing how diasporan migration can "sharpen sociocultural diversity" and crystallise "multiple modernities" (Tambiah 2000, cf. Eisenstadt 2000).

La brujería tira mas para los congos que para los lucumises. Los lucumises están más ligados a los santos y a Dios. ...La diferencia entre el congo y el lucumí es que el congo resuelve, pero el lucumí adivina. (Barnet 1966, 33f, cited in part by Peel 1990, 363f. *fn* 20 and substantially revisiting Cabrera 1954b)<sup>78</sup>

## 1.5 Back on planet Earth

Before *Ifá*'s 'stairway to heaven' ([en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jacob's\\_Ladder](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jacob's_Ladder)) sprouted up in Ilé-Ifè like Jack's magic beanstalk, its seeds had germinated in the Benue valley and its tendrils wound around the Nsùkà and Óka hills, down the Òmámبالa ["Anambra"] river valley and across the Niger confluence. But botanical metaphors aside, what exactly moved when, and how? For any bit of folklore, the ratio of internal inheritance to borrowing across boundaries—vertical to horizontal transmission—is an empirical question undecidable in advance (Graça da Silva & Tehrani 2015, Bortolini & al. 2017).<sup>79</sup> The foregoing data of *Ifá* diagnose borrowing on a time-scale of centuries not millennia, because sound shifts between local variants of oracle terms are smaller, hence more recent, than general phonetic differences between cognates of the general (nonritual) vocabulary of the respective language hosts. If oracle jargon *in situ* was as old as the nearest common ancestor of all these languages, its phonetic splits should approximate those in basic lexical items—contrary to fact.

This much is already enough to dismiss dreams of primordial "Yorùbá" hominds glimpsed in a crystal ball of googled genetics and ethnic conspiracies (Fálóyè 2018, cf. Ònuḡha 2019). The remaining possibility is that *Ifá*—textual mark of Yorùbá culture par excellence—is an amalgam of things copied from afar with those inherited and renewed in place. Real demographic migration is strictly unnecessary for this outcome, and even if it occurred it would be no easier to detect for *Ifá* than for wheat cultivar adoption in northwest Europe (Olalde & al. 2018, Cavalli-Sforza 2019, 178-81). Even supposing for the sake of argument that medieval Ifè's inhabitants received some copper alloy artefacts direct from errant Ìgbo artisans like those seen in recent years (Thomas 1913a, Jeffreys 1941, Neaher 1976a, 133, 1976b, 1979a, Njókú 1994), there's no reason beyond an unimpressive coincidence of one syllable to connect these conjectured donors to vanished forest autochthones named "Ugbo (not Igbo)" (Òṣúntó.kun 2004, no tones in source) as referenced in the myth of Mòrèmi and reenacted in Ifè's annual Qbátálá or Edi festival (Stevens 1966, Ògúnwùsi 2019a).<sup>80</sup>

Naturalistic methods are less febrile and more informative. Available traces, "sparse and patchy" (Sutherland & Wordley 2018) though they inevitably are, show that the oracle grew stepwise, collecting mutations and complexity while crossing language boundaries. The accumulated changes detailed above include phonetic transcription errors in oracle terminology (§1.2), planar rotation of the duplex linear arrays (§1.3) and constructive adaptations of oracle semantics to local ideational complexes, most notably the Ìgbo 'plural' personality and the Yorùbá celestial trope of IDQ (§1.4).

Ifè's metaphysical innovations surpassed Nri's in several ways. (i) Solar authority evoked in the *Chí Ukwu* cult licensed the *Èzè Nri* to pronounce *nsó àna* 'earth taboos' across a wide area (Ònwùjejiògwù 1981, 166) and key images of authority are literally grounded. Alongside the epithet *ìgwé* 'sky'—endlessly addressed to Ìgbo paramounds in Nollywood films—Henderson & Òmùnnà report that the *Òbí* of Qnìcha is also called *ńkpu* 'termite mound' and that the feathered crown worn by Qnìcha palace chiefs depicts "a mound of earth" (1988, 28). They see parallels in the famed *ìjèlè* mask "representing a deceased person of high title... emerging out of the termite hill that connects this world with... *àní ìmmuò* 'land of the dead'" crowned by a "sky-ascending tree... of life" (1988, 30f. citing also Meek 1937, 186, Cole 1982). By contrast, Ifè *babaláwos* raised up the underground ancestral domain of *òrun* itself to *become* the sky, surely enhanced by "the relationship between *Òrúnmílá* and Islam" when *Ifá* "absorbed some [Islamic] practices and beliefs into its own worldview" (Olúpòná 2016, 178, cf. Fisher 1973, Gbàdàmósí 1977). (ii) The clout of Ìgbo priestly elders—who 'feed' remembered underground dead with sacrifices on altars of lineage *òfó*—is inherently dispersed among compounds of the commune, whereas secular trends of bilateral kinship and collateral residence expanded the urban charter of the prototypic Yorùbá palace, whose chief occupant, screened behind a frontally beaded crown (Thompson 1970), acts as "mediator between the living and the dead" and controls "the collection and redistribution of goods on a grand scale"—as Polanyi described 19th century Àgbómè under Qyó influence (1966, 34f, cf. Herskovits 1938, 49, Tall 1995). Overall the Nri ruler resembles more the head of a Polynesian or Southeast Asian "conical clan" (Sahlins 1963; Friedman 1975) than a Yorùbá *oba alá.ṣe èké.ṣi òrìyà* 'ruler, whose power is second only to that of the *òrìyà* [divinities]' (Abraham 1958, 71).

<sup>77</sup> [Divination doesn't claim to predict the future but to "deduce" what's happening here and now, identifying unseen forces affecting a person to explain the course of events. ...Divination reflects the impulse to intervene in an unfolding sequence of events in people's subjective life, revealing causal factors. Such concerns are similar to those of the natural sciences...]

<sup>78</sup> [Magic means more to Congolese Cubans than it does to Lucumís. The Lucumís are more loyal to their saints and to 'God'. ...The difference between Congo and Lucumí is that the Congolese fix problems while the Lucumís make predictions.]

Also relevant is that Lucumí initiates are prohibited to join Abakuá but the reverse trajectory is possible (Miller 2022, 39 *fn* 17).

<sup>79</sup> Schleicher (1868) assumed the opposite and reconstructed all shared folklore automatically as proto Indo-European heritage.

<sup>80</sup> Most historians of Ifè write "Ìgbò" (Adémákinwá 1958 vol. 2, 32-42; Fábùnmi 1969, 17f.; Elúyémí 1975, 123; Babáyémí 1988, 33-35; Akintóyè 2010, 46) either tonelessly or with explicit [LL] perhaps under Wázòbíán influence (cf. §2 below). Similarly, the sporadic flux of phonetic variants like "Mòrèmi" (Ògúndiran 2020, 433), *Mòremi* etc. may diagnose the hazy status of mythic nomenclature.

That the sky is a handy parking place for invisible causal agents has been remarked since Feuerbach (1841), but whether this arrangement adds cognitive value is open to debate (Horton 1971, Guthrie 1995, Godelier 1996, 147). Memetic mechanisms of evolutionary psychology may be enlightening, but *Ifá*'s strides of self-fashioning are largely explainable by more mundane, material considerations. When *babaláwos* poetically revamped and digitally indexed peasant folktales and herbal recipes into a proprietary cache of sacred texts—a precocious 'big data' scrape—they not only composed an effective charter for the Ifè throne, they also did their own particular interests no harm:

*Ifá* priests are in many respects quite different from other *òrìṣà* devotees, being specialist and professional masters of a divinatory system which operates precisely by bringing all the disparate cults and forces into relationship with each other and mediating between them. ... But the *Ifá* cult does in one sense work like any other *òrìṣà* cult writ large, for the effect of all synthesising *Ifá* stories is ultimately to claim a unique and superior position in the cosmology for *Ifá*: every divination verse in the vast *Ifá* corpus reaffirms the sagacity of *Ifá* and the effectuality of the *Ifá* divination system, and many explicitly show other *òrìṣà* at a disadvantage in comparison with *Ifá*. (Barber 1990, 335 fn. 14)

Since the priests of all deities rely partially upon the diviners for sacrifices and worshippers, it is to their economic advantage to direct the sanctions of religious faith toward the diviners and their work more than to any other deity or cult, aside from their own. (Bascom 1941, 44)

It takes historic *chutzpah* to enclose a folkloric commons distilled from long popular experience and expropriate its symbolic surplus to sustain a priestly rentier class. The encroachment is all the bolder in West Africa's baseline social ecology, whose low carrying capacity for elites and high resistance to accumulative "take-off" have been bemoaned as "backward" by Western market-fetishists (Rostow 1962). In retrospect however the con is obvious. Analogous hoards of metaphysical capital appear across the anthropological record with enough frequency to qualify as a structural *telos*:

The creation of an apparently separate religion is closely tied to the history of the state. ... The development of the Merina state in Madagascar in the 18th and 19th century shows how the construction of the symbolic state is accompanied by a partial destruction and reformulation of the symbolism of the subjects. Thus, certain key attributes of elders/ancestors were forcibly transferred from local descent groups to the king and his palace... Interestingly, a similar process involving the diminution of the transcendental social of subjects for the benefit and construction of the royal transcendental has been examined for early Egypt... (Bloch 2008, 2058)

Willett posits the same scenario for the Odùduàn takeover: "The indigenous population almost certainly had some cult of the ancestors... [which t]he sophisticated ruling class in Ifè seems to have overcome" (1967b, 33).

Independent parallels show that Ifè's innovations were neither rare accidents nor clever one-off hacks but replicable steps of a cultural logic or "psychological necessity which brings about the appearance of certain groups of ideas and activities on certain stages of culture" (Boas 1910, 535). Channeling Childe's (1951) take on neolithic intensification, Bookchin insists that the name of *evolution* properly applies to any ubiquitous and recurrent process of cultural unfolding:

If critics were correct in dubbing [the] dialectic a mystery for claiming to encompass *all* phenomena by a few cosmic formulas, then they would be obliged to regard human social development as a mystery if they claimed that it lacks any continuity and unity—that is, the bases for a philosophy of History. Without a notion of continuity in History, how can we explain... the clearly unrelated evolution of complex agricultural systems in at least three separate parts of the world—the Middle East, Southeast Asia and Mesoamerica—that apparently had no contact with one another and that were based on the cultivation of three different grains, notably wheat, rice and maize? ... Mesoamerica and Mesopotamia, most clearly, could not have had any contact with each other since Paleolithic times, yet their agriculture, towns and cities, literacy and mathematics developed in ways that are remarkably similar. (1994, 163)

Ifè's trajectory recaps the Eurasian pattern. "The massive political and social changes which accompanied Roman imperial expansion led to an effective simplification of religious organization" as Augustus' elevation to *pontifex maximus* capped "an already old process, the appropriation by the Roman *élite* of the religious institutions of the Roman people" (Gordon 1990, 181, 183f., cf. Brelich 1951). In the "millennium from about 600 BC to 650 CE... preindustrial empires" saw a "process of structural differentiation... by which 'religion' (or 'religious authority') became defined for the first time as an independent category" (Beard 1990, 46f) and "exclusive alliances between church and state constituted a key element in each religion's formation" (Hopkins 1999, 248, cf. Eisenstadt 1971, 1982, Baumard & Boyer 2013, 277), proving "the speculative proposition that the state and religion are identical" (Rose 1981, 112 citing Hegel's *Philosophie der Religion* v. 2, 190). 12th Century Germanic Europe saw "a redrawing of the boundaries between the sacred and the profane" as saints' relic bones ceased to be a "repository of the collective values of the group" and instead signified the "superior coercive power" of clergy, knights and merchants (Brown 1975, 134, 140, 143).<sup>81</sup> In northern Christian towns, top social strata did semantic somersaults no less agile than those by which Ifè's poetic gurus launched death into the sky. Latin *mundus* 'clean; world' (cf. Sanskrit मृण् *mṛṇ-* 'shaved clean', Macdonell 1929, 231), whose negation *im-mundus* logically meant 'un-clean' (cf. Italian *immondizia* 'garbage'), was inverted ("disenchanted" à la Weber, "rationalized" per Habermas) in ecclesiastical usage so that non-negated *mundus* took on the negative connotation of defilement, as in "this world, the realm of sin and death" (Lewis & Short 1879, 1175 citing *Evangelium Johannis* 17,9). Cinquecento Florence bravely contested theocratic-oligarchic "'descending'... power" (Pocock 1975, 29 quoting Ullmann 1961, 19f., cf. 95f.).

Maybe the confluence was directly influenced by Eurasian "religious rejection of the world characterized by a negative evaluation of man and society and the exaltation of another realm of reality [sic] as alone true and infinitely valuable" (Bellah 1964, 359) but clear traces of early contact are few. Pace Binsbergen (1997, 230), the numerologic-graphic match between Arabic and Benue valley oracles is not accompanied by phonetic or semantic similarities in any of the 16 4-bit signs, nor by shared interpretive text. The only possible scenario is that, after sharing basic binary calculus, the two systems grew independently in parallel on their respective sides of the Sahara while parallel sociologies endogenously evolved. Some subsaharans managed to spin 'religion' (state worship) out of atmospheric whims, then when fullblown Eurasian monotheisms eventually reached West Africa by land and sea, these recombined with homegrown up-gazing ideologies pre-adapted to express metaphysical disdain for the real, ancestral, biological ground on which we stand. The outcome is a planet-wide *putsch* whose apocalyptic consequences are dawning on human awareness rather late:

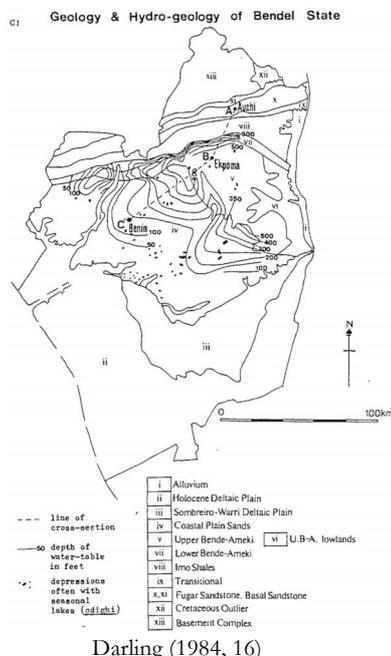
Alors que les Modernes regardaient en l'air, les Terrestres regardent en bas. Les Modernes formaient un peuple sans territoire, les Terrestres recherchent sur quel sol poser leurs pieds. Ils reviennent sur une Terre dont ils acceptent enfin d'explorer les limites; ils se définissent politiquement comme ceux qui se préparent à regarder Gaïa de face. (Latour 2015, back cover)<sup>82</sup>

<sup>81</sup> The pattern recurs across continents: Vēdic priests outrank warriors (Dumézil 1940, 43, cf. Dumont 1962, Madan 1971, 1997, Meillassoux 1973, Malamoud 1980, Graeber 2011, 62ff.), Thai Buddhist amulets attract "the commodification of charisma" (Tambiah 1984) and in Congolese "areas characterized by weak government, relics... substituted for public authority" (MacGaffey 1990a, 60).

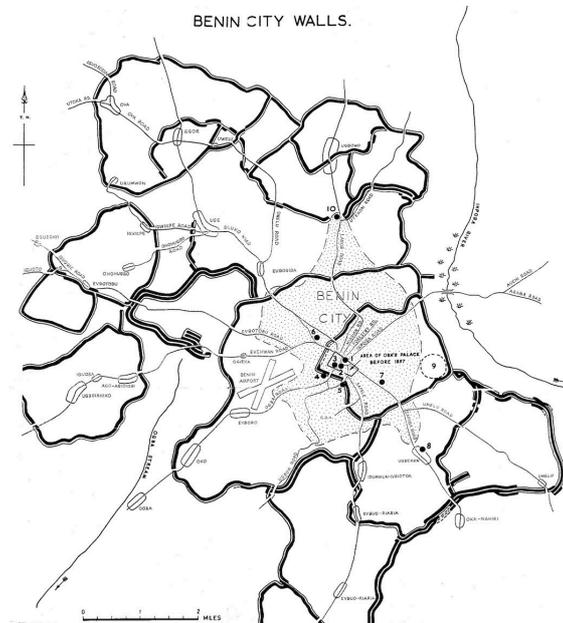
<sup>82</sup> [Whereas Moderns gazed up into the air, Terrestrials now direct their sight downward. The Moderns became people without a homeland, whereas the Terrestrials are looking for where to plant their feet. They are returning themselves to an Earth whose limits they have belatedly begun to investigate. They define themselves in political terms as people who are finally ready to look at Gaïa with unaverted gaze.]



By itself however, no amount of travel can explain the present bifurcation of 9ja’s populace into two lopsided sets: three gargantuan commons of shared speech, each wreathed by dozens of homologous units of lesser magnitude. That recursive geometry diagnoses fractal self-organization, an algebraic signature of nonlinear tiling around generative “seeds” (Mandelbrot 1982, 168). 2000 years ago, the heat of indigenous iron smelting furnaces hatched ethnolinguistic embryos into cultural blooms that replicated southward from dry savanna hills to humid forest plains, as hunting and horticulture fed trade and human fertility (Andah 1979, Shaw 1985, Ògúndiran 2005). Tropical ecology was transformed, and a vast lowland from Èdó to Ìjẹ̀bù became honeycombed with massive earthen moats “of total length in excess of 16,000 km” enclosing “in excess of 6,500 km<sup>2</sup>” (Darling 1981, 106, cf. 1976, 1984). At the heart of this wide lattice—a classic case of “impressive structures in previously unsuspected locations” (Graeber & Wengrow 2021, 440)—sat, not a compact holy headquarters on the pattern of Nri or Ifẹ̀, but the rich and sprawling, bifurcated Èdó capital laid out in broad, concentric avenues as described in 1485 by the first Portuguese visitor (Ryder 1965, 28, cf. Ofeimu 2003). The fact that most of these red ramparts occur in current Èdó-speaking areas and around “Benin-City” itself, points to Èdó authorship and sits uneasily with conventional historiography that treats Èdó as an Ifẹ̀ afterthought (§2.3 below).<sup>94</sup>



Darling (1984, 16)



Connah (1967 endpaper, cf. 1975, 102, Shaw 1978, 171)

Other Èdó data help to widen a forensic window through the *Wá-zò-bìán* ‘event horizon’.<sup>95</sup>

## 2.2 Allochronism all the way down<sup>96</sup>

Leonardo da Vinci finally sank Noah’s Ark—and invented paleontology—by observing undisturbed beds of marine invertebrates on Emilian mountaintops ([en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fossil#Early\\_modern\\_explanations](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fossil#Early_modern_explanations)). The same stratigraphic logic inspired Tylor’s theory of cultural archaisms: history sits on slow geology, it doesn’t move by miracles. For Tylor,

‘survivals’ ... are processes, customs, opinions and so forth which have been carried on by force of habit into a new state of society different from that in which they had their original home, and they thus remain as proofs and examples of an older condition of culture out of which a newer has been evolved. (1871.1, 15)

Caveats apply, because Tylor labored under two untenable pretensions: (i) trans-generational inertia (*whose* “habit”? inherited *how*?) explains the persistence of antiquated forms, (ii) Victorian enlightenment occupies a privileged perch from where some traits look like the leftovers of “lower intellectual levels” (1871.2, 403). The quick fix for (ii) is cultural relativism, but at the price of logical self-contradiction (Tambiah 1990, 128f. citing Putnam 1981). A more reasonable way to explain trendlines of change is to expand the repertoire of evolutionary mechanisms beyond the reproductive success of biological individuals, to include ‘exclusive’ fitness i.e. “attraction” to stable, group-level frequencies of traits “biased toward... cognitive and practical abilities and goals” (Sperber & Claidière 2006, 21, cf. Gould 1988, Nowak & al. 2010, Claidière & al. 2014). As for (i), the easy way out is again functionalist: to clothe “semi-operational”—frankly embarrassing—beliefs in “overcharitable exigesis”, assuming condescendingly that all exotic wordviews express warm and fuzzy consensus, whereas on closer look, some seemingly nonsensical ideas are the coldly useful instruments of social “manipulation” (Gellner 1962, 176f., 182) and “symbolic violence” (Bourdieu 1979, cf. Sperber 1982).

Unburdened of Tylor’s excess luggage, allochronism flips from a bug to a feature and a viable theory of modernity as a “multiverse” of “nonsynchronous contradictions” (E. Bloch 1963/1977b, 146; 1932/1977a, 38). Braudel disaggregates three overlapping strata of historical events—geographic, social, individual—that need not synchronise (1949, 14, 1958),

“The seed of Islam is passed through the father like the seed of Judaism is passed through the mother” (Blackburn 2010). A glossy pamphlet printed at the University of Wisconsin boasts that “because Igbo speakers have permeated the world’s societies in many different ways, they have also *increased in population by childbirth and marriage*” (NALRC 2002, italics added). In the real world, however, Biafran chromosomes don’t noticeably help children of Igbo-speaking emigrants to acquire or maintain their parents’ ethnic language.

<sup>94</sup> To Shaw, “it looks as if the function of of these many hundreds of kilometers of earthworks was not defensive, but to make community boundaries” (1978, 170). Their apparent alignment to topographic contours (Connah 1967, 609, cf. Andah 1982, 67) could also be explained by requirements of function of flood control, consistent with a recurrent inundation motif of indigenous (nonbiblical) folktales. The tallest such structure rings the present Yorùbá-speaking town of Ìjẹ̀bù-Ode, midway between Èdó and its erstwhile colony of Èkó (renamed “Lagos” by the Portuguese) astride a human trafficking route of the captive population called *Olùkù mí* (Lovejoy & Ojò 2015). Locals now call this monument [sùngbó erédò] (O. Làsisi *p.c.*) which, if parsed as Yorùbá, could mean ‘circular ritual grove of [a] water deity’ < *eré, igbó, odò, -sù* (Abraham 1958, 177, 286, 314, 450, 625), perhaps a reference to Olókun, the state cult of the Èdó kingdom (cf. Lloyd 1959, Darling 2001, Chouin 2013, Làsisi 2019, Chouin & Làsisi 2019).

<sup>95</sup> “In astrophysics, an *event horizon* is a boundary beyond which events cannot affect an observer” ([en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Event\\_horizon](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Event_horizon)).

<sup>96</sup> [en.wikiquote.org/wiki/Turtles\\_all\\_the\\_way\\_down](https://en.wikiquote.org/wiki/Turtles_all_the_way_down)

to which must be added the “cosmic time” of fossil-carbon energy (Bellamy & Diamanti 2018, cf. Benjamin 1928), then Wallerstein shows how states and empires appear and vanish across the globe like bubbles riding on long (‘secular’) waves of production and exchange (1974, 2010, cf. Luxemburg 1915) and Saïd diagnoses “the hallmarks of modernist culture... [to] include a response to the external pressures... from the *imperium*” (1993, 188). No expectation exists that older phases of humanity were more homeostatic or homogeneous than the sample visible today. Conversely, social development does not unroll a predetermined script but emerges from clashing contradictions. Bookchin summarises the position gnominically thus: “Shorn” of Hegel’s teleology and of Engels’ reductionism, “dialectical reason may be rendered naturalistic and ecological” (1990, 15, cf. Levins & Lewontin 1985).

Unconfined by the limits of human recollection, the comparative method diagnoses *Ifá* as a medieval bricolage of fossils and inventions, but for all of its brilliant originality, *Ifá* resembles other cases near and far where hermetic-poetic virtuosi conjure ‘religion’ out of a mix of found folklore, creative cosmology and an exclusivist social contract (cf. §1.5). Traditional humanism, rather than coming to grips with remarkably parallel outcomes of distant developments, hides behind an imagined duel of two hackneyed strawmen, willed action versus passive conformity:

[I]f we try to study social change without attending to the role of history as a subjective reality, then we effectively exclude human agency from it: social change becomes something driven by inherent mechanisms below the level of consciousness, or a naturalization of history. (Peel 2016a, 537)

On the contrary, subjective-individual and historic-collective meanings can coexist, although they needn’t always match: “Quando io adopero la parola «disastro» nessuno può imputarmi credenze astrologiche...” (Gramsci 1932/1975, 438, cf. Décobert 1998).<sup>97</sup> But just as shunning naturalism can be hazardous to the health ([en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Antivaxxer](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Antivaxxer)), neither are natural scientists immune to ideology themselves (Mannheim 1952, Kuhn 1962, MacGaffey 1986). It’s noble to preach tolerance of “nonoverlapping magisteria” (Gould 1997), but even if magisteria don’t overlap, they can collide.

In premodern West Africa behind the Saharan and Atlantic barriers to prior literacy zones (cf. Curtin 1997), the scarcity of calendar dates invites a temptation to deny co-evality and garnish 12th-16th century Ifè with the atemporal labels “ancient” and “classical” (Frobenius 1913, 187, 316, 337, Willett 1967, Horton 1979, Ògúndiran 2003). Such vaguely prestigious adjectives feed “Hellenomania” (Bernal 1987, 281) and “orientalism in reverse” (al-‘Azam 1981), inspiring derivative remakes of Greek tragedy (Clark 1961, Sóyínká 1973). At the same time the “classical” conceit packs an implied Orientalist thesis of “slow, but inevitable decline” (Turner 1978, 6), fostering factoids like “the production of... brass/bronze sculptures” floated upon the undefended assumption that this ever occurred “in Ilé-Ifè” itself:

The Classical period has been the focus of most archaeological investigations in Ilé-Ifè. The period was characterized by the florescence of the production of naturalistic terracotta [and] brass/bronze sculptures. (Ògúndiran 2002, 41)

Realist periodizations are available: (i) relational *early/middle/late* categories like Connah’s Èdó stratigraphy (1975), (ii) reference to immediate context like Shaw’s “Islamic Contact Period c. 700AD - 1475” and “Coastal Contact Period c. 1475AD - 1850” (1976, 61) or (iii) a global frame calibrated to coeval, late feudal/early capitalist Western Europe when commodity chains came clanking down on tropical African coasts (Rodney 1970, Wallerstein 1974). To instead declare “the end of prehistory” sounds like liberation until it turns out that the replacement is “a polysemic conception of time that unites the cyclical and linear modes of historical thinking” (Ògúndiran 2013, 791, cf. 2020) echoing the ‘decolonial’ strand of postmodernist romance.<sup>98</sup> Pomo circularity spurs ethnic imaginations to project present forms of identity indefinitely backwards, whereas the boring-old comparative method defines prehistory linearly and tractably as *events before the onset of (oral or written) memory*, therefore approachable only by indirect, probabilistic and fragmentary inferences.

### 2.3 Ifè’s modern magnetism in Èdó

*King Òvónrànmwè [“Ovorammen”] the paramount ruler of the Benin Kingdom, whose ancestry, one line of legend insists, was none other than Yorùbá!* (Sóyínká 2006, 222)

J.U. Eghar[h]evba was born in Ìdànrè in 1893 and schooled in Àkúrè—east Yorùbá towns in the western penumbra of the Èdó kingdom for some centuries (1972, 4, cf. Akintóyè 1969, Adédiran 1989, 1991). His publications pioneered Èdó literacy on the model of Crowther’s standardized Yorùbá spelling (Àjàyí 1960), but he blended faith and folklore from anonymous sources to bank a Yorùbá-centric political investment. The “indirect rule” regime in “Nigeria” was modeled on British India’s “princely states” where “existing powers... would be left with as few modifications as possible” but, as Lugard’s successor Clifford wrote in 1920, the “system... was in reality a thinly disguised form of direct administration by British Officers” (Ìgbàfè 1967, 715f., cf. Maine 1861, Mair 1962). Like other imperial nation-building projects, Lugard’s bulldozing of the 9ja ethnic landscape had severely unintended consequences (Merton 1936, cf. Kinzer 2007).

Egharhevba crafted the currently standard stories of the Òminìghon oracle, Èdó copper-alloy casting and Èdó state formation.<sup>99</sup> More or less explicitly he named Ifè as the source of all three, but his authority in these matters is usually cited without mentioning his eastern Yorùbá upbringing and part-parentage (1972, 4, Ùsuánléle & Fálólá 1994, 1998). Circular endorsement of his books by Yorùbá historians is therefore hardly dispassionate, whereas art curators may be inclined to buy his words wholesale for a more superficial but no less misdirected reason: as a neat, authentically ‘native’ Èdó narrative to paste into museum and auction catalogs, the better to distract from the Èdó antiquities’ scandalous provenance (Fagg 1981, Éyò 1997, Plankensteiner 2007b). Willett’s smooth synthesis of ethnicity and image laundering pleased these interested parties by connecting all their blurry mirages with improbably sharp, straight lines:

There is no direct evidence in Ifè itself of the date when the brasses and terracottas were made, but there is evidence [sic] from Benin. ...The Òba Oguóla, who reigned towards the end of the 14th century, asked if the Òmì could not send a brass-smith to teach the craft to his people. Iguè-Igha went, and he is worshipped to this day in Benin as the patron of the brass-smiths. This tradition means that brass-casting must have been [sic] flourishing in Ifè already before the late 14th century. How long before is a matter of guesswork, but it seems likely that the brasses were not made over a very long period since they appear to be the work of only two or three artists. We may assume then that brass-casting in Ifè flourished during the 12th to 14th centuries, but it may have begun earlier and continued later. (1967b, 34, 78)

- 97 [Whenever I use the word *disaster*, nobody can accuse me of believing in astrology...] Zimmerman (2001) recounts how newly global “human sciences” of the late 19th century began—unevenly to be sure—unsettling the cultural quietism of European humanists.
- 98 Citing the Nazi legal theorist Carl Schmitt, Mignolo & Walsh seek to “transcend the linear precepts, binary-based suppositions and outcome-oriented views of Western knowledge, research and thought” (2018, 50 cf. 226 *fn.* 11, Habermas 1986, Brennan 2003, 363).
- 99 Akinólá (1976) compares Egharhevba’s “received” tradition with the “new” one reprised also by Aimuwu (1971) and Àkẹ̀zùà (2008).

Dissent came from a documentary historian who objected that “the picture of the past 600 years is... far too static” (Ryder 1965, 37), from a parade of archaeologists (Connah 1968b, Shaw 1970b, Williams 1974, Èyò 1977, Qbáyemí 1976) and from *Qmo n’Qba* Erediauwa, the Èdó monarch whose sceptical remarks about the alleged Yorùbá origin of his own dynasty earned him an intemperate rebuke from the reigning ‘king’ of Yorùbá historiographers:

The mistake that modern historians (including Yorùbá) made... is that they confused Odùduwà with Qrúnmilà, the bringer of *Ifá* divination. It was Qrúnmilà who, according to [the] traditional account, had sixteen children, each of whom he sent to rule over each of sixteen communities in his own world, among which were Ifè and Adó (Benin). (Erediauwa 2004, 206)

At least those who said that Benin tradition agree[s] with Ifè tradition quote Egharhevba who was a Benin chief, who actually did a lot of research not only on Benin but on Àkùré and surrounding areas, Úrhobo and Işékiri. He even wrote a book entitled *A Short History of Benin*. And any day, I will rather follow that book than follow what an *Qba* who is not an expert in the field [writes]... His own father used to attend and meet at the conference of Yorùbá *Qbas* regularly during the colonial rule. His own father did not object to this... What did he study that was not available to Egharhevba? ... [T]he story told about Ifè in Benin is less likely to be credible than the story told about Ifè in Ifè. ... I believe the story as told by the *Qòni* of Ifè. It is better founded than what the *Qba* of Benin is trying to tell Nigerians. The *Qba* of Benin has no *locus standi*, as it were, to tell the story of Qrànmiyàn. (Àjàyí 2004)

Àjàyí protests too much. His own house is made of glass, unless he can say why Ifè has “*locus standi*... to tell the story of Èdó. And Egharhevba’s is not the only canonical Nigerian history book composed with poetic license: consider the *History of the Yorùbás* (1899) by Rev. Samuel Johnson, another pioneer penman whose “kinglist, as a list was his creation rather than his discovery” (Law 1984, 214, cf. Agíri 1975).

Egharhevba’s irredentist view of Èdó as an eastern Yorùbá annex was magnified, not just by nearness of the nearest *Wá-zò-bián* attractor ([en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Attractor](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Attractor)), but also by faintness on the far side. Igbo’s modern oblivion in Èdó was ensured by the truncation of two scientific careers. During 1906-13, Northcote Thomas was “the first government anthropologist ever to be appointed” in Nigeria until he was judged to undermine Lugard’s legitimacy and abruptly “transferred to Sierra Leone” having been labeled “a recognized maniac” who “wore sandals” and “lived on vegetables” so as “to bring a certain amount of discredit upon the white man’s prestige” (Lackner 1973, 135 quoting Flood, Colonial Office 1003, 19 December 1930, cf. Basu 2016). Starting in 1951, Robert Bradbury documented the Èdó kingdom, first as a student of Prof. Darryl Forde (London) then as staff of Prof. Qnwùkà Díké’s Benin Historical Research Scheme (Ìbàdàn), until the Biafran Blitzkrieg of 1967 and Major Qkónkwo’s occupation of the Midwest (Qròbátò 1987, Gore 1997, 36). Before their respective departures, however, both scholars had described two structural features in which Èdó resembles Nri more than Ifè (cf. also Qbáyemí 1976).

- (i) Status succession and property inheritance follow male primogeniture. In Èdó this applies to *Qmo n’Qba* (‘the legitimate royal child’) and to the serried ranks of *egbaevbo n’ogbè*—titled dependent initiates of *eguae*, the huge, extended royal household—as well as to village and family heads throughout the kingdom (Thomas 1910, 12, 64, Melzian 1937, 49, 166, Bradbury 1956, 1965, 1968, 1973, Shaw 1978, 172).
- (ii) Palace authority is circumscribed by a “style and structure of political competition and conflict” (Bradbury 1968, 248) whose “centrifugally fragmenting” phases deserve the astronomical metaphor of “galactic” (Tambiah 1977, 74, cf. Manfredi 2013a). In Èdó, insubordinate *egbaevbo n’ore* ‘town chiefs’ (Melzian 1937, 31), an appointed hierarchy of non-royal ‘bigmen’, gave the British a pretext to impose “free trade” with Gatling guns in 1897 (Róúimí 1974, Ígbáfè 1979, 90) and then destabilised Lugard’s emirate-style administration after the coronations of Èwéka 2 in 1914 and Ákenzuà 2 in 1933 (Bradbury 1968, 216). Finally in 1963, *Qmo n’Qba* Ákenzuà restored palace hegemony by winning a plebiscite to detach the Midwest from a Western Region founded on Ifè cultural supremacy and *ogbóni* initiation networks (Coleman 1958, 344-49, Bradbury 1968, 247; Otite 1975, 75; Vickers 2000; Idúuwe *ms.*). The galactic pattern recurred a generation later, when *Qmo n’Qba* Erediauwa censured a town title-holder for serial episodes of *lèse-majesté* fueled by looted Èdó State funds (Egbegbulem 2008, 2012, Qkenwá 2008, Enogholase 2009, Èdó State Government 2013).

The same traits hold (i) in Ìgbo households (Úchéndù 1965, 84f., Ánèné 1966, 13) and (ii) in Ìgbo chiefdoms (Áfiigbo 1972). The scale of Èdó political economy greatly surpassed that of any Ìgbo-speaking town, but structure is not the same as size. Èdó military expansion stretched a local Ìgbo pattern onto a vast regional frame, and the homology was proved in practice by a natural experiment of the 17th century when Ágbò [“Agbor”] and a string of so-called Ùmù *Èzè* Chùma towns extending east as far as Qnicha [“Onitsha”] and Qsòmàlá [“Ossomari”] on the left bank of the Niger, became Èdó tributaries. All these towns acquired Èdó-style palaces without deleting their own *èzè* institutions that had been shaped centuries before by Nri immigrants (Bradbury 1969, Henderson 1972, Nzímíro 1972, Idúuwe *ms.*, Qnwùejíogwù 1974, Èjiófó 1982, Áfiigbo 1983, Qhadíkè 1994, Manfredi 2013a). Evidently the old and new frameworks of governance could not have cohabited for so long in all these settlements, maintaining parallel routines of ceremony and batteries of nomenclature, if the coexisting constitutions were not fundamentally compatible.

As reviewed in §2.8 below, the priority of Ifè *cire perdue* art, alleged by a wildcat adventurer, was officially adopted in colonial musings on 9ja prehistory like this overconfident revelation by the founding government museologist:

[T]he Ìgbo and Ìbibio tribes, who preceded the Yorùbá in Nigeria and show many signs of Egyptian influence, do not cast in bronze or brass. This fact, which indicates that knowledge of bronze-working in Nigeria did not come from dynastic Egypt, also suggests that neither did the art exist in Nigeria in earlier times, but only began with the Yorùbá. (Murray 1941, 75)

This story was dismissed by ~1100 y.o. radiocarbon accompanying cuprous sculptures excavated in primary burials in Ìgbo Úkwu near Nri (Shaw 1970a, Qnwùejíogwù & Qnwùejíogwù 1977, *pace* Lawal 1973). Nobody knows if the Ìgbo Úkwu finds were cast *in situ*, but they weren’t isolated: similar items have surfaced nearby and in the eastern Niger delta, some in primary sites (Alagoa 1976, 355, 362, Ánòzie 1993), nor is the area lacking technical prerequisites. (i) Some of the Ìgbo Úkwu pieces chemically resemble worked copper ore deposits just 100 km away (Chíkwendù & Ùmèjí 1979, Craddock & Picton 1986; McIntosh & McIntosh 1988; Chíkwendù & *al.* 1989, Craddock & *al.* 1993, Garenne-Marot & Hurtel 1993). (ii) The town of Qka [“Awka”], 15 km from Ìgbo Úkwu, has long specialized in iron fabrication (Nzekwú 1959, Oguagha 1989) and two types of iron furnace have been excavated 80 km from Ìgbo Úkwu in the Nsúká [“Nsukka”] plateau, one of them dated to the 17th/18th century (Ánòzie 1979). (iii) Beads recovered from Ìgbo Úkwu and Gao (eastern Mali) are similar enough to “de-mystify” (Insoll & Shaw 1997, 10) the possibility that Ìgbo Úkwu was

linked to medieval saharan trade through the Niger valley. In contrast, premodern Ifè has left no trace of copper alloy smelting (Elúyemí 1976, 322, Lawal 1977a, 203) and today “brass-casting is carried out in few of the [Yorùbá] towns, the most important of which are now Ijè bú-Ode, Ibàdàn, Ilóbùù and Obo Ayégúnlè” (Adépégba 1983c, 31).

That Egharhevba would map Èdó cultural heritage as unilineal (biological) vertical inheritance is no surprise. Ifè already did this for itself with the attractive metaphors of the skychain (Apter 1987, 2017) and the inverted descending queue (§1.4 above). Doctrinal preference for descent over diffusion (horizontal borrowing) is more globally widespread. The Romans felt so culturally inferior to Greek colonizers of *Magna Graecia* (the coasts of Sicily and the southern Italian peninsula) that Augustus paid Virgil to compose the *Aeneid*, a propaganda masterpiece that puffed the Julian ruling house as the spawn of a Greek goddess and a Trojan hero. This song of exceptionalism in turn shows mythopoetic parallels to the “patriarchal narratives” of Hebrew *Exodus* (Weinfeld 1988). Egharhevba may not have read Latin epics, but he was steeped enough in Abrahamic literature to apply a stencil of Old Testament-ish ‘begats’ to high-profile Èdó topics like the oracle, cast sculpture and the ruling dynasty. A sympathetic reception was assured, both inside Nigeria and abroad, as Egharhevba’s account reinforced larger power claims, and this predictable success foreclosed consideration of factually more informative alternatives like the following, whose supporting details are presented below:

- (§2.4) The Èdó oracle *Ìba Ominigbon* arrived ‘downstream’ of Nri-Igbo *Áfa* (probably via Ùrhobo) and sits either ‘upstream’ of Yorùbá *Ifá* or else on a collateral transmission line—either way, *contra* Egharhevba.
- (§2.9) A parallel conclusion holds for Èdó cuprous metallurgy (“Benin bronze”), which bears multiple verbal and material traces of Igbo participation but no sign of specific Ifè influence in form or content.

In fairness, the *babaláwos*’ idea that *Ifá* dropped down to Ifè from above expresses perfectly their detachment from *terra firma* and corresponding reliance on remote, abstract—call it heavenly—authority. The same self-exoticising move was also ‘in the air’ in older kingdoms around the confluence like Nupe, Ígàlà and Nri (Thomas 1913a, Nadel 1935b, Oguagha & Okpoko 1984, Weise 2003, 2013) but in that exalted company Ifè exceptionalism was truly exceptional.

## 2.4 Ìgbònic Òminigbon

The second paragraph of Egharhevba’s second book—*Ìba Ominigbon*—begins as follows:

Ominigbon (Ogbeide) o re a tie eni omwan no rhie Iha na ke Uhe (Ile-Ifè) ghadi Edo. Obo Oronmila no re Uhe oro na rue iha, ren ore obiewaise n’odion oghe Oronmila vbe eghè nii, o ke vbe ren iha dinmwin esesemwese o ke do mu oghe obo re tobo-re y’oto gha fi vbe Edo.<sup>100</sup> (1936a, 3, no tones in source)

Emovon finds “nothing in *Òminigbon* myth [or] its corpus that helps to corroborate the claim of Úhè origin” (1984, 2). Even taken at face value, Egharhevba never wrote that “*Òminigbon* (Ogbeide)” was indigenous to Ifè or that the *Ìba* he brought to Èdó bears particular resemblance to Yorùbá *Ifá*. Historians jumping to such conclusions may not appreciate how successive editions of Egharhevba’s first book—*A Short History of Benin*—were serially embellished. (i) Between the printings of 1933 and 1936, the pioneer *cire perdue* artist of Èdó called “Iguehae” (or other spellings, cf. below) acquired the interpolated identity of ex-servant of the *Ọ̀ni* of Ifè, and (ii) by 1953 the grave of the dynastic founder Èwéka 1 moved from the Èdó town of Ùsamá to Ilé-Ifè itself—a revision that’s “not likely to be the product of new findings” (Úsuanléle & Fálólá 1998, 374-77). (iii) From 1936 to 1953 to 1968, Egharhevba’s list of early Èdó rulers holding the title *Ọ̀gísó* (“sky-ruler”) grew on the printed page from 1 to 12 to 15 and their *rēs gestae* expanded apace, duplicating accomplishments previously credited to the post-*Ọ̀gísó* dynasty (Eisenhofer 1995, 145-48, 154f.). (iv) Egharhevba’s friend Bradbury, while praising his mentor’s “industry and integrity” as well as “accuracy” concerning “the period from 1715 onwards”, diplomatically assessed the earlier spans of his Èdó chronology as “very uncertain” (1959, 285f.).

Motive for these elaborate enhancements is not far to seek. In Southern Nigeria under Lugard, “the claim of descent from the royal family of Ilé-Ifè was sometimes fabricated by kings anxious to legitimate their rule” (Law 1973, 211, cf. Ašiwájú 1976, Adépégba 1986), so it made sense for a patriotic midwife of Èdó rebirth from its defeat of 1897 to bid for a favored spot in the colonial pecking order. Horton, seated at the University of Ifè, understandably pushed a maximalist interpretation of Egharhevba consistent with “Ifè leadership in matters pertaining to *Ifá*” (1979, 123), a system aptly characterised as “the political interpretation of Yorùbá religion” (Apter 1987b, 3, cf. §1.5). This explains why Ifè oral tradition would fuse—or *confuse*, in the words of *Ọ̀mọ n’Ọ̀ba* Erediauwa quoted above—two delegations of celestial immigrants listed in reverse-stack (IDQ) format: *Odùduwà*’s 16 “elders” (Fábunmi 1969, 3f) and *Ọ̀rúnmílá*’s 16 oracle signatures called *odù* (Abímbólá 1976, 26f.). Ideological conflation of the two sky-hierarchies is reinforced by the audible echo of the string *odù* in *Odùduwà*, the semantically opaque name of the dynastic founder figure.<sup>101</sup>

Egharhevba’s text and Horton’s strong reading of it force the Ifè-Èdó relationship into a model of direct succession or transfer from A to B, but this is not inevitable. Ryder (1965) contemplates another possible geometry, namely that A and B share a common inheritance or influence from some hypothetical third location C whose identity remains to be determined. Indirect explanation of similarity is the essence of the comparative method: most famously, nonaccidental resemblances between Sanskrit, Greek and Latin don’t show that one of them begat the others, only that they all reflect “some common source which, perhaps, no longer exists” (Jones 1786/1807, 34 cf. Haas 1969, 18f.). Similarly, the myth of “Proto-Bantu” (Guthrie 1962, 281, cf. Meinhof 1899) arose when tropical Africa was viewed from a myopic starting point, statistically over-weighting nearby resemblances and underestimating more distant comparisons whose historical significance is, however, far greater when measured probabilistically (Greenberg 1963, 1972, cf. Westermann 1927).

As shown above (§1.2), the chronological age of *Ifá*, *Áfa*, *Ìba* and kindred oracles is reckoned in centuries, not in the millennia of Benue-Kwa (BK), the Niger-Congo branch that sprouted a dozen language clusters from Àkan to “Bantu”. Such relative youth doesn’t entail that for any pair of oracles adjacent on the map, one must have been the source of the other. A long list of clues in *Ìba Ominigbon* disproves that it derives from *Ifá* and shows instead an Igbo source, maybe via Ùrhobo (below, this section). Separate facts support a similar correction of received ideas about Èdó copper-alloy work (§2.9). Pertinent observations divide into five subsets whose independence—unbundled transmission in separate information streams—makes their parallelism more significant. The linguistic matches—Igbo etymologies of Èdó expressions pertaining to oracles and metallurgy—are also more compelling for a second reason: their “unconscious

<sup>100</sup> [Òminigbon (Ogbeide) is the name of the person who brought *Ìba* to Èdó from Úhè (Ilé-Ifè). His teacher in Úhè was the oracle-priest Ọ̀rúnmílá, and he had already become Ọ̀rúnmílá’s senior apprentice and mastered *Ìba* before establishing his own practice in Èdó.]

I’ve corrected “Obo Ọ̀rúnmílá” to *Ọ̀bo Ọ̀rúnmílá* and applied tones and official spelling to the whole Èdó text (cf. §§0.4-5 above).

<sup>101</sup> An unknown Yorùbá source (Courlander 1973, 53, 158) says that Ọ̀rúnmílá ruled Èdó before Ọ̀ránmíyàn, whose name ‘My crisis has been resolved’ is conventionally understood to convey an oracle allusion (Abraham 1958, 687, Babalólá & Alábá 2003, 762).

character” as opaque to modern awareness (Boas 1910, 67).<sup>102</sup> By contrast, Egharheva’s conscious (‘folk’) etymologies of *Bini* and *Ẹ̀wéka* as Yorùbá *ilẹ̀ ibínú* ‘vexatious land’ and *owó mí ká* ‘I have won’ (1953, 6-8) may be entertaining mystifications, but both sides can play this game and the fun is easily reversed by tauntingly Ẹ̀dó-ifying *Odùdúnwá* as “*I ma do d’uma*... ‘I have not missed the road to good fortune’” (Erediauwa 2004, 209, cf. Akinolá 1976, 25).<sup>103</sup>

### Primary familiar-name

Whether reflecting Egharheva’s written authority or an independent oral tradition—if one still exists after decades of literate feedback—the Ẹ̀dó palace today regards *Òminigbón* as the name of *Ìba*’s pioneer practitioner (Chief N. Ìsekhurhe, *p.c.* 2009) roughly analogous to *Àgwù* and *Ọ̀rúnmilá*, the named familiar spirits of *Afa* and *Ifá* respectively.<sup>104</sup>

What kind of word is *Òminigbón*? Wescott calls it “an archetypical noun” and glosses it as “divining tree” (1963, 58) but this description applies more obviously to the species *òguèèga* (*Detarium senegalense* or *hendelotiana*) whose half-pericarps furnish the oracle processor strings (discussed below). Quadrisyllabic shape typifies a nominal compound or lexicalized phrase, but there’s no guarantee to isolate all the meaningful constituents, because over time a listed expression of any size tends to become semantically opaque as its components suffer phonetic erosion, morphological oblivion and regular rules of sound change. More than other word classes, proper names tolerate structural decay because they can efficiently designate a unique individual person or place without calling up a denotation of any kind (Kripke 1970, 48). Any obscure loanword or borrowed phrase can therefore easily become localized as an unanalyzable proper name, and this would not be shocking in the present example of a widely shared cultural complex.

An Ẹ̀dó-internal etymology for *Òminigbón* almost works. The initial string *òmini-* has no listing in the Ẹ̀dó dictionary, but two possible hints appear in fixed expressions with some phonetic and/or pragmatic overlap:

- (i) The string “*Emini*” (tones unknown) begins a formula *Emini ere nọ we*... ‘What *Emini* say(s) is...’, repeated by Egharheva 256 times to introduce each basic oracle text (1936a, 10-39). *Emini* has no dictionary entry, but contextually it names the messages’ invisible source, an authority of “ostensive detachment” (Boyer 2020a). On internal grounds, *èmini* could be the plural of *òmini-* with archaic, prefixal *o-/e-* inflection as in *ògie/ègie* ‘chief/‘rulers’ (Wescott 1963, 69) and —modulo ‘dotted’ vowel harmony—*òmó/èmó* ‘child/‘children’ and *òdiòn/èdiòn* ‘elder/‘elders, senior age grade, collective ancestors’ (Melzian 1937, 160, 166).
- (ii) The string *òmini-* superficially recurs in *òminigie*, an expression glossed “class of people who possess no titles” as if the residual part is *ègie* ‘chieftaincy title(s)’ (Melzian 1937, 29, 144). Apophetic elision of *è*, required under such an analysis, would be unusual but has a possible precedent in *ùmòbiè* ‘mother of many children’, assuming that this is composed of *-mò* ‘bear fruit (of plants)’ plus *ìbiè* ‘children/servants’.<sup>105</sup> Wescott suggests a simpler parse of *ùmòbiè* without elision, treating the final syllable as the bare predicate root *-biè* ‘give birth to’ (1963, 115), but a parallel treatment of *òminigie*—identifying the final syllable as the bare predicate root *-gie* ‘send’—would lose in semantic plausibility what it gains in regular morphology, and in any case no such option exists for *Òminigbón* because Ẹ̀dó apparently lacks *-gbón* as a bare predicate root altogether (Melzian 63, 79, 124, 206).

Consider a prefix elision analysis on the analogy of *òminigie* in (ii). Subtracting *òmini-* from *Òminigbón*, the residue could be one of two nominal complements, differing only in the identity of the abstract initial vowel:

- àgbón* LL “world, esp. in contrast to *èrínmwin*... world of the dead and the unborn” (Melzian 1937, 4, 55)  
*ìgbón* LL “the Ì[gb]o people” (Melzian 1937, 85)<sup>106</sup>

To parse *òminigbón* as ‘class of people without *x*’ if *x* = *ìgbón* doesn’t yield a coherent interpretation, whereas *x* = *àgbón* could allow it to denote a class of people located outside the visible world—not a bad description of human ancestors like the paired tutelaries of *Ẹ̀pha* (or *Ẹ̀vma*), the duplex 4-bit oracle of the Ùrhobo-speaking region, directly south-east of Ẹ̀dó (Eriwwo 1979).<sup>107</sup> Relevant folklore has been paraphrased from a ritual specialist as follows:

The most popular divination apparatus among the Urhobo is specially made of 16 half-shells of the *agbragha* fruit, and it is from this tree that Epha derives its other name *Agbragha*. ... In Urhobo mythology the spiritual forces behind *Agbragha* are those of Againabe and Akunabe. These two spiritual beings are thought to have been mortals who... were able to operate freely in both the physical world (*akpo*) and the spiritual realm (*erivbin*). When they died a dispute arose between the people of *akpo* and those of *erivbin* over where they should be buried... because both the people of *akpo* and the inhabitants of *erivbin* regarded Againabe and Akunabe as traitors and tale-bearers who, in their lifetime, had specialized in learning the secrets of the one world and divulging them to the other... In the end it was decided as a compromise to bury them at the border between the two realms... A fruit-bearing tree known as *agbragha* was planted on their graves. ... These two spiritual-cum-mortal beings... vowed not only to continue but to intensify their efforts at revealing secrets of both realms to anyone who established communication with them through the *agbragha* fruits. The legend goes further to say that in a dream Againabe and Akunabe revealed to a hunter named Ominigbo how to divine,

<sup>102</sup> From my experience among the Yorùbá, the people often used by scholars as informants because they are considered directly involved in the art either through their vocation or their use of the objects, sometimes give information which would make themselves or their activities appear important or mysterious. Information extracted from the language is more likely to be free of personal bias. (Adépegba 1983c, 21)

<sup>103</sup> *Bini* (“Benin”) may have been southern Nupe *Bini* or *Beni* (Banfield 1914, 47; Dupigny 1920, 7; Nadel 1935a, 274, Ryder 1965, 31f),

<sup>104</sup> Ibié writes “*Ominigun*” (1993, 1-4 no tones) citing *Ogbè Irètè* (“*Ogbe Ate*”) and *Ọ̀fún Ogbè*. This could be a real variant or a typo.

<sup>105</sup> The reported gloss of *òminigie* could derive from the Ẹ̀dó lexical elements *ma* the negative modal auxiliary and the root *-ni* ‘to set the fees payable by initiates of a title society’ (Melzian 1937, 121, 129). As for *ègie*, if it’s treated as a frozen plural of *ògie* ‘ruling chief’, Melzian tentatively relates the latter to *ìgie* ‘corner, base’ and *ùgie* ‘fixed occasion’ (1937, 82, 135, 196).

<sup>106</sup> Emovon defines *Igbon* as “a foreigner” (1984, 2). *Izõn* (“‘Ijaw’”) glosses *Igbon* even more vaguely as “Hausa, Northerner” (Williamson & Timitimi 1983, 79), as if to exclude Igbo speakers, who might be covered instead by narrow geographic terms like *Abo/Ebe* (colonial “Aboh”). Apart from the fuzzy semantics, there are two phonetic reasons to treat *Izõn Igbon* as acquired secondarily from the Ẹ̀dó (“Benin”) empire in the historical course of Atlantic trade. *Izõn*’s indigenous bilabial implosive [ɓ] (spelled *b*) is not used in *Igbon*, whose labiovelar plosive [gɓ] is however expected to occur here because the Ẹ̀dó cluster (Macro-Ẹ̀dó or ‘Eddoid’) generally lacks [ɓ], apart from three small delta lects (Elugbe 1986, 29). Secondly, *Izõn* does not observe the general prohibition observed that holds throughout Macro-Ẹ̀dó (minus the same three lects) against dotless nasal mid vowels like [ɔ̃] (Williamson 1965, 16f), therefore the nasal, dotted vowel of *Igbon* is likely to have been transmitted to *Izõn* via a Macro-Ẹ̀dó language.

<sup>107</sup> The abstract decomposition of possession as location is motivated in theoretical and comparative syntax (Freeze 1992, Kayne 1993) and applies no less in BK (Manfredi 1994, Ajíbòyè 2005, 87-136).

that is, establish this communication with them through the *agbragha* fruits. It is however stated in another version that the secret of divination was first revealed to a hunter known as Dibié. These shells are believed to be spiritually charged with the powers of those who stand astride *akpo* and *erivbin*, hence they are able to know secrets not only of the physical world but also of the spiritual sphere. Therefore this system of divination, which is referred to as either *Agbragha* or *Epha*, is taken to be the most reliable of all... (Nabofa & Elugbe 1981, 6-8, no diacritics in source)<sup>108</sup>

This report fails to indicate tones or vowel features, but with some philological help it yields four linguistic signposts of an exotic origin for the oracle, specifically a prehistoric trajectory from Ìgbo to Ùrhobo and thence to Èdó.

- (i) Out of a dozen local pronunciations of the 4-bit oracle signs (Fig. 1 above), the Ùrhobo names of the twin oracle tutelaries spelled *Agai-nabe* and *Aku-nabe* are phonetically closest, by inspection, to the Ìgbo versions of these (doubled) signatures: *Agári n'áàbo* '◊◊◆◆/◊◊◆◆' and *Akuvu n'áàbo* '◆◆◆◆/◆◆◆◆'.
- (ii) “Dibié”—a rough spelling of the alternate quoted name of the culture hero *Òminigbo*—is obviously *dibiè*, the ordinary Àgbò (“Agbor”) and Ùkuàni (“Kwale”) term for oracle specialist, corresponding to the eastern Ìgbo pronunciation *dibìà* (Williamson *ed.* 1968, 34; Williamson 1972, 91; Manfredi 1991, 321; Igwè 1999, 125).
- (iii) In Èdó the final vowels of *Òminigbon* and *Ìgbon* are dotted (narrow pharynx) and nasalised, but both features are absent in the Ùrhobo counterparts *Òminigbo* and *Ìgbo*.<sup>109</sup> The same phonetic difference divides Èdó *ófigbòn* from Ùrhobo *ófigbò* ‘red palm-oil’ (Melzian 1937, 135, Ukere 1986, 10), a tradeword with a literal Ìgbo gloss *ófe-ìgbo* ‘food for the community, that is, all purpose oil’ (Ònwuejiógwù 1972, 40) as pronounced in Aníóma and Onícha *ófigbo*, Ùkuàni *ófigbò* (Thomas 1913b, 314, Armstrong 1967, #287, Williamson 1968, 41).<sup>110</sup> This pattern determines a sequence of spread. Across the cluster as reconstructed by Elugbe, nasality was lost in Ùrhobo in seven items (10a) but three of these kept their narrow pharynx dot, proving that loss of nasality need not affect dottedness (pharyngeal stricture).<sup>111</sup> It follows that, if the final vowels of Ùrhobo *Òminigbo*, *Ìgbo* and *ófigbò* had been originally dotted as well as nasalised, the dots should have stayed when nasality went, contrary to fact.<sup>112</sup> The reverse scenario is not symmetrical: by Elugbe’s reckoning, two lexical items acquired nasality in Èdó (10b) and two more can arguably be added (10b’), providing a workable model for how Èdó *Òminigbon*, *Ìgbon* and *ófigbòn* developed. If the final syllable of all three items was originally undotted and non-nasal and then became nasal on arrival in Èdó *à la* (10b), they would acquire the dot by a general rule of acoustic enhancement, that undotted nasalised mid vowels are impossible. This holds across a wide *Sprachbund* west of the Niger, including all of “Edoid” except for three small delta lects (Adétúgbò 1967, 172, Àmayo 1976, 109, Oyèlá.ran 1970, 62f., Awóbùlúyí 1978, 141, Capo 1985, Elugbe 1986, 116).

	“Proto-Edoid” (Elugbe 1986)	Èdó (“Bin’”) (Melzian 1937, Wescott 1962a, 31)	Ùrhobo (Ukere 1986)
(10)a. ‘life-world’	*-N	àgbòn	àkpò
‘tooth’	*-N	àkòn	àkò
‘sunshine’	*-N	òvèn	ùvo
‘many’	*-N	-bun	-bu
‘spin (thread)’	*-N	-sin	-si
‘flow, crawl’	*-N	-sun	-su
‘full’	*-N	-v(u)òn	-vò
b. ‘newness’	*[no nasality reconstructed]	ógbòn	-kpò
‘palm(wine)’	*[no nasality reconstructed]	ùdín	ùdi
b’. ‘cut (grass)’	*[item not reconstructed by Elugbe]	-gbèn	-gbè
‘leopard’	*ɣ <sup>113</sup>	èkpèn	[necognates: è rha, èjele]

- (iv) The phonology in (iii) allows an Ìgbo-internal etymology of *Òminigbo*. If *igbo* is a meaningful constituent, it’s not the modern *Wá-zó-bì-án* exonym as defined in the post-Biafra second edition of Melzian’s Èdó dictionary: “a derogatory Èdó word for the Ìgbo-speaking people (not much in use any more with this meaning but as a general abusive term” (Aghèyisi 1986, 67). Instead it denotes the social collective as in fixed collocations: the aforementioned *ófe-ìgbo* ‘common edible oil’, the famous greeting *Ìgbo, kweé nù!* ‘The whole assembly should assent!’ and many personal names like *Òdè-n’igbo* ‘The news has spread to the people’ and *Ònwu-zúru-igbo* ‘Death is common to all’ (Ònwuejiógwù 1972, 40). In all these expressions *igbo* is synonymous to *òrà/òba(n)* (Williamson 1972, 429, Igwè 1999, 656). The other lexical pieces of *Òminigbo* could be *òmi* construed either animately as ‘one who delves/plunges’ or inanimately as ‘depth, mystery, secret, obscurity of sense’ plus *n(à)* the locative preposition e.g. as in *Òdè-n’igbo* (Igwè 1999, 123, 456, 573, 607f., Williamson 1972, 89, cf. 1984a, 173, 235). Joining these constituents together, the hypothetical compound *\*òmi-n’igbo* ought to signify either (animate) ‘someone who delves into the community’ or (inanimate) ‘concealed, general knowledge’.

<sup>108</sup> “Interview with Okohwake Igonuware of Arhavwarien on 10th and 11th August 1974” (Nabofa & Elugbe 1981, 15 fn 1). *Afa Nri* premises a similar two-sided communication between visible and invisible worlds of human existence (Ònwuejiógwù 1997, 103).

<sup>109</sup> Thanks to Prof. T. Ojaide for verifying the final undotted vowel of Ùrhobo *Òminigbo*, an essential data point.

<sup>110</sup> The initial dotted *ó*... in Ùrhobo and Ùkuàni *ófigbò* copies the *ó*... of [ófè], the Ònicha pronunciation of *ófe* ‘stew/soup’ (Williamson 1965, 68). The indigenous Èdó and Ùrhobo terms for palm oil are *èbù* and *èmvri* respectively (Melzian 1937, 56, Ukere 1986, 10).

<sup>111</sup> The voicing contrast in ‘life-world’ (10a) and ‘newness’ (10b) falls under a general diachronic rule *\*gb > kp* (Elugbe 1986, 105, 110). The root vowel correspondence in ‘sunshine’ (10a) is irregular.

<sup>112</sup> In *Òsósó* (Àkóko), *Ìgbo* and *ófigbò* have a dotted final vowel that’s not nasalised (E. Omolúàbí *p.c.*) but this fits the hypothesis that the nasality of Èdó *Ìgbon* was innovative, because nowhere in NWE (“Northwest Edoid” the cluster that includes Àkóko) does either item in (10b) show nasality, whereas three of the items in set (10a) are cited by Elugbe with a nasal in NWE: ‘tooth’, ‘sunshine’ and ‘full’.

<sup>113</sup> Elugbe’s \*-N for ‘leopard’ is equivocal. Ùrhobo has no cognate (Prof. E. Udjo, *p.c.*), Elugbe & Williamson reconstruct non-nasalised *\*èkpè* (1977, 356, no tone) and no nasality appears in any cognate east of the Niger (Williamson & Shimizu 1973, 222-25), unless the scope of reconstruction is arbitrarily stretched to include forms like Ekóí *ngbe* (Crabb 1965, 77). Across BK, the translated gloss of ‘leopard’—a feline species that’s totemically “good to think” *à la* Lévi-Strauss (1962, 128)—covers a plurality of items whose history is the more complex for its iconic attractiveness. Ìgbo *èkpè* LL, probably the closest to Èdó *èkpè* LL, denotes not the carnivore known in Ìgbo by the hypocoristic *ághí/ághu* lit. ‘the hungry one’ (Williamson 1972, 10, Igwè 1999, 20), but instead “a vigorous a type of dance requiring much energetic action and so restricted to able-bodied young men” (Igwè 1999, 155). Of wider distribution is Ìgbo *èkpè* HL, the leopard-dance initiation club (cf. Miller 2009) that spread west from the Cross River in modern times and which in Èfík is called *èkpè* HL without nasality but with a subphonemic final subdot. Dotted and undotted *e* are in near-complementary distribution in some Ìgbo dialects and in Èfík (Williamson 1966, Cook 1985, 270f.) and the difference is ignored in Èfík manuals as well as in the state of the art Ìbibio dictionary which has dotless “èkpè” (Goldie 1874, 74, Adams 1952, 188, Womers 1968, x, Urua & *al.* 2012, 98).

In sum, Nabofa & Elugbe inadvertently collected crucial evidence for the Ìgbo-speaking origin of the Ùrhobo oracle called *Èpba* or *Èmma*, as well as for its onward transmission to Èdó.<sup>114</sup>

An Ùrhobo oracle is prominently cited in the journal of a slavetrader’s late-17th century visit in the Èdó palace:<sup>115</sup>

To conclude this account of the religion in Benin, it is an inviolable law that no priest shall ever go out of the country under very high fines and even pain of death unless he has first obtained leave of the king; and they are more particularly obliged by that law not to go to Oedo [Èdó] the capital city of the kingdom, which seems very strange considering the great respect both king and subjects pay to their priests. The priest of Loebo [Ùrhobo], a town near the mouth of the river Ferosa [Formosa] or Benin river, is esteemed and very famous among them for his intimate familiarity with the devil and for being an eminent magician; whose prerogatives are such that he can at his will cause the sea either to advance or draw back and foretell the most remote events; in regard whereof the king has bestowed on him and his heirs forever all the lands of the territory of Loebo, with all the slaves that were therein; and from his name the town was called Loebo. This priest is counted in the rank of their chief sacrificers, and so dreaded by all the people, that none dares come near him, much less to touch his hand, the king’s envoys not excepted. (Barbot 1688-1732, 375)

The same relationship to the palace is referenced again in the late 19th century, in “folklore that most Ùrhobo diviners and musical artists (including Ogute Otan) seem to accept” (Prof. T. Ojaide *p.c.*), this time explicitly by name:

*Ominigbo* was the name of the diviner who foretold the sacking of Benin in 1897. ...[H]e... told the *Oba*... that “white army ants would swarm and take over Benin”... before noon of the following day. That noon came and there were no swarms of white ants or locusts around and the *Oba* ordered *Ominigbo* to be executed. As soon as the execution was done, the *Oba*’s men saw a column of British soldiers... After then, all the *Èpba* practitioners in order to memorialize *Ominigbo*’s name started their divination by invoking his name to have the courage to tell inconvenient truths!

A western Ìgbo etymology of *Òminigbòn*—maybe via Ùrhobo—makes Ìgbo sources less surprising for three more *Ìba* oracle terms (immediately below) plus nine other items of Èdó vocabulary, seven of which are specific to ritual (§2.5).

### Secondary familiar-name, two more oracle terms

Egharhevba gives the full name of the *Ìba* familiar (culture-hero) as “*Ominigbòn* (Ogbèide)” (1936a, 3, no tones). The parenthesised material has no Yorùbá parse but with the allegro pattern LHLL is a “normal” Èdó personal name meaning *ògbè* LL ‘family house can’t fall’ i.e. fail (G. Edebiri *p.c.* citing Bello Osagie 2017, cf. Melzian 1937, 138, M. Ìghílè *p.c.*).<sup>116</sup> The puzzle of how an alleged immigrant got an indigenous Èdó appellation may explain why a bicultural Èdó-Yorùbá recension of *Ifá* would strain to identify Ogbèide as *Ominigbòn*’s “eldest son” (Ìbié 1993, 6) even though Egharhevba gives no hint that two distinct individuals are involved. Provisionally, I suggest that Ogbèide, a *hapax* (unique token) in Egharhevba’s text, is the phonetic parse into Èdó of a non-Èdó loan for which a plausible Ìgbo etymology is at hand.

In the context of an activity, the Ìgbo predicate root *-gbú* means “to do [something] with forceful movement of the hand” (Ìgwè 1999, 583) and nominalizes in synthetic compounds *ò-gbú x* ‘cutter/killer of x’ (11a) and in a static situation, a homophonous intransitive *ò-gbú x* means ‘middle/depth of x’ (11b).<sup>117</sup> The same two complementary senses recur in an open list of expressions where suffixal *-gbú* adds the adverbial meaning ‘to perfection’ to an active, transitive root (12a) and conveys the related notion ‘utterly’ in construction with a pseudoreflexive phrase (12b). Although syntactically distinct, all four types share a common semantic component: the superlative culmination of a graded property, whether resultant outcome or inherent attribute (Williamson 1972, 363, Éménanjo 1984, Ìgwè 1999, 209, 277, 376, 583).<sup>118</sup>

- |        |  |   |
|--------|--|---|
| (11)a. | <i>ò-gbú èdè</i><br><i>ò-gbú èfì</i>                 | ‘planter of <i>èdè</i> [cocoyam]’<br>‘cow-slaughterer→chief’  |
| b.     | <i>ò-gbú mírì</i><br><i>ò-gbú ńrú</i>                | ‘depth of water→deep water’<br>‘depth of sleep→deep sleep’  |
| (12)a. | <i>-gǔwé-gbú</i><br><i>-rè-gbú</i><br><i>-sì-gbú</i> | ‘grind-kill→grind perfectly or to a powder’<br>‘eat-kill→chew perfectly or into pulp; eat someone into poverty’<br>‘boil-kill→cook perfectly or overcook’ |
| b.     | <i>-jò-gbú ònwé yá</i><br><i>-má-gbú ònwé yá</i>     | ‘ugly-kill self→be utterly ugly’<br>‘beautiful-kill self→be utterly beautiful’  |

Phonetically, an Ìgbo sequence of voiced bilabial implosive [ɓ] (spelled *gb*) plus *u* before front vowel can undergo ‘coalescent’ (nonlinear) assimilation (Éménanjo 1978, 24f), perceivable in Èdó as labiovelar plosive [gɓ] plus front vowel consistent with Egharhevba’s “...gbè...”. As for the final two syllables that Egharhevba rendered ...*ide* LL, a close match is *ìlè/ìrè* LL ‘effectiveness [of a medicine or sacrifice], fulfilment [of a prediction or agreement]’ based on the root *-lè/-rè* ‘efficacious, fulfilled’ (Williamson 1972, 179, 253f, Ìgwè 1999, 259, 723).<sup>119</sup> For the Ìgbo tapped [ɾ] or [ɽ], the Èdó alveolar stop *d* is at least as plausible a loan treatment as any other of modern Èdó’s many lenis (lightly articulated)

- 114 A piece of anecdotal evidence of Ùrhobo contact with *Ñmù dibiè* the western Ìgbo oracle guild is the greeting *Mì sia aguare!* ‘I salute the assembly’ used in a ceremony of *égedì dibiè* ‘ecstatic oracular dance’ in honor of *Odù* Ègwabò Idúuwe at the Agbò royal lineage Ògbe Ñmù Dèin (recorded 9 January 1982). I had no idea that this expression was Ùrhobo until so informed by Prof. P. Ekeh (*p.c.*).
- 115 The text appeared posthumously in a “composite” form with “derivative” contemporary material (Law 1982, 156, 165). Identification of Barbot’s “Loebo” and “Oedo” as Ùrhobo and Èdó respectively is confirmed by geographical details in several passages.
- 116 This LHLL contour of *Ògbèide* has phonetic and syntactic parallels (Wescott 1962a, 61, 65, 1963, 88, 92, cf. Melzian 1937, 8).

- (i) *àlẹ̀fẹ̀* LH<sup>1</sup>H ‘an escape’ < *àlẹ̀fẹ̀* LLHLH where the final downstep alias “flat tone” merges with L in allegro speech;
- (ii) *òsa-t-kpèé* ‘wood-dove’ lit. ‘God-can’t-sing [more sweetly]’.

- 117 The semantic typeshift of ‘qualificative noun’→attributive modifier is generally available in Ìgbo, e.g. *ágadi nwaanyi* ‘advanced age of a woman’→‘old woman’ (Éménanjo 1978, 47f.; Mádùkà-Duruńze 1990; Ìgwè 1999, 17). The genitive case of ‘sleep’ in ‘deep sleep’ is shown by downstep [ɿ] on the final syllable of *ògbú ńrú* LH<sup>1</sup>H<sup>1</sup>H versus the penult of *ò-gbú èfì* LH<sup>1</sup>H<sup>1</sup>H ‘chief’.

- 118 E.g., superlative *-gbú* collocates with the adjectival root *-sọ* ‘sweet/tasty’ in a western Ìgbo *Trinklied* reprised in 1984 by XY chiefsis Clement Oghèné and Obrám Esédáfé of the Palmwine Drinkers Club: [@1'38"-2'32"](http://manfredi.mayfirst.org/gyratlon19841mabigbe.moi).

*Mánya, manya nkwú ó, manya* Wine, wine of oilpalm indeed, wine  
*Ó sọ-gbú-sọ!* Supersweet! [←It sweet-kill-sweet!]

- 119 *-rè* occurs in Ágbò with the same meaning (Elugbe 1969; Manfredi 1991, 32; 1992, 110f.).

voiced coronals, laterals and rhotics (Wescott 1962a, 23f.; Ámayo 1976, 87; Elugbe 1986, 78). Thus Ìgbo \*ò-ghú ìle/ìre LHL is a plausible guess for the auditory target of Egharhevba's hypothetical Èdó-spelling translation as Òghéìde LHL.

On the semantic-pragmatic side, a synthetic compound of òghú plus ìle/ìre would predictably denote either (i) a person 'who effectively or curatively throws [the oracle apparatus]' or 'whose [oracular predictions and sacrificial requests] are precisely fulfilled' or else (ii) a medicinal instrument or oracular prediction 'achieving utmost efficacy'. Gloss (i) would be appropriate praise for a *dùbà áfá* and gloss (ii) for his proprietary tools and pharmacological or verbal formulas.

Tone apart, an expression phonetically similar to \*ò-ghú ìle/ìre LHL is heard in the documentary film *Mummy Water* (Jell-Bahlsen 1989), namely Òghúìde LHH!H or Òghúìde LH!HH, a ritual epithet of the lake spirit Ùhámímiri, mythic patron of Úgwuntà ["Oguta"], an Ìgbo-speaking port in the òru floodplain of the lower Niger valley. Like any proper name, it's not necessarily transparent to the user. "According to consultants, the name *Oghuide* originates from Benin" (Jell-Bahlsen 1998, 102 *fn* 17) but such attributions are ambiguous because the Ìgbo predicate -s(b)í, usually translated in English as 'come from [place]', can also refer to a detour not the original departure point (Williamson 1972, 466; Ígwè 1999, 744f., cf. Manfredi 1991, 252). Loose claims of Èdó 'origin' proliferate in the Niger Delta as metaphors for cultural allegiance, just as many southwest 9ja towns present themselves as Ifè 'migrants' (Òbáyémí 1976, 200). The Úgwuntà palace has a distinctive Èdó-style organigram reflecting political and economic ties to the Èdó kingdom, for which the idiom of wholesale migration is a condensed poetic slogan (Nzímíro 1972). Ìgbo 'floodwater' is given variously as *ídè* HL, *ídèi* HLL and *ídèé* HH!H (Williamson 1972, 170; 1984; Ígwè 1999, 243) so by attribute typeshift (11b) a phrase pronounced roughly \*òghú ìde/òghú ìde could mean 'depth of flood→deep flood', a description that fits Úgwuntà lake, or alternatively on the model of synthetic compounds as (11a), 'one who kills with inundation', a fitting apotropaic tag for a water goddess.<sup>120</sup> In sum, while it can't be excluded that the founding bronzecaster of Èdó was a priest of the Úgwuntà lake goddess, criteria of semantic as well as tonal similarity independently favor Ìgbo \*ò-ghú ìle/ìre as the hypothetical basis of the parenthesised *hapax* in Egharhevba's cryptic citation "Ominigbõn (Ogbèide)" identifying this legendary individual.

Another polysyllabic Èdó expression of *Ìba Òminigbõn* is ògwéèga. This doesn't analyze into meaningful components in Èdó—nor in Yorùbá—but it has two physical referents: (i) the tree species *Detarium senegalense* or *hendelotiana* and (ii) the oracle strings, each of which links four half-pericarps of that tree (Melzian 1937, 137, Èhigiamusoe 2013, 189f., *pace* the garbled tones of Aghèyisi 1986, 105). The same ambiguity between tree and binary artefact holds for Ìgbo òkwe which denotes *Ricinodendron africanum* and the *Afa* oracle's 4-bit half-pericarp string (Williamson 1972, 373f.; Èzikéojiakú 1984, 38; 1987, 64; 2000, 72; Ígwè 1999, 601) and also the Ùrhobo counterpart *agbragha* (Nabofa & Elugbe 1981, 7, no tones). This botanical-ritual parallelism further suggests a hypothetical Western Ìgbo phrase \*òkwe èja literally 'òkwe seeds for èja (ritual sacrifice)' (cf. Williamson 1972, 17; Ígwè 1999, 32; Èzikéojiakú 1984, 57f.).<sup>121</sup> The required loan path of Ìgbo \*òkwe èja > Èdó ògwéèga is phonetically straightforward: the tone match is exact and the shift Ìgbo -j- > Èdó -g- is plausible because Èdó lacks affricated -j- and has palatal stops as positional variants of velars (Wescott 1962a, 46).<sup>122</sup>

Whatever its immediate antecedents, Èdó ògwéèga eventually became *gumagan*, *agumega*, *agúmagàn* and *àgúмага*—local Gbè names for the oracle strings (Maupoil 1943a, 197, Surgy 1981a, 49, Segurolo & Rassinoux 2000, 27, Hamberger 2011, 603). The tonal match to these is either exact or trivially different for Gbè-internal reasons, and the shift of the initial vowel is regular, cf. *Áyó* < *Òyó*. Across Gbè, this Èdó-derived name for the oracle processor exists alongside the (À)nàgó name *kpèlè* < Yorùbá *òpèlè* denoting the seedpods of *Schreberia arborea* (Gbile 1984, 53, 93, Keay 1989, 403f., Verger 1995, 599, [701 bad typo], 1997, 602, [694 bad typo] and Awóyalé 2008). This duplication of ritual nomenclature shows that the oracle reached Gbè in parallel transmission streams, Èdó and Yorùbá, respectively by coast and inland routes.<sup>123</sup> In Gbè, the oracle chain connects seeds of either the *àsló* 'bush mango, *Irvingia gabonensis*' or *avini* tree species (Trautmann 1939, 20f., Maupoil 1943a, 198 *fn* 2, citing Bertho 1936, 370, Segurolo & Rassinoux 2000, 72, 80, Höftmann & Ahohunkpanzon, 2003, 102), the latter name probably < Yorùbá *àwín*=*ìwín* 'black tamarind, *Dialium guineense*' (Abraham 1958, 79, 329, 725, Keay 1989, 204f., Èhigiamusoe 2013, 191). *Irvingia gabonensis* also supplies an alternative binary material for the *Afa* chain, both of which are known in Ìgbo as *úgílí* (Ògbàlú 1970, 58f., Williamson 1972, 514).

One more translatable technical expression of Èdó *Ìba*—shared with Ùrhobo *Èpha/Èrwa*—is *n'áabe*. This is applied by Èdó and Ùrhobo oracles to any identical pair of 4-bit arrays: "If both positions are the same, their name is followed by *n'áabe* 'combined'..." (Melzian 1937, xviii, 137, cf. Egharhevba 1936b, 8, Nabofa & Elugbe 1981, 9). Melzian's English gloss has no linguistic basis in either Èdó, Ùrhobo or Yorùbá, but in Ìgbo it closely matches *n'áabo* (= *n'áabe* in some dialects), the ordinary adnominal modifier 'double' (Williamson 1972, 190, 359; Ígwè 1999, 456). Ìgbo *n'áabo* has exactly the same specialized use in *Afa*, as *n'áabe* does in *Ìba* and *Èpha/Èrwa*, namely to mark bilateral symmetry in a thrown pair of 4-bit chains (Ònwuejiógwù 1997, 52; Èzikéojiakú 2000, 73, Appendix 3.1 below).<sup>124</sup> This etymology was identified by Èzikéojiakú who writes "*n'áabo* (or *n'áabe* in Edo)" (2000, 73, no diacritics) and a generation earlier was spotted in the Ígálá version of *Ifá* by Boston who wrote in passing about ♦♦♦♦/♦♦♦♦ "*Èka nabo... nabo* is the Ìgbo term for twice" (1974, 354, no tones). Nabofa & Elugbe missed the boat in Ùrhobo through several stumbles: (i) oversegmenting "nabe" (*n'áabe*) as "abe", (ii) arbitrarily limiting the cognate search in Ìgbo to cardinal "2", which is also cognate but less obviously so, especially because among its many variant forms they landed arbitrarily on "abua" (no tones) and (iii) jumping from the correct but trivial point that oracle jargon "can hardly be called a language" to the hasty conclusion that it necessarily "was made up"—independently invented—by speakers of Ùrhobo, ignoring the more interesting possibility that a nonlinguistic code can perfectly well be borrowed from "a neighboring tribe" (1981, 12f.).

120 If Ùhámímiri's other canonical epithet "Ogbuama" means 'brilliantly sparkling one' then its tone would be *òghú àma* [LH LL] and its meaning 'depth/epitome of brilliance' would follow the stative rule in (12b) above (cf. Williamson 1972, 154, 268; Ígwè 1999, 385).

121 In a non-western Ìgbo dialect, the regular phonetic counterpart of this phrase would be \*òkwe àja.

122 Èdó -gi- corresponds to Èsán -j-, e.g. Èdó *ògíe* = Èsán *òje* 'chief' (Elugbe 1986, 174f.), and borrowed into Ìgbo, Èdó -gi- becomes -j-, e.g. Èdó *Èsígíe* > Ìgbo "*Asíjé*" (Nzímíro 1962, 52). By contrast, Yorùbá -j- becomes Èdó -ɟ- not -g-, e.g. *Ìyè bú* > *Uzèbú*, *Òjó* > *Ozò* (Melzian 1937, xi, 214; Wescott 1962a, 90).

123 The modern title *Akplogán* alias "Aplogan... head of religious affairs" (Law 1999, 77) in "Ouidah/Whydah/Hueda" and nearby Gbè kingdoms may parse as *akp(è)lè* 'oracle chain' plus *ògán* 'protecteur de secte' (Segurolo & Rassinoux 2000, 52, Rouget 2001, 97, cf. Akoha 2010, 264, Manfredi 2013b) literally 'custodian/patron of oracle paraphernalia'. Yorùbá *òpèlè* may have an Èdó etymology, given that its alternate form *òpéperé* (Dennett 1906, 250) "recognized in Ifè but not in Mèkò" (Bascom 1969, 29) phonetically resembles *apèpè*, an item cited by Melzian as the Yorùbá version of Èdó *ákbuè kbué* "a tree, the fruits of which are used in *Òrònmíla* divination" (1937, 15). *Ákbuè kbué* is *Detarium microcarpum*, a species whose nomenclature overlaps with *Detarium senegalense* as Èdó calls both *ùkèbùhè òhó* (Èhigiamusoe 2013, 188f.). The proposed direction of borrowing *ákbuè kbué* > *apèpè* is supported by the greater likelihood of Yorùbá despirantising [x] (spelled *kb* in Èdó) > [kɸ] (spelled *p* in Yorùbá) than the reverse. Èdó has no reason to spirantise borrowed *kp* since it has this plosive natively. Aghèyisi's abridged reprint of Melzian changes *ákbuè kbué* to *ákbuè* with the gloss of "marble" (1986, 6) but Nigerian English *marbles* denotes the tree seeds used in the *áyò* counting game (Melzian 1937, 15).

124 Other northern Ìgbo cases of backness harmony are *Kèdú* 'How is [it]?' versus *Kèdú* and *Ò dù òmá* 'It's fine!' versus *Ò dù òmá*.

To find Ìgbo etymologies for four *Ìba*-specific expressions—two proper names and two technical terms of the oracle, all of which are morphologically opaque in either Èdó or Yorùbá—would be bizarre unless the rest of the oracle had been borrowed at the same time, either directly from western Ìgbo or at second-hand via Ùrhobo which as noted above is independently described as a geographic mediator of the oracle. This could still be squared with Egharhevba’s text under the most charitable interpretation of the latter, retreating from Yorùbá purism to Blier’s less falsifiable assumption that the legendary persons *Òminìgbòn* and *Òrónmìlá* were Ìgbo-speaking residents of/itinerants transiting via *Úbè* (Ifè). However, such special pleading to save Egharhevba’s published words is pointless (i) in light of the textual criticism reviewed above that he sought *Wá-zó-bián* prestige by tethering Èdó to Ifè ideologically, and (ii) because more Ìgbo loans occur across a wider spectrum of Èdó cultural domains than can be explained by invoking *migratōres ex machinā*.

## 2.5 Nine Ìgbonisms beyond the oracle

Ìgboisms in Èdó—let’s call them *Ìgbonisms* for short—are not limited to the oracle. Seven more are of wider ritual use, two occur in general Èdó vocabulary and two more (§2.9) analyze proper names of Èdó *cire perdue* reported authorship.

“The Bini have now eight days in their week but the part of jujuism [sic]... has preserved the more ancient form of four days” (Dennett 1906, 215) “representing the four quarters of the earth” (Egharhevba 1953, 98). All four ritual day names are cognate to the ordinary days of the Ìgbo market week (13a). The plain Èdó term for ‘dog’ has an Ìgbo cognate with a plausible Ìgbo etymology (13b). For both sets, the direction of borrowing is proved by the fact that the *nC* sequences in Ìgbo *ńkwo* and *ńkítá*, being unpronounceable in Èdó, are minimally repaired as *o-* and *e-* in “*okwo*” and *ékítá* respectively, whereas if the latter had been adopted *into* Ìgbo they could have kept their initial vowels unmodified.

	Èdó (Dennett 1906, 215, Melzian 1937, 33, 34, 48) (Egharhevba 1946, 81, 1953, 98, 1968, 82, no tones)	Ìgbo (Williamson 1972, 9, 108f., 312, 314, 390) (Igwè 1999, 15, 154, 487, 496, 615)
(13)a. ‘day of rest’	èdè èkén (also ‘east’)	èkén/èk(h)é
‘[2nd weekday]’	èdè “orie” (also ‘west’)	óriè/óyè
‘[3rd weekday]’	èdè “abò” (also ‘south’)	áfò/àbò
‘[4th weekday]’	èdè “okwo” (also ‘north’)	ńkwo
b. ‘dog’	ékítá	ńkítá <? ‘instrument of chasing game’ <sup>125</sup>

Another example is *ùkburhè*. This Èdó patrilineal ancestral staff is carved from the tree *ùkburhè òbó* (*Detarium senegalense* or *microcarpum*) alias *ákbuèkbué*, the same species as the Ìgbo counterpart *òfó* whose segmented “branchlets... are often clustered at the end of short gnarled bosses and fall off entire” (Keay 1989, 206, cf. Dalziel 1937, 188, Meek 1937, 63, Ilogu 1964, 234, Vogel 1979, Williamson 1983, 274, Ben-Amos 2007, 153, 410, Gore 2007b, 133f., Aka[h] & al. 2012, Ehigiamusoe 2013, 188-90, Ekhosuèhi 2014).<sup>126</sup> *Òfó* and *ùkburhè* stems share a communicative ritual use. In Èdó: “During prayers they are knocked on the ground in order to confirm the words” (Melzian 1937, 213). In Ìgbo:

*Ìsù ofó* is the ritual of knocking the sacred stick on the ground (*àlá*) to activate the powers of *òfó* and *àlá*...  
[T]he knocking of the sacred stick on the ground evokes all kinds of connotations. There is the belief in the potency of the sacred stick itself because of the immanence in it of supernatural powers. There is also the belief in the potency of the earth, the source of life and the abode of the ancestors... (Uwaláka 1996, 14 *fn* 1, 21)

In Ígàlá and in Ìjèbú Yorùbá, the “*ok(w)utè*” statue is “made of the same kind of wood and patterned in the same way” (Ògúnbà 1964, 251, Boston 1964, 18, 23, 1968, 196, cf. Obáyemí 1976, 221, no tones).<sup>127</sup> In Ònìcha (“Onitsha”) two reigns after *Èzè Chíma* (§2.3 above), an Ígàlá prince introduced “*òrà òkwnute*, a secret inner council of the incarnate dead” (Henderson 1972, 88, cf. Williamson 1972, 372). *Òkwnute* figures haven’t been reported in Ònìcha (Prof. R. Henderson *p.c.*) so it’s unlikely that Èdó *ùkburhè* owes its name to Ìgbo, but Ìgbo *òfó* is the only available source of Èdó *òbó*. The sound shift Ìgbo *f* > Èdó *h* is paralleled in *Áfá* > *Iba* and in *òfú* > *òhún* “◆◆◆” (modulo 180° rotation, §2.3 above).<sup>128</sup>

*Ìk(h)éng(h)a*, an icon representing the human right hand/forearm/dexterity/agency, stands on the *iru òmmùò* ‘ancestral altar’ in the *òbí* ‘ancestral dwelling-temple’ of an Ìgbo patrilineal compound (Basden 1921, 219f.; Jeffreys 1954; Cole & Ànjákò 1984, 24-34). Carved from soft or hard wood, it depicts a seated titled man or the abstract cylinder of a chiefly stool—both types topped with horns evoking “the stubbornness of a ram” (Ònwùejìògwù 1975, 92) or more simply “a distinction of gender” (Boston 1977, 110).<sup>129</sup> Similar icons of similar significance are carved in Ígàlá, Èsán [“Ishan”], Ùrhobo and Èdó (Vogel 1974; Lorenz 1987; Foss 2004).<sup>130</sup> The Èdó version, called *ìkèèga obó*, also has a deluxe edition of the cylindrical type cast in copper alloy, replacing the integral ram’s horn with a superposed ivory tusk (Bradbury 1961).

Bradbury was noncommittal about the crosscultural path of *ìkèèga obó* (1961, 138 *fn.* 14), but a viable Ìgbo etymology exists. Southern Ìgbo has *ìk(h)éng(h)a* with two aspirated consonants (Igwè 1999, 252). Aspiration (here spelled *h*, cf. §0.4) is an old Ìgbo feature (Ladefoged & al. 1976; Williamson 2000) absent in adjacent languages, and no example exists of Ìgbo adding aspiration to a non-Ìgbo loan. The aspiration of *-ng(h)a* rules out folk etymologies like “the strength with which I advance” (Òdítá 1973, 79) and “my strength must go ahead” (Ònwùejìògwù 1975, 93f.) because the root *-gá* ‘go’ is not aspirated in any Ìgbo dialect but the root *-g(h)à* ‘scratch, claw’ (Williamson 1972, 125; Igwè 1999, 185) can connote tenacity. Similarly the initial L tone of *ì-k(h)éng(h)a* excludes the noun *ìk(h)e* [HH] ‘strength’ but allows a gerundive *ì-*

<sup>125</sup> Clark (1989, 245), cf. *-chú* ‘chase’, *ńta/ńtá* ‘hunting’ (Williamson 1972, 83f., 328, Igwè 1999, 116, 528). Èdó final downstep is ‘total’ (L).

<sup>126</sup> Ehigiamusoe notes that “the main species *D. senegalense* or *hendetoliana* and *D. microcarpum* bear the same native names in many communities, however the Benins have two distinguishing terms *òguèèga* and *ákbuèkbué* for the two main groups” (2013, 190). He nonetheless connects *ùkburhè òbó* to both species (2013, 188f.).

<sup>127</sup> A widely recognized Yorùbá name for the tree itself, as opposed to the ritual artefact, is *ògbògbò* (Verger 1997, 597).

<sup>128</sup> As with *Òminìgbò*, indirect transmission of *òbó* from Ìgbo to Èdó via southeast “Èdoid” can’t be excluded. In Ísóko the ritual counterpart is *òwò* (Peek 1980, 63) and the same voicing occurs in the Ùrhobo oracle name which can be pronounced *Ènma* as well as *Èpba* (Prof. T. Ojaide *p.c.*). “Many words associated with Ísóko religious belief and practice have Ìgbo cognates” (Peek 1976, 34).

<sup>129</sup> Every *[dìbìá áfá]* has carved images of *ágwù*, its household and pets, and sacrifices are made on these images to persuade and activate *ágwù*. For example, Ezumézú (Plate 1 = [people.bu.edu/manfredi/Ezumezu.jpg](http://people.bu.edu/manfredi/Ezumezu.jpg)) is a wooden figure in which all images of *ágwù*’s household, pets and cult are carved on one piece of wood. (Ònwùejìògwù 1997, 13)

In 1985, cement representations of *ìkèèga* and *òfó* were erected in crossroads of the Ímò State capital Òweré [“Owerri”] by *Brigadier* Íke Nwáchukwu (Ejizú 1991, 250), then demolished by the military administrator, Pentacostal Colonel Tanko Zubairu (Ilozùè 1999).

<sup>130</sup> In constructing his ideal type of “the art style of Owo” (i.e. the town of Òghò)—Fagg strangely managed to overlook the many published Ìgbo and Ígàlá examples of “a human head... provided with the horns of a ram” (1951, 75).

prefix nominalizing *-k(h)é* ‘be hard/strong/difficult’ (Ígwè 1999, 305), parallel to *Ì-jé-ìè*, the monumental mask of the Òmám̄bala [“Anambra”] valley that ‘walks (*-jé*) proudly about (*ìè*)’, or else to a syncopated version of the reduplicated gerund *ì-khí-khè* ‘strength’ (Ígwè 1999, 252). Thus *ìk(h)éng(h)a* means ‘the one that claws forcefully’, not very different from the attested gloss “strength... to succeed” (Jeffreys 1954, 30 quoting Ègbúniwe of Ònicha [“Onitsha”]).

As for Èdó *ìkèèga*, Èdó vocalization of Ìgbo *nC* was already discussed for (13) above. Semantically, Èdó *ìkèèga* is ambiguous between a primary meaning ‘wrist’ and secondary reference to “an anklet [*sc.* bracelet] of cowries which is worshipped as *Òbó* ‘hand, arm’” (Melzian 1937, 90). Banal loanword opacity of *ìkèèga* in Èdó motivates pleonastic *ìkèèga obó*, literally, ‘right hand/arm of the hand/arm’, to specify the Èdó icon—compare the redundancy of *shrimp scampi*, etymologically ‘shrimp shrimp’, on the bicultural-but-not-bilingual menus of red-sauce Italoamerican restaurants. In Èdó, ‘wrist’ is *ùrbú abó* < *ùrbu* ‘neck’ plus an irregular form of *òbó* ‘arm/hand’ (Melzian 1938, 133, 209).

Two more. Melzian compares Èdó *úku* “a praise-name of the *Óba*” to the Ìgbo adjective *úk(w)u* ‘large, great’ (Williamson 1972, 517, Ígwè 1999, 783) and this works because the full epithet is *úku à-kpòlò-kpólò* where the second part independently means ‘very big’ in Èdó (1937, 118, 203), thus it’s another bicultural *shrimp scampi* pleonasm. Èdó *èbulúkù* ‘loincloth’ (Melzian 1937, *xvii*) has an analytic Ìgbo etymon *m-be n’úk(w)ù* ‘native underwear’ *lit.* ‘item set upon the waist’ (Williamson 1972, 65, 270 *illus.*, 518), again with regular *nC* repair, cf. Úrhobo *ibunúkù* ‘skirt’ (Ukere 1986, 18).

## 2.6 Facial recognition test: Èṣù or Vòdún?

Ambient *Wá-zó-bìán* ‘noise’ in modern scholarship signal threatens to drown out not only the philology of the oracle but also the archaeology of ritual icons, to which specialists in the field of ‘art history’ assign historically improbable and incoherent identities, the better to package them for booming modern markets of ethnic capital.

For example, in the mid-17th century, a carved wooden tray was brought from the Gùn-gbè speaking town of Àlàdà (Capo 1991, 14) to the Suabian-German town of Ulm by Christoph Weickmann, a successful slavetrader:



[rossarchive.library.yale.edu/web/site/index.php?globalnav=image\\_detail&image\\_id=7667](http://rossarchive.library.yale.edu/web/site/index.php?globalnav=image_detail&image_id=7667)

Weickmann’s collection catalog—the *Exoticophylacium*, printed in 1659—describes this artefact as follows.



[reader.digitale-sammlungen.de/de/fs1/object/display/bsb10075653\\_00046.html?numScans=2&zoom=0.5](http://reader.digitale-sammlungen.de/de/fs1/object/display/bsb10075653_00046.html?numScans=2&zoom=0.5)

*Ein Opfer-Brett von erhabenen und wunderseltsamen und abscheulichen Teufels-Bildern geschnitten welches der König zu Haarder, so des größten Königs von Bennin Vasall ist, samt dessen größten Offizieren und Naturen derselbigen Provinz, den ihrer Götter Opfer oder Fetisse zu gebrauchen und ihnen darauf zu opfern pflegen und ist dieses Opfer-Brett von dem jetzt-regierenden König zu Haarder selbst infelirt und von ihm gebraucht worden.*

A sacrificial board carved in relief with wondrously strange and abominable devilish images which the king of Haarder [Àlàdà], who is a vassal of the Great King of Bennin, together with his most senior officers and natives of the same province, are accustomed to use in sacrifices to their gods or Fetish, and upon which they make offerings to them. This sacrificial board has been invested [i.e. commissioned] by the currently reigning King of Haarder himself and employed by him. (translation by Jones 1994 36, cf Vansina 1984, 3)<sup>131</sup>

Luschan likens this “sacrificial board” to some *opón Ifá* that Carl Arriens sketched for Frobenius (1912, 249), but adds a sensational comment in a different vein: that “a drilled drain, opening directly opposite the head carved above it, leads out from the middle round depression on which one can just imagine, neatly placed, a severed head” (1919, 493).<sup>132</sup>

Bassani repeats the reflexive *Ifá* label but has the candor to list several “anomalous” features that “contradict or at least are not congruent with what’s now known about the use of similar trays in the divinatory practice of the *Ifá* oracle” (1983, 585).<sup>133</sup> The face atop the tray may broadly resemble the Èṣù carved on many modern *opón Ifá*, but all of Bassani’s other stylistic comparisons are directed elsewhere: to Ajá-gbè wooden *venàvì* ‘mother of twins’ statuettes of the “Mono” River valley (citing for these, Merlo 1975).

Joining the *Ifá Gruppendenken*, Jones begs belief to suggest that “a number of small dents on the surface” of the central area—visible in Luschan’s photo above—were produced “presumably from the repeated throwing of palm nuts” but then immediately backtracks: “... (or perhaps something heavier)” (1994, 36). Straining to reconcile the *Ifá* theory with Bassani’s qualms and Luschan’s lurid allusion, Jones gestures towards “another cult” (1994, 36, 93 *fn* 21), obliquely referencing rites of “veneration of deceased members of the lineage” as enacted in 17th century Àlàdà by “the removal and reburial of heads” (Law 1991, 107 cf. 1989, 411, Herissé 1911, 161, Akindélé & Ageṣin 1953, 108-10, 171 *plate* I-B).

Most of the tray’s variegated motifs—including birds, brooms, swords, pipes and pangolins—are widespread in Westafrican lore, but not every image is indifferent to locale. A design resembling four 4-bit oracle strings, one pair flanking each side of the “drilled” channel drain, more plausibly represents the four strings that are thrown, two pairs per cycle, in *Ìba*, *Èpha/Èywa*, *Afa* and kindred oracles further north, than an *òpèlè Ifá* which comprises just one doubled 4-bit string that’s anyhow less used with an *opón* (Bascom 1969, 9, cf. §1.3.3 above, §3.1 below). Either the quadruple 4-bit figure on the Àlàdà tray doesn’t signify a binary processor of any kind, or else the tray’s conventional attribution to *Ifá* should give way to some oracle localization that uses four 4-bit strings, consistent with the pattern actually inscribed.

Entertaining zero doubts, Drewal sees simply an “*opón Ifá*... divination tray” (1987, 145*f.*, cf. Drewal & al. 1989, 21). With clairvoyance worthy of a *babaláwo*, he decodes the triplicate horn shape in the right circular band as *iróké* “tapper rattles... used to invoke the presence of Òrúnmilà... that is voiced three times” and further illustrates “the prominence of three in the Àlàdà piece” by registering that “[t]hree medicine gourds crown the brow” of the central face, as if to prove a hunch that “[n]umbers may also be significant in *Ifá* divination tray iconography” (1987, 146, 148). Holy trinities aside however, and even sticking to southern Nigeria, it’s parochial to pretend that *Ifá* owns a patent on cardinal three. For example, threefold ritual packets tied around a forehead are found in two major, nearby non-Yorùbá traditions:

Numerous *ikéngá*, both the warrior and titled person’s types, as well as some masks, have a row of pointed projections flanking the head, usually three or another odd number on each side. *Ikéngá* in the southern Ígbo area have three knobs on a horizontal bar. The number three is associated with males throughout West Africa. In Benin [i.e. Èdó], the king has three hidden tufts of hair as protective charms, and doctors wear amulets that resemble these projections during public appearances (Paula Ben-Amos *p.c.* 1987). Alternatively, these projections may stand for *húnú/ húnun*, cone-shaped pieces of chalk used in rituals. (Bentor 1988, 71, cf. Williamson 1972, 334, Ígwè 1999, 545)

“Arranged around the border are a myriad of images”—Drewal continues—but “[n]o narrative unifies these diverse depictions” because the forms have “approximately equal visual importance” (1987, 146). The reader may well wonder which artefact Drewal is looking at when he describes “an explicit orientation and emphasis on four directions, the four quadrants between these and the center of the tray” and judges that the “compositional mode documents the autonomy of individual motifs” (1987, 146*f.*). Such is plainly true for modern examples of *opón Ifá* (e.g. Maupoil 1943a, 192*f.*, Abíódún 1975, 439) but not in this particular object, whose meandering *bande dessinée* seems to repeat several individuals in dynamic postures as if serially progressing through a dramatic folktale, proverb or commemorative text. If these bas-reliefs have any analogue in coeval carvings of the region it’s the Èdó ivories, commissioned when—as Weickmann records—Àlàdà participated in the Èdó kingdom’s human trafficking network on the Atlantic coast (Curnow 1983, 177, cf. Eisenhofer 1993, Lovejoy & Òjó 2015). Not until circa 1698 did Àlàdà fall into the Òyó political sphere (Akinjógbin 1971, 313 citing Bosman 1705, 397, cf. Maupoil 1943a, 46), by which time this sculpture was gathering Bavarian dust.

In sum, a list of observations—some unintentionally made by Drewal himself—count against Luschan’s first-glance assignment of this 17th century Àlàdà tray to a 20th century Yorùbá type. Robotic recycling of the anachronistic Yorùbá tag can’t enhance the object’s resemblance to actual *opón Ifá* beyond a basic slab of wood, worked to a smooth surface—never mind that this tray uniquely has three of them—ringed by a wide figurative border and surveilled by a central face. More numerous and more specific are the discrepancies from *opón Ifá*—the drain channel, above all—not to mention the problem that this item left Àlàdà four decades before Òyó (Yorùbá) hegemony arrived there.

Scholars try to classify isolated antiques, and ethnic consciousness seeks familiarity at any price, but free extrapolation of present models backwards in time brings diminishing returns. This dilemma is avoidable, however. In paleontology, a single token can properly define a novel taxon, and archaeologists do accept the ambiguity of mute “images... in need of confirmatory evidence” (Adépégba 1989c, 16).<sup>134</sup> The greater mystery is how art critics could simultaneously fixate on

<sup>131</sup> Thanks to M. Kone of [www.orishaimage.com](http://www.orishaimage.com) and [susannewengerfoundation.at](http://susannewengerfoundation.at) for discussions of the image and its catalog text.

<sup>132</sup> ... von der runden Vertiefung in der Mitte, in die man sich ganz gut etwa einen abgeschnittenen Kopf gelegt denken kann, führt unten, dem oben geschnitzten Kopfe gerade gegenüber, ein Bohrloch nach außen. (Luschan 1919, 493)

<sup>133</sup> Excerpting this original text from the cited page:

Questa soluzione spaziale è anomala... Posso però rivelare che l’informazione contenuta nel catalogo seicentesco circa l’impiego del vassoio in riti sacrificali sembra contraddire, o perlomeno non collimare, con quanto sappiamo ora circa l’utilizzo di vassoi simili nelle pratiche divinatorie dell’oracolo di *Ifá*.

<sup>134</sup> For example the “heroic nudity” of two bronze warriors shipwrecked off the Calabrian coast remains cloaked in mystery despite abundant “numismatic, arthaeological and literary sources” about eastern Mediterranean cultures of the day (Castrizio 2019, 67*f.*)

“naturalistic” style (§2.8 below) and be indifferent to naturalistic reasoning (Manfredi 1991, 309-11). Today, as historic colonizers wonder what is to be done with historic colonial loot (Östberg ed. 2010, Sarr & Savoy 2018, Baqué 2020), simple parity should caution present curators and gallerists of this farflung bling not to default to apply speculative methods designed to gratify collectors, many of whom may not be more ethically scrupulous or culturally informed than the old-school buccaneers responsible for the objects’ initial extraction from their primary context of use.

Like the lonesome Àlådà tray in Ulm, the inscrutable brass casts recovered in Ifè fire the imaginations of art historians and ethnic chauvinists alike. Current museological consensus about these anonymous finds was fathered by a paragon of romantic fervor and scientific insouciance—quirky qualities which are ironically emulated by some of the same experts who lambaste his racist rants (§2.8). With a little linguistic help, a more credible alternative comes into view (§2.9).

## 2.7 MFA sends letter to *Ọba*

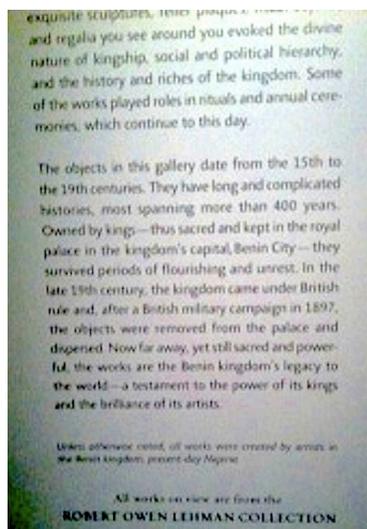
Curatorial malpractice has not spared “Benin bronzes”—Èdó copper-alloy casts—in metropolitan trophy racks. When 32 sculptures originally seized by the British army in the 1897 sack of the Èdó palace were deposited in the Boston Museum of Fine Arts (MFA) by an heir of a notorious predatory banking clan, the contractual niceties were best known to U.S. tax lawyers but the museum explained its own role in the affair with p.r. boilerplate and a shiny FB selfie:

In 2012, the MFA gratefully accepted the Robert Owen Lehman Collection... Today, the ethics of collecting and displaying works removed from their places of origin during periods of European colonialism is a subject of debate among museums, local and national governments, collectors, and the public. The MFA displays these Benin artworks for the benefit of communities in Boston and abroad, and holds them in the public trust where they may be studied and viewed by all. [www.mfa.org/collections/featured-galleries/benin-kingdom-gallery](http://www.mfa.org/collections/featured-galleries/benin-kingdom-gallery)



“27 September 2013. Ambassador Walter Carrington, Chief Nicholas O. Obaseki of Benin Kingdom, His Royal Highness Professor Gregory I. Akenzua of Benin Kingdom, Chief Esosa Eghobamien The Obobaifo of Benin Kingdom, Dr. Arese Carrington and Malcolm Rogers, Ann and Graham Gund Director of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. Thank you to everyone who joined us and the Coalition of Committed Benin Organizations for the opening of the Benin Kingdom Gallery and a celebration of the arts and culture of the Edo community.” [www.facebook.com/mfaboston/photos/a.10151699724402321.1073741849.28314922320/10151699725127321](https://www.facebook.com/mfaboston/photos/a.10151699724402321.1073741849.28314922320/10151699725127321)

The dignitaries’ regal clothes and titles notwithstanding, this exhibit never had Èdó royal assent (cf. below). Gallery wall text (celphone image transcribed below) mouthed flattering obfuscations about the items and their chain of custody:



Display detail, Benin Kingdom Gallery, Museum of Fine Arts Boston, 27 September 2013. Text transcribed below.  
Presumptive author: Dr. C. Geary, Teel Senior Curator of African & Oceanic Art. Photo: F. Ekhatq.

“...The objects in this gallery date from the 15th to the 19th centuries. They have long and complicated histories, most spanning more than 400 years. Owned by kings—thus sacred and kept in the royal palace in the kingdom’s capital, Benin City—they survived periods of flourishing and unrest. In the late 19th century, the kingdom came under British rule and, after a British military campaign in 1897, the objects were removed from the palace and dispersed. Now far away, yet still sacred and powerful, the works are the Benin kingdom’s legacy to the world—a testament to the power of its kings and the brilliance of its artists.”

Visually also, these 34 trafficked “hostages” are subjected to the customary fetishistic museum format whose “aesthetic anaesthetises the historic” (Wilson 1993, 3, cf. Kravagna 2008).



[www.facebook.com/mfaboston/photos/a.10151699724402321.1073741849.28314922320/10151699734862321](http://www.facebook.com/mfaboston/photos/a.10151699724402321.1073741849.28314922320/10151699734862321)



[d1nn9x4jgzyn4.cloudfront.net/styles/1720x1290/s3/migration-slide-image/benin\\_gallery\\_3.jpg?itok=XPV/BIGFC](http://d1nn9x4jgzyn4.cloudfront.net/styles/1720x1290/s3/migration-slide-image/benin_gallery_3.jpg?itok=XPV/BIGFC)

Months before showtime, Benin Club of Massachusetts—for decades the main Èdó *émigré* assembly in the region—offered to escort an MFA delegate to *Ọmọ n’Ọba* Erediauwa, just as in 2005 the MFA had in analogous circumstances obtained “representation” from the *Asantehene* of “Ashanti” Kingdom (cf. [www.mfa.org/exhibitions/west-african-gold](http://www.mfa.org/exhibitions/west-african-gold)). This time around, the MFA ‘sent a letter to the *Ọba*’ (paraphrase of Dr. C. Geary *p.c.*, 30 May 2013) while Dr. Arese’s local factotum Mr. Alex Ọmọregie formed a factional “Coalition of Committed Benin Organizatons” (MFA text above) sufficient to lull willing foreign gullibles with whiffs of ethnic legitimacy. Benin Club rejected this *mauvaise foi*, protested to the palace and boycotted the gallery gala—a classic spectacle of *divide et impera* that Frederick Lugard would have loved and that the Lagos press reported two days later under the trenchant headline “U.S. Museum Splits Benin Royal House”:

Last week, a “delegation” described by MFA as representatives of the Benin Monarch, Ọmọ N’Ọba N’Edo Uku Akpolokpolo Erediauwa (CFR), were among the guests who witnessed the official opening of Benin Kingdom Gallery at the Boston museum. ...But last year, the *Ọba* of Benin responded to the Robert Owen-donation through a member of the Benin Royal house, Chief Irabor Frank, who stated via email: “The *Ọba* of Benin had said at many forums that the looting of the Benin palace by the British government in 1897 was premeditated. The *Ọba* had made his demand very clear that the stolen Benin artefacts should be returned.” Few days ago a brother of the *Ọba*, Prince Èdun Akẹnzua claimed that he was not aware of the Benin delegation to the opening of the gallery in Boston. He explained in SMS: “The *Ọba* did not send any representative to the Boston museum event.” Akẹnzua noted that a claim that the *Ọba* sent a delegation “is spurious.” Akẹnzua, Enogie of Ọbazuwa, who said he was on holiday abroad as at the time of sending the SMS, disclosed that “the palace has categorically informed me that no representative was sent.” He noted that “some organisations (project) their events” through misrepresentation. He described the action of the so-called representatives of the *Ọba* as “wrong and reprehensible.” [nrguardiannews.com/national-news/134176-us-museum-splits-benin-royal-house](http://nrguardiannews.com/national-news/134176-us-museum-splits-benin-royal-house)

Nine months after the MFA 4-1-9 gala, Adrian Mark Walker MD flew from England to Nigeria and restored to *Ọmọ n'Ọba* Erediauwa two copper-alloy casts (on red velvet tray, left image below, Otzen 2015) that had been robbed by his great-grandfather *Capt.* Herbert Walker, intelligence officer of the 1897 invasion force. At the handover on 20 June 2014 “Èdó people came out in large numbers to show immense gratitude” (Láyíwọlá 2014).<sup>135</sup> Coincidentally or not, “about a week” later the Nigerian National Museum in Lagos announced receipt from the MFA of eight assorted objects including one unidentified Èdó-style cast of undetermined quality (on hacked mattress foam, right image below, Şówólé 2014).



Left: Edun Akenzua and Mark Walker at *Ègnae Ọba n'Èdó*, 20 June 2014. Photo: Kelvin Ikpea/AFP (via Otzen 2015).  
Right: National Commission for Museums & Monuments display, 26 June 2014 (*Guardian* [Lagos] via Şówólé 2014).

The contrast between Dr. Walker’s truth-and-reconciliation moment in the Èdó palace and the MFA’s arm’s-length airdrop of charity cast-offs goes beyond fine points of antiquarian ethics to illustrate a stark choice between facing or falsifying the past. By volunteering a copy of his ancestor’s personal diary from the 1897 raid, Dr. Walker furnished primary evidence that the British army theft of several thousand Èdó palace icons was as intentional and official as the Nazi plunder of occupied Europe to which he explicitly compared it in his quoted remarks (Láyíwọlá 2014). The MFA on their part, by wafting expensive smoke around secretive, mediated and contested deals with some peripheral Èdó palace personalities behind *Ọmọ n'Ọba*’s back (not to mention with Dr. Arese Carrington’s local ethnic astroturf), only further mystified the chain of opaque transactions connecting Robert Owen Lehman’s treasure horde with its African origins.

Already in 2009, the open-source approach advocated in vain by Benin Club to the MFA had been successfully applied by the Stockholm Ethnographic Museum. At the ribbon-cutting (photo below), *Èdaikẹn* (crown prince) Ehenẹden Erediauwa—now *Ọmọ n'Ọba* Èwúarè 2nd—was joined by his uncle *Ènó,giè* (Duke) Edun Akenzua, the same person who would denounce the MFA in a newspaper interview four years later.



Photo: Tony Sandin (via Östberg ed. 2010, 7)

The Stockholm catalog, frankly entitled “Whose Objects?” (Östberg ed. 2010), gave its diverse contributors scope to debate the modern migrations of these overdetermined commodities, putting to shame the sweeping of this grubby history under the Oriental(ist) rug of the MFA’s polished marble dais in 2013. In fact, much worse than grubby:

[A]n den Benin-Bronzen klebt regelrecht Blut. ...[M]it jedem Monat, mit jedem Tag sinkt die Wahrscheinlichkeit, dass die Bronzen gezeigt werden können, ohne sich zu blamieren... (B. Savoy via Bohr & Knöfel 2021).<sup>136</sup>

<sup>135</sup> State broadcast footage of this remarkable event was posted at [www.youtube.com/watch?v=xuTT1F6dQBO](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xuTT1F6dQBO).

<sup>136</sup> [ [T]he Benin bronzes [sic] are undeniably stained with blood ... [W]ith every passing month and every passing day, it becomes harder to display these bronzes [in foreign galleries] without exposing one’s own complicity... ]

Such scruples are mocked by the self-outed author of Bush’s neocon “axis of evil” slogan, a wealthy collector who holds that “art cannot... redress grievances, salve shame, absolve guilt” on the grounds that Picasso’s *Demaiselles d’Avignon* turned all African art into ‘Western’ intellectual property, and who sensationalises restitution pitfalls before parachuting in like the U.S. Marines to save the day: “I suggest a defense of the existing” (Frum 2022, cf. Tomasky 2018). Less self-serving is the inverse possibility, namely to let the ‘West’ simulate Africa just as it simulates itself in prestige piles: “Ein Fake-Museum in einem Fake-Schloss, das würde Sinn machen” [A museum of fakes inside a fake castle—now *that* would make sense] (Savoy 2017).

## 2.8 Fàlò-fólò Frobenius<sup>137</sup>

*Willett's Ifè in the History of West African Sculpture is organized around a patchwork system of working hypotheses which has evolved over time and become more or less ossified into 'fact' by virtue of constant repetition. ... Most research to date into the problems posed by the Nigerian bronzes can only be described as Yorùbá-centric, as if Ifè actually were the point of creation of the world.* (Rubin 1970b, 353)

*It is within the realm of the art critic to make subjective evaluations of works of art, and the Benin workers lend themselves to this... What is not generally realized, however, is that these evaluations are subjective and should be used as such, not as established facts.* (Éyò 1977, 146)

### Sequelae of a nonsequitur

Egharhevba's hint that the *Iba* oracle came to Èdó from “Úhè” i.e. Ilé-Ifè (§2.4 above) was not a stray mistake. Also without evidence, he named Ifè as the source of the current Èdó ruling dynasty and of its workshop of commemorative cast bronze. In principle, the artistic heritage claim could be checked against the archaeological record, but in practice and lacking relevant data, the attribution has been mortgaged on a mystery souvenir collected by a roughshod Prussian.

To crown his “charming little adventure” of 1910, Frobenius bribed and wheedled out of the custody of the custodian of Ifè's Olókun grove “a head of marvellous beauty, wonderfully cast in antique bronze, true to the [sic] life, incrustated with a patina of glorious dark green” (1913, 98). That and similar trophies hold high profiles today, not just as world-class commodities but also as boosters of local morale. Their burnished aura kindles precolonial nostalgia, soothes postcolonial blues and taunts “the poet's pen” to give them “a local habitation and a name” (*Midsummer Night's Dream*, Act V scene i). One patriot confesses embarrassment “that the Ifè's of today are not as important in the work of art or carving or of war... as their great grandfathers were...” (Adémákinwá 1958 vol. 1, 40f.) and as if to compensate, Ifè authorship of the bronzes is proclaimed in history books, though hedged with customary academic adverbs:

The classical period in Ilé-Ifè: classical and awe inspiring *is thought to* have lasted from the 11th to the 15th centuries AD, though terracotta sculpture *is probably* much older and *may have* commenced in the 7th century, *within or outside* the precincts of the Ilé-Ifè. When the technology of the lost wax process came to Ilé-Ifè from the north *as it was assumed*, the highly developed art of sculpting in clay was translated into copper alloy casting. Although the technique was introduced from the north, that the art itself is Ilé-Ifè's art *is incontrovertible.* (Ógúnyemí 2010, 1f, italics added)

However, for better or worse the only tangible historical reference to cuprous casting in premodern Ilé-Ifè had to be inferred from two oblique sentences in one precocious pamphlet—Egharhevba's *Short History of Benin*.

*Ọba* Ogùọ́la wished to introduce brass-casting into Benin so as to produce works of art similar to those which had been sent to him from Ifè. He therefore requested the *Ọghè nẹ́* of Uhè [in later editions: *Ọ̀ni* of Ifè] for a brass smith and Igue-igha [in later editions: *Iguegha*] was sent to him. (1953, 12)<sup>138</sup>

On this slender thread—double or so the infamous sixteen words with which U.S. neocons hawked their invasion of Iraq—hangs the weight of modern curatorial consensus concerning the most freighted topic of Nigerian art history.<sup>139</sup>

In fairness, Egharhevba himself never explicitly wrote that copper alloy was ever cast in Ifè, but his skeletal hint was dressed up as an archaeological *egúngún* wrapped in a richly embroidered shroud of authority. His casual remark became more heavily cathected with each successive paraphrase down the decades:

A Benin tradition, for example, recounts that *Ọba* Ogùọ́la sent to the *Ọ̀ni* of Ifè for a bronze-smith to instruct his people in the craft... As *Ọ̀ni* seems to have reigned towards the end of the fourteenth century [fn 54], bronze-working must have been established at Ifè before that time. (Willett 1960, 245)

The naturalism of Ifè was transmitted, as we know from traditional evidence and could in any case deduce from stylistic comparison, to Benin... (Fagg & Plass 1966, 65)

There can be no doubt that the modern city of Ifè is on the site of Ilé-Ifè, despite the objections of Alan Ryder [fn 93] and that terracotta sculpture and *cire-perdue* castings were made there from early in the present millennium. (Willett 1971b, 367)

We know also that the great bronze founding industry of Benin was introduced from Ifè... (Fagg 1982a, 11)

From Kenneth Murray, founding director of Nigerian antiquities, his successor Bernard Fagg inherited a noble agenda to “dispose of the widely-held hypothesis that the Ifè-Benin complex [sic] owes its style and inspiration to origins outside West Africa” (1959, 293). Their high-minded defense of indigeneity takes off from two solid inferences:

- (i) “Some of the *terracotta* figures must be about four feet high” (Willett 1959, 137) so it's virtually certain that they were locally produced rather than being carried to Ifè across long distances.
- (ii) Some of the brass heads recovered in Ifè are stylistically so similar to some of the Ifè *terracottas* that direct cross-inspiration between the items in their respective media must have occurred at some time.

Murray however went further and stretched these reasonable strands into a tenuous conjecture:

These bronzes... are more akin to the sculpture of the [Italian] Renaissance than to the typical art of Africa. An extraordinary thing about them is their faultlessness of workmanship and their isolation as a style. None has been found at Ifè that suggests their evolution; there is nothing to show progress up to, or decline from, their perfection. ... Some people have thought that **they** were not made at Ifè, but were brought from elsewhere. ... The existence of the delicate *terracottas* in an identical style makes it unlikely that **they** could have been brought from far... (1941, 73, boldface added)

An identifiable logic lurks behind Murray's loose wording. If the “they” (boldfaced twice above) refers to “bronzes” that were not “brought from far”, then Murray must have assumed (iii) that the “bronzes” were modeled on the

<sup>137</sup> ‘Frobenius’ follower(s)’ (cf. Aníkúlá.pò Kú.ti 1976).

<sup>138</sup> Meyerowitz writes “Ighè Igha” (1940, 129) citing Egharhevba (1936b) in a 1937 printing inaccessible to me. Other spellings are also reported although some could be typos: “Igueghae” (Willett 1967a, 132) and “Iguehae” (Éyò 1977, 134; Lawal 2001, 524 fn 73). On the chemistry of *brass* and *bronze*—terms much muddled by historians—cf. Shaw (1970, 273-80), Herbert (1984, 94), Junge (2007).

<sup>139</sup> “The British government has learned that Saddam Hussein recently sought significant quantities of uranium from Africa” [www.cnn.com/interactive/allpolitics/0307/bush.16.words/content2.html](http://www.cnn.com/interactive/allpolitics/0307/bush.16.words/content2.html), cf. Wheeler (2007).

*terracottas* rather than the reverse. But why? No one disputes that the *terracottas* of Nok are centuries older than the oldest Nigerian lost-wax casts, or that “Nok culture flourished at about the beginning of the metal age” (Fagg 1959, 289) i.e. some 2500 years ago, when tin and iron were first mined and smelted in the vicinity (Bitiyong 1993, Chesi & Merzeder 2006, Breunig 2013, Breunig & Rupp 2016). However, the *generic* precedence of *terracotta* before *cire perdue* as techniques can’t decide whether any individual example of clay art produced in Ifè either influenced, or was influenced by, any particular copper-alloy cast located there, no matter how exactly the two may visually match. To elide this elementary point and assume that only one sequence of media—from clay to metal—is possible for every sculptural influence in Ifè is to imagine that Ifè people stopped baking *terracotta* the first day they set eyes on gleaming brass, as if ontogeny of form must recapitulate phylogeny of material. Such delusion perfectly illustrates the general fallacy of genre stereotypes:

[A]s long as the Nigerian art traditions are studied as *groups* without attention to any possible stylistic variations within the groups, *no matter how subtle*, possible intercultural influences between the various Nigerian art traditions will be difficult to ascertain or dismiss. (Adépegba 1983b, 31, original italics)

Willett restates Murray’s leap more cautiously, but never entertains the reverse sequence of events:

Kenneth Murray, writing in 1941, effectively demonstrated that Benin Bronzes were being made before the Portuguese arrived, and that the Ifè bronzes appeared to be ancestral to them. The identity of style between the bronzes and *terracottas* at Ifè, showed that they could not have been made far away. (Willett 1960, 239)

It would seem **very likely** that the art of Ifè developed in *terracotta* first. (The existence of the highly skilled *terracottas* of the Nok culture, now dated by radiocarbon to between 900 BC and AD 200, supports this idea.) The art was then transferred bodily, unchanged in detail and fully developed, into brass, so that it is to the *terracottas* that we must look for the origins of the art of Ifè. (Willett 1959, 137=1958, 33 without the “very”, boldface added)

The naturalistic art style **probably** developed in *terracotta*. (Willett 1967b, 34, boldface added)

An early review of Willett’s *magnum opus* did not fail to note the faulty, crucial reasoning:

[W]e cannot say whether Ifè naturalism originated in bronze or *terracotta*... we have at this point no even remotely adequate understanding of the relation between the bronzes and *terracottas* of Ifè... (Rubin 1970b, 351)

The problem is how to get from premise (14a) to conclusion (14c) across an unsupported bridge (14b).

- (14)a. The Nigerian ‘Iron Age’ including tin and *terracotta* long preceded the Nigerian ‘Bronze Age’ of *cire perdue* casting.
- b. The “naturalistic” *terracottas* made in Ifè were the models for the “naturalistic” “bronze” heads (Willett 1959, 137).
- c. The “naturalistic” “bronze” heads found in Ifè “could not have been made far away” (Willett 1960, 239).

The syllogism being invalid on its face, proof is still required that brass heads were made in the locality of Ifè as opposed to any other place in the Niger-Benue basin. “It was hoped that evidence of bronze casting might be discovered... but this aim was not achieved” (Willett 1960, 240). The admitted failure didn’t stop generations of art historians from following Willett the pied piper down the primrose path of Ifè creationism first trod by Frobenius. Even Blier, though proudly nonconformist regarding some aspects of the Ifè narrative, still affirms without evidence the conventional “autochthony (regardless of ethnic or lineage identity)” (2015, 233) of Ifè’s copper alloy heads.

It’s never too late to reverse a misstep and retrace a road not taken. Depending on who’s counting, the complete tally of *cire perdue* pieces ever found in Ifè is either “21 bronze [sic] sculptures... from only three sites” (Éyò 1977, 114) or 27 (Dark 1960, 17) or “less than thirty” (Shaw 1981, 112) or maximally “[a]round 40” (Blier 2015, 93).<sup>140</sup> Furthermore, none of these pieces was recovered in a primary setting, whereas some *terracottas* were excavated *in situ* (Shaw 1981) with a potentially informative radiocarbon context. The oldest brass with a published TL date—a so-called *Oḡni* figure from Ita Yemòwó (1365±70)—is nominally a century younger than the oldest dated Ifè *terracotta* (1275±80) and half a century younger than the oldest brass collected in Nupe: the large “seated figure” (1325±60) which on stylistic grounds “can be matched in detail in Ifè sculptures from the Iwínrín Grove” (Willett & Fleming 1976, 138f, cf. Eccles 162, 20f.). However, the age difference between the two media falls within the respective error bars, therefore as far as anybody knows, these brass and *terracotta* works were contemporaneous (cf. Lawal 1977, 202).



(Forman & Brentjes 1967, plates 3, 4, cf. Éyò 1977, 68, 70)

<sup>140</sup> By comparison, the Ìgbo Úkwu excavations yielded “a hundred major... and nearly 600 minor... leaded tin bronze[s] made by *cire perdue* casting and [items] of copper made by smithing and chasing” (Chikwendù & al. 1989, 29, cf. Shaw 1970a, 107, 295), and Èdó was despoiled in 1897 of “over 4000” locally produced copper alloy casts (Shaw 1970b, 80).

Mere inspection can't say if the clay head *above right* (found in Igbó Iwínrín) inspired the lost-wax cast *above left* (found in Iléé Wunmònjíe) as Murray and Willett assumed, or if the direction of influence was the reverse, from left to right, translating the inspiration from brass to clay.<sup>141</sup> Also, the brasses recovered in Ifè are few enough that all of them could have been brought from Nupe or Ígálà as luxury goods, paid for with wealth from Ifè's Oló.kun grove, "the center of the great glass-making industry which had spread blue *sègi* beads across West Africa" (Willett 1960, 237, cf. Frobenius 1913, 100, Elúyemí 1976, 1987, Lankton & al. 2006, Babalólá 2015). If so, the Ifè *terracottas* could easily be low-budget local knockoffs of costly metal imports, though no less artistically accomplished for their greater economy and fragility.

Various clues help adjudicate the opposite causation chain. (i) The absence of similarly "delicate" *terracottas* outside of Ifè in southwest Nigeria (Williams 1974, 209) is less expected under Murray's scenario proceeding from widely available clay to unique local metal, than it is with the inverse development of artistic influence, from exotic metal to local clay. (ii) A second observation also favors the latter sequence of events as far as Ifè is concerned:

Fragments of terracotta figures, some three-quarters life size, have been recovered from the Iwínrín grove and elsewhere at Ifè. It is obvious that the naturalism of the face is not repeated throughout the whole figure.  
(Speed & Simmonds 1966, 1)

It would be odd for original sculpture to be "naturalistic" just from the neck upwards unless this discrepancy arose when clay sculptors copied body-less brass heads while lacking metallic models for the rest of the human figure.

A less direct but still empirical way to save (14b) could be via Egharhevba's corollary that Ifè taught *cire perdue* to Èdó. If so, nonaccidental similarities of materials and techniques should exist between Ifè brass finds (as few as they are) and Èdó bronzes (numbered in the thousands), but the result is negative: "Ifè and Benin [Èdó] employed entirely different methods of the *cire-perdue* process" (Williams 1974, 208). The Ifè finds have pre-fired cores without internal armature, with parallels to the north and east in Nupe, in the Ígbo Úkwu finds and in extant industries of the savanna, but not for any Èdó works (Williams 1967; 1974, 179-98; Seromi 1987, 56f, 64, 87).<sup>142</sup> Also, the respective alloys used in the Ifè and Èdó objects show different isotopic ratios of lead, suggesting "separate sources" of ore, which would be surprising—though not impossible—if Ifè shared its metallurgical tradition with Èdó (Goucher & al. 1978, 290).<sup>143</sup>

Failing all objective tests, the lowest conceivable bar that Egharhevba's corollary could pass is to find some subjective resemblance between the Ifè *cire perdue* finds and the *oldest* Èdó bronzes—if only an independent chronology of the Èdó corpus existed (spoiler: not yet). Such an exercise would however be pointless if it amounted to merely casting an apriori eye across four thousand Èdó bronzes, most of which lack firm dates, to declare "oldest" just those which look most "naturalistic" or Ifè-like in some respect. Unfortunately, that's exactly the circular reasoning followed by Fagg and Willett, and this gaffe did not escape critique:

For the last 36 years it has been common to accept the speculations in von Luschan's (1919) copious account of Benin Antiquities and those of his pupil, Struck (1923) on chronology, as providing an authentic version of Benin art history. Unfortunately, nearly all the numerous dates advanced by Struck lack any foundation in fact. The von Luschan and Struck chronology is based on formal differences between a number of heads and groups of figures. The 'Queen Mother' heads... are assigned to AD 1485 quite arbitrarily and the clay heads excavated at Ifè by Frobenius are assigned to the same period because the similarity between the two types is considered to be so great. ...The underlying assumption of theories of the development of Benin art is that the more naturalistic, less stylized and more finely cast specimens... are earlier than the more stylized less finely cast ones... because the art of casting bronze at Benin was learned from Ifè where there was a tradition of casting bronzes of outstanding naturalism and skill... (Dark 1960, 18)

By and large, since evidence of an Ifè stylistic influence has yet to be convincingly demonstrated, a new and *independent* chronology is needed for Benin art, and this should be structured on internal evidence, rather than on an assumed continuum of Ifè naturalism.  
(Lawal 1977a, 199, italics added)

In retrospect, Murray's conjecture (14b) has all the plausibility of Tony Blair's "dodgy dossier" when "intelligence and facts were being fixed around the policy" to invade Iraq, evidence be damned.<sup>144</sup> Rather than explaining anything, it's Ifè exceptionalism—like Anglophone neoconservatism—that needs to be explained. When Nigeria's first official antiquarians set themselves to refute the canard that "native" African artists lacked a flair for something called "naturalism"—the Victorian esthetic standard, which they maintained against the tide of 20th century European artists since Picasso (Cooper 1970, Martin 2006)—this well-intended mission of reputational rescue drove them to embrace the needlessly specific antithesis that "proves the African, *or more specifically Yorùbá*, origins of the art of Ifè" (Fagg 1959, 292, italics added). However, it's a nonsequitur to say that anything not distantly exotic must be immediately local. On the contrary, before "specifically Yorùbá... origins" can be taken as proved, other regional transmissions need to be ruled out. Rubin gets the last laugh with his wisecrack quoted above, that Willett must have truly believed the *babaláwos'* cosmology to the effect that everything on earth originated in Ifè, *q.e.d.*

To defend an Ifè origin for the metal heads at all costs, Willett's last resort was to lean on the external prop of Egharhevba's tale of Ifè-to-Èdó transmission, read with blatant confirmation bias. The story endures despite objections by other archaeologists both (i) because it fits a modern ethno-national agenda and (ii) because no clear alternative has thusfar been articulated. The former defense is logically indefensible, but the latter can now be definitively dismissed because a literal reading of Egharhevba's account is falsified on etymological grounds (§2.9 below). In the intervening century however, a parade of eminences has lined up to defend the initial attribution by any means necessary.

<sup>141</sup> A near-identical Wunmònjíe cast is dated 1490±85 (Willett & Fleming 1976, 137). To my knowledge, no Iwínrín *terracotta* has been TL-tested. Contextual C-14 determines only that a stylistically similar *terracotta* from Odò Ogbè is older by some unknown interval than 1630±95 (Eyò 1974, 106).

<sup>142</sup> Williams distinguishes the respective techniques as follows. An "admixture of large quantities of organic matter" is "characteristic in the preparation of clays for moulds and cores in the *cinquecento* method as today observed among the Yorùbá and at Benin" whereas "a low percentage of carbon remaining in the burnt contact area" is found in "core stuff from the Ifè *Láfogido* bust" (1974, 189). The latter method, called "spiral" and pertaining to the Nupe (Jeba-Tada) and Ifè finds, stabilizes a "self-supporting" core by "admixture of pulverized charcoal... between the core mass and the mould" without resort to "the integral armature of the south" e.g. of Èdó (1974, 201, 189, cf. 232). Williams associates the spiral method to the Ígbo Úkwu finds (1974, 211f) and Shaw had already remarked the *absence* of armature in one Ígbo Úkwu cast: "no signs of iron pegs" (1970a, 186). Williams' iconoclastic *Icon & Image* (1974) received prompt appreciation in France (Paulme 1976) but Anglophone acknowledgement was long delayed (Gore & Picton 2010).

<sup>143</sup> Willett & Sayre reach the opposite conclusion from different assays of different objects in a different lab (2006, 77), but lacking the opportunity to "calculate a correction factor" they chose to "exclude [Goucher's] data from our statistical analysis" (2006, 56).

<sup>144</sup> M. Rycroft, 23 July 2002: [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Downing\\_Street\\_memo](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Downing_Street_memo), [www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/uk/article387374.ece](http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/uk/article387374.ece).

### Leo *oní-original-tòkunbò*<sup>145</sup>

Frobenius' travelogue of "Inner Africa" is rightly reviled because of its imperially deranged, proto-Nazi quest for "a race, far superior in strain to the negro" and its toxic rants about "the dreary moral waste of the black man's soul" (1913, 88f., 106, cf. Frobenius & Freytag-Loringhoven 1917).<sup>146</sup> But it's only fair to admit that the same unpalatable book, penned by such "a despicable character" (Fabian 1998, 86), is the key source of current ethnic group-think about Ifẹ prehistory.

One sculpture, unveiled by Frobenius as "the Oló.kun, Atlantic Africa's Poseidon" (1913, 98, photo facing 308, cf. 1926 photo facing *xvi*) furnished the eventual logo of Yorùbá exceptionalism and is emblazoned today—in lieu of an image of Odùduwà, the image-less legendary Ifẹ ancestor—on the crests of the University of Ifẹ, the Oòduà People's Congress vigilante corps and the Ifẹ royal Yorùbá Parapò Cultural Carnival among many other ethnic enterprises.<sup>147</sup> After three decades of reification, the "father of the museum movement in Nigeria" gave government blessing to the adventurer's guess that this metal head represents "Oló.kun the sea goddess, mother of Ọ̀bàlùfòn the second Ọ̀ṣàni, or king, of Ifẹ" (Murray 1941, 72, cf. Bascom 1939, James 1994). Subsequent curators were loath to admit that the icon's chain of custody got lost in Ifẹ's "broken... continuity both of traditions and practices" and that the only empirical basis for the "Orí Oló.kun" tag is effectively a sleight-of-phrase: the piece is literally an *orí* (head) which "appears to have been dug up in the Oló.kun Grove during the second half of the 19th century" (Willett 1960, 234, 237). Frobenius himself didn't hide that Ifẹ's recovered treasures are opportunistically "christened" (1913, 286), musing guilelessly about the "Oló.kun... head in particular named 'Mia' by the natives (why I do not know)" (1913, 313).<sup>148</sup>

The first professional description of this item obtained a different identification from a different oral source:

The beautiful and well-known so-called Oló.kun head, which Leo Frobenius has frequently shown in illustrations, is, judging by the head ornaments, according to information given by the Ọ̀ṣàni of Ifẹ, the portrait of a Yorùbá aristocratic lady and not of a god. (Sydow 1938, 59 *fn.* 1)

Not only is the sculpture "ambiguous" in gender (Willett 1960, 241 *fn.* 42), so is its supernatural referent. Yorùbá Oló.kun is male in one paraphrased *Ifá* story (Frobenius 1913, 238-40) but female in most other accounts: "Oló.kun... was the consort of Odùduwà, the twain thus seen as primogenitors [sic] of the Yorùbá" (Şóyínká 2006, 224) or she was "the rich Ifẹ bead trader of Odùduwà's generation" (Akíntoyè 2010, 187). In the latter tale, childless Oló.kun flaunted her wealth so as to shade her co-wife Ọ̀sààrà—"a poor woman but blessed with many children"—but the materialistic "power show" (Aníkúlá.pò Kú.ti 1981) was overwhelmed by "wealth in people" (Guyer 1995) namely

Ọ̀sààrà with her children and children's children with their friends and well-wishers and the usual crowd of inquisitive onlookers who could not be controlled or prevented from trampling on the gems, the jewels, the dresses and all the other costly articles put on show by Oló.kun who, it is related, very quickly took her leave of the unruly crowd and, from that time, 'never smiled again'. (Fábùnmi 1969, 4f)

In Èdó by contrast, Ólokún—HH!H as it's pronounced there—is no barren loser but rather a bestower of children (Welton 1968). The ubiquitous Èdó clay statues of Ólokún are all anatomically male. Yorùbá-centrism led Beier to call Ólokún female on five pages (1956b, 280, 282, 286, 291, 294) and male on only one (284). "Ólokún, here definitely a goddess" goes the caption of one sculpture in "Osonigbe" [Urhonigbe] (1956b, 291) although the photo doesn't seem "definite" at all. The mistake is common—Nevadomsky confirms that Èdó "Ólokún is sometimes confused with Mámí Wátá and described as female" (1993, 25, cf. Jell-Bahlsen 2008)—and Beier's second draft silently corrects the caption of the same photo as male, adding that Èdó representation of "Ólokún as a female deity, a kind of great mother" is limited to just one "far from conventional" sculpture in a "more modern shrine" created by an idiosyncratic female sculptor who was "influenced by Western ideas and Christianity" (Beier 1963a, 38, 60f.). Beier speculates that the female gender of *Oló.kun* in modern Ifẹ may be innovative, caused by *Oló.kun*'s relegation as a "suppressed divinity" or "conquered deity" after Oòduà overthrew the *ancien régime* (1956b, 295, 1963a, 62, cf. Ọ̀báyemí 1992).<sup>149</sup> In fairness, gender-fluid supernaturals are not rare, and in coastal Ijẹbù, where "Àgbó or Mágbo" is the name of a mask that "perform[s] to honor Oló.kun", "Àgbó masks... have male and female aspects" (Lawal 1996, 66).

Setting aside where "Orí Oló.kun" was actually made and who it was originally intended to depict, another mystery is the current location of the artefact itself. Frobenius boasted of capturing the prize after hard haggling and a token dash of "six pounds, a bottle of whiskey and a few other trifles" while still plotting to substitute "a fresh copy... made at the tinsmith's"—excusing this trick by the "utmost importance to obtain the type and material of a more ancient epoch for comparison with the bronzes from Benin" (1913, 99).<sup>150</sup> When the counterfeiting ruse apparently flopped, the cash (without the whiskey) was refunded under duress of minatory visitation by the District Commissioner from colonial headquarters in Ọ̀sogbo (1913, 112).<sup>151</sup> A persistent rumor that the item presently held in the palace is Frobenius' ersatz

<sup>145</sup> 'Leo, trafficker of genuine imports'. The phrase *original tòkunbò* was coined by sellers of automotive spares after the IMF currency collapse and flood of shoddy counterfeits. Guyer writes "*tòkunbò*" [LHL] (2004, 91) but the durative H-tone prefix of *-bò* doesn't occur in nominals (Abraham 1958, 113, Bámgbósé 1966a, 75). Fabian describes the context of ethnographic "commodification" (1998, 88) while Apter reads Frobenius' refashioning of Ifẹ myths as an "affective" gloss on Yorùbá "poetics of displacement" (2022, 121f.).

<sup>146</sup> *Ad infinitum*: "Oh Europeans, my dear Europeans, do all the good you can to these black 'children', bring them everything you possibly can, give them work and gladness, fortune and freedom, but never, never forget to bring the whip!" (1913, 130). The British also received the wrath of "me, who was greatly respected in the German colony [Togo]... had not been held in honor in the English colony... where we pursued our scientific studies with all our might and by spending our good German money!" (1913, 132f.).

<sup>147</sup> Cf. [www.oauife.edu.ng](http://www.oauife.edu.ng), [oodnapeoplescongress.org](http://oodnapeoplescongress.org), [www.afeniferereneval.org](http://www.afeniferereneval.org), [www.newswatchnigeria.com/ooni-unveils-yoruba-parapo-cultural-carnival-logo](http://www.newswatchnigeria.com/ooni-unveils-yoruba-parapo-cultural-carnival-logo). On the haplogy *Odùduwà*→*Oòduà*, see Abimbólá & Oyèlárán (1975).

<sup>148</sup> Let's guess that this "Mia" truncates Ọ̀rànmíyàn alias Ọ̀rànhíyàn, said to be "the youngest of Oòduà's sons" (Fábùnmi 1969, 15).

<sup>149</sup> Even Odùduwà/Oòduà is ambiguous (Epègà 1931, Ìdówú 1963, 27, Ọ̀báyemí 1992, 65), described as male in Ifẹ (Fábùnmi 1969, 3) but elsewhere as "the wife of Ọ̀bátálá... this union is symbolised by two whitened calabashes closely fitting on top of each other" (Abraham 1958, 451, cf. Crowther 1852, 207, Ellis 1894, 41), as "*Iya Agbè* i.e. 'Mother of the... closed calabash'" (Farrow 1926, 45) and "*Iya Agbà*, la mère qui reçoit" [the welcoming mother] (Baudin 1884, 11). Upon hearing in Ifẹ that "Odùduwà is a female deity, an earth goddess in fact", Beier surmised Bachofen-like "that early Yorùbá society was matriarchal" (1955, 20f., cf. Belasco 1980, 97f.). Verger was less gullible: hearing female Odùduwà concepts in the Gungbè towns of Xògbónù ["Porto Novo"] and Wémè ["Dagbe"], he warned of missionary "confusion" over mythic sex-assignment and invoked Lévi-Straussian ideas of *Odùduwà*: *Obátálá* :: *earth* : *sky* and *Odùduwà* : *Oló.kun* :: *earth* : *water* (1957, 448-64, cf. Baudin 1884, 12; Cabrera 1954a, 441). Classificatory "untidiness" in the "overlapping and inconsistency of Yorùbá spiritual beings" (Barber 1990, 313) is supported by an *oriki* from Baniṅbe near Xògbónù: *Ọ̀kọ ni Oòduà, aya ni Oòduà* 'Oòduà is both husband and wife' (Verger 1957, 487, cf. Augé 1982, 128 citing Vernant 1965).

<sup>150</sup> The intrigue is plausible, given Frobenius' admission that a stone carving removed from Ifẹ was substituted with a "copy made by [artist and fellow expeditionary] Carl Arriens" (1913, 119, cf. x). One antiquity removed from Ifẹ is the *terracotta* photographed in Canada in 1968 in possession of Frobenius' expedition engineer Albrecht Martius (Abíódún 2014, 207f.).

<sup>151</sup> With better grace, Bascom reversed his "unauthorized export" of two brass heads "smuggled" from Ifẹ in 1938 (Tignor 1990, 429f.).

cast (Fagg & Underwood 1949) has been downplayed “on the balance of evidence” from exhaustive forensic tests, but even so the scandalous possibility “cannot be entirely excluded” (Craddock & al. 2013, cf. Barley 2010, 3).

To sustain the belief that this elegant antique was indigenous to Ifẹ̀, it’s convenient to describe the town’s modern squalor as a fall from former magnificence. As a matter of record, Ifẹ̀ did suffer “desecration” in 1886 at the hands of neighboring Ọ̀dákékéké and remained “deserted until 1894” (Akinjogbin 1992, 159). 16 years later, when Frobenius cried out “Poor Ọ̀ṣòni! Poor palace! How are the mighty fallen!” (1913, 277), his outpouring of pity slid down a slippery slope leading to a much repeated, Romantic-fantastist trope of entire civilizational collapse:

Yorùbá culture belongs to antiquity by virtue of its inherent “style”. The slave traffic of Mediaevalism, modern industrial conditions and the foreign rule of today have, beyond question, distorted, transformed and ruined it. Yet we need not first delve a few yards beneath the soil and dig up terracotta to see from their features after such long concealment that these have an austere severity, a “beautiful” style, which is a certain index of their antiquity. (Frobenius 1913, 95, 337)

Gegenwärtig ist die alte Kunst von Yorùbá auf ein sehr tiefes Niveau herabgesunken...<sup>152</sup> (Luschan 1919, 511)

The visitor to the ramshackle and noisome cocoa town of today could have no inkling, save within its museum, of the store which its people once placed on preeminence in every field. (Fagg 1982b, 27)

To prove Yorùbá exceptionality compared to its “negro” neighbors, Frobenius cited three material traits—hunting bow, architectural impluvium, certain styles of hand loom—that struck him as less tropical than Mediterranean, imagining that these features were transmitted by Phoenician coastal trade (1913, 326-33, 345). This “Atlantic” hypothesis, long faded as a serious proposition, lives on as the memorable idea of Yorùbá exceptionality itself. Of course there may be excellent reasons to perceive Yorùbá as unusual in the broad region in any number of respects, without needing to derive these special qualities from a primordial pedigree. Genuine novelty can, and does, emerge in time.

Thus Frobenius refashioned a beautiful brass artwork into a rhetorical brass knuckle which has proved especially handy in modern Ọ̀ja’s *ròfò-ròfò* [rumble](#) of vain and dangerous ethno-national myths.

The Yorùbá disposition is absolutely different from that of the so-called “negro” nations. ...The soul of this people appeals to us as being so originally un-African... (Frobenius 1913, 146, 319)

The Yorùbá is a fine race, and in some respects—such as ease of control, and perhaps physique—it is better than the Ì[gb]bo; but were I to need carriers or workmen for specially trying work requiring resource and self-reliance, and had to take men of one race only, I should choose Ì[gb]bos before Yorùbás... (Kitson 1913, 38)

Under a system which aims at getting all the peoples in the country to the goal of autonomy at the same hour and minute, the Yorùbás have been compelled to mark time on their higher level while the other sections catch up with them. (Awóló.wò 1947, 49, cf. Dudley 1978, 206)

It would appear that the God of Africa has specially created the Ì[gb]bo nation to lead the children of Africa from the bondage of the Ages. (Àzì káíwè 1949, cited by Coleman 1958, 347)

### William Fagg *post Nok ergo propter Nok*<sup>153</sup>

*In the attempt to extend the timescale of Benin art from the forged antiquities of the present day backward through Ifẹ̀ art—whose directly ancestral status may be accepted as adequately established [sic] in art history—to the earliest times, the Nok culture of the central area of Nigeria is now presented as the only candidate at present available for the ancestry of Ifẹ̀ art—though whether the ancestry is direct or collateral remains to be seen. Yorùbá kingship, even though the Benin monarchy was derived [sic] from it, is **very different** from it.* (Fagg 1970, 45, 49, boldface added)

In form if not in substance, Frobenius’ remote Mediterranean pedigree for a racialized Yorùbá “soul” matches the Ifẹ̀ belief that “*Oòduàà rọ̀ nì, o—Oòduà* only descended” (Fábunmi 1969, 4). Whether original Yorùbáness was implanted in Nigeria by Semitic traders navigating “the Atlantic Ocean’s shores” (Frobenius 1913, 321) or by sixteen sequential elders dropping from above, both flavors of cultural exoticism share key historiographic traits: they are (i) monocausal, (ii) immune to counterevidence and (iii) uninterested in influences from Ìgàlá, Nupe and adjacent populations in the diverse multicultural zone west of the confluence, known collectively as *Kákánda* (Ọ̀báyẹ̀mí 1980, 1983). The same three boxes are ticked by the British Museum pamphlet text (above), with one modest difference: for William Fagg, the source of the Ifẹ̀ mystique is neither ancient Carthage nor airy *òrun*, instead it’s the early iron-age culture baptized “Nok” by Bill’s *àbúrò* Bernard after the tin-miners’ town of the central plateau in whose vicinity he collected and excavated fine figurative *terracottas* (Fagg 1959). Note however that “Nok” includes much of Northern Nigeria, because similar fired clay icons have been found as far as 400 km further north, in Katsina and Sókoto (Chesi & Merzeder 2006, 104-19).

Invoking “Nok” “ancestry” allowed W. Fagg to bring the esthetic mystique of “Ifẹ̀ art” out of the sea and down from the sky onto dry land, but not yet within empirical reach.<sup>154</sup> It’s not widely accepted that either “Nok” or Èdó sculpture shows great resemblance to so-called Ifẹ̀ style (Fagg 1959, 292f., Lawal 1977a, 205 replying Willett 1967a, 110-17, 125) and this negative evaluation is no surprise. When Fagg wrote, it was commonly believed that “Nok” ironsmelting and *terracotta* happened 2500-1700 years ago, but new radiocarbon and thermoluminescence data push back its “disparition” (*terminus ante quem*) by about three centuries (Franke 2016, Höhn & Neumann 2016, cf. Boullier & al. 2002, 12, 27). Willett (1986) already accepted that one millennium between “Nok” and “Ifẹ̀” dilutes the concept of ancestry to insignificance, so how much moreso if as it now seems, the time gap was 30% longer? At best, “Nok” represents a breakthrough savanna culture of broad regional significance, but it’s illusory to consider “Nok” as either a “direct or collateral” source for any artistic or technical traits of the Ifẹ̀ finds, save perhaps for their generically non-Mediterranean Westafricanity. The respective contexts share little else. For example, unlike the really existing Ilé-Ifẹ̀, the “Nok” excavations disclose no hint of “social hierarchies or...other signs of inequality” (Breunig & Rupp 2016, 251f.). Even Willett eventually conceded the point: twenty years worth of Nigerian radiocarbon and thermoluminescence data

<sup>152</sup> [Presently the old art of Yorùbá has declined to a very low level...]

<sup>153</sup> Not to be confounded with the “post-Nok” successor culture of the past two millennia with “complete absence of Nok sculptures” and “marked difference in pottery” (Breunig & Rupp 2016, 244 citing Beck 2015, Franke 2015).

<sup>154</sup> Another thing Fagg retained from Frobenius is disdain for modern locals, e.g. his gratuitous sneer at “forged antiquities” (quoted above) and his scurrilous denial that the British firebombing and looting of Èdó in 1897 amounted to a “sack” (1981), even gloating that British burning of the Èdó capital was not so bad, since “all the houses up to roof level were of course made of mud and were doubtless all the better [sic] for a superficial firing along the top edges” (1981, 20). Èyò (1997) rebuked this odious provocation.

allowed him to announce that “the chronological gap between Nok and Ifẹ has been spanned” (1986, 93) but the corresponding visual evidence failed to support Fagg’s armchair idea:

There is however no clear general stylistic link for this period. ... Precisely what the relationship is between the Nok and the Ifẹ traditions remains obscure. Did one somehow lead to the other, thanks to the migration of people? Or do they both draw on a much wider common tradition? (1986, 94, 99)

Equally implausible is the conventional belief, already hinted by Frobenius, in “directly ancestral” Ifẹ tutelage of Èdó *cire perdue* techniques. Egharhevba’s legend to this effect was grafted by Underwood (1949) onto a subjective chronology of Èdó bronzes devised by Luschan (1919) and Struck (1923) on the basis of an assumed irreversible decline of stylistic “naturalism” and technical skill (Eisenhofer 1997).<sup>155</sup> Frobenius had already promoted the capital-R Romantic “model of a decaying artistic expression” (Junge 2007, 195), opining that “The most beautiful specimens of craftsmanship must have undoubtedly been the oldest” (1913, 95). W. Fagg then spliced these strands of untethered opinion into one omniscient narrative, whose empirical disconnection belies its rhetorical self-assurance:

It is at Benin that we can best discern the aftermath of the Ifẹ school of sculpture...

Of the many bronze heads in the extant corpus of Benin work, one type is by common consent the earliest: namely, the very thin heads of generally naturalistic form... Some informants at Benin have declared that these are the heads brought from Ifẹ before Oguṣṣa’s time, but these reports may be discounted because more or less subtle stylistic differences are not among the details that an ancient oral tradition is likely to preserve. It is far more likely, from a close study of their iconography, that they are from the first two centuries of Biní casting, which terminate with the period of first European contact in the late 15th century. What is very clear is, on the one hand, that the realistic subtlety of their modelling can derive only from the Ifẹ tradition, and, on the other, that stylization of a somewhat superficial kind is already well advanced as compared with the more idealized heads of Ifẹ...

In the late 16th century the gradually changing artistic tradition seems to have undergone a major reorientation... Perhaps the most striking development was a great increase in the number and variety of the bronze castings... and above all the great series of several hundred wall plaques... which were to adorn the mud pillars and pilasters of the palace courts for the next century and a half, until they were torn down by a later Ọba and stacked in an outhouse to wait another 150 years for the British expedition. ...

In the great middle period, so extraordinarily prolific of imposing if seldom masterly bronzes, Benin art stood at a kind of climacteric. The Ifẹ aesthetic had run down for lack of appreciation and nourishment; its aftermath and the philistine influence of a partly alien materialism were in an equilibrium which made possible the production of works whose most admirable quality was restraint. Only by hindsight do we discern in this period the seeds of decay... In the event, artistic discipline gave way and a flamboyant decadence set in. (1958, 62, 64-65; cf. 1963)

The art of Ifẹ was more naturalistic than that of Benin, but the Early Period at Benin is the most naturalistic, and is not very far short of the naturalism of Ifẹ except that some features such as the ears have become schematic. (1970, 43)

To be minimally credible, the hybrid Underwood-Fagg conjecture would need to cite more than a mere impression of “naturalism” and point to some observable trait directly linking the hypothetically “early” Èdó casts with their equally hypothetical “Ifẹ” antedecents. Fagg recognized this necessity and proposed two elements of the required type:

According to Benin oral history, it was in Ọba Oguṣṣa’s time, perhaps in the 13th or 14th century, that a request was sent to the Ọṣini of Ifẹ for a master bronze-caster to be sent to Benin to teach the Benin craftsmen how to cast bronze heads, which according to the story had till then been made at Ifẹ for the Ọbas of Benin. ... Confirmation of this story is found especially from two sources: first, one small figure found at Benin which is undoubtedly in the Ifẹ style (although it may have been made perhaps by Iguegha at Benin); and, secondly, from recent excavations by Prof. Frank Willett at the place called Ọrun Ọba Adó at Ifẹ, where heads of Ọbas of Benin were traditionally buried. A small piece of Benin bronze work was found in these excavations, but, more important, the excavations were found to relate in their lower levels to a period about AD 1000-1200 (and indeed one radiocarbon date related to a period about AD 600). (Fagg 1970, 43)

Neither of these suggestions withstands scrutiny. As to the first point, Egharhevba had indeed urged Fagg to identify the “small figure” as an image cast by “Igue-Igha” for Ọmo n’Ọba Èywuàrè and to accept it as “one of the missing links between the style of the Ifẹ heads (probably all belonging to a single period) and the greater stylization of the Benin heads” (Fagg 1950, 70), but Èyò reasonably objects that “interchange of works between Ifẹ and Benin may only reflect contact and may not necessarily mean that one was derived from the other” (1977, 136, cf. Bitiyong 1993).<sup>156</sup>

The second point is factually wrong: Willett never reported “[a] small piece of Benin bronze” from Ọrun Ọba Adó, but only “seven brass castings” with no mention of Èdó origin (1971b, 366; 1971a, 28). Radiocarbon of AD 1060±130 and 1150±200, obtained by Willett “from a layer containing terracotta sculptures” at the same site, may disfavor “the possibility that Ifẹ and its ruling dynasty may have moved to the present site since the 16th century” (Ryder 1965, 36), but such dates are wrongly “taken by Willett as confirming the antiquity of the Ifẹ/Benin connection” (Shaw 1973, 233).

The Luschan-Struck strand of the story fails an even more basic chronological test: to show that some freestanding Èdó heads are older than the less “naturalistic” Èdó palace plaques. Precisely the opposite conclusion was reached by Williams (1974, 149-78) on stylistic grounds, and his impression is confirmed by thermoluminescence measurements. This summary tabulation of Goedicke & Henschel’s (1993) data shows at first approximation that the palace plaques, whether calibrated as a cluster or individually, are centuries *older* than the “naturalistic” heads in the sample:

	“plaques” n=19	“figures” n=2	“groups” n=3	other n=4	“heads” n=8	total n=36
mean TL date	AD 1583 SD=67 years	AD 1591 SD=67 years	AD 1674 SD=33 years	AD 1731 SD=145 years	AD 1752 SD=84 years	AD 1645 SD=111 years

<sup>155</sup> Austrian von Luschan was more famous for another typology of stolen heads: 300 crania confiscated to Berlin from victims of the German genocide of the Herero in 1904-07—some of the relics being sold onward to New York (Gross 2018, cf. Schaller 2008). Luschan held that “the only ‘savages’ in Africa are certain white men with ‘Tropenkoller’ [tropical delirium/culture shock]” (1911, 22), where the latter term “first appeared around 1895 in Berlin dialect as a mocking designation for the ‘pathological irritability’ (*krankhafte Reizbarkeit*) of European officers and officials in tropical colonies” (Besser 2003, 304, citing Ladendorf 1906, 315f). On the other hand, the same aristocratic Luschan callously endorsed apartheid, opining that “racial barriers will never cease to exist, and if ever they should show a tendency to disappear, it will certainly be better to preserve than to obliterate them” (1911, 23, original italics).

<sup>156</sup> This example of modern feedback into archaeological data is not isolated. As Shaw drily notes, “most of the ascriptions” of Benin Museum catalog labels used to identify Èdó copper-alloy casts are “probably attributable to Chief J.U. Eghar[h]evba” (1969, 94).

Reading Goedicke & Henschel in more detail, the firing of the earliest plaque (IIC 27506) is assigned by TL to the year 1508, whereas two of the “naturalistic” heads (IIC 7658, 8170) are calibrated to 1729 and 1859 respectively. Moreover, Riederer & Forkl infer from chemical analysis that the so-called *Iyoba* and *Oba* “naturalistic” heads now held in Stuttgart “are made from a type of brass which did not yet exist in Benin by the time the plaques were produced” (2003, 231).

All these forensic indications prove just the opposite of what Luschan and Struck believed, and what Underwood and Fagg *needed* to believe to save Ifè tutelage of Èdó. Compared to these facts, Fagg’s flights of fancy are self-parody:

As the [self-described] umbilicus of the world, Ifè acquired over the centuries a religious organization hardly less elaborate than its political structure... and it would not be surprising if the exercise of spiritual and temporal power on such a scale tended in some sense to corrupt, by fostering among the priests and chiefs a worldly cynicism and materialism such as we know to have developed in Egypt and Greece... In the case of the art of Ifè, I have suggested a correlation between its worldly naturalism and a (hypothetical) tendency to cynical materialism in the higher levels of the hierarchy. A similar explanation seems to me valid for the Benin court style, and is of course more readily open to verification; the seed may, is reasonable to suppose, have been transplanted from Ifè at the time of the original cultural-political penetration. ... [T]he great corpus of some thousands of bronze and other antiquities, surviving from the past 500 years of Benin history... can be read almost like a book... [T]hese Benin antiquities are so clear in their broad historical implications that they are destined to provide the armature on which we shall eventually erect the art history of this part of Africa. ... Of the late period of Benin bronze art much less needs to be said, for it follows almost inexorably, from what has already been said, in the completion of a cycle of decay... until the overpowering impact of western technology topples the art into a decline which is final and short enough of term. (1963, 20, 26, 36f.)<sup>157</sup>

Another missing link in a theory deriving “Ifè” art from “Nok” is some reason to exclude from the transmission chain any geographically intermediate locales such as Nupe that have yielded stylistically similar casts. Why must Nupe be derivative of Ifè rather than the other way around? Standard literature settles the point unhelpfully by fiat:

The seated bronze figure at Tada... belongs *undoubtedly* to the Ifè school... the extraordinary seated bronze figure of Tada, which is about two-thirds of life size and *certainly* of Ifè manufacture... [T]he human and animal figures of Jeba and Tada, on the middle Niger in Nupe country... are said to have been brought thither from Idá [“Idah”] on the lower Niger early in the 16th century by the culture hero Tsoede, who deposited them as sanctions of chieftainship at a number of Nupe villages. Since these include the four largest bronzes ever found in Africa, the possibility must obviously be considered that Idah was once a great center of bronzecasting, but research there has so far failed to confirm this. One of them, the most famous, is *certainly* by an Ifè master (and this incomparable seated figure greatly extends our appreciation of the Ifè style)... (Fagg 1963, 16, 27, 40, italics added)

[T]he finest Ifè bronze work so far known, the seated figure of Tada... has reposed on the banks of the Niger in Nupe country for five centuries or more. (Fagg 1970, 43)

That the seated Tada bronze is of Ifè manufacture seems *beyond doubt*. (Fraser 1975, 34, italics added)

Preconceptions aside, technical similarities between clay cores of copper-alloy items collected from Ifè and Nupe group them apart from the Èdó casts (Slater & Willett 1988, cf. Ryder 1965, Williams 1974, Lawal 1977a, Obáyemí 1979a, Thornton 1988), but this finding does not clarify if Nupe and Ifè icons are the output of separate workshops, because no workshop has been found in either place. Given the small numbers of objects in play, and their close formal and material resemblances, a common source is the most economical explanation, but the comparison can’t say whether this inferred, reconstructed source was closer to one or to the other, or to some third location still unknown.

In a fact-free environment, speculation freely roams. To Dark, the Nupe sites at “Tada and Jebba seem to be a meeting point of the Ifè and Benin [Èdó] styles” (1960, 27 *fn* 41), but even if this impression of intermediate status translates into descriptive terms, such an outcome could have resulted from several alternative transmission paths, depending on unknown factors especially whether any of the few objects under consideration were actually cast at Ifè or Nupe. Other scenarios appear in the art history literature, none impossible *a priori*, but all obtaining their explanatory force from implausible and/or invisible events. Lawal imagines that imaginary Ifè brass artists had understudied “a rich casting tradition” that existed in Òyó before all “traces” of casting were “carefully” eliminated in both places, like a bank robber erasing the fingerprints of a perfect crime, then a few years later he referred to a different folkloric plot that’s more entertaining but no less conspiratorial:

No relic of brass-casting has yet been found in the ruins of Òyó-Ilé; it is possible that not enough research has been carried on there. ... The strategic location of Òyó-Ilé on or near a major caravan must have afforded her an ample supply of raw materials<sup>[FN]</sup> as evidenced [sic] by both the Tsoede and Lower-Niger complexes. ... If the story that the seat of government was transferred from Ifè to Òyó-Ilé be correct<sup>[FN]</sup>, it might imply that the erstwhile Ifè royal brass casters were also transferred. Perhaps this is why brass-casting has not survived at Ifè as at Benin; nor can traces of past working be now found there, if all the implements had been carefully transported.<sup>[FN]</sup> (1971, 156f.)

One of the most baffling things about Ifè art is the conspicuous absence of any living trace in present day Ifè of the artistic tradition which produced these famous bronze and terracotta sculptures. The only explanation we have at present for this phenomenon is the story which tells of a mass slaughter of artists and sculptors at some point in the distant past, because they had conspired with some courtiers to keep the news of the death of a certain well-loved *Ọ̀pni* from the public. The bronze-casters had made an effigy of the deceased *Ọ̀pni* and placed it on the throne, and to this effigy the unsuspecting chiefs and other members of the court paid homage. But soon the trick was discovered; thereupon the heir apparent ordered the execution of all the artists.<sup>[FN]</sup> (1977a, 203)

Such empirical insouciance by art historians routinely draws the wrath of archaeologists, e.g.:

The succession of essentially unproven assumptions underlying this identification will be obvious although their continued repetition invests them with the status of fact which can hardly be justified and indeed, this kind of thing is the source of many of the problems that bedevil the writing of Afrian art history. (Craddock & Picton 1986, 10)

Lacking material support, the belief that Ifè practiced copper-alloy casting rests on just one prop: Egharhevba’s brief remark that Ifè founded Èdó’s *cire perdue* industry. That domino falls to verbal evidence of a less subjective type: a long list of Igbo etymologies in Èdó vocabulary, whether general in nature or specific to the exotic and specialized skill of copper-alloy casting (§2.9 below). The fabulists however bet the store on Egharhevba, none more than Willett.

<sup>157</sup> Fagg himself recognized that a tendency of later Èdó pieces to be thicker and heavier may have a simple material explanation in the arrival of brass manillas in larger quantity, providing an ever-cheaper casting medium for conspicuous display (Éyò 1977, 142).

## Willett the wishful

Invited to Nigeria in 1956 as the *protégé* of Bill and Bernard Fagg (Picton 2007, 13*f*), Willett inherited their premature certainty about artistic inheritance. Writing in Willett's obituary, his close colleague Picton candidly admits that

Frank [Willett] was entirely dependent on the interpretive framework proposed by William Fagg in which Ifè ceramic sculpture was the distant child of Nok; once the tradition was transferred into [sic] the medium of cast brass, Ifè was the ancestor [sic] of the art of Benin-City. (2007, 14)

Willett diligently brought modern Ifè's copper-alloy finds out of curio cabinets stocked by imperial treasure-hunts and into the public record of field archaeology. However, when his—and his patrons'—hopes were dashed that “evidence of bronze casting might be discovered” (1960, 240), rather than question this cherished prior, he grasped at one last straw: Egharhevba's claim—authoritatively endorsed by Murray and W. Fagg—that Èdó *cire perdue* casting skills came from Ifè. This prestigious precommitment pushed Willett so far out on a limb that he could herald an isolated low-grade Èdó plaque pulled from “a relatively recent rubbish pit in Ifè in 1940-41” (1967a, 186) by announcing “that the art-historical importance of the piece is *self-evident* in supporting the tradition of a connection between the casting traditions of Ifè and Benin” (1973, 10, italics added). Confirmation bias is the only explanation of this desperate claim.

Such leaps of faith landed painfully on the toes of professional colleagues. Connah's review of Willett (1967a) gripes that Ryder (1965)—a critique of Egharhevba—“is listed in the bibliography” but that “its arguments are ignored in the text” (1968b, 351). Willett presented Èdó potsherd pavements dated 1305±105AD as an example of “[t]he cultural influence of Ifè” (1967a, 104) but Connah considered this inference “unwise” (1968b, 351, cf. Williams 1974, 310 *fn.* 4) because “such pavements were being made in the Lake Chad region as early as the 8th century AD” (Connah 1968a, 315) i.e. long before the earliest known Ifè example. Werner & Willett's (1975) attempt to link Èdó metallurgy forensically to the Ifè finds was thoroughly debunked (Craddock 1985). In reply to Willett (1964), Shaw remonstrated:

It therefore seems difficult to understand how the idea of ‘brass is early, tin bronze is later’ at Benin was extracted from the evidence. ... The new evidence published here suggests that, if there is any correlation between chronology and metal content it is in fact the other way round, i.e. that bronze is early and brass is late. (1969, 86)

Willett & Fleming insisted that the “[s]eated figure from... the Nupe village of Tada... is clearly an Ifè work... and is perhaps the supreme masterpiece of Ifè founding” but still had to concede, “It is strange that it should have been traded over such a large distance, especially if, as traditions suggest, it travelled via Ídá [‘Idah’] the Ígàlà capital” (1976, 138*f*). Willett & Sayre found it “puzzling” that only one Tada item fits the alloy profile of the Ifè finds, and noted that this one is “a nearly pure copper” which would more reasonably suggest a separate origin from the others (2006, 64).

The theoretically laudable goal “to explain the unusual naturalism of the Ifè sculptures” without appealing to remote origins *à la* Frobenius and Fagg led Willett to suppose that apparent portraits like the life-size mask christened Òbàlùfòn (1967a, 33) had a functional analog “in mediaeval Europe, where royal funerals employed effigies of the deceased... with the purpose... of emphasizing the continuity of the [king's] authority through successive office-bearers” (1966, 34, 39). As a real Yorùbá counterpart for this role, he cited “naturalistic wooden effigies made in recent times for second burial ceremonies at Òghò [‘Òwò’], a hundred miles to the East” of Ifè (Willett 1966, 34), but an Òghò specialist judged this comparison “inadequate” and its reasoning “strange” (Abíòdún 1976, 7).<sup>158</sup>

Unable to prove *cire perdue* casting in Ifè, Willett demurred from replying to relentless critiques by Ryder, Shaw, Connah, Craddock, Williams, Eyò, Òbáyemí and Lawal. Such reticence never restrained a certain Oxford philosopher.

## Sir Robin, last-ditch defender of the realm

... *bloodied but unbowed*... *bloodied but unbowed*...  
(Horton 1979, 90, 93)

This pugilistic refrain above punctuates Robin Horton's punchy 40,000 word riposte to Ifè sceptics. Conceding most of the critiques of Ryder (1965), Òbáyemí (1976) and others unpersuaded by “Ifè pretensions to an accepted ‘paternal’ primacy among the dynasties descended from Odùduwà” (Law 1977a, 122), Horton retreats from the least believable Ifè beliefs—the *motte* that the Yorùbás came from Arabia or from the sky—and takes a defiant stand on the bland *bailey* that “Ifè became prominent *after* the main dispersal of the ancestral Yorùbá-speaking population from a homeland in the area of the Niger-Benue confluence” (1979, 94, original italics, cf. [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Motte-and-bailey\\_fallacy](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Motte-and-bailey_fallacy)).

Eventually Horton accepts to defend just two Ifè-centric ramparts:

- (i) that “a ‘classical’ political and artistic tradition... originated in Ifè and subsequently spread to Benin” (1979, 87)<sup>159</sup>
- (ii) that “the city [of Ifè] remained the ‘spiritual capital’ of Yorùbáland” (1979, 70).

Both of these closely written formulas drawn from standard Ifè dogma surrender more than they save. Point (i) amounts to Willett's final fallback, that Ifè's past prestige is *indirectly* proved by its reflections in the visible glory of Èdó (“Benin”) as interpreted by Egharhevba. It's a high stakes, long odds wager—not normally expected from a logical-positivist philosopher—to tie the historical veracity of Ifè's self-image to an unsubstantiated, selfinterested narrative.

Point (ii) is an undergraduate debater's gambit: “spiritual capital” can't be observed, but nimble rhetoric can deploy the verb *remain* to project an uncancellable presupposition into argumentative discourse. (Something can't be said to *remain* if it never *was there* to start with, cf. Lakoff (1970, 178). Even so, Horton acknowledges the lack of tangible historical traces of the key premise:

<sup>158</sup> Adépégba tried a less direct explanation for the controversial stylistic trait, turning to theories of political economy:

The growth of naturalism with autocracy is not peculiar to Nigerian art. In classical Greece and Rome there are evidences that the types of political set-up to some extent conditioned naturalism in art. In the democratic Greek city-states, the arts had no rulers to glorify hence they are mostly impersonal ‘perfect’ human representation. The naturalism of the portraits of the period, where it exists, can hardly be compared with the portraits of the time of Alexander the Great, or the portraits of the Romans whose political setup was dominated by certain individuals. (1983b, 31)

This thesis relies on the unprovable claim that medieval Ifè was significantly more ‘autocratic’ than medieval Èdó.

<sup>159</sup> Cf. “adoption and adaptation of the Ifè-centered innovations” in the “Yorùbá-Èdó region as a whole” (Ògúndìran 2003, 51).

Ifẹ influence depended on an *entente*, lasting from the middle of the 17th to the end of the 18th century, between the major successors to the city's economic and military power. ... [T]he evidence for this *entente* is still mainly of a negative kind... Another principal contention of this paper is that the *entente* encouraged the development of Ifẹ as an 'elder-statesmanly' and mediating center, and they the city discharged this function through the *Ifá* cult. (1979, 147)

In sum, Ifẹ supremacy was audibly silent, like the “dog... [that] did nothing in the night-time” (Conan-Doyle 1894, 50).

Nobody disputes “[t]he Ifẹ-centric nature of *Ifá*” (Apter 1987, 11) but the problem for (ii) is that the boundaries of “Yorùbáland” may be vague now but they were undefined centuries ago as far as anybody knows. In the multi-ethnic *Òokun* [LMM] zone, located near the same Niger-Benue confluence that Horton accepts as the “ancestral... homeland” of Yorùbá-speakers, the format of the duplex 4-bit oracle is “Agbigba” (Ògúnbiyí 1952, cited by Bascom 1969, 7, no tones), markedly closer to Ìgbo *Afa* and Èdó *Òminìghbon* in both form and content (Seton 1929, 43, Nadel 1953, 39, Qbáyemí 1979b, 1983, 83, cf. §1 above). Having apparently never heard of *Òminìghbon* at all, Horton wrongly assumed that the only duplex 4-bit oracle practiced in modern Èdó is *Ifá* alias *Òrónmìla* (1979, 123 citing Bradbury 1957, 54, cf. Gore 2007a, 36).<sup>160</sup> Even in nearby Ouidó the local version of *Ifá* shares with Èdó *Òrónmìla* a ranking order among the 16 basic *odù* different from what obtains in Ifẹ (Ìbiẹ 1986, 65). Thus as far as evidence goes, the effective boundaries of Horton's “Yorùbáland” in (ii) were not necessarily larger than those of its supposed “spiritual capital”.<sup>161</sup>

### Şijúwadé olóríi-túlè, Şoyínká olóríi-fake-tòkunbò<sup>162</sup>

“All we are saying is give us the head”

Yunifẹ student protest song, 7 June 1981  
(Belgore & al. 1981, 43)

We also have our myths, but we have never employed them  
as a base for the subjugation of others. (Şoyínká 1986)

The ink was not yet dry on Horton's lawyerly Ifẹ brief before the rule of law broke down between the Ifẹ palace and the adjacent town of Modééké, whose exonym (< *Modákékéké*) denotes bearers of *kékéké* ‘broad facial keloids’ representing the heritage of Ọyó, the 17th-18th century empire erased by the Sókoto *jihād* early in the 19th (Abraham 1958, 300, 364, Law 1977a, 280, Òké.diji 1998, 495). The Ifẹ-Modééké clashes that resumed in 1980 continued a century and a half of sporadic combat between Ọyó descendants and non-Ọyó fractions of the linguistic area now known as Yorùbá.<sup>163</sup>

The slogan “Yorùbá warfare in the 19th century” (Àjàyí & Smith 1964) is unhelpfully ambiguous, because the intended broad ethnic reference in this phrase is anachronistic. A name sounding close to “Yorùbá” was first narrowly applied by the Sókoto Caliphate to nonmuslims of Ọyó, then the scope of the expression expanded only in the latter 19th century as Bishop Àjàyí Crowther's Church Missionary Society constructed Yorùbá spelling from Ọyó speech, to the point that Anglophones started describing Ọyó speakers as “Yorùbá(s) proper” (*sensu stricto*), i.e. as a subset of the maximal area where Crowther's Yorùbá literacy was taught in schools (Burton 1863, 222, Johnson 1897, 8, Àjàyí 1960, cf. Awóniyí 1981 and Peel 2000a, 283, 384 citing Law 1977a, 5 and Farias 1990). More concisely put:

[I]t was only in the process of evolving a written form of the language that the name Yorùbá, formerly applied only to the Ọyó, came to be applied to all the [presently named] Yorùbá people. (Àjàyí 1974, 129)

Pace Peel, however, the eventual hegemony of Yorùbá selfconsciousness took more than “cultural work” (1989). The emergent shared identity was also molded by hard material forces: (i) encroachment from the savanna and the coast by soldiers of Sókoto and London and (ii) redirection of human trafficking into vegetable commodities controlled by

...the Royal Niger Company which, in the classical manner of chartered companies, used administrative as well as commercial weapons to drive out its competitors. (Hopkins 1973, 164, cf. Abraham 1958, 536).<sup>164</sup>

These external drivers of group awareness projected Ọyó culture in the transatlantic diaspora of the Middle Passage. Back home, however, Ọyó supremacy stalled halfway. From the 1820's to the end of 19th century, Ìbàdàn absorbed displaced Ọyó populations and tried to rebuild Ọyó power under new management, but met armed resistance. This struggle played out in Ifẹ and environs, well described by standard historiographers.

- 160 E.g. Jungwirth (1965) recorded a version of *Iyèrè Ifá* from the “Ifá-Òr[ó]nmìla Union” of Benin-City. Horton apparently missed Melzian's contrasting descriptions of *Òminìghbon/Ògwojéga* and *Òrónmìla/Ifá* (1937, 137f., 159), and his mistaken focus on the latter may have been reinforced by Qlá Rótímí's 1974 stageplay premiered at University of Ifẹ campus in December 1971 creatively re-imagining the 1897 overthrow of the Èdó kingdom by the British army. Bradbury—the other source Horton might have consulted—did cite *Òminìghbon* at least once (1961, 134) but never to my knowledge did he evaluate Egharheva (1936a) as a historical document.
- 161 Willet too could not resist saving unsubstantiated prehistory by invoking as evidence the very thing which was to be proved, citing “oral traditions in Ifẹ and elsewhere... that the Ifẹ empire covered the whole of Yorùbáland [sic] before the rise to dominance of the Old Ọyó Empire in the 17th century” (1986, 97).
- 162 *Olóríi túlè* ‘owner/seller/epitome of student's head’ cf. *túlè* ‘student’ < English *student* (Abraham 1958, 656) reinforced by folk etymology < *tú ilẹ̀* ‘pour downwards’ as if describing the posture of concentrated reading (Awóyalé 2008). *Oní fake tòkunbò* ‘owner/seller/epitome of illegitimate counterfeit’ (cf. *tòkunbò* ‘imported secondhand goods’ lit. ‘coming from the ocean’). The expression “fake *tòkunbò*” is observed by Guyer (2004, 91). Bowley (2017) reports a relevant example of recursive fakery of art: [www.buffpost.com/entry/damien-hirst-nigerian-art\\_n\\_5911b952e4b0e7021e9b1cde](http://www.buffpost.com/entry/damien-hirst-nigerian-art_n_5911b952e4b0e7021e9b1cde), [www.instagram.com/p/BT01TCq3Hf/](http://www.instagram.com/p/BT01TCq3Hf/) victorsozaboy (Victor Ehikhamenor) May 8, 2017 at 1:40am PDT  
This postcard of “Golden heads (Female)” by Damien Hirst with no reference to Ifẹ and great artists that originally made these timeless classic[s] will travel far and wide. Once again the hunter has glorified his tale in the absence of the lion.
- 163 Ethnically less tendentious labels for this cluster, covering Ígàlá and Íşèkiri and many local varieties (Adétúgbò 1967, Fresco 1970, Akínkugbè 1978), include *Yoruboid* (Capo 1985), *Defoid* (Capo 1989 < *èdè* ‘language’ cf. Abraham 1958, 148) and *Macro-Yoribá*.
- 164 Original name *Royal African Company*—slaving venture of the British state—then privatised as *West African Company* and merged with George Goldie's *United African Company/National African Company/Royal Niger Company* until 1900 when “the business of empire... had become the empire of business” (Said 1993, 23) and Goldie's jurisdiction was spun off as the colony “Nigeria” with its commercial side rebranded UAC, now *Unilever*. ‘Religion’ was not left out: the British Church Missionary Society invested in WAC which Bishop Crowther's son Joshua managed on the Niger in the 1870's (Flint 1960, 26 cited by Nzímíro 1962, 32). Neoliberals call mercantilist West Africa an “open economy” (Hopkins 1973, 168ff), glossing over the sense of “open” that describes the “veins of Latin America” (Galeano 1971, cf. Dalton 1976). To “open” the Niger basin in either sense, Goldie's “constabulary forces embarked on many punitive expeditions and other wanton acts of plunder and terrorism” (Asíégbu 1984, 261), just as General Pinochet's putsch jailed Chilean society in order to “open” the economy for Milton Friedman's “Chicago boys” (Klein 2007) on 11 September 1973.

With the establishment of the Fulani at Ilorin, free access to the north, which was formerly the main source of slaves, was seriously interrupted. The Yorùbá therefore turned on themselves to meet the demand for more slaves. [FN The old Spanish and Portuguese colonies in South America had just won their independence during this period and were in dire need of slaves to work their plantations.] The Ijèbú, whose country bordered the coastal areas, were the middlemen in this trade, and they soon started to encourage their neighbors, the Ifè, to engage in slave raiding. ... (Awé 1967, 13)

During the massive Ọyọ migrations southwards earlier in the [19th] century, a sizeable refugee population had grown up in Ilé-Ifè. ... [I]n the [eighteen]forties disagreements appeared and the refugees finally withdrew from the town and established just outside it a separate settlement. ... About 1850 open war erupted between the two and the Ifè were defeated and forced to abandon their town for five years. (Akintóyè 1971, 53)

In the 1870's, Ibàdàn carried a series of expeditions into Èkiti country and finally brought under subjection the Ijèšà who had been the greatest obstacle to its ascendancy to the northeast of Yorùbá country. [FN] With these new conquests, Ibàdàn had come to a position where it could dispense with the patronage of the *Aláájín*. ... Indeed the roles of Ibàdàn and Ọyọ were now effectively reversed not only in the politics of the Ọyọ community but in that of all Yorùbá land. ... [T]he Ijèbú, people of an old established kingdom, resented the fact that this upstart town which could not even boast of a crowned head in its town should supercede well-established kingdoms and defy all crowned heads. ... In Ọfà and Ilé-Ifè, Ibàdàn's allies Ọfà and Mọdákéké were also attacked by the Ilorin Fulani and the inhabitants of Ilé-Ifè respectively. ... Moreover the *Aláájín* was in secret collusion with the enemies of Ibàdàn. ... (Awé 1967, 23f)

Ilé-Ifè itself barely escaped being swamped by creating a separate town of Mọdákéké just outside its own walls. ... The Ifè people. ... had welcomed many Ọyọ migrants in the hope that they were acquiring valuable tenants aamd cheap labor for their farms. ... The Ọyọ complained that they were treated as slaves, being made to build Ifè houses, clean their farms, perform all sorts of menial tasks and above all pay heavy rent for the land they tilled. ... Twice, in 1850 and 1881, Mọdákéké sacked Ilé-Ifè and drove the *Ọ̀ni* and his people into exile. (Ajáyí 1974, 150)

After the British-imposed military stalemate of 1900, the war of Ijèbú and Ifè against Ibàdàn and other remnants of Ọyọ moved onto an ideological plane. In 1945 Obáfèmi Awóló.wò, an Ijèbú barrister in London, launched Egbé Ọmọ Odùduwà, adopting Ifè as the symbol of Yorùbá postcolonial rebirth and making the ambiguous object that Frobenius christened “Orí Oló.kun” into the badge of pan-Yorùbá identity. Back in Nigeria however, political mobilization by *àwọn aláákòwé*—the literate modernists—faced frustration. In the 1940's, Adélabú Adégòkè an Ibàdàn populist formed Egbé Ọmọ Ibílè excluding Ijèbú “strangers” (*àjèjì*) resident in the city (Sklar 1963, 289-320). In 1962, barrister Ládokè Akintólá, a gifted orator and cultural conservative whose cheeks bore the *ké ké ké*-lroids of rustic, Ọyọ-descended Ọgbómòsọ (Ọşúntó.kun 1984), split from Awóló.wò and formed a parliamentary pact with Ahmadu Bello, *Sardaunā* of Sòkoto and head of the ruling Northern Peoples Congress. In 1963 Awóló.wò was jailed for treason, then in January 1966 both Akintólá and Bello were assassinated in the early hours of Major Nzeógwù's failed coup that aimed “to install Chief Awóló.wò as executive president” (Luckham 1971, 21ff., 42 fn 3 citing Şólá.rin 1967, cf. Akínrè fón 2019).<sup>165</sup>

After the counter-coup of 1966, Awóló.wò was pardoned and deployed in the federal war against secessionist Biafra, but his newfound loyalty to a unitary nation-state didn't erase the historic rifts in the Yorùbá ethnic zone. The Ifè palace continued exacting *omó ịsákòlè* ‘ground-rent’ from Mọdékéké peasants until 1978, when General Ọbásanjó signed a “[d]ecree... abolishing the customary proprietary rights of families and individuals—and traditional rulers—over both developed and undeveloped land” (Vaughan 2000, 149, cf. Lloyd 1962, 63f., Berry 1988). This dictatorial enclosure of rentable demesne, imposed under pretext of neoliberal economic rationality, had the immediate and intended consequence to endow a neofeudal cadre of top military officers with vast *latifundia* like Ọbásanjó Farms, Ọ̀tà.<sup>166</sup>

Ọbásanjó's 1978 landgrab reignited 19th century strife. In December 1980, when Awóló.wò's Unity Party of Nigeria (UPN) government of Ọyọ State installed Şjjuwádé as *Ọ̀ni* of Ifè, a war of machetes, arrows and guns rained on the newly liberated Mọdékéké serfs (Ọlání.yan 1992, Vaughan 1988, 47ff., 2000, 188-92). On 1 June 1981 the headless body of 'Bùkólá Arógundádé, a history student of the University of Ifè (Yunifè), was found at Ifè's Odò Ọgbé shrine. The following weekend, Yunifè hosted the 1st World Ọrişà Conference, financed by Şjjuwádé himself (Abimbólá & Miller 1997, 31) and marking Prof. Wándé Abimbólá's title of *Àwíşé Àgbáyé* ‘world ambassador’ of *Ifá*. On Sunday 7 June after overnight rain, I woke up in a hotel near the campus gate and cadged a lift to the canteen to buy *àkàrà*. The car's other occupants were students discussing how to protest the recent ritual slaughter of their colleague. That afternoon, Prof. Abimbólá urged conference participants to avoid Ifè town. With a private message to deliver on Mòdòrè Street I rushed to board a *kombi* bus, which halted halfway on damp tarmac littered with stones and shoes. Not long before, “several thousands” of students had carried an empty coffin toward the palace while singing the above-quoted refrain to the tune of John Lennon's 1969 anthem “Give peace a chance”. As the cortège reached the crossroads, federal police shot in the air and stampeded four students into fatal contact with an ungrounded electric pole in front of Mayfair Hotel.

Two months later Wólé Şóyínká, Professor of Dramatic Arts at Yunifè and founder (cf. Bàabàngidáa 2018) of Ọyọ State Road Safety Corps—the freshly minted UPN militia—staged an interrogation in Corps premises, Ibàdàn, trying to browbeat an “illiterate” Senior Mortuary Attendant of Yunifè to disown the university pathologist's finding of electrocution, as if to deflect responsibility from Şjjuwádé onto the federal police (Belgore & al. 1981, 112f., 153-60). Ọ̀ni Şjjuwádé escaped accountability and “[a]fter renewed conflict in 1996, reports of killings on both sides defied imagination” (Olúpònà 2011, 48). As for Şóyínká, his coy self-deprecation *olórikunkun* ‘stubborn-headed’ (2006, 213) euphemises a rap sheet that includes one armed hijack, two kidnaps and one count of intercontinental petty larceny. After his meddling in the Mayfair massacre, the charge of “hypocritical self-righteousness” that he penned for others was returned to him by the Yunifè pathologist (Şóyínká 1972, 16, 1994, Belgore & al. 1981, 154, cf. Má.jà-Pearce 2007).

1981 was not the first time the dramaturge delved unbidden into the matter of a missing cranium.<sup>167</sup> Two years before, he had veteran researcher Pierre *Fátúmbi* Verger sequestered by the same dictator Ọbásanjó, affording Şóyínká

165 Awóló.wò vs. Akintólá in Nigeria was more than analogous to Nkrumah vs. Danquah in Ghana. These two rivalries were directly linked in the charge proffered at his treason trial that Awóló.wò the Fabian socialist had conspired with pro-Moscow Nkrumah to overthrow the Nigerian first Republic—an accusation in tune with Whitehall anticommunism which was the alleged motive for “British election tampering against the Action Group in 1956” (Vickers 2011, cf. Lapping 1985, 384-86, Mason 2007). The struggle of federally-aligned Ọyọ elements against regional Awoists continued in 21st century Ibàdàn as *Alhaji* Lamidi Adedibú made and unmade successive governors of Ọyọ State while the neo-military PDP controlled Abuja [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lamidi\\_Adedibu](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lamidi_Adedibu).

166 “The Land Use Act is a military document” said Jiti Ọgúnýè, a lawyer. “It was made by the Olúşégun Ọbásanjó administration in 1978 at a time when the federal government was intervening in businesses, institutions and all walks of life of the people”... He also condemned the fact that the Act was by a departing military government in its bid to protect its “land grab” adding that Ọbásanjó himself had acquired “a large expanse of land... in the name of farming. They needed to have that law in place and prevent people... from coming back to them to ask why did you take the land.” Mr. Ọgúnýè said further that the Act was inserted in the 1979 constitution to make its amendment difficult. (Adébáyó 2009)

167 A fixation recalling the precocity of the Jolly Roger skull, emblem of the Pyrates Confraternity which he co-founded in Ibàdàn in 1952, see archive photos at: [jojonaija.com/throwback-photos-wole-sayinka-and-his-friends-that-founded-the-pirates-confraternity](https://jojonaija.com/throwback-photos-wole-sayinka-and-his-friends-that-founded-the-pirates-confraternity).

and a hapless confederate the opportunity to dash ahead to Salvador, Bahia, bluff their way into the home of Verger's friend the sculptor Carybe and snatch a small figure which they credulously believed to be the same one that Frobenius tried to swipe in 1910. In both capers, the pilferers acted on the same myth—first conjured by Frobenius, then amped by Awólò.wò's civil religion (cf. Voegelin 1938)—that the treasure's serene face depicts the Oló.kun divinity.

Verger's side of the story, never published in English, was recorded by his biographers in Brazil:

À Lagos, juste avant l'embarquement à l'aéroport pour retourner au Brésil, [Verger] est arrêté sur des motifs inventés (trafiquant d'armes ou d'œuvres d'art, agent de l'Afrique du Sud...), dénoncé pour des motifs rocambolesques (le vol d'une sculpture en bronze d'Ifè connue comme la tête d'Oló.kun) par certains collègues de l'université nigériane qu'il croyait être des amis (Wáńdè Abímǒbǒlá, Wólé Šóyínká, Olábiyi Yáí), jeté en prison sans recours et ainsi humilié à l'âge de 77 ans. [FN 112: Verger aurait notamment été dénoncé à la police en raison de la jalousie de Wáńdè Abímǒbǒlá (Verger avait fait une copie de tous ses enregistrements sur Ifá pour l'Université d'Ifè, mais Abímǒbǒlá aurait souhaité accaparer l'ensemble de ses archives). Quelques jours auparavant, Verger s'était opposé à Wólé Šóyínká qui appuyait alors la thèse de l'existence d'un racisme politique de nature génocidaire au Brésil. Deux professeurs de l'université d'Ifè, W. Šóyínká, futur prix Nobel de littérature et alors à la tête du département de théâtre, et Olábiyi Yáí, se rendent rapidement à Salvador et trouvent dans la maison bahianaise du peintre et sculpteur Carybé un copie de la tête d'Oló.kun que ce dernier a lui-même réalisée et qu'ils supposent être l'original. Ils se ramènent au Nigeria où ils s'aperçoivent qu'elle n'est qu'une modeste copie en plâtre d'une réplique en bronze de la pièce du British Museum...

En ce qui concerne l'étude de la divination, [Verger] tenta sans succès de faire publier au Nigeria dans les années 1970 le corpus d'histoires d'Ifá qu'il a recueilli. ... En 1966, il déclare avoir recueilli plus de 4,000 histoires d'Ifá, "d'intérêt plus ou moins grand, mais toutes contribuent à définir la structure et correspondances du système d'Ifá" ainsi que d'avoir enregistré, retranscrites en yorubá et traduites en français plus de 600 de ces histoires. [FN 71: Titres et travaux (sept. 1966), 35.] Étant donné que plusieurs histoires se chevauchent ou constituent des variations proches, le corpus effectivement recueilli puis retranscrit peut être ramené au final à environ 2,000 histoires distinctes. (Souty 2007, 104, 106, 337, citing Nóbrega & Echeverría 2002, 270-75)<sup>168</sup>

Elements of this report can be partly corroborated. (i) In April 2009, Fundação Verger in Salvador allowed Prof. 'Sopé Oyèlá.ràn and myself to examine several meticulously typed, partly tonemarked *Ifá* transcripts, each indexed to a numbered audiotape.<sup>169</sup> A remarkable feature of these foolscap folios is that the names of sacrificial plants are typed in green ribbon ink, and those of animals in red. (ii) Verger eventually published excerpts of two texts "collected from Awótúndé Awóríndé in Ōşogbo in 1969" and marked "Recording P.V. XII-28" and "xx-9" (1989, 168f., 186-88).<sup>170</sup> Maybe it's a coincidence that Abímǒbǒlá credits the same *awo* for one poem, recorded in Lagos in December 1968, in his UNESCO anthology of 16 *Ifá* texts, whereas the other 15 chants in this book were all performed in Ōyó by a different *awo*, namely Oyèdédélé İşólá, at various times (1975, 178-207, 463f.). That the two scholars' sources intersected even to this minor and possibly accidental extent is at least consistent with the unanswered allegation that professional rivalry led to the covert appropriation of primary data.

Šóyínká's own potential motive in the affair was something else again. Barring an undisclosed personal grudge, his intervention could have been nothing more than an expensive Walter Mitty ego trip, and if so, the quest for notoriety didn't fail, because bad publicity is still publicity of a sort, even if Pinky Panther finally failed to solve the cold Frobenius case.<sup>171</sup> Verger boycotted Nigeria for the last 16 years of his life and Šóyínká, unable to apologise in person, waited ten *more* years after Verger's death before acknowledging the researcher's "rough treatment at the hands of the police, and... betrayal by trusted colleagues" while still floating a delicately phrased post-mortem evading primary responsibility:

...unfortunately, it was Pierre's impish sense of humor that had triggered off a chain of events... Pierre died some years ago. Reconciliation with that misused scholar was one that I truly craved, but appeasement must now be delayed until our reunion under the generous canopy of Ōrúnmilá [sic]. (Šóyínká 2006, 260f.)

Having blamed the victim as craven self-exoneration requires, Šóyínká added three insults-upon-injury: (i) downplaying the offense (using *misused* in the impersonal passive), (ii) traducing theology (do Yorúbá ancestors meet in 'heaven?') and (iii) botching the diacritics of Ōrúnmilá (did proofreading *also* traduce when the man kept silent in the face of injustice?).

Šóyínká's Ifè exploits suit both available construals of the characterizing nominalization *olóri*. (i) By taking Carybé's tourist trinket he became a transitive *olóri-fake-tókumbò*, holder of a replica (intentional fake) head that traveled by sea (*òkun*). Although Frobenius' baptism of "Orí Oló.kun" was speculative, the gift-shop copy did cross the Atlantic (twice) in transiting from London to Salvador to Dakar. (ii) Then, in his equally vain cameo role in the Ifè student autopsy, Šóyínká played not 'Robbin' Head' the righteous outlaw, but Sheriff of the Highway Patrol befitting the intransitive version of *olóri*, not *possessor-of-(someone's)-head* but *person-at-the-head (of something)* as in *caposquadrista* or "road safety boss" (Belgore & al. 1981, 153). The authoritarian itch was apparently not sufficiently scratched in 1980, because our hero has now accepted the commission of "Grand Marshall [sic]" in *Àmòtè kùn* 'Leopard'—a new-minted autodéfense militia of Yorúbá-speaking states—as if to finally "proclaim his tigritude" according to a famous *įjalá*-infused anti-*négritude* riposte of 1962 (Šóyínká 1977/2019, 86 cf. Jahn 1966, 242f./1968, 265f., Babalólá 1966 and induction selfie below).

<sup>168</sup> [In Lagos, just before boarding a flight back to Brazil, Verger was arrested on trumped up charges (arms- or art-trafficker, South African spy...), having been accused on incredible grounds (theft of an Ifè brass sculpture called *Head of Oló.kun*) by come Nigerian university colleagues he had regarded as his friends (Wáńdè Abímǒbǒlá, Wólé Šóyínká, Olábiyi Yáí), thrown in jail without appeal and so humiliated at the age of 77. [FN: Verger was notably reported to the police due to the jealousy of Wáńdè Abímǒbǒlá (Verger had duplicated all his own *Ifá* recordings for the University of Ifè, but Abímǒbǒlá wanted to grab all his archives). Several days before, Verger had disagreed with Wólé Šóyínká who held the view that genocidal political racism existed in Brazil. Two professors of the University of Ifè, W. Šóyínká, future Nobel laureate in literature and then Head of the Dept. of Theater, and Olábiyi Yáí, dashed to Salvador and found in the Bahian house of the painter and sculptor Carybé a copy of the *Head of Oló.kun* which Carybé had himself made and which they believed to be the original. They returned to Nigeria where they realized that it was only a modest plaster copy of a bronze replica in the British Museum...]

As to divination, in the 1970's Verger unsuccessfully tried to publish in Nigeria the corpus of Ifá stories he had collected. ... In 1966 he claimed to have more than 4,000 Ifá stories "of more or less interest, all helping to define the structure of the Ifá system", and to have recorded, transcribed in Yorúbá and translated in French more than 600 of these stories. [FN...]

As some stories overlapped or were variants, the full set collected and transcribed may amount to 2,000 distinct stories.]

<sup>169</sup> Thanks to the Foundation's research director Prof. A. Lühning and to the library staff for their warm cooperation during our visit. Regrettably on that brief occasion we were unable to listen to any of Verger's archival audio or to clarify the extent of holdings of *Ifá* oracle texts conserved in whatever medium.

<sup>170</sup> The *awo* is portrayed on the sleeve of his LP recording (Awóríndé 1965, [people.bu.edu/manfredi/AwotundeAworinde1965.jpg](http://people.bu.edu/manfredi/AwotundeAworinde1965.jpg)).

<sup>171</sup> Šóyínká framed the 1979 caper as substitute fulfilment of his vow circa 1976 that "a task force of specialists... including foreign mercenaries if necessary—be set up to bring back the treasure" [sc. the FESTAC emblem mask] (2006, 223 quoted by Savoy 2021). Šóyínká's disclaimer "I never really looked for fame" [www.theguardian.com/books/2021/sep/25/wole-soyinka-this-book-is-my-gift-to-nigeria](http://www.theguardian.com/books/2021/sep/25/wole-soyinka-this-book-is-my-gift-to-nigeria) is nuanced by how the protégés of Beier's CIA-funded joints *Black Orpheus* and *Mbári* were groomed to ethnic forms of anticolonial consciousness a.k.a. "strategic essentialism" (Suhr-Sytsma 2017, 69 citing Spivak 1987, 205, Rubin 2012, 9, cf. Ogbecchie 2021).



(Photos: [pic.twitter.com/ucdpwPBP8W](https://pic.twitter.com/ucdpwPBP8W), [pic.twitter.com/OZr6masHX5](https://pic.twitter.com/OZr6masHX5), both via Kabir 2021)

## 2.9 Igbonic art, Igbonic authority

Not only material deposits rest beneath modern consciousness: non-folk etymologies also wait to be exhumed. Three linguistic fossils disprove Egharhevba's asserted art history and along with it, Willett's desperate, dependent plea for Ifè authorship of the figurative casts recovered in Ifè itself. Lexical echoes of unmistakable Igbo origin demonstrably occur in two proper names traditionally linked to Èdó bronze—including the legendary founding *fondeur* of *cire perdue* named by Egharhevba himself—as well as in a semantic doublet of a technical term for the Èdó bronzeworkers' guild. The conjunction of these independent measures is statistically unlikely to be the random noise of stray phonetic accidents.

### Èdó *cire perdue*: two names and a semantic doublet

"Igue-Igha" the ancestral Èdó "brass smith" (Egharhevba 1953, 12) subsequently rewritten as "Iguegha" (1960, 11) is "a rather strange name for an Ifè man" (Éyò 1977, 134; cf. Lawal 1977a, 198). Today may unfortunately be too late to verify the pronunciation independently, thanks to intervening 'blowback' from published writing into oral tradition:

Egharhevba's books have been avidly read in Benin and even where an informant has not himself read the book he may have had it read to him or at least have been influenced by it, perhaps unconsciously, in conversation.

(Bradbury 1959, 268)

The *Short History of Benin* didn't assign an Ifè origin to this persona until the book's second, 1936 edition (Ùsuánléle & Fálólá 1998, 377f). The name has no parse in either Èdó or Yorùbá, but is intelligible in Igbo with an apt interpretation.

Depending on whether it's treated as a nominal compound or a gerundive phrase, *ìgwè ìhìgha* [H<sup>!</sup>H LLL] can be glossed as 'oozing/glittering/molten metal' or 'the burning of metal with a hot instrument' (cf. Ígwè 1999, 227, 245, 266).<sup>172</sup> This Igbo decipherment yields Egharhevba's Èdó spelling—especially the first printed version thereof—under two simple and independently valid phonetic hypotheses:

- (i) *ìhìgha* > *ìgha* obeys a productive Èdó rule of anticipatory identical consonant elision in adjacent syllables, as in *éggogo* > *égo* 'bell' (Òmózùwá 1989, cf. Wescott 1962a, 92), *Àkpàkpávà* > *Aakpávà* [Street] or for that matter in Èdó pronunciations of English *newspaper* > *nèùspà* and *exercise* > *èṣàìz*.<sup>173</sup>
- (ii) If the Èdó voiced glottal fricative [ɦ] is a "free variant" (Wescott 1962a, 45) of velar [ɣ] spelled *gh*, loanword rule inversion gives [ìgwéìgha] as a possible Èdó rendition of the proposed Igbo string with *h*. *H*>*gh* substitution is also likely because the eastern Yorùbá towns of Egharhevba's childhood have [ɣ] corresponding to Ọyó *h* in items like *èghín* = *ìbín* 'here' and *òghón* = *òhún* 'there' (Adétúgbò 1967, 210-12).

Nor is "Igue-igha" the only presumptive Igbo name linked to the arrival of lost-wax casting in Èdó. Another appears in roughly transcribed rapid translations of "native traditions, collected from some of the more important natives... Chief Ariyo, Court Historian; Chief Eseri, Ossa, Osuon, Ju Ju Men; Chief Ihollo, Master Smith... by Sir Ralph Moor, K.C.M.G. and Mr. Roupell... at Benin city in November 1897" as follows:

This is how the white men came to *Ado* [Èdó]: King *Esigie* [Ésìgìe] or *Osawe* [Òsawé] was very old and could not walk about, but all the time he could [would] tell his boys that he was [saw] a white man when he was born, and he wanted to see [a] white man again before he died. So they sent messengers with some tusks as presents to the country by the big water where white men used to come, and they told the messenger to go and salute any white man they found there, and beg him to come; which they did. And ever since then white men have come to Benin. The white men stayed long, many many years; they came to trade, and if a man comes to trade he must sit down and sell his things softly, softly,—they used to buy ivory, redwood, oil, gum and slaves, but principally ivory—in return they brought guns, powder, rum, salt, cloth and silk. Then there was a different white man who used to come, but he bought only slaves. When he came, a messenger used to come before him to tell everyone he was coming; then if a man had any slaves to sell, he could send to farm to get them. But he only paid a poor price, 1-4 bags.

These white men used to sit down [*stay*] at *Gwatto* [Úghòtón] and there they built houses, big houses with big doors where they kept their goods and slaves. We never heard of these white men bringing white women here, but the king could dash them some girl for wife. When the white men came, in the time when *Esigie* was king, a man named **Ahammangiwa** came with them. He made brasswork and plaques for the king, he stayed a very long time—he had many wives but no children—the king gave him plenty of boys to teach. We can make brasswork now, but not as he made it, because he and all his boys are dead. [...]

<sup>172</sup> In the proposed Igbo etymology of Egharhevba's "Igue-igha", the initial constituent is *ìgwè* 'iron/metal/bicycle/sewing machine/titan' (Ígwè 1999, 245), then regular phrasal prosody raises the final syllable of *ìgwè* HL to downstepped H. *Ígwè* also happens to be the surname of the great grammarian whose name is perpetually mispronounced—to his bemusement—by fellow Igbo speakers using H!H tones as if to say the distinct lexical item meaning 'sky, heaven, chief' (1999, 245). Perhaps they do so with devout intent because he's an ordained reverend, but their piety is misdirected: Ígwè's works of scholarship show him not to be a flighty sky-dweller but rather a human titan with the strength and sharpness of iron itself!

<sup>173</sup> Similar onset deletions apply in spoken varieties of Yorùbá and northern Igbo (Abímbólá & Oyèlárán 1975; Manfredi 1991, 55).

When *Osogboa* [Ōrhòǒgbà] was king, he sent his messengers to the king of *Igbon* [Ìgbon], a country near the Niger—but the king of *Igbon* was bad and killed the messengers—then *Osogboa* vex, and he sent war against *Igbon* and caught the king and plenty of his people. When they brought them, *Osogboa* called **Ahammangiwa** and his boys, and asked them if they could put them in brass. They said, ‘We can try’: so they did, and those are they. Then the king nailed them on the wall of his house. The other plaques are pictures of white men, friends of the kings and **Ahammangiwa**, but who they are or their names we do not know who they are. The white men’s house is near *Obayagbon*’s [Ōbahiagbon’s]—it is where the first king put them—it has always been kept up ever since—it has fallen in now since the war.

**Ahammangiwa** was a white man. In the time of *Esemede* [Ōsémwèdè], *Overumi*’s [Ōvónrànmwèn’s] grandfather, white men named **Ayniaju** (the man without eyebrows) and another named *Cappy Dor* used to live and trade at *Gwatto*... (Read & Dalton 1899, 5f., cf. Roth 1903, 229f. boldface added)<sup>174</sup>

How informative is this published text?<sup>175</sup> One positive sign is that thermoluminescence dates (§2.8 above) match the attribution of the palace plaques to *Ōmọ n’Ōba* Ōrhòǒgbà of the 16th century (Bradbury 1959, 285). Other details imply an *Ìgbo* identity for the plaques’ creator, depending on how some garbled expressions are understood:

- (i) That *Ahammangiwa* is a bad spelling job is shown by other quoted names whose Èdó pronunciations—given above in brackets—are masked by garbling or the influence of nearby languages: “Gwatto”, the initial *a* in “Ado”, the lack of rhotacism in “Osogboa”. In published literature, the only guess for the source of *Ahammangiwa* is Arabic (e.g. Williams 1974, 125), but any imaginable resemblance to Arabic names like *Ahmadu* is remote at best. Luschan prudently refused “to opine about such a piece of information before hearing from a proper scholar of Westafrican soundshifts how a word pronounced *Ahammangiwa* today would have sounded in the 16th century” (1919, 22).<sup>176</sup> No phonetic time machine is needed to find ordinary *Ìgbo* personal names like *Àhà-ń* ‘My name’, *Ajù-nwa* ‘Doesn’t/shouldn’t refuse/never refuses child[birth]’ (e.g. [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chioma\\_Ajunwa](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chioma_Ajunwa)) and *Àhà-ń-ajù* [HL-H-H!H].<sup>177</sup> These forms are automatically understood by *Ìgbo* culture bearers as truncating full sentences like *Àhà-ń-efùla* ‘My family name should not become extinct’ and *Ōba-ajù-nwa* ‘The community never refuses childbirth’ (Èchèrúó 1979, Ûbàhàkwé 1981, 48) which, taken together, predict the existence of a name \**Àhà-ń-ajù-nwa* ‘My family name never refuses childbirth’—a string unknown to *Google*’s Orwellian panopticon, but judged plausible by a fluent *Mbàisàn* *Ìgbo* speaker (Û. Ìhiònú *p.c.*). Familiar loanword rules like *Ìgbo* *-j* > Èdó *-g* (cf. *fn.* 118 above) suggest how an Èdó pronunciation of \**Àhà-ń-ajù-nwa* could get mangled as *Ahammangiwa* in the distorted transcript made in a British inquest under duress. *Ìgbo*-internal soundshifts entail that anyone who confers the name \**Àhà-ń-ajù-nwa* hails from the east side of the Niger river.<sup>178</sup>
- (ii) The text “he was a white man when he was born, and he wanted to see [a] white man again before he died” is nonsensical if applied by *Ōba* Èsìgìe to himself, but can be made sensible—and consistent with anaphoric “again”—by emending “was” to *san*. In that sentence, “white man” clearly stands for Èdó *Ébó* ‘European’ but *Ahammangiwa* himself isn’t called an *Ébó*, he only “came *with* them” (italics added).<sup>179</sup> However, as later applied by the interpreter to *Ahammangiwa*, “white man” could represent a different Èdó expression, either *òmwan n’ó fua* ‘person of white color’ i.e. of light complexion or else *ényaè* ‘albino’ (Melzian 1937, 54, 62, cf. Jones 1983, 40 = Crecelius 1879, 117). Pidgin “the great water” is ambiguous in context between two Èdó lexemes: *òkún* ‘the sea’ and *Ōhimwin* ‘the River Niger’.<sup>180</sup> Ryder preferred the freshwater interpretation (1965, 25f.) which is plausible because much of the region’s commerce moved through *Ìgbo*-speaking Niger river ports (cf. Nzimiro 1972).<sup>181</sup> *Ayniaju*, referencing another of the ethnically ambiguous “white men”, is tagged “the man without eyebrows” which is very close in meaning to a homophonous *Ìgbo* phrase *ányà ajù* ‘eyes don’t blink’.<sup>182</sup> This could have been conferred on an individual of any ethnicity, but it was definitely coined by a speaker of *Ìgbo*, attesting an *Ìgbo* presence in early 19th century Èdó commerce.<sup>183</sup>

The tin ears of colonial scribes can’t hide the *Ìgbo* biography of the 16th-century individual credited by palace chiefs as artist of the palace plaques. An *Ìgbo* analysis also explains Egharheva’s odd spelling of the reputed first Èdó “brass smith” decoded above. Both names disprove Egharheva’s story whether or not they refer to the same person.<sup>184</sup>

174 Italics in the published version appear random. Here I italicise all proper names and phonetically retranscribe each first mention.

175 If the original scribal document still exists in British occupation archives, it may contain more clues.

176 [I]ch würde es für sehr unvorsichtig halten, zu einer solchen Angabe Stellung zu nehmen, ehe wir von einem wirklichen Kenner west-sudânischer Lautverschiebungsgesetze erfahren, wie ein heute »Ahammangiwa« gesprochenes Wort im 16. Jahrhundert ausgesagen hat...

177 The first comment on [igberetvnews.com/100167/just-in-biafra-as-soludo-weigs-in-for-kanu](https://igberetvnews.com/100167/just-in-biafra-as-soludo-weigs-in-for-kanu) has the screen name “Ahamaju” (no diacritics).

178 The only *Ìgbo* dialects pronouncing ‘name’ with *-b-* are spoken east of the Niger (Ward 1941, 35). The regular correspondence of *-b-* to *-f-* in *àbà* = *àfà* ‘name’, *èbì* = *èfì* ‘cow’, *bá* = *fá* ‘3pl.’ etc. can be reconstructed as \**pn*—a glottalized (lenited) bilabial plosive onset in a nasalised syllable—or as a longer formula expressing the same phonetic equation (Williamson 2000; Ōhirí-Aníichè 2003). The date at which *-b-* developed in these words by debuccalization is unlikely to be less than 500 years ago.

179 Like Yorùbá *Ōyìnbó*, Èdó *Ébó* can also refer to an African person who is prosperous, pretentious or literate, e.g. Burton (1863a, 238).

180 E.g. “On the lower reaches, the natives speak of it as the ‘Big Water’. The addition of the word ‘salt’ serves to distinguish the sea from the river among the [Ìg]bo people” (Basden 1938, 110).

181 Direct observations of pre-19th century commerce are rare. Ìjèòma summarizes those of the 1841 British expedition:

Up to about the mid-19th century, the states of *Àbó* and *Ígàlà* virtually controlled the bulk of the trade on the Lower Niger and did the policing of their spheres of influence. *Ígàlà* would appear to have given safe conduct from *Ahàba* to the confluence of the Benue, while *Àbó* policed from *Ahàba* to its location at the apex of the delta. (1983, 39)

182 Ígwè (1999, 282) doesn’t cite the root-*jù* ‘flog/bat’ in collocation with *ányà* ‘eye(s)’ but it occurs in a proverb given to me in October 1976 by the *Ōjòbù* (< *Ōgì obò*) of *Ágbò*: *Élu aafú ihian o jùbèni ényá* ‘Life never hurts you to the extent that you stop blinking your eyes’.

183 Similarly, how the looted Èdó “cockerel” icon that became the mascot of Jesus College, Cambridge came to bear the distinctly *Ìgbo* name *òkúkò* ‘hen’ (colonial spelling “okukor”, Hertz 2016, Robinson 2016, further garbled by the BBC as “okukur”, Akinpèlú 2021) may show mere scribal incompetence rather than a trace of artistic authorship. ‘Hen’ in Èdó is *òkúkòkòkò*, whereas ‘cockerel’ in both languages is *òkpa* (Melzian 1937, 165, 172, Ígwè 1999, 662, 667). Upon repatriation, the label of *òkpa* was restored (Ìbílé.kè 2021).

184 The hypothesis of *Ìgbo* authorship of Èdó copper-alloy art may not be new. Horton cites Ryder (1965) via Williams (1974) for “traditions to the effect that the techniques and style [of the palace plaques] were brought by a white man from over the sea or by ‘the *Ìgbon*’” (1979, 76). However, careful review of both Ryder and Williams finds no basis for this attribution. Maybe Horton misread Read & Dalton’s remark that the plaques depict *Ìgbon* *captives* (“put them in brass”) or else his intended reference was garbled in the historian’s traditional footnote format. Either way, the suggestion has solid empirical support of which Horton himself was unaware.

The finding that Èdó lost-wax expertise had an Ìgbo origin is reinforced by an independent detail of palace bronze-casters. In Èdó and sibling languages, *òtu* (LL) denotes an age-grade cohort (Melzian 1937, 151, Elimelech 1976, 121), but in Benin-City it also refers to the Ìgùn bronze-casting lineage (Agbontaen-Eghafona 2010, 25 citing Omogegie 1997). By contrast, the Ìgbo homophone *òtu* (LL) *excludes* the meaning of age grade—which in Ìgbo is *ùke* LL—and denotes instead any initiation guild or club (Williamson 1972, 387f., Ìgwè 1999, 621, 780). Precisely this extra meaning as found in Èdó is limited to the hereditary *cire perdue* workers of the palace, so the latter usage is a presumptive Ìgbonism of Èdó bronze.

Alongside *cire perdue* casting, another plausible instance of Ìgbo artistic influence in Èdó is the monumental genre of “mud sculpture” best known from Ìgbo *mbàrì* communal temples and from Èdó *Ólokún* altars (Beier 1956b, 1963a, Ben-Amos 1972, Peek 1976, 39, Izevbigie 1978, 1987, Cole 1982). Unfired clay is ephemeral—intentionally so for *mbàrì* spirit houses, sacrificially abandoned to decay in the forest—but westward transmission of this style left intermediate tracks in Úrhonúgbe (“Usonigbe”), Ólokún’s legendary home 80 km east of Èdó, leading Odokuma to conclude that

...the origins of the medium and concept, particularly those representing Ólokún, most likely stemmed from the western Ìgbo area and later spread to other neighboring areas through the river Ethiope. (2011, 47)

### Èdó palace organization

Egharhevba’s third pillar of Ifè infrastructure in Èdó is monarchy—the focus of Àjàyí’s 2004 attack on *Òmọ n’Óba* Erediaun (§2.3 above). Like alleged Ifè primacy in Èdó *cire perdue* art and in the Óminigbón oracle, so also the reputed “common origin” (Bradbury 1964, 159) of Ifè and Èdó kings rests on modern hearsay, and in this case, any possible glimpse of Ìgbo influence is blocked in advance by the colonial stereotype of southeast Nigeria as “stateless” and lacking paramount “chiefs with substantial territorial jurisdiction” (Meek 1937, x, Fortes & Evans-Pritchard 1940, 5). “Chiefs in the Eastern Region do not rule in the accepted sense” declared Jones (1956, 8) ergo—so goes the usual argument—any “centralized political systems” encountered there must be outliers introduced by external “conquest” (Áfiigbo 2005, 483 rehearsing Meek 1937, 185). “Ìgbo... ungovernability” (Áfiigbo 1981b, 307), the supposed correlate of supposed Ìgbo statelessness, was the constant refrain of the exasperated occupiers in 1929-30 when southeastern women raised an anticolonial *intifáda* and were gunned down by the dozens “in cold blood” ([sms.cam.ac.uk/media/1123478](https://sms.cam.ac.uk/media/1123478) @ 1:55:44).

British disdain for perceived Ìgbo anarchy blew back as Biafran self-love for “the communal democracy which gave stability and morality to the politics of our traditional society” (Òjúkwu 1968, 263) where “[n]obody had any special privilege because of ancestry” (Ònwumèchili 2000, cf. Áfiigbo 2002). In reality however, residents of Nri’s neighbor Óka [“Awka”] a millennium ago left behind “archaeological evidence for a social institution which indicates a considerable measure of centralization of social authority and an attendant concentration of wealth” (Shaw 1978, 99).<sup>185</sup> Similar inequalities occur in living memory (Ònwuejiógwù 1981, 134, 2001). The divide between rich and poor citizens—*ògalanya* and *ògbènya*—is ritualised by *ózo* title ceremonies of ‘big man’ potlatch (Handlin & al. 1986, Àchébé 2011, cf. Sahlins 1963). Many communities also recognize economic peonage and endogamous untouchability—*òbù* and *òsù* (Úchéndù 1965, 89f., 1977; Thomas-Éméagwalí 1984, 1989). A century ago, these castes and classes were salient enough to spark local resistance, when the British recruited individuals euphemistically described as “ordinary young men of *no special standing* in indigenous society” to preside over “native courts” (Áfiigbo 1966, 541 italics added).<sup>186</sup> Thus, whatever colonialists and Biafrans may have believed, Ìgbo monarchies and aristocracies were not imported outliers, rather they sat on top of indigenous categories of entrenched feudalism, comparable to Èdó’s own form of social hierarchy.

British conquest obscured other political commonalities between the Ìgbo and Èdó-speaking zones. Many Ìgbo paramounts were deposed in the course of the attempted—and wildly unsuccessful—“permanent [sic] pacification of the Hinterland” (*Capt. I. Hogg* 1904, cited by Àsìégbù 1984, 281). The Ézé Nri’s abdication, long and loudly demanded by Bishop Shanahan, was finally, publicly accomplished at gunpoint in 1911 (Tovey 1929, Jordan 1949, 35, both cited by Ónwuejiógwù 1981, 175, 184).<sup>187</sup> Notwithstanding the formal doctrinal distinction between Direct and Indirect Rule (Mair 1962), the colonial regime in Èdó between the overthrow of Óvónrànmwè in 1897 and the 1914 restoration of Èwẹka 2 was indistinguishable in practice from the eastern “warrant chief” system (Ìgbáfẹ 1967, Áfiigbo 1967, 1972).

The gamut of east-west resemblances is masked by the legend that Ifè begat the Èdó dynasty, prompting a frankly bewildered Dr. Bradbury to wonder how they “came to differ so markedly” (1964, 155). A less puzzling account is available, namely of convergence: that the current kingdoms of Ifè and Èdó grew from separate roots to become superficially entwined in recent centuries. The undeniable modern attraction—in both directions—between the Ifè and Èdó states could not erase the prior contrast between Ìgbonic primogeniture, still observed in the Èdó palace, and the flexible ‘seniority’ (*ìpò àgbà*) practiced by most Yorùbá paramountcies including Ifè itself (Adéboýè 2007).<sup>188</sup>

In sum, while nobody can ignore the present existence of an “Ifè-Benin interaction field” or “Yorùbá-Èdó world system” (Ogúndiran 2002, 2003), the substantive question is *when* this economic and cultural commons was formed, and in respect to *which particular traits*. Distinctive, undisputed Yorùbá intellectual property, currently ubiquitous in Èdó, includes the cults of three pre-eminent supernaturals. *Èsangó* (or maybe *Èsangó?*) doesn’t even earn a lemma of its own in the Èdó dictionary, so transparently is it borrowed from Yorùbá *Sàngó* plus prosthetic *e-*, not to mention the ostentatious Yorùbá lyrics sung in *Èsangó*’s Èdó ceremonies. Similarly, *Èsu* and *Òrọnmìlà* obviously reached Èdó as *Èsù* and *Òrínmìlà* along with the *Ìfá* oracle, whose recitations are still today performed in Benin-City by itinerant Yorùbá

<sup>185</sup> Shaw holds “that this authority was more religious and moral than political and administrative” (1978, 99) but this begs what counts as politics and whether Nri differed from Ifè in that respect. Typically without evidence, Fagg dismisses “the ‘divine kingship’ of the Nri clan [as] an anomaly among the [Ìg]bo, and probably introduced by the Jukun, who once overran the area” (1963, 112).

<sup>186</sup> For decades, government and churches have decreed to ‘finally’ abolish caste (e.g. Òsújí 2020), but with no more success than their counterparts in India. Two recent examples of *òsù* harassment abole to my attention through euphemistic accounts by victims.

<sup>187</sup> Gwilym Jones, colonist turned anthropologist ([mcoy.lib.siu.edu/jmccall/jones/jonesbio.html](https://mcoy.lib.siu.edu/jmccall/jones/jonesbio.html)) admitted fiddling the chieftaincy roster of Eastern Nigeria in order to downgrade *Ézẹ Nri* in favor of *Obi Onioba* [“Onitsha”], in whose palace Nnàndi Àzíkaiwe [“Azikiwe” alias *Zíkè*] held a middling title (M. Onwuejiógwù *p.c.*, cf. Jones 1956, 10, 21, 53f.). Verbose but toothless *Zíkè* eventually founded the NCNC party, duly favored by the British to block Awóló.wò’s suspect Action Group from entering a postcolonial government.

<sup>188</sup> Primogeniture is the default succession rule in Ìgbo, based on the familial authority of the first son—*ókpara* or *óphara*—who evokes reincarnation and other ideas of patrilineal ancestry (Úchéndù 1965, 84f.; Ànèné 1966, 13; Manfredi 1997). There’s no reason to think that primogeniture succession to the *Obí* royal title in western Ìgbo towns like Ágbò, Ísele-Úku and Úbulu-Úku (Ìjéoma 1983, 36) is anything other than an Ìgbo archaism, although living ideology may tend to lump it together with more visible aspects of the Èdó palace format adopted by Ìgbo kingdoms of the “West Niger” plains and *òru* ‘floodlands’ in the 17th century (Údò 1970, 49, Nízimiro 1972; Èjiófó 1982; Ohadíkè 1994). More accurately it seems, the dramatic eastward expansion of Èdó political institutions in modern times traversed an older common ground that was already shared between the Ìgbo and Èdó-speaking areas, and did so the more easily thanks to pre-existing structural similarities.

*babaláwo*s who rely upon simultaneous Èdó translation for local intelligibility (Gore 2007a, 36 and my own observation in December 1982). Short of creationism, however, none of these facts shows anything about older claims of borrowing.

Less plausible is a Yorùbá derivation for either of the Èdó state cults. The name Ògún, patron of ironwork, could be indigenously Èdó because it's homophonous with the number-inflected Èdó noun ò-gún/ì-gún 'metalsmith/brasscasting lineage' (Melzian 1937, 83, 136, cf. Ofeimu[n] 2003).<sup>189</sup> Modern Yorùbá descriptions of Ògún [LH] as the 'god of war' (Crowther & al. 1911, 167, Williams 1973, 151, Lawal 1977b, 56) may have been suggested at second hand by the tonally distinct Yorùbá noun *ogun* [MM] 'warfare' that forms the title *ológun* [MHM] 'warlord' with the productive *o-ní-* prefix.<sup>190</sup>

Èdó Ólokún [HH<sup>1</sup>H] is triply ambiguous between (i) the name of a supernatural, (ii) 'the sea' and (iii) 'the Ethiopian River' which is the location of Úghòtón, reputed home of the Ólokún cult (Melzian 1937, 144, Belasco 1980, 79). In Èdó songs, the supernatural is addressed as Òkún, homophonous with òkún 'the sea' (Melzian 1937, 142, Welton 1968, 227, Rosen 1993, 37). Yorùbá *Olókún* has a transparent derivation as 'possessor or epitome' (*o-ní-*) of 'the sea' (*òkún*), cf. Bámgbósé (1972, 1975), but Yorùbá shrines, songs and rituals for *Olókún* [MH<sup>1</sup>M] are scarce to nonexistent, so the Èdó pleonasm of Òkún and Ólokún could show secondary Èdó reborrowing of the name in its Yorùbá version.<sup>191</sup>

Yorùbá vs. Èdó origin is indeterminate for two other shared lexical items. Èdó *óloí* [HHH] 'living queen' could come from Yorùbá *olorì* [MML] 'senior or designated queen' with regular *r*-deletion (Aikhionbare 1988, 226 *fn.* 5), but the mismatch of tones between the two languages is mysterious and no Yorùbá-internal etymology exists. The Èdó plural *í-loí* [HHH] 'queens' looks archaic, parallel to the inflected plurals of patently indigenous human nouns like ò-*kébuo*/ì-*kébuo* 'woman/women' and ò-*ví*/ì-*ví* 'sg./pl. offspring' (cf. *-bíe* 'give birth'). Lastly, Melzian (1937, 134) compares Èdó *ódòdò* 'red flannel', a Portuguese trade item associated with the reign of Òba Èwúarè (Bradbury 1959, 278), to Yorùbá *òdòdò* 'redness' (Abraham 1958, 451), the proverbial color of *Ẹ̀sàngó's* flashy *agbádá* gown (Verger 1957, 358, 361) but again as with *óloí:olorì*, the tone difference of *ódòdò:òdòdò* is unexplained by a hypothesis of direct borrowing in either direction.

Some Èdó footprints in Yorùbá were influentially overlooked by casual observers. Both languages use the name Èkó for Lagos island (cf. *fn.* 3 above), which before the 16th century was an Èdó 'camp' (*èkó*) whose armed garrison installed the present Òba Èkó lineage.<sup>192</sup> This bicultural heritage however somehow escaped the notice of a "choleric visitor" (Smith 1962, 331) who instead perceived "abundantly evident" Yorùbá hegemony in Èdó, then colonial curators recycled this traveller's tale into conventional wisdom by dressing it up with pseudoscientific cant:

It is however abundantly evident that Benin and Dahome are integral parts of Yorùbá, somewhat differing in language but identical in manners, customs and religion. (Burton 1863a, 222)

Though their language differs somewhat from that of the inhabitants of Yorùbá and Dahomey, in manners customs and religion these peoples [*sc.* "The Biní"] must be regarded as *integral parts of a single ethnological whole*. (Read & Dalton 1898, 362, italics added)

The near identity of these quotes shows the "production of anthropological knowledge in a concrete colonial situation" (Clifford 2003, 7). Air war was the most spectacular expression of 20th century global power, but bombardment by ethnic clichés also flattens "human terrain" (González 2008) and efficiently inscribes foreign whimsy in a timeless template, handy for the occupiers and serviceable for retrospection by the newly occupied. Not only did medieval Yorùbá ideology furnish administrative legitimacy for the colonial Western Region, it also became the "derivative discourse" (Chatterjee 1986) of Awóló.wò's anticolonial movement Ègbé Omọ Odùduwà and its political arm the Action Group (AG) whose ethnically inspired government of the Western Region founded the University of Ifè in 1961.

In the non-Yorùbá rest-of-the-West however, especially in the western Niger Delta, the AG's "cultural nationalism" was less popular than its Fabian "welfarist programme" (Dudley 1982, 47). During the 1951 Western Region campaign, Èdó, Àgbò and nearby palaces violently defected from Awóló.wò's AG to join NCNC, Chief Àzíkàíwè's ["Azikiwe's"] breakaway eastern party. A 1963 plebiscite eventually hived off the Midwest, thereby constituting the first postcolonial jurisdiction of the 9ja entity and the only one ever created by ballots rather than bullets or decrees (Bradbury 1968, 247, Otite 1975, 75, Vickers 2000, Ìdúùwè *ms.*). Today the same tense rivalry simmers in Èdó, administrative capital of the former Midwest, between the national PDP and APC parties rehashing the region's long-term bicultural heritage.

The modern oblivion of medieval Ìgbo influence in Èdó illustrates the political fickleness of oral tradition and the distracting effect of fanciful stories spread by assorted thieves, chiefs and historians about anonymous visual icons.

### Fast forward to history

After ten detailed chapters surveying Africanist art scholarship, Vansina's textbook concludes by evaluating theories of stylistic development within and between the various African localities concerned:

The tree model is moderately fruitful because it draws attention to time, but it remains flawed because it considers only drift, not multiple influences nor radical innovation. A stream model comes closer to reality and takes unknowns into account, but it too cannot account for the reasons for change, nor can it document and explain radical innovation. Only the reconstruction of the general social and cultural history can be the proper framework in which to establish valid art history. (1984, 195)

This verdict is premature—by the time of writing, evolutionary analysis had scarcely been applied to African icons—as well as being multiply misguided in principle: (i) too pessimistic about the comparative method, which *pace* Vansina is all about innovation and can't ignore mutations even those of a radical, 'catastrophic' cast, and (ii) unreasonably optimistic in expecting "general social and cultural history" to interpret artefacts from *pre*-historic time i.e. without benefit of accompanying ideographic records. The serial failings of Africanist art criticism lamented by Vansina are plain enough, but they're less historiographic than ideological in origin and so perhaps they escape his possible field of view. Not for lack of trying or shortage of empirical arguments did sober specialists of Nigerian archaeology fail to scotch mythopoetically intoxicated derivations of Èdó art and aristocracy from Ifè. Rather, the ships slipped past each other in the scholarly night because ethnic and scientific logics don't intersect, and the irreducible gap between the two frames of reference explains how easily discrepancies of retrospective awareness arise within just a few generations.

<sup>189</sup> No Yorùbá is heard in Ògún songs recorded at Úgbèkun, Èdó on 13/12/1981 ([manfredi.mayfirst.org/AmayoUgieOgun13Dec1981.moi](http://manfredi.mayfirst.org/AmayoUgieOgun13Dec1981.moi)).

<sup>190</sup> 'Warfare' in Èdó is an unrelated lexical item *òkúò* (Melzian 1937, 142). Èdó *ológun* [HHH] 'warlord' is certainly borrowed from Yorùbá *ológun* [MHM], with a predictable change of initial M to H parallel to Yorùbá *agbádá* [MHH] 'wide gown' > Èdó *agbada* [HHH].

<sup>191</sup> In Ìlájè (coastal Yorùbá) the supernatural is *Malòkun* 'earth-spirit of the sea' < *umalè* [*ì(rín)mòlè*] *òkun* (Òjoadé 1980, 66, Sheba 2002, 3).

<sup>192</sup> The matter remains vivid in ethnicised Lagos politics of the "Tinúubú" era: [nitter.d420.de/IPrinceSavior/status/1729260756569362480](http://nitter.d420.de/IPrinceSavior/status/1729260756569362480).

Explanations in terms of inheritance (“the tree model” that Vansina malapropically calls “drift”) and borrowing (the wave model that—metaphorically?—he calls a “stream”) are not optional in “historico-cultural ethnology” (De Martino 1941, cf. Bloch 2005). The question is not whether to guess—all reconstructions, being hypotheses, are necessarily guesses—but how to evaluate guesswork empirically. A century and a half ago, Schleicher and Darwin applied inferential methods to reconstruct language change and biological speciation on time scales of respectively thousands and millions of years. In both domains of prehistory, comparison of observable traits in distant locations—whether sampled from extinct fossils or from surviving present descendants—points to prior states of affairs separated from the present by unobservable events. With luck, chronologically intermediate stages (but scarcely ever actual events) may be directly attested by opportune finds. Famous breakthroughs of paleontology were spurred by unexpected fossils like *Homo habilis* ([en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Homo\\_habilis](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Homo_habilis)) and Indo-European philology was significantly boosted by accidentally preserved epigraphy and by modern relics like the Vēdic poems—intellectual capital orally conserved quasi-verbatim by the *brāhman* caste. Sometimes a speculative reconstruction can be verified after the fact, as when Saussure (1879) posited two abstract consonants in the Indo-European protolanguage so as to explain otherwise inexplicable vowel correspondences between Sanskrit and epigraphic Greek, then decades later these unheard of sounds were uncannily matched by two mysterious syllabic signs on Hittite cuneiform tablets unearthed in Anatolia (Kuryłowicz 1927, 1956, Watkins 1958).<sup>193</sup> Similarly, pleistocene human migrations inferred from modern haplotypes have been either proved or disproved by fossil human DNA whose sequences were only recently able to be extracted and read with the help of souped-up molecular assays and automata (Skoglund *et al.* 2017, Lipson *et al.* 2020).<sup>194</sup>

The thought experiment to replay inferred reconstructions “forward in time” (Watkins 1962, 7) detects both kinds of change that excited Vansina’s interest: novel mutations (vertical innovation mapped in trees) and the spread of extant features across extant groups (horizontal contagion modeled in waves). Both types of innovation serve as markers of diachronic communities (subgroup populations) which share them to the exclusion of other cladistic characters.

Archaeological fieldwork has declined in neoliberal West Africa since the 1970’s, but the same array of methods can be applied to language data, which are less arduous and less expensive to obtain. Non-folk etymologies resemble subterranean deposits in the Boasian respect of possessing an unconscious character. Eventually, any nonaccidental convergence between the two types of diachronic signal—archaeological and linguistic—enhances the confidence level of either source treated separately. Multiplication of probabilities also obtains when comparing independent traits. For example, the individual trajectories of *cire perdue* icons and the duplex 4-bit oracle have no a priori necessity to align, so if any demographic parallel is observed between these two high profile cultural complexes, this is newsworthy and leads to a further conjecture of bundled transmission, indicating more comprehensive political and ideological forces operating south of the Niger-Benue confluence in medieval times. A potentially confounding factor is that local, inland changes overlapped in time with the long-distance, trans-saharan and transatlantic interaction, but the impacts of the latter are easily exaggerated by the mere fact of inscription in the ideographic records of literate commercial and ‘religious’ actors, whose testimony is habitually over-blown—as Vansina (1961) took commendable pains to point out.

Jointly, indigenous and foreign forces eventually produced the fractal social aggregations observable today across the Westafrican subcontinent. The extreme modern fragmentation of this zone supplied a learned philologist with the wry motto of his inaugural lecture: “Let us joke over it; Nigeria as a Tower of Babel” (Capo 1992) and inspired another colleague to the less ironic allusion of Biblical Paradise (N. Eménanjo *p.c.* to Ndiméle 2003). More seriously, current forms of ethnic false consciousness echo the discourse of ‘religion’ in two ways. Concretely, they arose as old West Asian monotheisms began to syncretise with local intellectual frameworks, riding on elective affinities in both directions further orchestrated “contrapuntally” in the “imperialist ensemble” of cultural “engagement” (Saïd 1993, 51). Abstractly, the retrospective inversion of cause and effect is a general psychological feature of ideological restructuring in social change (Godelier 1996/1999, 147/106). For both reasons, ethnic retrospection risks reduction to Whig history told by present ‘winners’ of the nationalist game, at the cost of making contingent events appear fatefully inevitable.

## 2.10 Why “people start to grope... in the air”

*Horton’s claim is that, given the structure of the basic African cosmology, social changes of the kind specified will result in a more monolatric emphasis. ...Horton does not say that, as a result of certain social changes, people first become more monolatric and then switch to Islam or Christianity. What he says is that, as a result of certain social changes, people start to grope for a more elaborate definition of the supreme being, and that if either of the world religions is present at this time, its ideas are likely to be enthusiastically if selectively accepted. ...Horton’s argument is that, in some respects, the Christian message contains elements that are very much “in the air” in a situation of weakening microcosmic boundaries...*

(Horton *et al.* 1976, 484, emphasis original)

*It seems likely that cannabis was used at Arad as a deliberate psychoactive, to stimulate ecstasy as part of cultic ceremonies. If so, this is the first such evidence in the cult of Judah.*

(Arie *et al.* 2020, 23)

To understand the rapid spread of Islam and Christianity across inter-tropical Africa in recent centuries, Horton (1971) proposes that these waves were catalysed by indigenous trends towards *monolatry*—a label coined in Hebraic studies for a situation where many supreme gods are recognized to exist, but only one per ethnic group:

Israels Gott ist freilich einer, aber einer neben anderen, wie schon daraus hervorgeht, daß er einen Eigennamen, Jahwe, trägt, durch den er sich von anderen Göttern unterscheidet. ...Im alten Israel besteht *Monolatrie, aber nicht Monotheismus*. Daß es neben Jahwe andere Götter gibt, ist dem alten Israeliten selbstverständlich, den das Dasein anderer Götter, welche diese verehren, lert es ihm ja deutlich. Jahwe ist Israels Gott, wei Kemosch der Moabs, Milkom der Ammons, Baalzebul der der Etroniten...<sup>195</sup>

(Stade 1887, 428f., italics added)

<sup>193</sup> The laryngeal reconstruction also had notable theoretical consequences (e.g. Kaye *et al.* 1985, Scheer 2015).

<sup>194</sup> This is harder in tropical Africa where humans are older, their diversity greater and the environment harsher on organic remains.

<sup>195</sup> [Israel’s god is surely singular, but one among others, as noted above, since he has one personal name—Jahwe—whereby he is distinguished from other gods. ...Ancient Israel practiced *monolatry, not monotheism*. That there were other gods besides Jahwe was obvious to an Israelite of the time, to whom the existence of other gods that could be worshipped was very clear. Jahwe was Israel’s god, just as Kemosch was Moab’s, Milkom Ammon’s and Baalzebul that of the Etronites...]

A better-known synonym is *henotheism*, popularised by the 19th century's most famous Orientalist philologist:

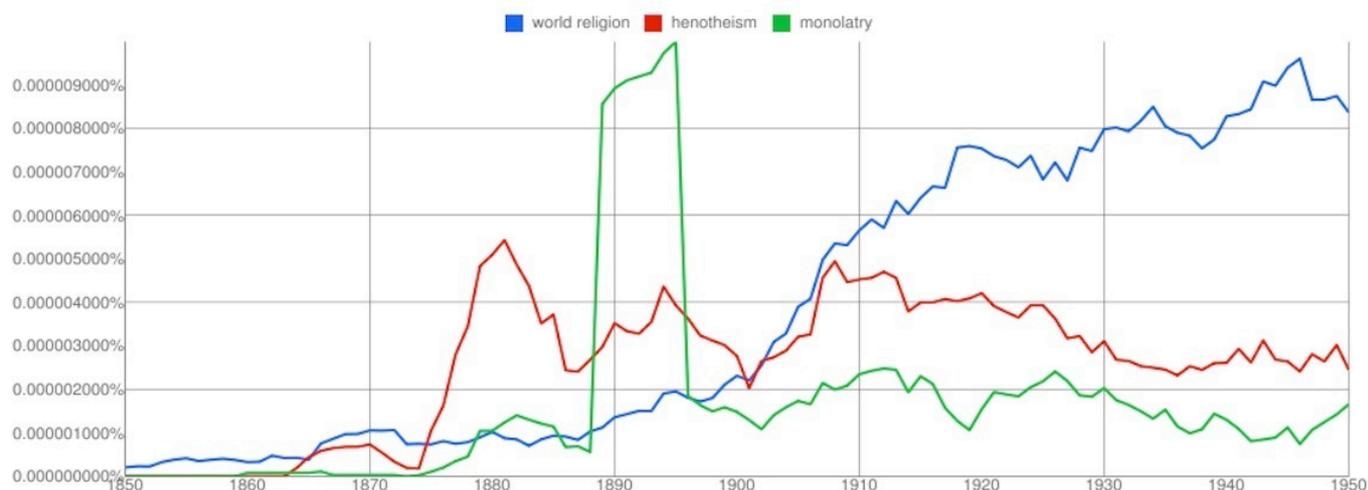
If we must have a general name for the earliest form of religion among the Vēdic Indians, it can be neither *monotheism* nor *polytheism*, but only *henotheism* [FN 1 from *εἷς*, *ἑνός* 'one' as opposed to *μόνος* 'one only']... This is the peculiar character of the ancient Vēdic religion which I have tried to characterise as *Henotheism* or *Kathenotheism*, a successive belief in single supreme gods, in order to keep it distinct from that phase of religious thought which we commonly call polytheism, in which the many gods are already subordinated to one supreme god, and by which therefore the craving after the one without a second, has been more fully satisfied. In the Vēda one god after another is invoked. For the time being, all that can be said of a divine being is ascribed to him. The poet, while addressing him, seems hardly to know of any other gods. But in the same collection of hymns, sometimes even in the same hymn, other gods are mentioned, and they also are truly divine, truly independent, or, it may be supreme. ... The poets ascribed the highest powers to the sun, but they ascribed equally high powers to other natural phenomena likewise.  
(Müller 1878, 260, 271*f.*, original italics)

Assyriologists think that “promotion” of Babylon’s patron god Marduk to “supreme” status over adjacent deities in the 2nd millennium BC made Hammurabi the world’s first henotheist (Bottéro 1981, 4, cited by Augé 1982, 139*f.*). Hebrew *YHWH* was just another henotheistically “national” supernatural at a time when nobody “disputed that other gods existed, any less than that other peoples did” (Caquot 1970, 388*f.*), until prophetic lamentations under Babylonian rule finally goaded the exiles into the exceptionalist monotheistic mindset that still prevails today:<sup>196</sup>

Marduk ne conserva pas toujours la place privilégiée que d'autres divinités lui disputèrent et lui ôtèrent au gré des fluctuations politiques. Cette organisation du divin relève de l'*hénouthéisme*, système reconnaissant une place particulière à un dieu, que Bottéro distingue du *monothéisme*, dont il lie l'apparition en Israël à la défaite et à la réactualisation correspondante du discours des prophètes, universalisant la personne de Yahvé à partir du moment où il fait des armées mésopotamiennes l'instrument de sa volonté. Il reste que Yahvé ne serait toujours pas encore ce dieu véritablement unique que suppose le monothéisme s'il n'apparaissait aussi dans le Livre de Jérémie à la fois comme le Dieu transcendant et l'interlocuteur familier des âmes individuelles: «Yahvé demeure le Souverain suprême et transcendant, qui du regard et de la puissance embrasse l'Univers entier; mais il se rapproche en même temps de chacun et se rend présent à son cœur: c'est le seul Dieu avec qui l'on puisse s'épancher et qui rompe notre solitude foncière. Jérémie est le promoteur du monothéisme spirituel» (1981, p. 16).<sup>197</sup> (Augé 1982, 140, original italics)

Horton predicted that “the advent of modern industrial society must sooner or later” favor henotheism/monolatry at the expense of “traditional African cosmology” (1971, 107), but “modern industrial society” coexists with several mass belief systems that defeat this expectation. For Weber, ‘world religions’ comprised “the Confucian, Hindu, Buddhist, Christian and Islamic religious ethics” plus Judaism *honoris causa* as “precursor” of the last two (1920, 237*f.*, cf. Masuzawa 2005, 217, Baumard & Chevallier 2015). A recent pundit adds Daoism, atheism and “the religion of Yorubáland and its diasporas” to complete the list of “religions that rule the world” (Prothero 2010, 220, cf. Abimbólá & Miller 1997, 1-6). Horton’s theory comes to grief on Buddhism and on all three of Prothero’s addenda to the standard Weberian list.

Horton’s question can be more productively reframed. Word attestation is a poor proxy for currency of ideas, but a graph of textual hits in printed literature shows a reversal of scholarly interest around the turn of the 20th century, from imputing the recognition of supreme beings to a more achievable task, a global census of top-ranked doctrinal brands.



If monotheism had a political-economic engine, it operated indirectly through the same social conditions that fostered “Axial” metaphysics, of which neo-Hegelian comparative sociology points to three indicative correlates: “the distinction between a mundane and extramundane order of reality”, the “disembedding... of the individual from his ascriptive social relations..., of society from nature and or nature itself from the higher order of reality” and “the development of a complex of forms of consciousness focused on the power of thought to address and revise its own procedures” (Unger 2014, 451*f.*).

<sup>196</sup> Freud conjectured “the dependence of Jewish monotheism on the monotheist episode in Egyptian history” i.e. the Amarna heresy of Amenhotep IV alias “Ikhnaton” or “Akhenaten” (1939/1964, 55/33, cited by Sacks 2014, 374). For Horton, Egyptian monotheism had the centrifugal function to oppose “the centrifugal tendencies” of “powerful priesthoods” (1962b, 139, cf. White 1949, 246*ff.*).

<sup>197</sup> [Marduk did not always hold his privileged position, which other divinities contested and envied in tune with political trends. Such a framework of divinity amounts to *henotheism*, a system granting a special place to one god; Bottéro distinguishes this from *monothéisme*, whose appearance he links to Israel’s subjugation [by Babylon] and its renewal as reflected in the discourse of its prophets, universalizing the figure of *YHWH* after he had made the Mesopotamian armies into the instrument of his will. Effectively, *YHWH* would never have become this kind of unique god in the monotheistic sense if he hadn’t also appeared in the Book of Jeremiah as both transcendent God and intimate interlocutor of individual souls: “*YHWH* remains the supreme and transcendent Lord of the entire Universe in both appearance and power, but at the same time he comes near to everyone and comes directly into his heart. This is the only God to whom one can reveal one’s innermost thoughts and who overcomes one’s basic isolation. Jeremiah is the sponsor of spiritual monotheism” ([Bottéro] 1981, 16).]

Specifically in inter-tropical Africa, Horton's teleology is mistaken, for an empirical reason much remarked, namely that many avowed Christians and Muslims practice, not the cultic possessiveness of jealous Jeremiahs, but a more relaxed régime of multiple situational loyalties—call it syncretism or religious polygamy:

Persons don't see their own religion as a bounded system... They are likely to be selective, rather than all-embracing, of those elements of Christianity or of Islam that come their way... They don't abandon their traditional ways of dealing with misfortune; they rather add on new ones. ... This does not mean that they do not believe in the aspects of the external religious practices that they absorb, but as in traditional life there is parallelism between practical common sense and beliefs that mystical powers affect natural and human life, so one finds it here. At Bafodea [Sierra Leone] a farmer employs both his skilled practical knowledge of the land and crops, and also rituals and magical protection, to insure success in farming. This side-by-side quality of traditional thought and action is readily applied to new social and economic situations through new religious forces. (Ottenberg 1984, 447-50)

Not even converted Yorùbá deny the existence of *òrìṣà*, although a Christian or Moslem will emphasize that he is unwilling to serve them. The *Olóríṣà* says that he does not 'believe' [*gbàgbò*] meaning that he is not a Christian [*onígbaḡbò*], or that he does not perform ablutions [*se àlùwàlá*] meaning that he is not a Moslem [*onimàlé*]. But many go to church or to the mosque and nevertheless privately perform *ébo*, the traditional ceremonial offerings to *òrìṣà*. ... The Yorùbá is truly capable of integrating certain aspirations and rejecting others. *Ṣònpònnó* himself is referred to in his *oríkì* as the *òrìṣà* who performs *ìkírùn*, a term which covers not only Yorùbá prayer but also Islamic ablutions (literally, 'to greet heaven'). The variant forms of Christianity that have arisen here—the various 'African Churches'—remain true to some traditional cultural elements, like polygyny and ritual awakening of the living water by means of nightly dancing, singing, drumming and rhythmic clapping of hands. In this way they tap sacred fecundities and healing powers from Jesus, just as if from *òrìṣà*. Their experience of Christianity is very direct and unreserved. They are reminiscent of early Christianity through their elementary involvement and primal experience of Christ; but there is no sensory deprivation with them or with Christ as they encounter him in elated trance. (Wenger 1983, 59f.)

Even for supreme beings that hover in the air, the historical significance may not be visible at first sight. Peel asserts that "previously pagan people" who "profess to be Christian or Muslim" thereby "change their religion" so as to cause "the 'domestication' of the world religion[s]" and "the beginning of distinctive indigenous traditions of Islam and Christianity" (1968, 121, 140f., 1977, 108, 111). The latter process is certainly real—all cultures spawn local variants—but without necessarily deleting paganism from the mental menu. Peel wants to distinguish the "dogmatic exclusiveness of prophetic religion" from permissive "syncretism" in terms of degrees of "cultural self-consciousness" (1968, 140f.), but this difference is not observable beyond explicit ideological statements which are easy to make without further consequences. At best it's premature to claim that Africans' rapid embrace of Abrahamic slogans and rituals launched them onto a historical path markedly different from "some of the mystical religions of the East" which are standardly said to show a "lack of impact of Christian missionaries" (Horton 1971, 97f.).<sup>198</sup>

Conversion advocates leave a prior question unasked: when does 'religion' begin—not to mention, end? Peel's label "*òrìṣà* religion" (2016) sets African metaphysics on an uneven playing field where a god is a god is a god, but where some gods are nevertheless suprema than others. This is an odd assertion. "*Òrìṣà* religion" may describe a present outcome of colonial encounters, but it's probably anachronistic for earlier times, when the mental options were more open than presentists presently imagine. At the other end of the historical road is a possibility that Peel didn't contemplate but which is apparently well under way on a world scale, namely the detachment of metaphysical commitments from social origins: call it "religion without culture" (Roy 2008, cf. 2005) e.g. 'New Age' consumerism (Pels 1998). In sum, at what points in the past and future is the term *religion* vacuous? Peel dodges this question by excluding any Weberian "causal explanation of traditional beliefs" in a "preliterate" context (1969, 71) but elements of an answer can be discerned.

It seems that African metaphysics substantially survived the missionaries' hectoring "manera preconceptuosa" (Ortiz 1959, 78) and colonial suppression, whether thanks to the generic peasant pragmatism (*furbizìa popolare*) not to burn one's bridges in haste, or as a result of particular events. 19th century "warfare, enslavement and population displacement, life in refugee camps and villagers' movement into cities" fostered individual "patronage of multiple *òrìṣà*" amid "a gradual creolization of Yorùbá society" (Òjò 2009a, 55, 66).<sup>199</sup> In such a pluralist setting, possessive and exclusive concepts like "apostasy" and "conversion"—effectively, spiritual divorce and remarriage—stood little chance, and anecdotal evidence of shrewdly tacit conservatism abounds. "Up till today in Nigeria, bishops and Islamic leaders come to the *babaláwo* for divination" (Abímóbólá & Miller 1997, 7). In neo-African diasporan settings, similar phenomena have been famously called *double consciousness* (Du Bois) and *transculturation* (Ortiz), adopting elements of West Asian henotheism/monolatry not as a Hortonian teleological stepping stone towards monotheism, but—like the Babylon example—as an adaptive niche allowing strains of organic 'paganism'—at worst, polytheism—to continue under predatory statist rule.<sup>200</sup>

Christian construction of "God in Yorùbá Belief" (Ìdòwú 1962) is belied by the difference between what monotheists call *exorcism* and the pagan praxis of ecstatic possession or "adorcism" (Heusch 1962, 1965, 145ff., cf. Talbot 1926, 268, Maupoil 1943a, 402, Verger 1954b, 1966, 35, Rouget 1980, Barber 1981, Cox 2008). The gap shows the noncongruence of two types of propositional attitude. Even in European languages the predicate *believe* is polysemous between mundane and 'religious' uses (Bouveresse 2007) and beyond Europe "... 'religious belief' ... does not have universal applicability" (Pouillon 1979, 51). Describing a Chadian binary oracle, Adler & Zempléni (1972) consider that "[t]he most important point is not believing (*croire*) but seeing (*voir*)" (Dammann 1978, 74). In Candombé "the question of belief is otiose" (Ryle 1988, 49). Malagasy ideas of ancestors fall outside the scope of belief statements "most of the time" (Bloch 2002, 140). A hypothetical Yorùbá sentence like *#Mo gbàgbò pé òjò ñ rọ* (literally 'I believe that it is/was raining') is incoherent and early adopters of Yorùbá *Aládùúrà* mistook the referent of the calqued expression *ìgbàgbò* to be literacy itself, i.e. blind faith in a book (Gillies 1988, 108, cf. Asad 1983, 245, Brenner 1989, Hopkins 1999, 82). Ìdòwú's belief that Yorùbá pagans ideate like English protestants could pass muster only at a relatively permissive time when "[c]onversion to Islam and Christianity was not so menacing... since individuals were not pressed to give up their old value systems, culture and language" (Olúpòná 2014). Similarly, European and African folklores could accidentally align in the

198 Weber's premise that East and West Asian ideologies irreversibly diverged seems implausible today. Formerly pacific Hindu offshoots like Theravāda Buddhism in the Sinhala state (Rāhula 1974; Tambiah 1992) are not less aggressive than some violent Abrahamic cults.

199 In like vein, Akínjògbin speaks of "the mixing and mingling of different sections of Yorùbá-speaking peoples and the subsequent harmonization of Yorùbá culture" (1998, 5, cf. also Morton-Williams 1956, 102f., Olóḡmọlá 1998, Ojò 2009b). To the extent this was intentional it can be described as "cultural engineering" (Ojò 2008, 353), otherwise as "integrative effects" (Barnes 2001, 124).

200 The obvious alternative to exclusivist *conversion* is additive *initiation* (Hubert & Mauss 1904, Evans-Pritchard 1937, Verger 1954b). It's inconsistent for postmodern scholars to embrace Hobsbawm & Ranger (1983), a Marxist critique of mass culture, while eliding its materialist premise that "the study of invented traditions cannot... expect to advance much... unless it is integrated into a wider study" of factors like "[s]ocial mobility, class conflict and the prevalent ideology" (Hobsbawm 1983, 12, 9).

“Baroque mirror” of 17th-18th century Brazil, in which Gêge-Nagô *cultos de orixá* and Portuguese counter-reformation tales of *adoração dos santos* were mutually reflected (Tall 2013). Religious belief consistently fails as an analytical category:

Classical Greek has no word which covers *religion* as we use the term. *Eusebia* approximates to it, but in essence it means no more than the regular performance of due worship in the proper spirit, while *hoisotes* describes ritual purity in all its aspects. The place of faith was taken by myth and ritual. These things implied an attitude rather than a conviction.

(Nock 1933, 10 cited by Assmann (1997, 7)

But of course Yorùbá pagans do not select ‘belief’ as the defining feature of religion... (Peel 1968a, 29)

[T]he Christian *believes* in God, which implies the possibility of disbelief, not only dialectically but as a matter of fact. A Yorùbá finds that absurd.

(S. Wenger quoted by Brockmann & Hötter 1984, 65, original italics)

In Africa, the mystery is not ontological... The real focus of the cult is on the material aspect of the object-god.

(Augé 1986, 130)

It is as though Christians feel so unsure of what they declare that they have to repeat, emphatically and endlessly, what they believe *in*, to convince themselves and others that they believe *that* the world is so, rather like a child coming back home in the dark might repeat to herself “I am not afraid of the dark.”

(Bloch 2002, 136 original italics)

Horton rejects such ethnography altogether as woolly relativism and instead posits direct intellectual continuity between “African traditional thought and Western science” (1967), treating Africa’s superficially rapid uptake of West Asian monotheisms as a vigorous evolutionary graft onto “the indigenous supreme being” that he believes to have already existed in “concept” before the advent of jihādic and missionary visions of omnipotence:

One final criticism of *Aládúúrà* [= Peel (1968a)] concerns the phenomenology of conversion. Despite all the fruitful things Peel has to say on this subject, he makes a serious slip when he talks of Christianity as if it were one more cult coming in alongside the existing cults of the *òrìṣà*. For one salient feature of Christian proselytization in Yorùbáland has surely been the identification of the Christian God with the indigenous supreme being Olórun, and the presentation of Christianity as the ‘true’ way of contacting this being [FN4]. Indeed it would seem that missionaries all over Africa have usually striven to discover the name of the indigenous supreme being and, where successful, have then gone on to tell the people of his ‘true’ nature. Hence the African convert has not accepted an addition to the pantheon of lesser spirits. Rather, he has accepted change and development in his concept of the supreme being. Although some readers may find this point too obvious to be worth stressing, I see it as the key to further development of an intellectualist theory of conversion.

(Horton 1971, 100)

Not himself a missionary, Horton nevertheless argues rather evangelically that supreme beings and natural-scientific frameworks of explanation share some cognitive virtues, which he considers to have been more useful to participants in larger-scale social networks. So convinced was he of this speculation that he restated it intact for 20 years:

So far as the immediate external relations of his village were concerned, ... the Níké man lived in a narrow world of flux and inconstancy. At the same time, however, his view of the world was far from parochial. A great trader, he would travel considerable distances to markets of those nearby groups which happened at the time to be friendly with his own; and early records show Níké to have been the crossroads of trade routes from such distant points as Èdḡà [“Adda”], Òka [“Awka”], Béndè and the Cross River. Such trade was kept open firstly by exogamic ties whereby members of a group were custom-bound to select their wives from a neighbouring community, and secondly by safe-conduct passes from the ubiquitous agents of the Àrù Chùkwu oracle. Even before the advent of Colonial administration, then, the Ì[ḡ]bo had, despite the narrowness of his political affiliations, a well-developed broad view of the world outside his own social group. ... It is in the above context that the imposition of a universal upon a parochial supernatural order becomes significant. For these two orders provide two distinct frames of reference within which the individual must act—the first for life within his social group, and the second for his numerous expeditions outside it. Nevertheless, though a man may regard himself as the son of a parochial *Aní* [“Earth”] of his group, he knows that the latter is ultimately a part of the universal *Aní*; and he is constantly reminded by the *òfó* in their shrines of the relation between the parochial cults and Chùkwu.

(Horton 1956, 26)

I suggest that the extent to which any population actively worships its high god is partly determined by the degree of its active contact with the wider world outside the microcosm. For the greater its active contact, the greater its need to take practical account of that level of theory which relates the microcosm to the wider world—i.e. the level of ideas about the high god. Again, the greater the active contact with the wider world, the greater the area of experience within the microcosm which comes to be seen, not as peculiar to it, but as part of a general human predicament. Hence the larger the number of occasions within the microcosm when people’s practical concerns force them to take active account, not of the lesser gods who are concerned with its peculiarities, but of the high god who is concerned with its universal features. Another factor which may be important in this context is the ascription/ achievement variable. Where the individual’s status is largely determined by ascription, his peculiar lot will appear to be something largely dictated by his community. Hence the ideas appropriate to the explanation of his lot will be drawn from the realm of those lesser gods who are concerned with the community and its peculiar features. On the other hand, where achievement plays a greater part, individual and community are likely to appear as partially independent variables. Here, then, explanations of individual vicissitudes may well refer, not to the parochial lesser gods, but to the high god who is concerned with the wider order of things. In the latter situation, one would expect individual worship of the high god to be far more developed than where ascription determines status.

(Horton 1962b, 139)

Where the way of life is dominated by subsistence farming and commerce is poorly developed... is likely to favor a religious life in which a great deal of attention is paid to the lesser spirits (underpinners of the microcosm), whilst very little attention is paid to the supreme being (underpinner of the macrocosm). ... However, where there is a development of factors making for wider communication (for instance, a development of long-distance trade)... [l]ess attention will be paid to the spirits, and more to the supreme being. This scheme... provides us with the basis for understanding in any given case the outcome of exposure to Islam and/or Christianity. ... The central Ì[ḡ]bo, though lacking in state political institutions, have long supplemented farming with a fair amount of intercommunal trade; and it is not surprising that in their indigenous religious tradition, cults of the lesser spirits are supplemented by a cult of the supreme being. ... About three hundred years ago, however, a strikingly different situation began to develop in the south-east corner of the area. The Àrù... became more and more deeply involved in the long-distance commerce stimulated by the Atlantic slave dealers... Over the years, moreover, their commercial prestige took on political overtones. ... Inseparable from these commercial and political developments were others of a religious nature. Most notable was the development of a cult of the supreme being far more elaborate than anything to be found elsewhere in Ì[ḡ]boland.

(Horton 1975, 220, 228f.)

For Horton’s purposes, any vaguely celestial African divinity will do, but this is airy reasoning in more than one sense. Everybody knows the *sky* is *high* and *high* can mean *supreme* in contexts of authority, so if skygod worship is more “active” in situations of long-distance trade, it seems to follow that supralocal pursuits spur contemplation of “the macrocosm” and “the general human predicament” by germinating “ideas about the high god” and “a more monolatric emphasis” (all quotes from the extracts above). A different and equally plausible explanation of the ‘high’ in *high god* is

suggested by *ganja* residues excavated by Arie *et al.* (2020) in a 9th-6th century BC stratum of the Judahite shrine of Tel Arad in historic Palestine. Horton's pet thesis of cognitive evolution, much like his no-holds-barred defense of "classical" Ifè (§2.8 above), burns more intellectual calories the closer it skates to the edge of circularity. Evidence of monotheism's impact in Africa stems less from observed psychology than from anecdotal, polyglot calques. The political-economic ratchet upward to theological and theoretical abstraction is a just-so story, while proposed examples of this evolution yield to material analyses that are more convincing because they were not inevitable.<sup>201</sup>

*Pace* Horton, it's far from "obvious" that "the African convert"—a generic cutout assuming what was to be proved—perceived Christianity as an instance of "change and development in his concept of the supreme being" (1971, 100). Sold into Christian forced labor regimes in *Lucumí* Cuba and *Nagô* Brazil, Yorùbá speakers subsumed Jesucristo into the pagan "pantheon" by parsing human characteristics of the New Testament's chief *agonist* as insignia of the *òrìṣà* cluster that continentals call *Ọ̀bàtálá* [*le?*'king of the big courtyard, *ita lá'* (Verger 1957, 438)], *Òrìṣà Nílá* ['big *òrìṣà'*] or *Ọ̀ba Òrìṣà* ['king of the *òrìṣà'*] (Ortiz 1906/1973, 129/31; Verger 1954a, 192; Bastide 1960, 366*f.*, cf. Cabrera 1954b, 9=117. This bricolage makes sense in a division of supernatural labor where *Ọ̀bàtálá* held the portfolio of physical creation but tragically blew his big chance to act in that capacity on opening night, when his initial descent to ground level snagged on an oilpalm branch. There he nodded out after improvidently imbibing a bellyful of *emu*, the tree's ambrosial, spontaneously alcoholic sap (Verger 1982, 250), only to dangle helplessly in mid air with a droopy crucified appearance. Gospel-like Yorùbá folktales of this 'white god' (*òrìṣà funfun*) tell how *Ọ̀bàtálá*'s naïve purity of intent brought unearned torments into which the victim nevertheless entered with willing foreknowledge, "accepting bitter and unpleasant consequences without complaint" (Verger 1982, 259, cf. Wenger 1983, 88-93, Manfredi 2014).<sup>202</sup> The mutual attraction of the two supernaturals is visible in a century-old sketch of *Cristo Crucificado* planted on a Cuban *Obatalá* altar.

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HAMPA AFRO-CUBANA



Figura 24.—Altar brujo. (De un apunte del natural)  
Ortiz (1906/1973, 176/63)

In this case at least, it's excusable to wonder who converted who.

In response to such counterexamples, conversion mavens may object that abrupt creole outcomes in crowded, cruel American slaveyards need not match more gradual developments in vaster, more lightly administered African colonies. However, to dismiss *santería* as mere heresy already concedes half the battle because it repeats the old puritan reproach that European Catholics are just as polytheistic as their pagan ancestors (Middleton 1729 cited by Manuel 1959, 23, Barbot 1732 cited by Sansi 2011, 32; Hislop 1862, Peel 1968a, 299). If even European churchgoers pay more heed to physical Jesus than to metaphysical *YHWH*, Horton needs to say why Africans should be analysed by different standards (cf. Boyer 2010, 36). A more distant—Martian or anthropological—observer might conclude instead that supreme beings are inherently a tough sell everywhere at all times, and that it's less informative to analyze any really existing form of Christianity or Islam according to its self-assigned doctrinal categories, than to allow the colorfully heroic characters of Jesus and Muhammad to wear the tangible identities of *òrìṣà*, each one sporting the vivid cultural characteristics of his respective localization. Such a humane assessment of 'religion' was advanced already half a century ago:

Si l'on s'en tient à l'exemple des systèmes africaines, on sera tenté de donner raison à Bataille [1973, 46] lorsqu'il écrit que l'effort pour concevoir un Être Suprême a partout échoué: abstrait et lointain ou proche et manipulable, le dieu païen n'est en tout cas jamais l'équivalent de la figure simultanément intime et transcendante du destin individuel qu'a élaboré le christianisme. La différence entre monothéisme et polythéisme se situe dans le rapport de l'homme au(x) dieu(x): rapport nécessaire de reconnaissance individuelle et réciproque qui ne s'accomplit qu'au-delà de la vie dans un cas, rapport fonctionnel uniquement mis en cause par les aléas de la vie individuelle et sociale dans l'autre.

(Augé 1982, 139)<sup>203</sup>

- 201 Horton doesn't try to justify his key claim that indigenous Africans held the same interest of dominion over nature that drives "Western science"—a notion closer to Frazer and Popper, and further from Tylor and Durkheim, than Horton would willingly admit (Tambiah 1990, 91, 131; Horton 1970, 105, 1987, 1993b, cf. also Marcuse 1965; Habermas 1968; Peel 1968a, 14; Bookchin 1980).
- 202 Pretended omniscience tripped by earthly accident is a leitmotif of southern 9ja lore (e.g. Egharheva 1951, 46; Manfredi 1991, 342).
- 203 [Sticking to African examples, let's agree with Bataille [1973, 46] that the attempt to imagine a Supreme Being has consistently failed. Whether abstract and distant or nearby and easily influenced, a pagan god is never equivalent to Christianity's simultaneously intimate and transcendent divine figure of individual destiny. The difference between monotheism and polytheism lies in the relationship between person and god(s), on the one hand a logical link of individual and reciprocal recognition that occurs only outside of lived experience, and on the other a practical relationship activated by the hazards of individual and social life.]

Considered in these terms, 9ja's commercial evangelic churches are less mono-, and more poly-, theistic than they admit. Unremarkably they evoke a standard pagan interest in this-worldly wellbeing, promoting prosperity and denouncing its abstract opposite, called 'witchcraft' in popular translation (Jenkins 2006, 91-97, 186 *fn* 6; Oppenheimer 2010).

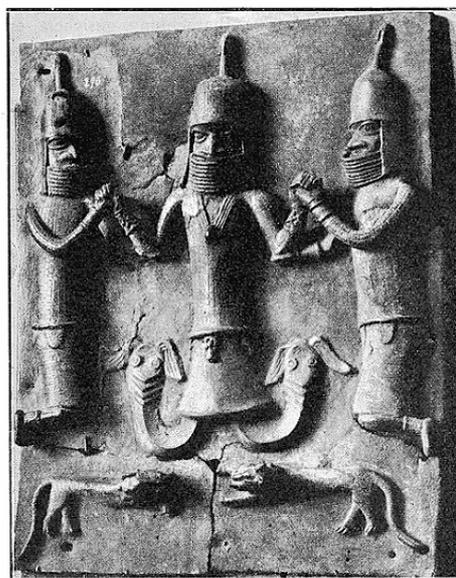
Horton's circularity is clearest when he stipulates that "nearly all known African traditional religions feature a supreme being who is the creator and sustainer of all that is" (1964, 95). The Whig interpretation that "the monotheistic God is foreshadowed in the high gods of some primitive peoples" (Bellah 1964, 359) relies on catechistic translations of local nomenclature by monotheists themselves (Parrinder 1949, 1962, Mbiti 1969, Àrì òze 1970). This ahistorical howler, often critiqued (Okot 1971, Taban 1988, Wiredu 2003, Cox 2014), is extra embarrassing for Horton to espouse, given that he later mocked Africanist theologians as "devout" (1984, 392). Metaphysician heal thyself.

On the contrary, Verger (1966) found no evidence of a "Yorùbá high god" having been recognized before Arab or European contact. Even Ìdòwú admitted that "[t]he name of Olórun ['owner or personification of òrun']... appears to have gained its predominating currency through Christian and Muslim impact upon Yorùbá thought" (1962, 37).<sup>204</sup> If supreme god notions nonetheless pervade Yorùbá studies, it only proves the "ambition of scholarly accounts... to construct... a map of the spiritual world which assigns to spiritual beings determinate and permanent positions in a comprehensive scheme of... hierarchical ranking (Oló.dumarè and his 'ministers' in order of seniority or importance, as described by Ìdòwú (1962))" (Barber 1990, 314). Horton scratches the same itch in the Niger Delta when he says that Kalabari Iẓòṅ *tamunò* [HHH] is "conceived as creator of the entire world" (1962a, 206), but his Port Harcourt colleague Alagoa objects: "In the Nembe language, as in Kalabari, the word *tamunò* means that part of a man which exists before he is born and leaves his body at death" (1964, 3). Alagoa's correction makes the Iẓòṅ phrase *opu tamunò* 'big *tamunò*' (cited by Horton) an uncanny parallel of Igbo *Chúkwu* (< *chí ukwu* 'big *chí*'), for which a convincing and non-Hortonian account is at hand (cf. §1.4 above). Descriptively, *Chúkwu* became the Àrù name for the town's patron divinity by translating "the conceptual code of another culture", namely *Ábàsi Íbùm* 'big *ábàsi*' from the neighboring Èfík trading state, whose "Ibinukpabi" oracle—known to Englishmen as "the long *jùjú*"—was instrumental to Àrù slave dealers (Nwàòga 1984, 57, 60). If a Hortonian then replies *Aha! But where did the Èfík get their own big ábàsi idea from? Didn't they trade a lot and so become cosmopolitan?* the simple answer is *Who cares? To dismiss the claim that supreme skygods emerge from intellect alone, it's enough to show that at least some of them have legs and follow the money.* Horton's theory is unfalsifiable: any part of Africa whose "indigenous religious tradition" is noticed in colonial literature is guaranteed by the time of observation to be already engaged in some kind of "intercommunal trade" if not "long-distance commerce", so any such correlation is less informative about internal dynamics than may casually appear.

It would be miraculous indeed if material considerations did not assist "white power... in conversion to Christianity [in] Eastern Nigeria" (Ífekà-Moller 1974, cf. Èkèéché 1972), but Horton & Peel refuse commonsense causality in favor of their favored scenario that "monolatry" is attracted to "weakening microcosmic boundaries" (1976, 484). Lacking historical or psychological evidence for such linkage leaves only logical necessity, but the logic in question is illogical:

Mais, s'il est bien certain que l'interprétation des événements individuels, familiaux, villageois ou à l'échelle du groupe, de la chefferie ou du royaume peut mettre en œuvre des principes d'explication d'ampleur variable, il ne s'ensuit pas qu'il y ait une correspondance terme à terme entre la nature des maux, l'intensité ou le nombre des gens atteints et la situation «hiérarchique» des entités spirituelles ainsi mises en cause. Aucun panthéon n'a l'allure d'une pyramide.<sup>205</sup>  
(Augé 1982, 138)

The Èdó example complicates Horton's simplistic framework by introducing a concept of supremacy that's not aerial but oceanic. Around the 15th century, when the Èdó capital was literally being entrenched behind huge concentric earthworks called *ìya* (Connah 1967, Darling 1976, 1984), the longstanding earth-sky dialectic of regional cultures was supplemented by the ritualisation of salt water, incarnated dyadically by the *Ọba* and by the Ólokún divinity. As frequently noted, it's conventional for the *Ọba* to move in public with each arm supported by a courtier as if his legs are ill-suited to locomotion on land, and artistic representations go further to replace his downward-pointing legs by upward-pointing catfish. Both traits are illustrated in this probably 16th-century copper-alloy palace plaque.



Luschan (1901, 25, cf. also Read & Dalton 1898, plate 18.2; Bradbury 1967, 32)

<sup>204</sup> Similarly, Melzian cites circumstantial evidence including diverse crucifix and rosary motifs in state icons, suggesting that the Èdó *Ọsanòbùà* "high god" cult appeared "as a later outcome of the early Portuguese missionary activity" (1937, 148).

<sup>205</sup> [But granting that interpretation of events affecting an individual, a family, a village or an entire group, whether chiefdom or kingdom, could deploy explanatory principles of varying scale, from this it doesn't follow there should be a one-to-one correspondence between the nature of the ill, its intensity or the number of people affected and the 'hierarchical' arrangement of supernatural entities held responsible for it. No pantheon resembles a pyramid.]

Proposed Portuguese transmission of this “fish-legged” motif (Drewal 2008, 43*f*. in reply to Fraser 1972) would only reinforce *Ọmọ n'Ọba N'Èdó*'s role as dryland representative of Ólokún's “new cult of sea wealth” (Belasco 1980, 115).<sup>206</sup> However, even accepting that this rubber-leg trope began as a Feuerbachian reflection of burgeoning prosperity from ocean trade, the story doesn't end there. At least since the 17th century, Èdó inhabitants have regarded the sea not just as a supernatural force or a tutelary divinity in the henotheistic sense of *primus inter pares*, but as the ancestral realm itself, supplementing or taking over the previously recognized location of departed humans underground:

The natives of Benin have all a singular veneration for the sea, and use [sic] to swear by it in matters of concern. They celebrate a feast on a certain appointed day in the year, that it may prove a beneficent deity to their country at all times; and they as ridiculously [sic] imagine the state of bliss or torment in the other life will be in the sea.  
(Barbot 1688-1732, 375)

Ólokún is the only deity who must be appeased in order to guide and accept the dead on the way to *Èrìvbin*. As he goes to *Èrìvbin* the dead travels through *Okenalubode* (The hill on which one must not fall down) at [the seaport of] *Ughòtón*, which is thought to be the final place of departure from this earth.  
(Izevbigie 1978, 98*f*.)

Ùrhobo—the most likely transmission gate for the 8-bit oracle from Ìgbo to Èdó, cf. §§1.3.3 and 2.4 above—tells an origin myth about the so-called Lower Niger copper-alloy casts deploying a unique concept: *Ùrhié Enù* ‘the celestial river’ (Foss 2004, 47, diacritics in Ukere 1986). This seems to be a creative fusion between the common skygod motif and the specifically 9ja-deltan doctrine that “*Èdjo n'ame rbe*... ‘Spirits come from water’” (Foss 2004, 47).<sup>207</sup>

It seems therefore that the sky was not the only direction where medieval horizons could expand. The specificity of this finding equally encourages more local explanations for medieval Ifẹ's sky-trope, duplex 4-bit oracle and sculptural treasures. The Ùrhobo and Èdó examples make plausible that the Ifẹ developments too were as much borrowed as driven by endogenous factors. The skychain motif of *Ọrúnmilà/Oòduà*'s descent to ground is not isolated in the neighborhood, rather it resembles “*ẹgban Tsoèdè*—the ‘chain of Tsoèdè’... the mythical ancestor of Nupe kingdom’... the mediator of the [sky] god *Sòkó*” (Weise 2003, 283, cf. Banfield 1914, 401, Nadel 1935, 278).<sup>208</sup> Nupe *Sòkó* is said to derive in turn from *Igàlà* (Nadel 1935b, 129, cf. 1935a, 1942, 73, Eccles 1962, 25) and hypothetical southwestward movement of this metal relic together with its dedicated orature would parallel the best available conjecture for the realistic source of the two dozen “Ifẹ” copper-alloy casts (cf. §2.9 above). By similar considerations, the mysterious and ambiguous presence in Ifẹ of the *Olókun* divinity, beside the much more developed *Ọlọrun* cult, transparently reflects the geographical situation of Ifẹ town in between the large Èdó and Kákànda cultural zones.

That the *babaláwos*—technicians of the duplex 4-bit oracle—led Ifẹ's radical skyward reorientation is beyond dispute, as is their ongoing role in the Yorùbá encounter with colonizing Anglicans and other Christian ideologues:

The *babaláwo[s]* sought to incorporate material from the world religions within their own cosmology. They did do so not just for pragmatic reasons, to enhance the flexibility and appeal of their own system, but from reasons of conviction. For they were intellectuals...  
(Peel 1990, 350)

*Symbolic violence*<sub>df</sub>—“power which manages to impose semantic relations... as legitimate while concealing underlying coercive relations” (Bourdieu & Passeron 1970, 18, cf. Boyer 2020b)—obtains “the consent of the dominated to their [own] domination” (Godelier 1978, 176).

From the stupidity and confusion of the people brought about by the trickery of priestcraft, despotism, which despises both, draws for itself the advantage of undisturbed domination and the fulfilment of its desires and caprices, but is itself at the same time this same dullness of insight, the same superstition and error.  
(Hegel 1807, 490/1977, 330 §542)<sup>209</sup>

*Ifá* is suited to this task by its status as a “pedagogical authority” (Bourdieu & Passeron 1970, 22). When *Ifá*'s urban specialists launched a renaissance of cosmopolitan “self-fashioning” (cf. Greenblatt 1980) by detaching traditional worship from the ancestors and inscribing supernatural signifiers on ‘heaven’—the new meaning of *òrun*—they substantially paralleled Gramsci's organic “southern intellectuals” who “mediated between the great landholders and the peasantry” (Brennan 2001, 176, 2006, 270) just as their imaginative creature *Ọrúnmilà*, poetic personification of *Ifá*, pre-qualified as a “precursor of Christ” (Brivio 2008, 247, citing Peel 1990) by elective affinity from the African side. Continued inculcation of *Ọrun*-ism by players in the *Wá-òò-bi-án* game prolongs the “long conversation... of formalized, ritual communication... dominated by the past in the present” (Bloch 1977, 287, 289) by stretching out a timescale of legitimacy beyond the limits of collective ancestral memory. As in other historical expansions of text technology, whether fully written (West Asia), mainly oral with visual mnemonics (West Africa, *pace* Goody 1986) or dual-channel (South Asia), the “strategic” (Pollock 2006, 499) state-sponsored capture of ideology by medieval *babaláwos* entailed that “national memory was implanted on a base of ritual oblivion” (Sand 2009, 189, cf. Cohn 1994, 76*f*., Dumézil 1940, 43, Dumont 1962, 75). As in the West and South Asian cases, this paradoxical arrangement has confined retrospective awareness also in West Africa, despite abundant comparative evidence in the public domain as sampled in the foregoing pages. At the same time, viable alternatives to the *Ọrun*-ist lineage do subsist in marginal niches, widely dispersed.

Justified disenchantment with Weberian *Entzauberung*—enlightenment—and the poisoned wake of world-scale capital accumulation doesn't require in response a postmodern relativist embrace of world ‘religions’ which, *pace* Gould, thrive as zones of mental shelter from the chill natural-science glare. Enough has been described above about Niger-Benue artisans of the late *Medioaevum*, working at the dawn of modern times, to recognise their empiricist orientation applying ancestral knowledge to present projects, consistent with evolutionary accounts of human culture. What separates that era from today is less Gellner's unique cognitive break from a “coercive” past (1988) than a negatively instructive, coercive detour fueled by forced African labor and fossil carbon (Williams 1944, Malm 2016) through unevenly eventful but eventually destructive and unsustainable adventures of national consciousness and the hubris of economic individualism.

<sup>206</sup> Belasco assumes “the founding of the Ólokún cult by *Ọba Qhèn* probably in the 15th century...” and concludes that “Ólokún worship was established prior to European landing” (1980, 78*f*.) but the conjectural date could easily be another example of how Egharhevba's inflated oral chronology anticipated medieval events on the order of “a hundred years” (Bradbury 1959, 286). According to Izevbigie, “There is no doubt that communal Ólokún worship began in *Ughòtón*” (1978, 282), consistent with Kramer's dynamic analysis as an “interpretation of the alien by mimesis” in “epochs of cultural intermingling” (1993, 250, 253).

<sup>207</sup> To the extent ascertainable from available sources, Ùrhobo *énù* ‘up/atmosphere’ could be borrowed from synonymous Ìgbo *énu*.

<sup>208</sup> Sad to say, the modern tokens of this sacred relic may literally be recycled Portuguese slaving shackles (Nadel 1935b, 130).

<sup>209</sup> [... aus der Dummheit und Verwirrung des Volks durch das Mittel der betrügenden Priesterschaft, beide verachtend, den Vorteil der ruhigen Beherrschung und der Vollführung seiner Lüste und Willkür zieht, zugleich aber dieselbe Dumpfheit der Einsicht, der gleiche Aberglaube und Irrtum ist.]

### 3.1 Appendix. *Afa* simulation [audio] by *dìbì*a Chùkwuùma, Àgbádaàna, Nri, August 1977<sup>210</sup>

Each numbered line was spoken after a single cycle (throw) of two 8-bit chains, yielding four 4-bit arrays which can be labeled ABCD from right to left. In principle six 8-bit words can be read from each throw, although in practice fewer can be called, and with some mutations such that in the course of 31 throws in this text, ten basic patterns occur:

- “AB, BC, AC, CD, BD, AD.” [= the full parse]  
 “AB, BC, BD, CD, AD.” [alt.-a]  
 “AB, BC, AC, CD, AD.” [alt.-b]  
 “AB, AC, AD, BD, BC.” [alt.-c]  
 “AB, BC, BD, CD, AC.” [alt.-d]  
 “AB, AC, BC, CD, AD.” [alt.-e]  
 “AB, AC, BC, CA, CD.” [alt.-f]  
 “AB, CA, CD, DB, CB.” [alt.-g]  
 “AB, CB, DB, CA, DA.” [alt.-h]  
 “AB, CA, DA, DB” [alt.-i]

Identical arrays in sequence are called X-*námbo* or *náabo* (double-X) or X-*náátò* (triple X). (Quadruples did not occur.) Each pair of distinct array names is pronounced with the normal derived tones of a X + Y genitive construction meaning ‘X of Y’, except that LL+L is unperturbed in line (14), and metalinguistic L tone appears in (23). Consonant substitutions are marked <in angle brackets> and annotated as [x] → [y].

1. Àká Ọra, Ọrá Àwụ, Àká Àwụ, Àkwụ Otúle, Ọrá Ótule, Àká Ótule.
2. Otúle námbo, Otúle Obi, Óbí Óse, Òtúle Óse. [AC=BC, AD=BD]
3. Ọrá námbo, Ọrá Ète, Ógbú Ète. [alt.-a truncated AD, A=B]
4. Óbí Atúrụkpà, Àtúrụkpà Áka, Àká Ọyeri, Àtúrụkpà Ọyeri. [truncated AD], [g] → [y]
5. Óbí Óse, Ósé Ọkala, Ósé È<k>e, Ọkalá Ète, Ógbú È<k>e. [t] → [k], [b] → [gb]
6. Ìjíte Áka, Àká Óhu, Òhú námbo, Ìjíte Óhu. [alt.-b, BC=BD, AC=AD]
7. Àtúrụkpà Áka, Àká Ò<y>eri, Àká Ógute, Ọgori Ogúte. [truncated AD], [g] → [y]

[hits tortoise shell once with *òfó* stick]

8. Àká Òtúle, Àká Ète, Àká Obi, Òtúle Obi, Ógbú È<k>e. [alt.-c], [b] → [gb]
9. Àtúrụkpà Óse, Ósé Àkwụ, Ósé È<k>e, Àkwụ Ete, Àtúrụkpà Àkwụ. [alt.-d], [t] → [k]
10. Òhú Ọgori, Ọgori Ọkala, Òhú Ọkala, Ọkalá È[k]e, Ọgori È<k>e, Òhú È<k>e. [t] → [k]

[hits double *ògèné* bell repeatedly with *òfó* stick]

11. Óbí Akwụ, Àkwú Ọra, Ọrá Ùrúrù, Àkwụ Urúrù, Óbí Urúrù. [dropped AC]
12. Ódí Óhu, Ódí Ọkala, Óhu námbo, Óhú Ọkala, Ódí Ọkala. [alt.-e plus extra AD, AB=AC]
13. Èté Óhu, Òhú Ète, Ète náabo, Ète náátò. [alt.-b, A=C=D]
14. Ète Atúrụkpà, Ète A<hw>ụ, Àtúrụkpà Àhwụ, Àkwụ Ete, Àkwú Óhu. [alt.-f], [kw] → [hw]
15. Ódí Àtúrụkpà, Ódí Ète, Ódí Óse. [alt.-c truncated last two]
16. Àtúrụkpà Ète, Àtúrụkpà A<y>ári, Àgári Ọ<r>a, Èté Ọha, Àtúrụkpà Ọ[r]a. [dropped BC], [g] → [y], [h] → [r]
17. Ète A[hw]ụ, Àgári À<hw>ụ, Àkwú Óhu, Àgári Óhu. [alt.-a truncated AD], [kw] → [hw]
18. Àká naabo, Àká Ọbala, Ọbalá Óse, Àká Óse, Àká Óse. [A=A]
19. Àgári Obi, Àgári Áka, Ọkalá Áka, Óbí Áka. [alt.-e, reversed CD, truncated AD]
20. Àká À<hw>ụ, Àká naabo, Àká Ò<y>eri, Àkwú Áka [alt.-d, A=C], [kw] → [hw], [g] → [y]
21. Àtúrụkpà Óhu, Òhú Àkwụ, Àwú Ọbala, Àtúrụkpà Ọbala. [alt.-b dropped BD]
22. Ùrurú Óhu, Ùruru Ọkala, Ọkalá Ète, Òhú Ète, Ùrurú Ète. [dropped BC]
23. Àgári Ògúte, Ìjíte Ọbala, Ọbala Odí, Ìjíte Odí, Àgári Odí. [dropped AC]

[laughs theatrically]

24. Ìjíte Ótule, Òtúle Ò<y>eri, Òtúle Ọkala, Ọgeri Ọkala, Ìjíte Ọkala. [alt.-b], [g] → [y]
25. Ọkalá Ọbala, Òhú Ọkala, Óhú Ùrúrù, Ùruru Ọbala, Óhú Ọbala. [alt.-g]
26. Àká Óhu, Òhú Ọkala, Àká Ọkala, Ọkalá Óhu, Òhú námbo. [dropped BD]
27. Óbí Ọbala, Àká Ọbala, Àtúrụkpà Ọbala, Àká Obi, Àtúrụkpà Óbí, Àtúrụkpà Ọbala [alt.-h repeating DB?]
28. Àká Ọkala, Ọkala Otúle, Òtúle Ọgeri, Àká Ótúle. [alt.-d dropped BD].
29. Ọrá Á[y]ari, Ọgeri Ọrá, Àtúrụkpà Ọrá, Ọgeri A<y>ári. [alt.-i], [g] → [y]
30. Ùrurú Àhwụ, Ùruru Àtúrụkpà, Àtúrụkpà Otúle, Ùruru Otúle, Àhwụ Otúle. [dropped BC]
31. Òhú Èse, Àtúrụkpà Óhu, Ósé Á<y>ari, Òhú Á<y>ari, Àtúrụkpà Á<y>ari. [dropped BC, reordered], [g] → [y]

[hits tortoise shell with *òfó* stick]

32. Ònyé bù Okéréké bù ndì à? Ndí Okéréké dìkwa!  
 Who are these So-and-So family? So-and-So family are indeed present!

33. Òkéréké kéné òfufe! Kèdì ikèngà gí?  
Mr. So-and-So should greet by worshipping! Where is your *ikèngà*?
34. Ò sị nà ó nwèrè ife jideni gí... ñke ñdì ụdò... tògbó yá nà nkị tị!  
It then says something is holding you... relating to the people at home... causing suffering!
35. ...gwá m ife ọ bụ, kà m gwa Òkéréké.  
...tell me what it is, so that I can tell Mr. So-and-So.
35. Ò sị nà ọ bụ ñdụ mli, yá ndị dī nà mli, ife a kwadobe nà mli.  
He says it is the ones of water, it's those which are in the water, something kept in water.
36. Nà ọ bya nà-enyé gí ife ị gà-iji ebú ife ọhụ áwụsị.  
That he will come and give you what you will use to pour the thing away.
37. Nà í me nyá, ị mé echí.  
That you should do it tomorrow.
38. Nà anyị gà-éjì égó, gbákọsị ifé, jèé nà mli, wánye yá.  
That we will use money, assemble everything, go in the water, submerge it in.
39. Yá bụ, é were ụbòsị nwerò me Eké jee nyá, ọ dīghị mmá.  
That is, if you go and do that on any other day than Èké (the main market and ritual day), it is not good.
40. Kèé egó jee mezi na, ị gà-afụ ya afu, ị gà-afụ yá, nà ife kwụ ọtọ, ife na-úzò ñkáná, n'úzò áka èkpe. Yá bụ é mesịa, ò mé gịní? Ó má-èrù áká. N'ime ife à, ị mé égo.  
If you divide money go and invest in it, you will surely see it standing on the left side. Then, what it is doing? It will not be too large. Then inside this thing, you put the money.
41. Ì ríjuo afó [g]u, àrú adùá gí mmá, ị dī ka í nwèzína uchè.  
If you have eaten belly full and your body feels OK, you still ought to think further!
42. Ì nwete ife ụmùáká gà ná-èrì? Ò ọ gà-adí mmá. Ụmùáká na-èrì-ifé, mà nwóké mà nwàanya í nwèrè. Fàà ná-èrìjuo afó.  
Have you got what the children will be eating? [Then] it will be good. Children need something to eat, whether you have boys or girls. They just keep on eating until their bellies are full.
43. Òkéréké mà gí eména jì ife? Nà ádì ife a dī ekwé, kà úrú madì? Ónye eména jì ife, àrú adì ekwé yá. Òkéréké wèré nzu bàá!  
Mr. So-and-So, shouldn't you have things? That there is anything that is more appropriate than human profit? If someone should not have things, his body will not agree. Mr. So-and-So crumble chalk (as a sacrifice).
44. Nà ọ bụ íjé tère na ị byà na bé m, wèé gbagha ife dī etu à. Màna kwó aká ọtọ màka Chínàékè!  
It's a long journey you came to my place and started doing something like this. Raise up your open hands to the Sky God.

[side discussion between Chúkumà and Àkụnné]

45. Ífe m nà-ekwú, díbyà m nà-emé, ọ màrà m amá, nà mú asàtara ya asatá, nà ó dùlégbu ányị, onye ọ màrà, o mébe.  
What I'm saying, the oracle I practice, it suits me, I've mastered it thoroughly, it has guided us through, someone it suits, practices [it].
46. “Ète Akwụ” bụ ñnekwu òkụkụ, ọ dī rọkwa nyá? “Ète Akwụ” ñnekwu òkụkụ.  
Ète Akwụ is [signifies] a big hen, isn't it so? Ète Akwụ [is] a big hen,
47. “Òghorì Ète”, áwọ ya árú.  
Òghorì Ète [means] s/he has a stomach ache.
48. “Òdí Òsé”, íwe, “Àtúrụkpá Òsé” ájì ohwú.  
Òdí Òsé [is] quarrel, Àtúrụkpá Òsé is a piece of coarse wrapper cloth.
49. “Ùrú rú námbo” úgwó. “Èté Òsé”, íyí a gá-anú.  
Double Ùrú rú [means] debt; Èté Òsé [means] an oath that to be sworn [drunk].
50. “Àkwú Àká”, Nkwó, évini.  
Àkwú Àká [means] Nkwó [day], a ram.
51. “Àká Òtúre”, ọhwó.  
Àká Òtúre [means] an ọfọ lineage staff i.e. the ancestors.
52. “Àkwú Íjite”, ụnò.  
Àkwú Íjite [means] household.
53. “Àkwú Òhú” bụ chí. “Àkwú Ùrú rú” yá bụ nwá.  
Àkwú Òhú is the *chí* life-force. Àkwú Ùrú rú, that is a child.
54. “Ọrá Obi”, ọbị bya.  
Ọrá Obi [means] a visitor.
55. “Àká naàbo”, há nà-abya.  
Àká naàbo [means] they are coming.

# Comparison of 4-bit array names and associated information from oracle localizations across 5 historical zones

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zone A				zone B					zone C				zone D				zone E											
<i>Ijá</i>				<i>“Agbigba”</i>					<i>Ìba</i>				<i>Áfa</i>				<i>Kbet't er remel</i> (“sand-writing” of literate Arabs)											
i	ii	<i>gloss of doubled array</i>		iii	iv	i	ii	iii	<i>gloss of single array</i>		i	ii	iii	<i>gloss of single array</i>		i	ii	iii	iv	<i>gloss of single array</i>								
◇◇◇◇	Ogbè	(1)	good visitor	Gbè	♂	[Oşika]	(1)	[Şikan]	(6)	[Shi]	(1)	leg	Ógbì	(1/5)	Ogbi	(1)	Óbì/Ógbù	(11)	Obi	Èbí	(5)	open door= <i>e</i>	(5/16)	♂	(7)	(4)	(1)	tarik ‘road’
◆◆◆◆	Ọyèkú	(2)	longevity/good journey/wives	Yèkú	♀	Oyèku	(2)	Eyako	(5)	Kum	(16)	crisis	Àkó	(2/6)	Ako	(5)	À(k/h)wù	(3)	Akwù	Oyèkwu/Ákwù	(13)	meeting= <i>e</i>	(16/5)	( )	(16)	(6)	(2)	jemāh ‘assembly’
◆◇◆◆	Ìwòrì	(3)	children; ending of good luck	(W)òlì	♂	Ogori	(7)	Gori	(8)	G(y)iri	(8)	stomach trouble	Òghoi	(3/2)	Oghori	(10)	Ògori/Òyeri	(2)	Ogoli	Ògòli	(11)	4-legged animal= <i>e</i>	(11/10)	♂	(8)	(3)	(5)	ijitima ‘unity, meeting’
◇◆◆◇	Èdí/Òdí	(4)	bad visitor/avoid journey	Dí	♀	Oji	(8)	Eji	(7)	[Nwa]	(9)	death	Òdín	(4/1)	Edi/Odi	(9)	Òdí	(10)	[ ]	Òjí/Òdí	(10)	stomach	(10/11)	♀	(11)	(11)	(6)	ocleh ‘deception’
◇◆◆◆	Ọbàrà	(7)	coming of good luck	Ab(á)là	♂	Ọbara	(4)	Bara	(15)	Mbara	(15)	annoyance	Ọkan	(6/11)	Ọkanran	(4)	Ọbala	(7)	Ọkaraọ	Ọbàlà	(2)	blood sacrifice	(2/3)	( )	(12)	(12)	(3)	lahyān ‘bearded person’
◆◆◆◇	Ọkànràn	(8)	accident; honor	Aklán/Akàná	♀	Ọkona	(3)	Kana	(16)	Gina	(4)	silence/dark skin	Ọ(v)ba	(5/12)	Ọ(v)bara	(6)	Ọkala	(1)	Ọbara	Ọkòṅò/Ọkàlà	(8)	blood sacrifice	(8/13)	♀	(13)	(10)	(4)	nekys ‘reversal’
◇◇◆◆	Ìròsùn	(5)	poverty	Lósò	♂	Orosun	(15)	Rusu	(1)	Lusu	(14)	illness	Ọghác	(8/4)	E/Aghare	(3)	Ùrúrù	(5)	Ègali	Òlòrù	(9)	laughter= <i>e</i>	(9/12)	( )	(10)	(5)	(16)	nousra el khārijah ‘victory leaving’
◆◆◆◇	Ọwónrín	(6)	longevity; slander	Wòlín/Wèlé	♀	Ọga	(16)	Ega	(2)	[Chiyong]	(3)	woman	Òrúúhu	(7/3)	Urhur(h)u	(7)	Àgári/Àyári	(13)	Uhu	Ègáli	(12)	machete	(12/9)	♀	(9)	(2)	(15)	nousra el dākhilah ‘victory coming’
◇◇◇◆	Ọgúndá	(9)	sudden trouble; double wealth	Gúdá	♂	Ogunta	(14)	Guta	(11)	Kura	(13)	fame/conciliation	Ọhá	(10/15)	Orha	(2)	Ìjíte/Ògúte	(9)	Oha	Ogwuta/ẹ/Èjítà	(14)	youngest son	(13/8)	♀	(15)	(14)	(8)	atabah el khārijah ‘outer threshold’
◆◇◇◇	Ọsá	(10)	difficulties in work	Sá	♀	Osa	(13)	Esa	(12)	Saa	(2)	man/‘idol’	Ìghítan	(9/16)	Ighite	(8)	Ọrá	(15)	Ijite/Ogute	Ọrá	(3)	elder’s walking stick	(3/2)	(♂)	(14)	(13)	(7)	atabah el dākhilah ‘inner threshold’
◇◇◆◇	Ìrètẹ	(14)	prosperity despite enemies	Lẹtẹ	♀	Irẹtẹ	(10)	Etia	(14)	Lete	(6)	misfortune	Ètúrẹ	(12/13)	Erhurẹ	(12)	Ète/Èke	(8)	Oture	Ọlẹtẹ/Ètẹ	(1)	fire running forward	(1/4)	♂	(2)	(7)	(13)	gandle ‘solid’
◇◆◆◇	Òtú(ṛ)á	(13)	peace and consensus	Túlá	♂	Otura	(9)	Turia	(13)	Toro	(7)	delay	Ète	(11/14)	Ete/?Eke	(13)	Òtúre	(12)	Ete	Òtúlá/ẹ	(16)	loud noise= <i>e</i>	(14/7)	♂	(1)	(8)	(14)	naki el khadd ‘beardless’
◆◆◆◆	Òtúrúpòn	(12)	accept advice	Trúkpẹ	♀	Ọtaru	(6)	Rakpan	(9)	Matpa/e	(10)	elder woman	Èká	(16/10)	Eka	(15)	Àtúrùkpà	(16)	Eka	Átúnúkà	(4)	elder woman= <i>e</i>	(4/1)	♀	(3)	(16)	(11)	bayādh ‘white color’
◆◆◆◆	Ìká	(11)	health and prosperity	Ká	♂	Oyinkan	(5)	Yikan	(10)	Mishpa/e	(11)	dark skin	Èrhóxuà	(13/9)	Erhokpo/a	(14)	Àká	(4)	Ètùrukpa	Èká	(7)	young woman= <i>e</i>	(7/14)	♂	(4)	(1)	(12)	homra ‘red color’
◇◆◆◆	Ọsẹ	(15)	good wife; journey/prosperity	Chẹ	♂	Ọkin	(11)	Arikin	(4)	K(y)e	(5)	victory	Òhún	(15/8)	Ophu	(16)	Òsé	(6)	Ohu	Òché	(6)	unearthed/uncovered	(6/15)	♀	(6)	(15)	(10)	cabdh el khārijah ‘outgoing arrow’
◆◆◆◆	Òfún	(16)	share with friends; be alert	Fú	♀	Ofun	(12)	Efu	(3)	[Kapla]	(12)	light skin	Òsé	(14/7)	Ose	(11)	Òhú	(4)	Ose	Òfú	(15)	compliant person	(15/6)	♀	(5)	(9)	(9)	cabdh el dākhil ‘incoming arrow’

Last updated 28 August 2014. Posted at [people.bu.edu/manfredi/4bitArraySpreadsheet.pdf](http://people.bu.edu/manfredi/4bitArraySpreadsheet.pdf). For cited references, see [people.bu.edu/manfredi/IfaAfajNri.pdf](http://people.bu.edu/manfredi/IfaAfajNri.pdf). The fullest available comparison of 8-bit wglossaries from zones B/C/D is collated in [people.bu.edu/manfredi/8bitSemanticKey.pdf](http://people.bu.edu/manfredi/8bitSemanticKey.pdf).

**Notes.** Left side of transcription = top of array; ◇ = concave up, ◆ = concave down, corresponding to single vs. double line in *yanrìn tíṭẹ* ‘sand-writing’. Omitted here is Èfík “Efa”, briefly mentioned by Talbot (1912, 274) as well as Southern African “four tablet divination” (Binsbergen 1996, 21f) which shows no resemblance (other than the use of binary numerology) to the oral Niger-Benue systems in Zones **A - D**, and only faint similarity to the literate Arabic systems in Zone **E**.

**Graph mutation in Zone C and Zone D-ii:** all asymmetric arrays rotate 180° with respect to their counterparts in Zone **A**, despite the impression given by Armstrong’s chart (1964, 139). Emovon notes that this flip is due to explicit adoption of a perspective “as if the reading was done from the side of the client sitting opposite the diviner” (1984, 4), although the matter is more complex because even rotated arrays are nevertheless read from the oraclist’s right to left, just as obtains in the nonrotated zones.

**[A-i]** Ọyọ (Abímbólá 1976), listed in the order recorded in Òmu-Ìlọrín (Clarke 1939, 252) as well as in “Ifẹ, Ìlẹ̀sà, Èkìtì and Ìgbómìnà” (Bascom 1969a, 47). A variant order of **[A-i]**, recorded in “Onđó and Bini [=Èđó]”, shifts *Ìká/Èká* to final position (Ìbié 1986, 65). **[A-ii]** is the order “primarily associated with Lagos, Òdè Rẹ̀mọ... and the provinces of Abẹ̀kúta and Ìbàdàn” plus Cuba and Brazil, called by Bascom “the dominant pattern” (1969a, 47; cf. 1961, 1966). **[A-iii]** also occurs in Nàgó and eastern Gbè, for which **[A-iii]** gives Àgbómẹ̀ names (Maupoil 1943a, 414f. plus variants from Trautmann 1940 and Herskovits 1938, 210f., cf. also Lóngé 1983, 30-33). Glosses of double arrays (= *ojú odú* ‘major *odú*’) from Clarke (1939, 255). Trautmann, Maupoil (1943a, 430-572) and Abímbólá (1976, 30f) list more detailed semantics of single names, based on folk etymologies, associated narratives or other mnemonics. **[A-iv]** lists a gendering of arrays as reported by Hébert (1961, 152 citing Johnson 1899, Maupoil 1943a, 414-16 and Alápini 1952). The Ajá-speaking variant of *Afá* **[A-ii]** demotes *Ká* to its **[A-i]** position: “*Gbe, Yẹku, Wólì, Di, Loso, Anlọẹ, Abla, Akla, Guda, Sa, Trukpe, Tu(mi)la, Lẹtẹ, Ka, Tse, Fu*” (Kligue[h] 2001, 205, 2011b, unreliable diacritics), whereas a nearby Èdè-speaking tradition has the **[A-i]** order (Spieth 1911, 201f) and yet a different order is reported nearby: *Gbe, Yẹku, Wólì, Di, Loso, Ọjọlì, Abla, Akla, Guda, Sa, Ka, Trukpe, Tula, Lẹtẹ, Tse, Fu* (Surgý 1981, 43).

**[B-i]** Yàgbà-Yorùbá (Bascom 1969, 7 no tones, citing Ògúnbiyí 1952). **[B-ii]** Nupe (Ọbáyemí 1983, no diacritics); Nadel (1954, 41) gives a different order. **[B-iii]** Angas, West Chadic (Danfulani 1995, 81f., 195, no diacritics, noncognates in [square brackets]), individual 4-bit glosses included.

**[C-i]** Èđó (names from Egharhevba 1936, 7-10, tones from Melzian 1937, 137). The first ordering is from Egharhevba (1936, 7-10, 10-39), who notes a variant with *Òsé* (13), *Òbún* (14), *Èrbóxuà* (15); the second ordering is from Melzian (1937, 137); Emovon (1984, 5) gives yet a third order. **[C-ii]** Úrhobo (Nabofa & Elugbe 1981, inconsistent transcription, no tones, significance of ordering not stated). Similar nomenclature occurs in Isókó *Èva* (Peek 1982, 189 no tones). BK1 tonemarking convention in Èđó: no mark = same as previous mark.

**[D-i]** Ǹri-Igbo (Ọ̀nwẹ̀jìọ̀gwù 1997, no diacritics, significance of order not stated). Revised transcription based on 1977 recording of *d̀b̀i* a Chúkumà at Águ-Ukwu Ǹri (= Appendix of [people.bu.edu/manfredi/IfaAfajNri.pdf](http://people.bu.edu/manfredi/IfaAfajNri.pdf)). **[D-ii]** Ǹsùkà-Ìgbo (Shelton 1965, unreliable diacritics, no ordering given, ◇◆◆◇ not named). BK1 tonemarking convention in Ìgbo: no mark = same as previous mark. **[D-iii]** is from the “*Ifa-anwa*” (seed-casting) method of Ígàlà (Boston 1974, no tones), significance of order not stated, approximate tones and alternate names from Armstrong (1964, 139 via Bradbury *p.c.*). Boston also documents “*Ifa-ebutu*” (sand-writing), a less specialized oracle which resembles “*Ifa-anwa*” substantially, not only in the names of the 4-bit signs but also to a lesser extent in semantics: seven out of the sixteen simplex “*Ifa-anwa*” glosses—those suffixed with “=*e*” in the table above—closely match the glosses reported by Boston (1974, 359) for their “*Ifa-ebutu*” counterparts.

**[E-i]** Before the slash is given a “mathematical” order attributed to the Berber author Ez-Zenati, also found in Porto Novo (Maupoil 1943b, 5-6, cited by Hébert (1961, 155 and 156, *fn.* 1), in Chad (Jaulin 1957 cited by Hébert 1961, 156, *fn.* 2) and in “Atimi” collected at M̀ekọ, Nigeria (Bascom 1969, 8 citing Monteil 1932, 89f., no tones). Trautmann (1940, 151). The order after the slash is obtained by reversing the parity of each bit (Hébert 1961, 182). The genders are given by Ez-Zenati (Maupoil 1943b, 61). The **[E-ii]** order was collected in Mauritania (Trancart 1938, via Hébert 1961, 150). **[E-iii]** is from Grande Comore (Hébert 1961, 146 who gives three alternate orders from Madagascar, cf. also Trautmann 1940, 153). The **[E-iv]** order and the Arabic glosses are from Darfur (Tūnisī 1845 via Hébert 1961, 121, 188ff). Jaulin (1957, 1966) documents semantic shifts in Chad.





Òghori <i>nààbò</i>	useless		empty handed	poverty, fall from wealth to deprivation			loss of kingdom [?]	hyena acquires talons for his paws [?]	[dog chews bones]
Òghori Àkà	death		punishment	[kill rat, sickness runs, dispute scatters people]			trouble coming to the house	<axe can't cut forest tree without sacrifice>	<axe usurps the inheritance of iroko>
Òghori Àkwù	unlucky ones		<animal sacrifice>	[war with bloodshed, Ògún]					[dog savior]
Òghori Àgàrí	stomach illness		[burden, sacrifice]	stomach illness, bloated like calabash				[stronghead prince beaten for his <i>Fa</i> initiation]	[stronghead prince]
Òghori Ète	corpse		child	boat of death collects sacrifice for Òvía			children	[why oracle priest never does farmwork]	python's stomach illness/[vulture's absence]
Òghori Ìjíte	female child			[corpse/quarrel]			[quarrel of friends]	[husband flees ashamed as wife pays his debts]	[failure of intelligence]
Òghori Òbì	òyè weekday			[illness]				[ <i>Oduduma</i> acquires longevity and followers]	[adultery/womb]
Òghori Òhú	woman			[Àkè/arrow of ancestral realm]				goat cures lion's stomach ache	child/fertility
Òghori Òkàlà	kindle fire/illness			[travel back in boat with sacrifice for Òvía]				[riches or death]	[diarrhoea/snake bite]
Òghori Òrà	nighttime			[stomach illness]				[ <i>gbà's</i> impoverished son inherits kingdom]	[farmer/tree]
Òghori Òsé	tell story			[woman/waist]					stomach ache/illness
Òghori Òtùré	female child			nubile woman					orphan repairs night damage, becomes rich [?]
Òghori Àtùrùkpà	big trouble			someone is tied up by his own belt					[ram's arrogance]
Òghori Òdí	mourning			someone dies and goes away never to return					[antelope's pelt]
Òghori Ùrùrù									[death]
									[lion's arrogance]
Òkàlà <i>nààbò</i>	thing struggled for		war, fight	quarrel, dispute	quarrel		<i>Ṣàngó</i> fights against Ram and flees to the sky	apes versus humans, earth versus sky [?]	porcupine and panther fight over one wife
Òkàlà Àkà	run/escape		[war, fight]	[steadiness and powerful hand]					[crow owns white scarf/is punished for theft]
Òkàlà Àkwù	accident		[tree]	[husband, wealthy house-owner]	[menstruation]			[approach of death]/<sow survives danger>	[water turns to mud]
Òkàlà Àgàrí	animal sacrifice			<celebration for surviving danger>					[suffering]
Òkàlà Ète	silk-cotton tree			[hunger, bad deed, ?]					[taboo violation is punished]
Òkàlà Ìjíte	titleholder			[oracle priest, curative herbs = Òbala Ìjíte]	[pregnancy]				[beware falling tree]
Òkàlà Òbala	deceit			<your sacrifice for others helps you yourself>	<prosperity>				[crab/the stubborn child ends up badly]
Òkàlà Òbì	said/decided	intelligence	advice, counsel	messenger who is your adversary	quarrel				disregarding advice brings disaster
Òkàlà Òhú	alcoholic drink		alcoholic drink	alcoholic drink, drunken behavior					[face to face]
Òkàlà Òghori	wasted lifetime			[small child that becomes an elder]					[danger from siblings and cousins]
Òkàlà Òrà	refusal/disgrace		false, no	[joy, celebration, coming of a child]					mistaken dog ownership [?]
Òkàlà Òsé	respect/avoidance			[curative herbs]					child beg forgiveness/[panther trapped]
Òkàlà Òtùré	truth			<abundance from the ancestors>					<accept limited bad>
Òkàlà Àtùrùkpà	deceit			<favorite, sexy wife>					<bachelor finds pregnant wife>
Òkàlà Òdí	watchfulness			confident boasting, drumming for Ólokún					[ancestral insult remains today]
Òkàlà Ùrùrù	cleansing evil			escape evil					[naif trapped in a sincere commission]
Òrà <i>naàbò</i>	villain		{{spirit}}	[sudden event like thunder, fall from tree]	[death]		worthless person	assassin farmer/[frog beats buffalo]	family better than treacherous friend
Òrà Àkà	pay a fine		punishment	sacrifice a rooster to the ancestors		[imminent event]			[sabotaged by a rival tie-dyer]
Òrà Àkwù	taboo			something dangerous behind your back		<i>ẹ̀bọ</i> (≈ Igbo <i>áḥsị</i> )			[ram and bull can't defeat each other]
Òrà Àgàrí	patrilineage		relative/brother/sister	patrilineage					father Mawu gives Dan his sister Sun as wife
Òrà Ète	sorrow		tears	tears					patrilineal inheritance/[fish-wife caught]
Òrà Ìjíte	patrilineal ancestors			[advice]			[the hunter's totemic duiker-wife]		[oraclist escapes ambush, leaves bag behind]
Òrà Òbala	bad-death ones		[god/sky/ancestors]	[sky god]					[witches fall in own trap/tree lives by bending]
Òrà Òbì	sibling, {visitor}			close sibling					[one tree outlives its brother in the world]
Òrà Òhú	sibling		<obey/careful>	<prediction>					[innocent maid of a pair is accused of theft]
Òrà Òghori	small child			[lies]					[living underwater, the frog escapes birds]
Òrà Òkàlà	small child		male	male child, man, men					[treacherous friend/tortoise brings fire]
Òrà Òsé	illness			worm illness					[buffalo kills hunter's obedient dogs]
Òrà Òtùré	first son			[advice]					[goat the troublemaker becomes sacrificial]
Òrà Àtùrùkpà	first daughter			[advice]					[innocent hunter executed/cow loses voice]
Òrà Òdí	left-side moiety			[deafness, stubbornness]					[toucan beak/river/a chief requires a house]
Òrà Ùrùrù	inlaws		{{children}}	[something that's wrong and to be discarded]		[no ill event]			[Afa reveals the password of death]
									[farmer uproots grass; people stop thunder]
Òsé <i>naàbò</i>	see		eyes	eyes, vigilance to avoid trouble			[kola medicine against death]	<act before too late>	<night/rain falls before job is done> [?]
Òsé Àkà	odd behavior			wasted spending of money					dog habitually eats shit/calabash always rattles
Òsé Àkwù	sacrificial items in market			baboon follow branch to market/make sacrifice					[where iroko falls is its own grave]
Òsé Àgàrí	sacrificial items in market			sympathy or desire to see someone					[sing good songs/suspicion causes adultery]
Òsé Ète	thing held			something that delays your hand to act					antelope's cane [?]/[strength of dancing feet]
Òsé Ìjíte	food sacrifice	[ <i>ehi</i> procreative force]		<avoid selfishness>					<crab lost his neck in helping others>
Òsé Òbala	joy			coral bead/[pale person]					[termites flee from bush fire]
Òsé Òbì	sacrificial items in market		market	sacrificial persons or things in market			'make market'/[bad head/witch/pregnancy]	proof of wife's honesty in the market	[vagina is buried and spoiled/ <i>Nefi's</i> adultery]
Òsé Òhú	profiteers			someone who plays a trick				<wallowing in mud does not kill the pig>	<pig doesn't rest in mud>
Òsé Òghori	waste/in vain			weakness/idleness					[partridge call/vagina blocked with clay]
Òsé Òkàlà	titleholder			[what is spoken will happen]					[squirrel is killed for betraying the hunter]
Òsé Òrà	you have escaped	sacrifice to living	[ <i>ehi</i> procreative force]	[something that you keep in mind]					[baobab is killed by helping others]
			{{annoyance}}						
Òsé Òtùré	joy			prosperity/progress/long life			goodness	[messenger/17/4-eye <i>ikin</i> ]/<escape death>	[loyal youngest son escapes death]
Òsé Àtùrùkpà	joy			[woman ties beads on waist]					[stubborn child dies in initiation]
Òsé Òdí	anger		[underworld, dead]	[bad spirits that go at night]					[intelligent people, don't try the impossible]
Òsé Ùrùrù	caution			[turbulent river spoils/scatters something]					[oracle bag with hole/riches lost from house]



## NOTES

\* This file (5pp. 438x320mm) is posted at [people.bu.edu/manfredi/8bitSemanticKey.pdf](http://people.bu.edu/manfredi/8bitSemanticKey.pdf). Coding of more data is in progress. Most recent update: 26 May 2015. For references and discussion see the main text, parts one ([people.bu.edu/manfredi/IfaAjaNri.pdf](http://people.bu.edu/manfredi/IfaAjaNri.pdf)) and two ([people.bu.edu/manfredi/BeforeWazobia.pdf](http://people.bu.edu/manfredi/BeforeWazobia.pdf)).  
n = total number of attested cases per locality. nn = *shared* number of cases between localities, in case of data gaps on both sides.

- As discussed in the main text (§4.3 of part one), Ñsùkà, Ùrhobo, Ìsókó and Èdó glosses attest a systematic 180° rotation of binary 4-bit arrays with reference to the Ñri orientation. In Èdó, the rotation is explicitly recognized by practitioners as reflecting the oraclist’s virtual perspectival shift, “as if the reading was done from the side of the client sitting opposite the diviner” (Emòvòñ 1984, 4). Importantly this geometric mutation, apparently contained in a contiguous area, did not in itself affect the semantic mapping of the array names; in other words, the ‘deep structure’ of the oracle is the set of (linguistically meaningless) names and not the geometric arrays that call these names in the binary procedure.
- The listing order of the 256 cases follows Ónwùejìógwù (1997), who apparently used alphabetical sequence based on the spelling of one version of the Ìgbo array names; this does not necessarily correspond to some of the variants given here, due to the extreme phonetic variability of the array names at Ñri. The corresponding names of the individual 4-bit arrays in the other localities are given at [people.bu.edu/manfredi/4bit-ArraySpreadsheet.pdf](http://people.bu.edu/manfredi/4bit-ArraySpreadsheet.pdf).
- Maupoil (1943a, 580 *fn.* 1) plausibly identifies this oracle text with a Ìgbo folktale (Ànekwé 1936).

## SOURCES

Column 1 is based on Ónwùejìógwù (1997) with supplementary translations in {curly brackets} from the recording posted in audio form at [manfredi.mayfirst.org/chukwumaDibiaNri.mov](http://manfredi.mayfirst.org/chukwumaDibiaNri.mov) and transcribed in the Appendix of part one of this monograph.

Column 2 is based on Shelton (1965b).

In Column 3, glosses in {curly brackets} are from Peek (1982, 199), otherwise from Nabofa & Elugbe (1981). The aggregation of Ùrhobo and Ìsókó is obviously a simplification intended to compensate for the sparseness of the data reported for both localities.

In Column 4, glosses in {curly brackets} are from Erivwo (1979) and Emòvòñ (1984), otherwise from Egharhevba (1936a), a source whose first edition is apparently lost and whose second edition (loaded with typos and obscurities) urgently requires full translation. Incomplete and unedited English versions of 73 out of the 80 chapter narratives recorded by Egharhevba (1965, 90-168) can be consulted at [people.bu.edu/manfredi/Egharhevba1965.pdf](http://people.bu.edu/manfredi/Egharhevba1965.pdf).

Columns 5-9 are based respectively on Nadel (1954), Boston (1974), Bascom (1969), Maupoil (1943a) and Kligue[h] (2011b).

Other sources exist for some of these oracle localizations (e.g. the works of Abím̀b̀ólá), but I know no other localizations of this oracle (i.e. any oracle with a semantic key in 256 parts where the array names are at least partly cognate to those above) that has been described in ethnographic literature with even a partial a sample of the 8-bit semantic table. (Exception: 14 Tiv glosses (Downes 1933, 69*f.*) are omitted here.) Any such information, whether from secondary or primary sources, can be mechanically added to the compilation above, and appropriate comparisons made. For example, it will be straightforward to to add a full column for any *libreta* of Cuban *Ifá*, such as typically comprises several hundred typewritten pages of mixed *Lucumí* (Cuban ritual Yorùbá) and Afro-Cuban Spanish, all systematically indexed by *odù* name. Such indexation was demanded by the literate nature of *Lucumí Ifá* consultation, in contrast to the African situation where indexed compilations emerged only gradually through the 20th century (e.g. Lijádu 1908, Ìbié 1986).

No glosses have been sampled here from the unordered 16-cowry oracle (e.g. Bascom 1980), which happens to be well attested on both sides of the Atlantic. While the scale of information retrieved by the cowry oracle is smaller, the content is relevant in principle, because some names of the unordered arrays in the cowry system are clearly cognate to those of the ordered 8-bit system.

## METHODS

The topline scores in the chart are calculated directly from the glosses in each column as a proportion of the available sample less than or equal to 256 meanings, as compared to the index set in Ñri. Recorded glosses in a given column *not* matching Ñri by the semantic criteria discussed below appear [in square brackets] and are not counted. Borderline/tenuous matches are flagged by “[?]” and excluded from the lower bound statistic where a range is given. Matches between any localities excluding Ñri are not counted in the topline, but are flagged <in angle brackets> for independent calculation; a few ratios are noted in the headers. This table calculates relationship \*\*to Ñri\*\* because Ñri is represented by a complete 256-part sample, but in principle the exercise could be carried out using any other localization as the index without obtaining a different degree of similarity to Ñri, since the similarity relation is both transitive and reflexive.

Three kinds of considerations, unavoidable either in practice or in principle, reduce the quality of the semantic matching scores obtained here with respect to a theoretical ideal, but without vitiating the results.

- In most of the sources, the main share of interpretations are cited in English or French translation, whose accuracy naturally varies with the investigator’s fluency in both object language and meta-language; with the quality of philological resources—grammars and dictionaries—which are available for the object language and the investigators ability to utilise same and especially with the investigator’s position on the insider-outsider scale with respect to the oracle knowledge. In all these respects, no scholar of any localization this oracle is ever likely to come close to Professor Abím̀b̀ólá (whose research is not sampled in the above table), who is famous for his balanced bilingualism and possession of a strongly insider perspective, and who enjoys the leading status of Yorùbá in terms of extant philological resources. In my view, the second highest level of adequacy among scholars of this oracle was occupied by Verger and Ónwùejìógwù, both of whom were bilingual (though asymmetrically and in different directions, neither one as balanced as Abím̀b̀ólá) and both of whom underwent thorough, long-term initiation in the respective oracles from monolingual virtuosi (though neither one employed his initiation to practice the oracle professionally). Both Verger and Ónwùejìógwù had the further advantage of sustained self-criticism and were personally sp opposed to dogmatism as to be exceptionally sensitive to conceptual difficulties in translating cosmological concepts. On a third rank in my opinion are Egharhevba (1936a) and Kligueh (2011). Egharhevba has the advantage of transcribing the 8-bit meanings directly in the source language (Èdó), but unfortunately only in a pioneering way, without tonemarking, with very many typos and without benefit of a dictionary or grammar. As a result, many key terms of Ìha are obscure, but it is not always clear if this is because they are esoteric or just wrongly transcribed. Kligueh like Egharhevba is a nonprofessional scholar, moreover he describes a nonstandard variety of a Gbè language and does not translate either completely or consistently. Other sources quoted here occupy yet a fourth level of semantic and pragmatic adequacy overall: they contain very valuable indeed irreplaceable information, but convey much less about the object of study. Although the wide range of this scale determines many incommensurabilities, it probably does not grossly change the relative degrees of similarity between the different localizations sampled, as calculated above.
- For the oracles on the eastern side of the area (Ñri, Ùrhobo, Ìsókó, Ígálà), the oracle returns short phrases, so normalization is relatively straightforward. In counting semantic matches in these systems, strict identity of denotation is relaxed just in two situations: partial matches (e.g. ‘said’ = ‘messenger’) and translation-independent links supported by culturally canonical pragmatics (e.g. ‘rooster’ = ‘good head’). These cases are relatively few in number, so they don’t substantially affect the statistical results and they can be manually excluded by the reader in case of differing judgement of plausibility.
- Semantic normalization in the above sample is more arbitrary for the systems located further west (Èdó, Nupe, Ilé-Ifè, Àgbómè, Adzá-Tádó). This is because the more western oracles return longer and multiple texts per array. A total limit on the scale of such texts is nevertheless imposed by the fact that they are learned (orally), so any stability observed from one practitioner and one location to another is a testimony to mental discipline supported by oracle professionalization based on appropriation of economic surplus. The learnability of these texts is also enhanced by their stereotypical linguistic and poetic format. The expanded circumstance of oracle semantics in the west poses a problem of comparison to data of the eastern area, where the cultivation of human memory is sustained by a more rudimentary/less professionalized guild or social class of oracle specialists. Therefore in comparing the western systems to each other and especially to those of the east, less stringent (more subjective, more abstract) criteria of identity are required. Provisionally, in addressing this issue, I have not calculated any statistical penalty for negative matches for a given 8-bit array (= a Yorùbá *odù*), which penalty would dilute whatever positives appear. This decision obviously reduces the absolute significance of the measurement, because comparison of texts of infinite length and infinite number would always yield identity (100% resemblance) between any two systems purely as a matter of chance. Such *reductio ad absurdum* is escaped, however, thanks to the relatively short length of most of the western texts (approximating standard folktales) as well as to the relatively small number of alternative texts recorded in a given locality (a handful at most). In some instances, stability and identifiability of the semantic core of the *odù* is reinforced by an accompanying one-sentence motto (Èdó *eria*, French *devise*). In Ilé-Ifè, these mottos have been systematically integrated in the narrative text in a specific poetic format, namely as “the name(s) of the Ifá priest(s) involved in the past divination that the *esé* alludes to” which are immediately followed by the formula “*a dí(F)á fún...*” ‘the one who cast for...’ (Abím̀b̀ólá 1976, 43). Similar nominal attribution of the motto occurs in some of the Àgbómè narratives, undoubtedly reflecting Ilé-Ifè influence (via Óyó) as noted by Maupoil. Borderline matches are noted in the table by [?] and reflected in the topline statistics as a min/max range where the amount is significant. To be sure, disregard of negative matches is better adapted to the retrospective demonstration of shared archaism and common origin than the more interesting and challenging question of prospective, innovative, evolutionary developments, i.e. it is closer in spirit to Greenberg (1963) than to Watkins (1962). This limitation is temporary!

### 3.4 re: Ògúndiran (2020)

*Archaeology, like all historical reconstruction, is partly a work of imagination. But it is constrained by evidence and underpinned by scientific principles of discovery, interpretation and refutation. Occasionally, it has the power to challenge myths and overthrow dogma. The strength of the past lies precisely there, in its unpredictability, its capacity to surprise and upset conventional wisdom.*  
(Wengrow 2022, 61f.)

In order to inject headline features of modern Yorùbá culture into “a continuum of deep-time changes stretching back at least two millennia” (2020, 4), Ògúndiran’s “new history” invokes comparative linguistics despite the author’s glaring unfamiliarity with the field, and even flaunts this professional difficulty as a badge of rebel honor:

My use of eclectic methodology is consistent with the nature of cultural history as a transgressive form of historical studies. (2020, 24)

Edgy postmodern attitude also informs the anonymous, hyperbolic blurb announcing the book’s Lagos launch:

[https://web.archive.org/web/20210415144803/https://lagosstudies.wcu.edu/?page\\_id=1426](https://web.archive.org/web/20210415144803/https://lagosstudies.wcu.edu/?page_id=1426)

Book Panels at virtual Lagos Studies Association Conference (June 22-26, 2021)

[...]

*The Yoruba, a New History* by Akinwumi Ogundiran (Indiana University Press, 2020)

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This book documents the ideas, imaginations and meaning that shaped the Yoruba experience, covering over two thousand years. Akinwumi Ogundiran brings new conceptual, methodological and theoretical insights into Yoruba studies in ways unmatched in previous scholarship. He carries out a close examination of the four core principles that shaped Yoruba identity (house, town/urban, gendered duality, and immortality) using rigorously-mined historical, archeological and linguistic evidence to tackle how the Yoruba developed a community of practice between the 11th and 14th centuries. From the age of turmoil in the 15th century to the era of restoration in the 16th century, Ogundiran crafts engrossing prose, laced with imaginative writing to give intellectual visibility to previously neglected ideas.

*The Yoruba, a New History* is a new template for studying African ethnicities. The author disturbs existing paradigms, exposing the loopholes in decades of scholarship that overlooks vital agents and agencies in the evolution of ancient civilizations. His Yoruba language competence aligns perfectly with his critical understanding of nuances embedded in ideologies, practices and metaphors that operated within and across historical timelines and locations. From material culture, archeological multi-layered interpretations, and social memory to ethno-linguistic and oral tradition, this book tells a deep-time history of the Yoruba in truly new ways, invigorating the gendered and even material culture produced and circulated within the Atlantic world. The author’s high regard for hermeneutics allows him to read and interpret sources beyond and above casual rendition. *The Yoruba, a New History* is a turning point in the scholarship of one of Africa’s most studied ethnic groups.

Similarly uncritical celebration cannot however extend to several of the book’s key assertions about Yorùbá prehistory.

Well-known considerations of demographic ‘drift’ (isolation by distance) in dialect geography (§2.1 above) leave no doubt that languages directly ancestral to the modern Yorùbá-Ìgàlá/Yoruboid/Macro-Yorùbá cluster were spoken close to the Niger-Benue confluence in the remote past. This uncontroversial premise, however, is not reason enough to baptise, Frobenius style, a human burial dated roughly 2500 years ago in the confluence-adjacent town of Uhè-Ìjùmu [colonially spelled “Ìffe-Ìjumu”] with an emblematic name, *Qmi*, coyly intended to signify a generic Yorùbá-Ìgàlá identity. Ògúndiran wisely retreats from this ethnic flourish to use “proto-Benue-Kwa” (2020, 34) as a default label for the prehistoric cultural affiliation of those human remains, but fails to inform the reader that the more abstract term is near-vacuous: throughout the half century ever since

...de Wolf (1971, 180) combined [Greenberg’s Kwa and Benue-Congo] into one branch for which Hyman (*pers. com.*) suggested the name ‘Benue-Kwa’... (Williamson 1989, 16)

BK spans almost every language of the entire Niger-Congo family apart from the Atlantic, Gur and Mandeng branches and some distant isolates. Such broad ambiguity verges on meaninglessness. Even assuming that the Uhè-Ìjùmu burial could be optimistically assigned to the BK2 subclade (§0.4 above), this narrower domain still encompasses three other large daughter clusters alongside Yorùbá-Ìgàlá, moreover the present extreme ethnic diversity of the modern confluence zone is an unpromising basis for a hypothetical argument of default ethnic continuity appealing to presentist inertia.

Slippage between hazy labels is a recipe for overconfidence, and the terminological fog is not dispelled by appealing to the authority of a survey chapter by a veteran non-westafricanist (Ehret 2017). The same single nonspecialist source is further credited with supplying directly to the author narrowly detailed calendric dates for successive stages of internal diversification of the Yorùbá-Ìgàlá cluster (2020, 44), without hinting that the underlying method of “lexicostatistics” (Swadesh 1952) has been “rejected” by the vast majority of linguists (Campbell 1998, 186) as “showy but meaningless number games” (Lunt 1964, 252, cf. Alinei 1991, Lehmann 1993, 37). Lexicostatistic results for the Niger-Benue confluence were eventually found “objectionable” by the very linguist who first applied Swadesh in Nigeria (Armstrong 1983, 146 *contra* 1962, §1.2 above). Without these faulty props, the only remaining motive to guess that “proto-Yoruboid ancestors began to spread from their southwest confluence at the end of the first millennium B.C.”, or to conjecture with incredible concreteness that “[b]y the year 800, the Yorùbá dialects in what is now the central, northeastern, eastern and southern areas of the Yorùbá world had assumed their distinctive identities” (2020, 46f.), is a circular logic demanding at all costs to attach recognizable ethno-linguistic selfie tags onto mute archaeological remains—the same ahistorical fallacy that animates much of the standard ‘art history’ literature devoted to this region (cf. §2 above).

Lack of absolute temporal anchors does not prevent ideas to be reconstructed at prehistorical depth from shared protolanguage vocabulary (Dumézil 1940, Benveniste 1969, Watkins 1995), but the reliability of this step depends on philological controls against the accidental confounds of later borrowing events. Such precaution is properly applied by the same cultural historian of eastern and southern Africa where Eastern Cushitic donkeys are concerned (Ehret 2012), but is apparently thrown to the winds when projecting a metaphysical creature onto a far remoter prehistorical epoch:

*Qmi*’s deep-time proto-Benue-Kwa ancestors also practiced a version of monotheism in which the ‘Creator God’ or ‘God of Beginning’ sat atop a pyramid of spirits and deities. According to Christopher Ehret [*sc.* 2016] we can reconstruct a specific word for the Creator God, *Nyambe*, in the proto-Benue-Kwa language to the 6th millennium BC and he also noted that the wide distribution of the term in contemporary Niger-Congo languages indicates that it may well go back to the very beginning of Niger-Congo civilization in the 12th millennium BC. ...The proto-Yoruboid [speakers] believed that the sky god ruled over the elements of the sky—thunder, lightning, rain—and their earthly implications—fertility of the soil, water and agricultural productivity. (2020, 38, cf. 84 *fn* 21)

This lofty chain of *crēdas* is triply groundless. (i) It fails to identify a Yorùbá cognate of \**Nyambe*. (ii) It neglects to disentangle observed sky-worship in modern populations from centuries of viral, *horizontal* influence by trans-Saharan and transatlantic traders and invaders—trends ongoing since the medieval onset of historical data. (iii) It overlooks detailed internal evidence for the precisely contrary proposition, namely for the relative novelty of the skygod concept in Yorùbá itself, as adduced decades ago from independent domains by a list of philologists like Verger, Bámgbóṣé and Abimbólá, alongside parallel findings in adjacent ethnolinguistic zones (§1.4 above). Obviously, any scepticism about supreme beings is unwelcome in the present 9ja mindset, and such doctrinal aversion may suffice to explain why critical research on this topic is unknown to populist punditry, but it remains a dereliction of intellectual responsibility for a such a strong scholar to go with the flow when the best available empirical record points in the opposite direction.

Oblivious to these pitfalls, *Wá-zó-bì-án* presentism insists on a predetermined ethnohistorical outcome: to capture medieval Èdó within the ambit of Yorùbá “knowledge capital” and telepathically to assert that “in the late 15th century, Benin... local identities and institutions were thinkable only with reference to Ilé-Ifẹ̀” (2020, 96). No surprise and no news therefore that the imagined map of this process (shaded area and arrows, below left) neatly matches the traditional ethnolinguistic rampart drawn by Dé.lànò (dashed line, below right). Both charts have a common ancestor: the cultural partition of southern Nigeria favored by Frobenius (§2.8 above). Necessarily, reciprocal directions of influence are ignored, nor can inconvenient arrows of inward transmission be drawn, no matter that these are strongly attested by sound shifts—the core data of linguistic diachrony in anybody’s book—and are diagnosed by these same indices as having occurred long after the primary differentiation of proto-Benue-Kwa into its modern fractal fragments (§1).

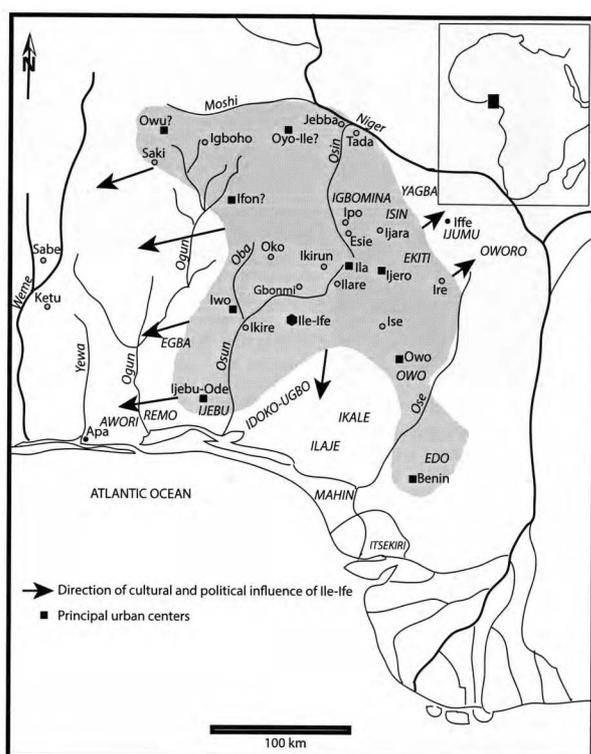
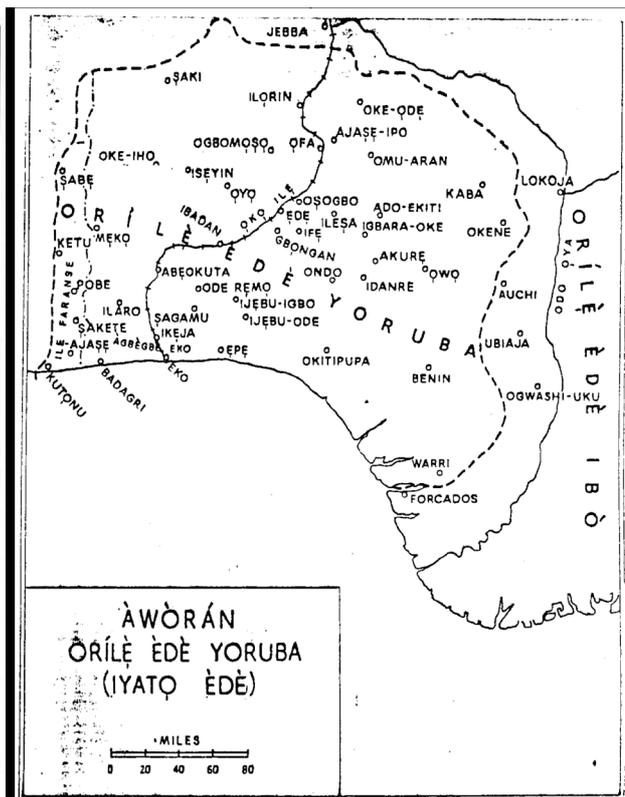


Figure 3.2. Ifẹ̀ Empire, mid-fourteenth century  
Ògúndiran (2020, 113)



Dé.lànò (1958, ii, reprinted by Bender 1970, 320)

In sum, what’s demonstrably most original in medieval Yorùbá ideology (the political economy of sky-worship) is displaced indefinitely backward by “transgressive” assertion into unobservable “deep time” and conversely, what Yorùbá owes in large part to various medieval neighbors (the powerful calculus of duplex 4-bit oracle addresses, a few dozen treasures of of copper-alloy portraiture) is inverted and represented instead as a debt that these neighbors owe to their supposed influencer. A better case of cultural mystification and retrospective expropriation is hard to find (*ex* Tiktok).

Appeals to exceptionalism may not be exceptional among archaeologists, but rumbles of dissent are growing against the premise that every impressive urban concentration of economic surplus automatically birthed “a class of wealthy and powerful chieftains who presided over a stratified society” (Ògúndiran 2020, 66). This prejudice is specifically denied for Great Zimbabwe (Chirikure & al. 2018) and has been challenged more broadly for the prehistoric record and modern ethnography (Wengrow & Graeber 2015, Graeber & Sahlins 2017, Graeber & Wengrow 2021).<sup>211</sup> The evolutionary imperative of social hierarchy is a Tylolean just-so story by which moderns, mired in runaway economic inequality and unchecked ecological hubris, flatter themselves as the telic ideal of human development. Such triumphalism, whether conceived at species-level or for a single ethnic nationality like Yorùbá, is easy to sell but harder to sustain.

211 Caveat lector: Sahlins went further than Graeber his brave student, to boldly roam among postmodern lions. Starting from the sober view that *ìyàn* ‘myth-legends’ “function as paradigmatic precedents” (Bascom 1965, 11), Sahlins proceeds to scold historians for dismissing motifs that “could never have happened, either because of their fabulous character or because they are merely functional reflexes of existing institutions” (2017c, 212f). Instead he proclaims—with customary tongue in cheek?—the “Hocartesian” thesis “that gods precede the kings who effectively replicate them—which is not exactly the common social science tradition of cosmology as the reflex of sociology” (2017a, 92/23). Sahlins’ preferred framework, “emic all the way down” (2017b), confects a “metahuman” (2017a, 93/25) mental *àbùlù* joining “gods, ancestors, ghosts, demons, species-masters and other such metapersons, including those inhabiting plants, animals and natural features: in sum, the host of ‘spirits’—wrongly so-called; they are this-worldly and indeed have the attributes of persons—the host of whom are endowed with life-and-death powers over the human population?” (2017d, 346). Who could prepare a softer landing pad for Odùduwàń royalty who reign by raining from *òrun*? Sahlins’ stance, like Ògúndiran’s, is proudly *contra* “the positivist epistemology of the natural sciences” (2017b, 157) espoused by mere pedestrian “observers like historians and anthropologists” (Ginzburg 2017, 139), drudges who still try to sort once-existing humans from ne’er-extant fantoms. If that’s yucky positivism, please sign me up—or else “beam me up” ([en.wikiquote.org/wiki/Star\\_Trek:\\_The\\_Original\\_Serie](http://en.wikiquote.org/wiki/Star_Trek:_The_Original_Serie)).

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## 5. Typographic notes

footnotes not endnotes

Three graphical figures are embedded in the text above their respective captions:

ManfrediFig1.jpg

**Figure 1. Comparison of 4-bit array names across 12 localities**

ManfrediFig2.jpg

**Figure 2. Comparison of 8-bit semantic translations across 7 localities**

ManfrediFig3.jpg

**Figure 3. Comparison of asymmetric 4-bit arrays across 5 localities**

All characters in the file are set in Garamond except for the following:

### Aboriginal Serif (5 glyphs)

ə LATIN SMALL LETTER TURNED E (Unicode 01DD)

é LATIN SMALL LETTER E WITH MACRON AND ACUTE (Unicode 1E17)

ĥ LATIN SMALL LETTER H WITH BREVE BELOW (Unicode 1E2B)

ẓ LATIN SMALL LETTER Z WITH DOT BELOW (Unicode 1E93)

˘ COMBINING DOUBLE INVERTED BREVE (Unicode 0361)

### AppleGothic (1 glyph)

Hz Square HZ (Unicode 3390)

### Lucida Sans Unicode (25 glyphs)

ŋ LATIN SMALL LETTER ENG (Unicode 014B)

ḃ LATIN SMALL LETTER B WITH HOOK (Unicode 0253)

υ LATIN SMALL LETTER UPSILON (Unicode 028A)

ṽ LATIN SMALL LETTER V WITH HOOK (Unicode 028B)

γ GREEK SMALL GAMMA (Unicode 03B3)

χ GREEK SMALL LETTER CHI (Unicode 03C7)

ε GREEK SMALL LETTER EPSILON (Unicode 03B5)

ɔ LATIN SMALL LETTER OPEN O (Unicode 0254)

? MODIFIER LETTER GLOTTAL STOP (Unicode 02C0)

´ COMBINING ACUTE ACCENT (Unicode 0301) unless an integrated acute accent exists for the vowel

` COMBINING GRAVE ACCENT (Unicode 0300) unless an integrated grave accent exists for the vowel

˘ COMBINING MACRON (Unicode 0304) only on m and n (upper or lower case), and lower case a

¨ COMBINING DIARESIS (Unicode 0308)

˙ COMBINING VERTICAL LINE BELOW (Unicode 0329) can be substituted by COMBINING DOT BELOW (Unicode 0323)

◆ BLACK DIAMOND (Unicode 25C6)

◇ WHITE DIAMOND (Unicode 25C7)

∩ INTERSECTION (Unicode 2229)

∪ UNION (Unicode 222A)

? LATIN LETTER GLOTTAL STOP (Unicode 0294)

β MATHEMATICAL ITALIC SMALL BETA (Unicode 1D6FD, D835, DEFD)

मुक्ड (string of 5 glyphs written together)

### Times New Roman (10 glyphs)

♀ FEMALE SIGN (Unicode 2640)

♂ MALE SIGN (Unicode 2642)

← LEFTWARDS ARROW (Unicode 2190)

→ RIGHTWARDS ARROW (Unicode 2192)

↔ LEFT RIGHT ARROW (Unicode 2194)

{ side bracket up

| side bracket down

┌ top bracket left

— top bracket extender

┐ top bracket right