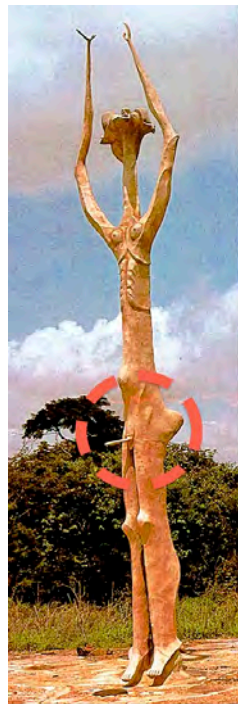


Èlà kò là! The Disneyfication of Ọ̀ṣun Ọ̀ṣogbo*

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Èlà monument (by Wenger & Àkànjí) in Ọ̀ṣun Ọ̀ṣogbo, pre- and post-emasculation
[fotos: left Gert Chesi (Wenger 1983, 148), right screenshot from Aljazeera 2014]

Auch das erotische Kunstwerk hat Heiligkeit.¹
- Egon Schiele, *Skizzenbuch von 1911*

Who come tief Jèsù blokus?

An Aljazeera TV documentary has accidentally glimpsed the genital mutilation of a public sculpture of Èlà—a divinity described as “the god of peace and reconciliation” (NCMM 2004, 16), the Yorùbá “Jèsù” (Adéoyè 1979, 67) and an *òrìṣà* who “never touches the ground with his [feet]” (A. Àkànjí in Probst 2011, 117).² The statue has stood for four decades in Ọ̀ṣun Ọ̀ṣogbo, a 75 hectare reserve of trees and shrines held in trust by the National Commission for Museums & Monuments and Ọ̀ṣun State (Decree 77, 1979; CAP 242 LFN, 1992) with help from UNESCO and IUCN (whc.unesco.org/en/list/1118). Custodial failure to repair the broken icon could be normal inefficiency, but intentional negligence is not unthinkable in this case. The vandal’s hidden sponsors could be prominent people acting from a mix of artistic envy, pettybourgeois prudery and fanatical zeal. Iconoclastic impunity also suits those who would profit by ‘dumbing down’ this potency to save the sensibilities of religio-tourists possessed of conventionally patriarchal modesty. UNESCO warns: “The risk of over-commercialization of the [Ọ̀ṣun] festival is a cause for concern” (2014a). If “Disneylandization is monetization” (Dorfman & Mattelart 1973, 85), then *Héé.pà onwó! Okó yóò já sílẹ̀!*³

Ancient place, modern people

In legend and maybe also in historical fact, ritual activity within the oxbow meander of Ọ̀ṣun’s watercourse predates the founding of Ọ̀ṣogbo’s medieval market town.⁴ By the 1950’s, this antique, majestic forest precinct was set to be overrun by rampant, banal ‘modernity’, if not for resistance raised by Ọ̀ṣun initiates and their authentically modernist ally: Susanne Wenger (1915-2009), the immigrant Austrian artist locally known as *Adúnni Oló.rìṣà*—although she preferred simply to be called *Mòmọ́*.⁵

* See also the detailed sociohistorical analysis by Ọ̀gúndiran (2014).

Héé.pà m’olẹ̀ to Mòmọ́’s closest collaborators late Adébíṣí Àkànjí, Bùràimọ́ Gbádàmoṣí, late Šàngódàré Gbádéḡešin and Kàsálí Àkàngbẹ́.

Sùn-unrẹ̀, o, S. Adéloyè, R. Armstrong, E. Eyo and A. Qbáyemí, who supported Mòmọ́’s work officially whenever they could.

È ẹ̀ ẹ̀ púpọ̀, ẹ̀yìn ọ̀rẹ̀ ẹ̀ mi R. Abiódún, A. Apter, L. Àyánkúnlé, S. Bennett, R. Bilansky, S. Booker, S. Capone, R.-M. Déchaine, K. Èṣùlẹ̀kè, C. King, D. Klein, M. Kone, J. Mason, T. vd Meer, I. Miller, O. Ndíbẹ́, A. Ọ̀gúndiran, ʼG. Ọ̀gúngbílẹ̀, J. Olúpọ̀nà, R. Oyèèwùmí, A. Ọ̀lọ̀ṣun, ʼD. Ọ̀lọ̀ṣun, E. Ọ̀mọ̀lúabí, ʼP. Onípẹ̀édé, ʼS. Oyèláràn, N. Pili Abena, P. Probst and N. Suhr-Sytsma.

1. “Erotic art, too, is sacred” (de.wikiquote.org/wiki/Egon_Schiele).

2. Unless it turns out that the Qatari state broadcaster—whose brand name means ‘the peninsula’ according to Wikipedia—fuzzed-out the fully frontal appendage in the editing deck using off-the-shelf software. Hard evidence on this point is not easy to come by.

3. Respectively: “Disneylandización es una dinerización” and *Hooray, praise be to magical money! The penis will get taken down!* The status of money as an *òrìṣà* of its own is often admitted as a metonymy of Ọ̀ṣun (e.g. Probst 2008, 251) but which god is greater is debatable. The Ọ̀ṣun groves were promoted in the *New York Times* “Cultured traveler” column: www.nytimes.com/2016/12/13/travel/sacred-grove-nigeria-osun-osogbo-worship.html.

4. Folk etymology even derives the placename Ọ̀ṣogbo from *osó ọ̀gbó* ‘magus of the forest’ (Awóyalé 2009). The hypothetical connection of Ọ̀ṣogbo to *ọ̀gbó* is reinforced by the final H tone of a (semantically opaque) *oríkì* panegyric: “Ọ̀ṣògbó Ọ̀ròkì” (Abraham 1958, 491, emphasis added).

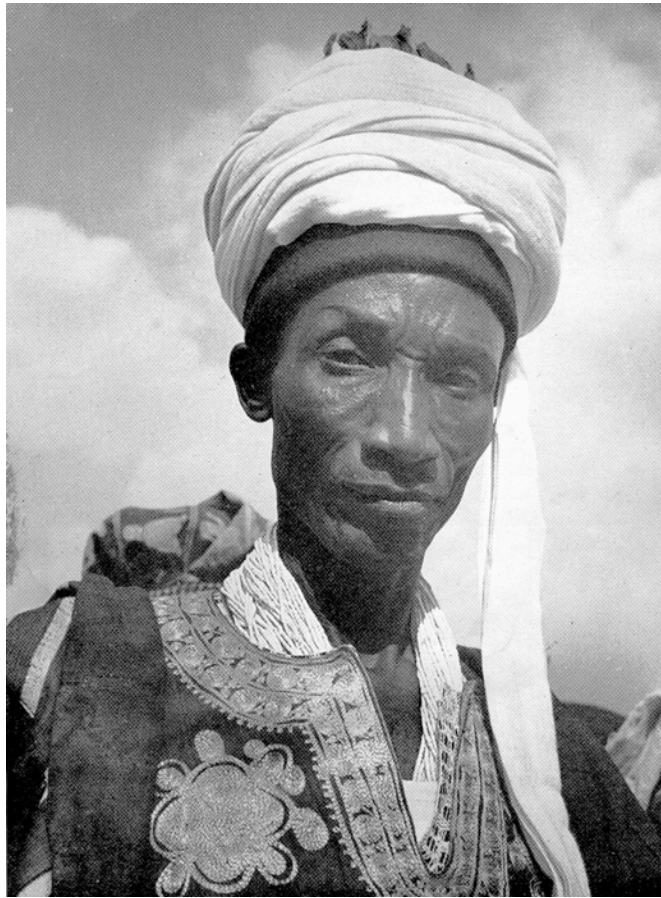
5. Mòmọ́ was an Ọ̀bàtálá initiate (signified by the *oló.rìṣà* title) allied with Ọ̀ṣun titleholders like late ʼLáyí Ọ̀lọ̀ṣun, but not the “Ọ̀ṣun priestess” of newspaper cliché, far less “a reincarnation of the goddess Ọ̀ṣun” as cathected by a bornagain Yorùbámerican (Matery 2018, 7). To avoid such embarrassing howlers she kept a religiously low profile, but gave three book-length interviews (Beier 1975, Brockmann & Hötter 1994, Caboara Luzzatto 2009) and published four autoexplicatory texts, the longest of which she radically revised while transposing from German to English (1980, 1983). Collaborating on the last of these strengthened a friendship begun in lucky misunderstanding when, first climbing the steps of her *àgùdà*-style *ilé pẹ̀tẹ̀sì* in July 1976, I accidentally inherited the moniker of her pet white *edun* monkey, rescued from a hunting snare only to escape his balcony cage. “Sẹ̀gun ti dé!” Mòmọ́ mistrusted anthropologists (1977, 6) and banished audiovisual gadgets from the “*équilibre dynamique*” (1983, 205) of rituals—as well as, for that matter, from *ẹ̀bọ àgbòn* ‘the sacrificial offering of the jaw’ (as she described our caffeinated conversations). At her instance, however, I did tape a few relaxed musical outtakes from her 4-weekly Saturday salon, and my fellowtraveller the multipercussionist Samm Bennett recorded a few more; these can be streamed at people.bu.edu/manfredi/research.html.

The art of creative transgression

Exactement les mêmes choses qui étaient l'objet de prohibitions strictes dans la vie quotidienne étaient, dans certains occasions rituelles, à des fins magiques ou religieuses, l'objet de prescriptions tout à fait obligatoires.⁶ (Testart 1991, 8)

Introducing MUSON's group exhibition catalog of Òsogbo New Sacred Art (Wenger & al. 1994), Mòmó presented the collective's name as *Àṣẹṣẹ*, a term evoking 'fresh or recent happening' (e.g. *à-ṣẹṣẹ Ẹ ọ àgbàdò* 'newly sprouted maize', Abraham 1958, 615). However, thanks to the paranomasiastic prosodic genius of the Yorùbá language, *Àṣẹṣẹ* with DO-DO-DO lexical tones differs infinitesimally from *àṣẹṣẹ* with MI-DO-DO meaning 'offender, someone who engages in committing offenses' (< *a-ṣẹ ṣẹṣẹ*, Awóyalé 2009), and the latter is not far from the truth, because *Àṣẹṣẹ*'s record of trademark *àṣẹṣẹ*—conscious provocation—is not reducible to mere avantgardisme but seems closer to Brecht's cathartic estrangement (*Verfremdung*), a ritually produced theatrical-political shock.

While defending Òṣun's ancient ecosystem, New Sacred Art never aspired to resurrect a premodern, premuslim, premissionary or precolonial past.⁷ On the contrary, they intended to outflank the forces of imminent destruction by planting new, immunized images in the living soil—using, where necessary, the resilient modern medium of portland cement. Mòmó was the most visible wielder of the guerilla trowel, but she did not invent the tactic and never claimed to do so. Her inspiration, preceding by several years her arrival in Òsogbo, was an indelible confrontation in Èdẹ with the person of *Ajagemo*, styled “the first ‘modern’ *oló.rìṣà*” (Beier 1975, 53).⁸



The *Ajagemo*—Qbàtálá high priest—of Èdẹ [foto: Beier (1959, 17)]

Mòmó often recalled how she came to enlist on the indigenous side of the Westafrican 20th century *Kulturkampf*. While forthrightly denouncing colonial and missionary “pogroms against the traditional religions” (Brockmann & Hötter 1994, 17), she nevertheless saw no point—and honestly no way—to turn history's clock romantically and restoratively back. As a bohemian unorthodox communist since her anti-Nazi youth (Brockmann & Hötter 1994, 11-15; Probst 2008, 245), Mòmó rejected the geometric *before-and-after* of Aristotelian timelines and Cartesian abscissas. Instead she invoked the subjective temporal experience of *lái-lái*, a Yorùbá term that can reference either distant past (*Èkúún láí-lái!*) or indefinite future (*títí láí-lái*) depending on the speaker's orientation to events (Abraham 1958, 410). Steeped in interwar Vienna's avantgarde psychology, she interpreted *lái-lái* as the dimension inhabited by Jung's archetypes:

that time-space-psychic-depth relativity (or complexity) without which the living myth of a culture as well as the living myth of the individual living creature would be no myth but a statistic, a mechanical and unfortunately merely linear process. (1983, 45)

For Mòmó the *Kunstmaler* (fine-art painter), *lái-lái* also had a second definition: as *aró*, deep-black indigo, the pigment of Òṣun's mythic dye-pots. *Aró* in turn signifies “taboo in the womb of [the Qbàtálán divinity] Iyemòwó. ...Iyemòwó's other name is *Ènẹ̀*, taboo” (1983, 210, 236 *fn* 47), as Mòmó notes while describing her own wax batik entitled “Qbàtálá's Mystical Transformations”.

6. [The very things strictly prohibited in daily life are precisely the ones explicitly prescribed in rituals for magical or religious purposes.]

7. Use of the term “revitalization” (Ọlájùbù 2002, 9), as opposed to *revival* or “return” (Beier 1975), acknowledges this point (cf. also Adépégba 1983b, 6). For reasons of ethics as well as esthetics, Mòmó refused to “imitate” the Yorùbá past just as she would never try to paint in the style of Michelangelo. The sociological “unity” of New Sacred Art is queried by Probst (2011, 93), transparently paraphrasing his consultant Adígún Àjàní who owns a commercial atelier in Òsogbo modeled on the industrial graphics workshop of Ulli Beier and Georgina Betts Beier.

8. The reigning *Timi* Èdẹ at the time was Láoyè, whose “enlightened” composure radiates from Beier's photographic portrait (1959, 2, 6).



“Ọ̀bàtálá's Mystical Transformations” (Wenger), detail [foto: Gert Chesi (Wenger 1983, 212)]

Alongside *lálélé* and *èwò*, Mòṣò's third artistic axiom was the *Leitmotiv* of Ọ̀sogbo's origin story as she retold it:

Timoyin... was a mighty hunter and a priest of Ọ̀gún, the god of iron and hence of war and the hunt. ...Impetuous by character, he rashly killed an elephant-cow in the process of giving birth. ...As Timoyin realized the enormity of his trespass, he was deeply perturbed and anxious to atone. He buried the mother with all honours of the dead. ...He had exposed himself to the explosive proximity of *èwò*, taboo, sacred principle and law of 'that which is set apart'. He was now highly vulnerable, like a snake after shedding its old skin. His identity was fissured open like the abyss into which day and night fall, equally unopposed. He was in a state of intense transdimensional perceptiveness. In the dead of night he arrived at the height of Ẹ̀wòwò. Far below the precipice, the river Ọ̀sun, that represented the goddess, meandered silently. ...On a small platform over the densely overgrown slope of Ẹ̀wòwò he saw sixteen lights glowing, which turned the surrounding darkness into even more impenetrable blackness. From that depth of darkness came voices, singing incantations, interrupted by some sipping, smacking of lips and hiccups. He approached, comprehending the extraordinary scene instinctively; and he met with sixteen helpers of the divine herbalist, the god Ọ̀sonyin. The sixteen lights were the 'third eyes' shining on the foreheads of sixteen *ànjàní*, genii. Timoyin joined the carousing demigods. He drank with them *otí ọ̀run*, heavenly brandy...

Himself now a god, Timoyin reached the flat rock-outcrop that is called Ọ̀jà Ọ̀ntótó. This is a market, not for humans but for the primordial aborigines who are anthropomorphic genii, *òrìṣe*. ...At Ọ̀jà Ọ̀ntótó, Timoyin for the first time heard the river's voice: Ọ̀sun Láoṣan and Ọ̀sun Iwẹ̀dà splashing over the boulders that kneel and thrust their stone breasts into the onrushing sacredness. Another incident, however, kept him from searching for the river. A mighty horned antelope with bronze earrings and necklace, an *agbòṣṣe* out of the mythic past, appeared and stared for a hypnotizing instant into his eyes. ...The animal fled, and he pursued it impetuously, forgetting about everything else—a hunter possessed by the chase. There where Ọ̀júbò Ọ̀sogbo is now the most powerful aspect of Ọ̀sun river worship, the antelope disappeared—transdimensionally—into a mighty tree. Duped of the kill, Timoyin set the tree on fire, which he kindled by means of the appropriate magic formula. Bursting into flames, the holy giant plunged with a thunderous thud into the river's dark and deepest pond. It fell precisely into that still waterhole that is the *idí aró*, the indigo dye place of the goddess Ọ̀sun. She emerged furiously calling along the reverberantly echoing river valley: Who was it that had disturbed her peace in so unheard-of a manner, had thrown fire into her sacred coolness—an unpardonable offense—and had smashed her dye pots? From all the other forty-two water holes... her junior wives, her *iyánwá*, emerged... They all declared their sympathy, crying out, “Ọ̀sun Ọ̀sogbo pèlẹ́, oo!” ...When Ọ̀sun after all this had seen the imposing manliness of the hunter, she cooled down and changed her feelings. There came a heartfelt reconciliation.

(Wenger 1983, 126ff)

Mòṣò took the moral of this story as her artistic charter, albeit one not easily accepted by any establishment:

'Obligatory violation of taboo' is like a change of gear, a shock effect on the vital oscillation and its rhythm, which is preeminently the lever and contrivance which launches and catapults us into apotheosis.

(1983, 235 *fn* 14)⁹

9. This text, read alongside the open confrontation with postcolonial, patriarchal palace morality recounted directly below, directly contradicts Beier's contemporaneous claim in a Lagos brochure that “the artist... does not aim at shocking her public” (1984, unnumbered p. 4).

Violating taboo to cover Ọṣun's nakedness

Traditionally “[t]he trees along the river are Ọṣun’s clothes” (Wenger 1990, 14). As these garments had visibly begun to fray under human depredation, “The Goddess of the Living Waters” (Wenger 1983, 115) could have ended up as *ìyá aláḡùsàá* ‘a mommy dressed in tattered rags’ or worse. *Ajagemọ* dreamed a solution, which was delivered a second time as Ọṣun’s message to Mòṣò via the Ifá oracle—effectively the Yorùbá internet.

Wenger was ordered to make the three arches [which] build the inner entrance to the Ọṣun grove. It took her three months of regular meditation on the spot to overcome her embarrassment and to conceive the right architectural idea to make the arches grow with the organic rhythm of the old trees. (1968, 13f.)

In the end she called Adébíṣí Àkànjí... and she said, “We shall make three gates. The center gate is formed out of two snakes; they meet and put their heads together...” She drew a plan on the ground, she described the shapes she had visualised with her hands—then she let Adébíṣí proceed with the work. (Beier 1975, 64)

More ritual assignments spurred Àṣẹṣẹ to further ethical-esthetic *aṣẹṣẹ*.

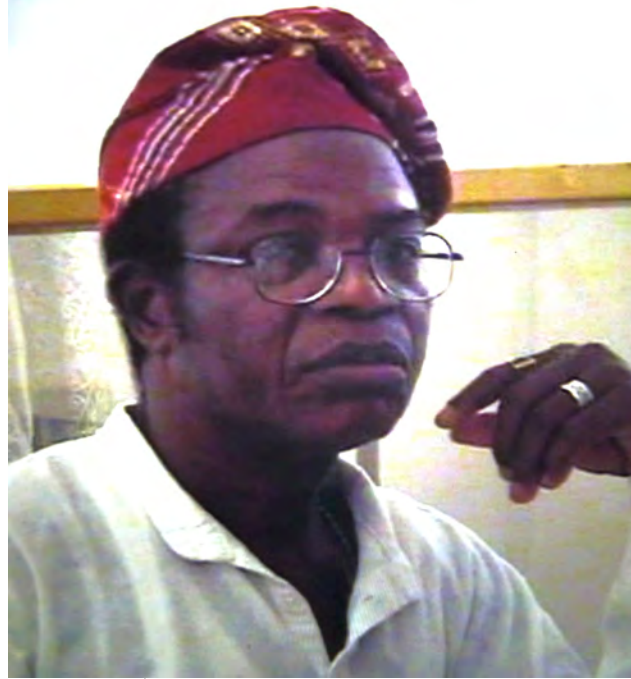
Ìyá Ọṣun delivered the goddess’ demands: first, repair the river shrine, threatened by termites; then its walls and doors, to facilitate contemplative peace inside. With an artist, every task oversteps ordinary manual completion and becomes a field for creativity. It is exactly this step beyond repairs to creativity which has saved the groves. Art is meta-organically alive. The evolutive order of one’s lifetime can neither be reversed nor repeated. But, at least according to the truth perceptions of Yorùbá and other religions, it can be resurrected via death and rebirth. It is [the] endurance of real thought that we are here involved in. The ancient art of the Yorùbá is sublime beyond doubt. But it is gone. The psychic predilection has changed. ...The religion of the Yorùbá is basically the same, but shaped by the experience of our time. ...New Sacred Art is a ritual for the sake of the gods’ very presence among us. (1983, 207)

Some of the shrines in the Ọṣogbo Groves are ancient in their inner construction, some walls may have survived the effects of the elements and time. With these ancient structures we never meddle. Their consistency and even texture are recognisable, imbedded in the modern additions. But continuous reconstruction which life imposes on our identity naturally changes our own selves, just as our interference with [the] decay of the shrines can or must lead to their new forms. As the involved individual is carried along by the evolving flow and metamorphoses willingly or not into a changed image of his own axiomatic and archetypal self, so his gods and their shrines have to be carried along by the current of time, so as not to vanish and get lost in stagnant and dead relics of a bygone phase of evolution. Impatient and self-willed emancipation of the individual mind is the criterion of modern man. While the past’s trust lay explicitly with collective involvements into the transcendent forms of life, the modern individual is averse to ready-made recipes, as to how to embark on the mystical adventure. Thus the shrines, in which dwell *Òrìṣà*, who himself dwells in man, have to be new and original in their concept of the enduringly divine. ...We cannot disguise ourselves before our gods. (1977, 7f, 11)

Evolution is a fact, not to be hailed, not to be regretted. *Òrìṣà*, no matter how intensely harrassed, cannot but be intensely alive. Alive, too, are our correlated talents. The living gods and our living art are both modern. Repetition of the past cannot but be an absurdity. (1990, 19)



Ẓàngódàré Gbádéḡesin
Bùràímọ Gbádàṡọṣí, Susanne Wenger, Kàsálí Àkàngbé
[foto: unknown, 1989, author’s collection]



Adébí sí Àkànjí [foto: [Hostos College](#), 28/09/2006]¹⁰

By 1994, when Mò mọ introduced the catalog of the MUSON group show, the tentative apologies sampled above had matured into a defiant *crēdo*. The excerpt below is quoted with footnotes intact, to highlight a dynamic cosmopolitanism that's unusual in Africanist art history committed to static, ethnically particularist and logically circular perspectives ("The Yorùbá world" etc.).¹¹

We in the Òsogbo Groves create shrines and monumental sculptures which are themselves shrines. We build them as a refuge for Òrìṣà (THE GODS), those exquisitely individuated, sacred motive-forces and spiritual fecundities which we know individually and personally with the inner mind of the senses. [FN The great English poet William Blake sings that "One must know God with the senses."]

SACRED ART (*Èrè*) literally *houses* the god: Òrìṣà might otherwise be homeless, having been evicted from their former homes by 'progress'. By the authority of *Ori/Logos* (and not by logic), one is placed into one "inescapable dimension of time" [FN in the words of Teilhard de Chardin, a Catholic philosopher of our time].

Our mind, proportioned according to one distinct order of one era, is modern. This order defines ritual and art, which can be performed and experienced only in the framework of our indispensable perception of our time. The spiritual compartments of the mind are furnished with 'modernity', which concerns us as well as the gods. The individual truth forms cannot be anything other than actuality. While rituals are defined by the reality of ancient myths, even these myths must be accented in the language of the present, just as trance (and hence 'trance-formation') cannot occur anywhere but in the present moment. River and time never flow back to their source, but follow time's inescapable dimension. Life is motion, simultaneously both IN time and BEYOND it. ...In our present time, before our eyes, all social, cultural and racial gaps—which seemed to be established and accepted forever—are dissolving like some *corpus delicti* deposited in caustic lime. (1994, 1)

The defiance of 1994 echoed events of decades before, when the Àṣẹṣẹ struggle took the overtly political form of nonviolent civil disobedience—risking arrest while publicly breaking an unjust law so as to uphold an ethical principle (Thoreau 1849).

[T]raditional rulers, who have a semi-divine status ("*Ọba ẹkẹjì ọrìṣà*") are, and still should feel, responsible towards their gods who have installed them, and to the public which supports them, for the preservation of these groves in a way which also applies to sanctuaries. ...Reckless utilitarian assaults on the sacred places all too frequently succeeded before the very eyes of the concerned priesthood. This was the situation when we started to work in the sacred groves of Ọṣun at Ọsogbo. These very extensive sanctuaries were already given in one section (Igbo Èlẹgbàa) by the *Atáájá* on loan for agricultural experiments, which however completely failed inside the groves, and were transferred to the other side of the river. But experimental teak plantations progressed, and with aching hearts we witnessed the destruction of part of the groves [of] Ọgún and Ẹgbé at the foot of Oñtótóo. Tortured by the sight, we lost patience and one night we entered the chaos of the newly slain trees, lying with entangled, broken arms still covered with withering green, all slain brethren and friends to us. On this scene of bombed cathedrals still stood trembling with anticipation of their turn—which would have come the next day—two of our most saintly tree heroes, high and beautiful, silently enduring like the Zebu or the [sacrificial] ram, messengers of the highest principles beyond. We, eight of us, climbed them with ladders, which we brought and girdled high up their bodies with white cloths, which we contributed [from] our own ritual dresses. Next morning officers came to arrest us at home, but after all they stopped proceeding, being themselves Yorùbá, convinced of the necessity to preserve a refuge for the new homeless genii. But the battle against destruction of trees, sacred animals and the fish in the sacred river still goes on. Only recently we are greatly helped by the Antiquities Department of the Federal Government, whose official survey will have to bring about a declaration of the groves and all what they contain, including flora, fauna, the very river and all our shrines to be antiquities of national importance. (1977, 18f.)

Violence was inflicted not only on the timeless trees, but also on the new defensive architecture:

To the left of the Ọbàtálá shrine is the *Ayédá.kun*, the house for Ajagemọ. *Ayédá.kun* is an abbreviation of *Ayédá.kun yípádá* which means 'world, forgive and come back' or 'world, give in and come back'. The original building that Susanne Wenger built on this site was destroyed by fanatical Muslims. Photographs by Brother George [Ọginni, a local evangelist] fortunately exist. ...Susanne Wenger speaks about the destruction of this building calmly. "It forced us to create a better one", she says. (Beier 1975, 67, 69)

10. Adébí sí Àkànjí rose in ritual hierarchy c. 1995 to become *Olúwo* of Ilé.dì Oñtótóo and thus *ex officio* guardian of the groves.

11. As applied by outsiders, the static attitude may be sincere—e.g. "[I]t is not for me to determine what is authentically Yorùbá about any of this, for Yorùbá art is the art Yorùbá people do" (Picton 1994, 23)—but ultimately it's apartheid. Èményonú's idea of "the Igbo novel" allowing "that Igbo literature is for the most part written in English" (Èményonú 1978, 189) was eventually graciously dropped (2003) in favor of a more straightforward definition as "literature... IN Igbo" (Èménanjo 1982, 47, original emphasis) and someday the concept of "Yorùbá art" may evolve analogously. Meanwhile *Things Fall Apart* exists in Yorùbá translation (Ọgúnymí 1997) but not yet in Igbo!



Ayéddá.kun (Wenger & Àkànjí), destroyed [foto: “Brother George” (Beier 1975, 67)]

Extension of the sculpted wall exacted more heavy expenditure of *owóo síbèntì* ‘money for cement’.¹² Mòmó’s wall design took ritual psychology into account. Entering Igbó Q̣ṣun from the motor road, all noninitiate visitors must pass under a broad cement arch, which is intentionally paradoxical in form:

So many of the holy groves for the different gods lie near the banks of Q̣ṣun that it seemed worthwhile to protect all those forests with a wall. To keep traffic outside and to mark for the visitor the necessity to get into a more thoughtful and simple state of mind, a gate is built where one branches away from the public road. Visitors are welcome only when in the right state and frame of mind to add to this existing situation and take it modestly as a favour to be allowed to visit the holy river goddess and the beautiful spot she inhabits. The gate represents a flying tortoise, the symbol of earth. Happy through the nearness of the living waters, it loses its inborn heaviness and gives so an example to the approaching pilgrim. Here the pilgrim too is expected to leave heaviness, the heaviness of everyday life behind. (1968, 8)

The tortoise symbolizes the heaviness of matter, and its taking to the air evokes a turning point in one’s rational habits. For here, other laws prevail. (1990, 18)

Arch and gates indicate the necessity of recollection. (1977, 39)



Flying Tortoise Arch by Wenger and Àkànjí, framing Bàbáa Jímò [foto: Gerhard Merzeder/Horst Stasny (Wenger 1990, 40)]

12. Mòmó’s Swiss pension bought many bags, but at an impecunious moment the costly material was sourced directly from the Strabag civil engineering multinational (en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Strabag) whose managers airlifted one of Bùràimò Gbàdàmòṣí’s massive carved boulders to Vienna. Wall or no wall, the Q̣ṣun’s trees remained vulnerable; in the harmattan of 1977 I helped clear dozens of dry palm branches that had been stacked onto the buttress roots of some *irókòs* near Q̣jà Òntótóo with an unstated threat to set them destructively alight.

Even the best metaphysical defences couldn't stop General Abacha's military satrap plunking a foursquare "pavillion" (pseudomartial reviewing stand) next to Ojúbọ̀ Ọ̀ṣogbo—Ọ̀ṣun's central shrine—from which perch he presided with police escort in true colonial style, with 504 state stationwagon parked alongside. The scene explains why the eyesore was immediately and devastatingly dubbed "Bus Stop" by Jímọ̀ Bùràímọ̀, the prominent community artist.¹³



The military governor's "pavillion"—alias "Bus Stop"—inside Ọ̀ṣun Grove [foto: Elúyemí (2004, 42)]

By 1997, work began on a full perimeter wall—built this time with unlovely cement blocks—to close all boundaries.¹⁴ Once the enclosure was complete, NCMM began demanding admission fees from every visitor, local and non (Elúyemí 2004, 67).¹⁵

Gods without gonads

As reviewed above, Mòmọ̀ did not regard static preservation as a viable alternative to 'modernising' destruction. Her misgivings are now vindicated, as World Heritage status risks to turn Ọ̀ṣun Ọ̀ṣogbo into a HCM (heritage cash machine) modeled on a Walt Disney theme park.¹⁶ The removal of overt genitalia from the Èlà statue is not the first indication of this trend.

In 1985 Ọ̀ṣogbo Local Government Traditional Council issued an order under the presumed authority of *Àtájá* Iyiolá Mátànmí III, condemning a "[full]blown male nude statue arbitrarily erected by Suzan Wenger on a trading site commonly frequent[ed] by young female[s]", finding that a "statue which depicts an unusual nude man with his private parts lengthily exposed to such surrounding was considered a gross act of indiscipline, profane and capable of generating social and religious disorder in the town" and holding that "Suzan Wenger has no place in our tradition and does not participate in any of the traditional rites" so that she "should henceforth cease from going to Ìdì Ọ̀ṣun (in [the] market place), Ilé Ọ̀ṣun (in the palace) and the Ọ̀ṣun house (in the grove)".¹⁷

13. NCMM's UNESCO application promised to replace Bus Stop with a less obtrusive "platform" (Elúyemí 2004, 60), but state edifices relentlessly accumulate. The current, 'enlightened' governor planned "a car park... to hold more than 500 cars" and "a massive gate... at the entrance to the sacred forest" ('Ọ̀ṣun festival gathers momentum as Arẹ̀gbéṣọ̀lá orders tarring of grove road', www.osundefender.org/?p=19231, 18 August 2011).

14. Construction, which started on the line between *Àtájá* Adénlẹ̀'s teak plantation, was cosponsored by IUCN (Amsterdam) and Ọ̀ṣun Grove Support Group (a committee of Lagos and Ibàdàn art patrons) and coordinated by Engr. Tùndé Morákinyò.

15. A problematic [sic] issue is that no entry fees are charged at the occasion of the festival procession when outsiders come in very large numbers. Looking at the flow of people and that there is a mixture of people from Ọ̀ṣogbo (who come there as devotees), it is probably impossible to do that. (NCMM 2004, 27)

The above is an understatement. Ọ̀ṣun ritualists consistently reject federal middlemen. Àdígún Ọ̀lọ̀ṣun physically confronted the first ticket tout in 1998, and just last year the NCMM site boss Ọ̀lákúnlé Mákíndé was "beaten blue-black which led to his being hospitalised... following [his] attempt to appoint [a] new leader of the confraternity in Ọ̀ṣogbo called *Ààrẹ̀ Ọ̀gbóni*" (Ọ̀lárínoyè 2013) to replace the then *Olúwo* Adébísi Àkànjí. The press report of the latter fracas only hints at the struggle waged by *agbẹ̀rù* outsiders to control Ọ̀ṣun in her present predicament as a cultural cash cow. Probst (2011, Chapter 3) has published the most detailed discussion of this unfolding situation, which briefly blended Ọ̀ṣun with the Beier estate and General Ọ̀básanjó's auto-aggrandizement project (Garuba & Gyamfi 2008, Šoyínká 2008). A recovered but unrepentant *Ọ̀gbéni* Mákíndé appears in the aforementioned documentary: www.aljazeera.com/video/africa/2014/09/nigeria-sacred-site-under-threat-201492811548135411.html.

16. In 2002, Ọ̀ṣogbo Progressive Union (London) insisted that "Given the right push, Ọ̀ṣogbo has the natural and precedent tendency to become a true African 'Disney World'..." (Probst 2011, 73 citing www.osogbocity.com/id25.htm). Cautionary parallels across Nigeria include the state "carnivals" recently created by some governors (Okungbowa 2010), which for solid business reasons eschew indigenous street parades like Calabar *Èkẹ̀pè* (Miller 2009) for fear of alienating commercial sponsors or inviting fanatical religious attacks. Instead, the official jamborees are copied from Afrocaribbean templates, even though ironically those faraway exemplars credit old West Africa together with very unchristian Saturnalia for their own inspiration (e.g. Friedemann 1985). Apter links Ọ̀ṣogbo art commodities to nation-legitimizing trends of "cultural fantasia" (2005, 2).

17. The same posture of affronted prude is now affected by His Holiness Yẹ́mí Èlẹ̀bùúibọ̀n: www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-54152233.

THE DECISIONS OF OSOGBO LOCAL GOVERNMENT TRADITIONAL COUNCIL TAKEN AT ITS MEETING OF 15TH JANUARY, 1985 IN CONNECTION WITH A STATUE ERECTED AT OSUN SHRINE OJA-OBA, OSOGBO BY SUZAN WENGER OTHERWISE CALLED ADUNNI OLORISA

- (1) The bloomy male-nude statue arbitrarily erected by Suzan Wenger on a trading site, commonly frequent by young female, at Idi-Osun was strongly condemned.
- (2) The statue which depicts an unusual nude man with his private parts lengthly exposed to such surrounding was considered a gross act of indiscipline, profane and capable of generating social and religious disorder in the town.
- (3) The council with dismay recalled the incident of 1977/78 which was very paramount to the progress of the city, but which by her attitude and role indifferent to the social and cultural growth of this traditional city) made it impossible for an amusement park proposed for Osogbo by the State Government to be realised.
- (4) The Traditional Council awfully decried the un-cooperative attitude of Suzan Wenger towards the Osun Devotees for her gross disregard for our cherished antiquities.
- (5) Suzan Wenger has no place in our tradition and does not participate in any of the traditional rites.
- (6) The said Suzan Wenger is hitherto warned to desist from profaning our tradition and cultural heritage.
- (7) She (Suzan Wenger) should henceforth cease from going to Idi-Osun (in market place) Ile Osun (in the palace) and the Osun house (in the grove).

[document in public domain]

The stern edict may have been welcomed by elites, but whatever its consequences for the town statue the banning gained no noticeable traction with illiterate *òrìṣà* devotees and failed to halt Mòṣò's "profaning" activities by the river. However the document's ineffectiveness does not deprive it of ethnographic interest. The gendering of the complaint in point (1) poses the question, whether the same fear of "disorder" should apply to the giant cement vulva embracing Oṣun Grove's Arugbá Gate (below, cf. Beier 1975, 83) as it does to an artistically protruding manhood.



Arugbá Gate (Wenger & Àkànjí) [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Temple_Osun3.jpg]

Gender parity aside, the affair highlights another point: genital nudity does not seem to generally occur in those genres of classic Yorùbá sculpture which are visible in public. Male and female genital depictions undeniably abound in old Yorùbá carvings and casts, but examples are apparently (corrections invited!) limited to four principal types:

- (i) *ẹdan Ògbóni*—privately commissioned, intensely tabooed, explicitly gendered figures which are unwrapped from their protective shrouds only in exclusive presence of fellow initiates within the closed confines of an *ilẹ̀.ḍi* house.
- (ii) *èrè ibé.jì* (or *ibejì*)—explicitly gendered images of deceased twins, always richly clothed for public outing and display.¹⁸
- (iii) *ajó-lókè-lókè*, a graphically genital male marionette of *ẹgún alá.rínjò* ‘traveling popular theater’.
- (iv) *Òrìṣà Oko*—divinity of agriculture whose main visual attribute is an erect iron penis (Wescott 1962, 347; I. Miller *p.c.*).

The privacy of types (i) and (ii) can easily be missed by patrons of art museums and dealerships where African trophies are stripped down to shiny surfaces. Type (iii) is the exception that proves the rule, given its parodic intent in burlesque performance (Adédéjì 1969; Thompson 1971, 1974; Götrick 1984; Drewal 1992). Type (iv) may be a fertility provocation, plausibly set aside as a relic once diachrony is brought into the analysis. For example, the difference is remarked between Yorùbá representations of the supernational Èṣù versus his counterpart Legba in the Vodun area (Fòṇ-gbè, Èvè-gbè etc.). Èṣù’s penis is “usually clothed” (Wescott 1962, 348) but Legba’s is often literally priapic (Cosentino 2013, 67). Cosentino proceeds from the fact that Èṣù’s “sexuality is implied rather than [overtly] realised” to a historical inference that when “the Yorùbá pantheon was force-marched westward to Àgbómè” and the “*òrìṣà* were recast as *vodun*”, the latter became “sharper, hotter, sexier” (2013, 54), but that reconstruction of events is not required by the visual and demographic evidence. Equally possible is that the more sexualized version was original, then central Yorùbá toned down the imagery in synch with new standards of modesty for the elevated classes in medieval city-states, analogous to the European “courtly-aristocratic code of conduct” (Elias 1939, cf. Braudel 1979).¹⁹ What Yorùbá does display in abundance is genital *allusions* unattached to human groins, ranging from the “long phallic hairstyle” which is one of the “distinctive features of the iconography of Èṣù” (Pemberton 1981, 98, cf. Drewal & al 1989, 29), to the principal sacred relic of the town of Ilé-Ifè: “Bernard Fagg, who carried out the restoration, informed me that a hole bored in the tip and certain engraved lines indicate the original phallic significance of the column” (Allison 1968, 14). Not to mention the unmentionable helmet erection sported by the current monarch of Ifè town itself (photo published as part of Musa 2020).



Èṣù staff (detail) [foto: Chemeche (2013, 203)]



Ọpá Ọrànmiyàn [foto: Allison (1968, plate 5)]

18. < *ibí-èjì* ‘double birth’ by regular prosodic foot formation, cf. Bámgbóṣé (1972, 28), ’S. Oyèláràn *p.c.*

19. Modern day Yorùbás sharing the imperial heritage of Ọyó are proverbially renowned for flowery and evasive formality of speech. Despite such reputation, a collection of 5,000+ Yorùbá proverbs (Owómoyèlá 2005) includes 15 direct penis and vagina mentions.



Oba Ògúnwùsì and royal consort (Musa 2020)

Any penises in the above images are in the mind of the beholder, but the unamputated Èlà monument is another matter entirely:



Èlà (Wenger & Àkànjí), pre-emasculature version [foto: Gert Chesi (Wenger 1983, 148)]
(see also image archived at www.susanne Wenger-aot.org/susanne-wenger/legacy)

The offensiveness of Èlà's intact image to a monotheistic (currently, Muslim) occupant of Òṣogbo palace is therefore no surprise, although it doesn't exempt the statue from protection by the UNESCO contract and supporting law (Probst 2011, 74f).²⁰

The foregoing helps to explain the difference between the unconditional reverence expressed by so many ordinary Òṣogbo citizens who take Mòmò sincerely as their Mother, and the reflexively hostile grumblings of bourgeois Yorùbá intellectuals against "that white lady who ruined the Òṣun Grove".²¹

20. Probst asks "why did the palace give Wenger the license to aesthetically reshape the Òṣun grove?" (2011, 157) as if *Àtájá* Adénlé had any idea of granting such license when he accepted Beier and wife to take up residence. The logic was probably simpler: then as now, *Òyínbó* presence equalled prestige, moreso when competing with rival neighboring towns. Nowadays after the collapse of Nigerian currency, the question is more transparently monetised: *Òyínbó* equals dollars, and tourist dollars are neither black nor white but green!

21. Quoth late Professor Abíólá Irèlè (p.c.) chez Professor 'Bíódún Jéyífò, Cambridge Mass., Saturday 15 March 2008. Although Mòmò disliked being called *Òyínbó*, she never claimed to be 'African' and she admired Yorùbá culture for its humanity, not for its ethnicity. Now it's too late to ask her if Èlà's erection riffed on the "humanation" of gonadic Christ in Renaissance art (Steinberg 1983, 9, 78-91).

Tourism, the final *Weltreligion*

The duty of annual pilgrimage is catching up with the latest addition to Max Weber's (1920) 'world religions' list: "the religion of Yorùbáland and its diasporas" (Prothero 2010, 220, cf. Abimbólá & Miller 1997, 1-6; Ogúnbilé 2003; Olúpòná 2011, 292f). Among all performances of international Yorùbáñity, Òṣun Òṣogbo draws the biggest crowds despite—or because of—Mòmó's transgressive icons which so strategically deterred aggressive monotheists and privatizers for half a century. But the distinction between pilgrims and tourists is fast diminishing (Goodluck-Ògàzì & Nwáchukwu 2014) and UNESCO's world heritage committee has no authority over the political economy of the sign (cf. Baudrillard 1996). Continued construction of Yorùbá as a global brand entails reduction of complexity, "unification and standardization" (Capone 2005, 287) to feed "the joys of identification and self-recognition" (Augé 1992, 18). Now the iconoclasts are not sworn enemies of *òrìṣà* but self-declared friends, catering to customers from another theme park on the other side of the Atlantic (see now also Qlárinoyè 2017).



[foto: Capone (2005, plate 12)]

Not to be out-Disneyed, *Ọ̀m̀ni* Ògúnwùsì has built Ifẹ́ Grand Resorts & Leisure, "a replica of [the] *Ọ̀m̀ni*'s Ìnàgbé Grand Resorts located in Lagos" with "the African Village where you have fifty African huts, with thatched roofs hung on trees named after all the *Ọ̀m̀nìs* of Ifẹ́, the deluxes/presidential suites, the sporting arena, the Igbó Oló.dùmarè..." and more (*Vanguard* 2018).

Sometime after 1990, Òṣun's Èlà statue was anonymously mutilated and the result accidentally captured in a TV documentary:

www.aljazeera.com/video/africa/2014/09/nigeria-sacred-site-under-threat-201492811548135411.html

AFRICA

Nigeria sacred site under threat

It is one of the few sacred places on earth that has survived colonialism, missionary activity and modern life.

Last updated: 28 Sep 2014 14:00

Listen

PAUSE 01:05 / 02:36 HD

As rapid technological change and population growth sweep across Africa, there are fears that irreplaceable cultural sites and age-old traditions will be swept away.

The Sacred Grove of Osun, one of the holiest places on Earth for the 35 million Yoruba people in Nigeria, is currently under threat.

Al Jazeera's Rob Reynolds reports from Osogbo.

www.aljazeera.com/video/africa/2014/09/nigeria-sacred-site-under-threat-201492811548135411.html

Èlà's neutering salves the wounded sensibilities expressed in the *Àtádója*'s 1985 banning order, but intentionally or not it also commodifies *òrìṣà* by advancing the anti-sex agenda of corporate-sponsored cultural spectacle:

Disney rejects bodies as the wellsprings of being. Instead, he inflicts on his characters the same punishment that Orígenes Adamantius inflicted on himself: he emasculates them and deprives them of real organs of relationship (sensation and procreation) to the universe. ...Disney's castration of his characters within this world assures total control over his own creations. (Dorfman & Mattelart 1973, 30)²²

The unknown²³ vandal's removal of Èlà's erection makes the icon visually more like its loinclothed, crucified avatar dangling above the ground, despite Mòṃó's best efforts to display the greater complexity of the Yorùbá concept of forgiveness:

Èlà is the adolescent, the child-man Ifá, the ideal of Odù, beloved lover of Ifá's mother who, strangely but psychically true, is not his [Èlà's] mother. It is for the love of Èlà that the Yorùbá have a shy inclination for Christianity, whose overt manipulation of Christ's most intimate mystery yet rebuffs them. (1983, 81, cf. 1990, 62)

In the words of Professor Wáńdé Abímbólá: "Between *Jéṣù* and *Èṣù*, the difference is VERY small!" And getting smaller.²⁴

UPDATE 10 January 2016: *Miracolo maschio!*

M. Kone (p.c.) of the [Susanne Wenger Foundation](#) kindly sends the following visual evidence that explicit masculinity has been regrafted onto the Èlà statue—at a still acuter angle—within in the past year or so.²⁵ And thereby surely hangs a tale...



Fátókí Qlòṣun between the suspended feet of Èlà Alátùn-únlókó, December 2015 [foto [M. Kone](#)]

22. One possible culprit feeds a Talebanic scenario: "Ibrahim Mukandam, whose name had been linked by the rumor mill to iconoclastic attacks on sculptures by Susanne Wenger in the Grove", who was the proprietor of an Islamic "school he had built in the grove as far back as 1959" and who was 'settled' by NCM to the tune of 500,000 naira — about USD3,000 — in 2006 (Strother 2012, 5). This documented payment of protection cash does nothing to disperse the whiff of complicity between federal managers and image sanitizers.

23. "Rechaza los cuerpos como surtidores de existencia. Disney inflige a sus héroes la pena que Orígenes se infligió a sí mismo; los emascula y los priva de sus verdaderos órganos de relacion (percepción y generación) con el universo. ...La castración de los héroes dentro de este mundo asegura a Disney el control irrestricto sobre su propia creación."

24. Quoted from memory of public presentation circa 1998, see also this blogpost avefirm.org/2018/09/02/osogbo-disco-very.

25. In the Warholian future, architectural anatomy will be virtual: www.cyark.org/projects/osun-osogbo-sacred-groves/overnien.

UPDATE 25 July 2018: *Information castration in the Goo-goo economy of clickbait*

An unsigned *Economist* report (link below) goes to town on the seeming causal link between slowness of demographic transition and undimmed pro-natal ideology. The journo's quickie on the topic directs equal scorn at women who comprehend "the science of fertility" enough to spend a fistful of dollars for IVF and the unschooled/unfunded 99% who resort to "pastors and traditional healers" for quack fecundity treatments. In this ersatz analysis, both styles of alleged economic self-harm are to be blamed on "a country where a woman's worth is defined largely in terms of her ability to bear children". Must be some atavistic irrationalism!

The confusion is compounded by the choice to accompany this unenlightening text with an unidentified *Reuters* photo (below) which innocent readers may misread as a run-of-the-mill, rundown voodoo shanty fronted by a cute but moldy portrait of stoic African motherhood. In fact the building is a cropped framing of the veranda of Ojúbọ̀ Ọ̀sogbo itself, the main shrine of the Ọ̀ṣun grove facing the riverbank site of the most important human fertility rite in West Africa today. By common knowledge, the cement architecture is the restoration work of Susanne Wenger and colleagues as reviewed above. The sculptor of the foregrounded figure *Ìyá ibéjì* 'Mother of twins' is not identified, but the piteous Madonna-ish impression of female devotion amidst poverty is clichéd enough for any NGO begging-poster, while also playing up the article's insinuation of African irrationality to want more babies than can be feed, schooled or gainfully employed. But are African women's choices really to blame for the youth bulge that now overflows in a tide of human trafficking across the continent and to the Global North?

Rather than suggesting any plausible sociology, the sensationalized image is cheap fodder for attention mining in the economy of digital distraction (Wu 2016). By contrast, due attention to the tableau's suppressed context does afford some insight to the real conundrum of tropical Africa's relentless population growth. The depicted scene is the central setting of a world-famous festival that annually choreographs a mass ritual of *male* fecundity, in whose indelible drama, supplicant sperm-producers are visually and herballly incited to imitate the culminating theatrical act: the perceived/announced spitting of a jet of water from the mouth of a wild catfish into the hand of the chief officiant, seconds after Ọ̀ṣun's swiftly flowing water has been ostentatiously 'fed' with a heaping mound of countless individual sacrificial offerings of cooked food amalgamated throughout the day under the shrine veranda on a wide wooden platter to the accompaniment of prayers and incantations earned by the pilgrims. As this symbolic exchange makes plain, *contra* the journalist's paternalising premise but in tune with basic biology, the rate of procreation in a patriarchal regime is not determined by female choice alone, without taking male 'contributions' into account. Point one.

Two: stepping back from Ọ̀ṣun Festival's cathartic frenzy, structural considerations come in view. Compared to more conservative zones further east, most of the Yorùbá-speaking region has famously reversed the taboo on twin births and turned it into a coveted honor (Chemeche 2003). This radical reversal occurred in tandem with a shift to urban residence and bilateral kinship, where reincarnation ideology is no longer a strict singleton pattern across alternating generations as still observable in naming patterns and male initiation scenarios in Cross River Igbo communities (Manfredi 1997). Instead, modern Yorùbá folklore represents reincarnation with a novel birth nomenclature of inverted seniority, shaped in isomorphism to tales of the supernatural origin of the Odùduà dynasty and the *odù* signs of the duplex 4-bit binary oracle—all envisioned as a hierarchical parade descending from the sky alias *òrun*, with juniors *preceding* their respective superiors onto terra firma (Manfredi 2021). Centuries of physical insecurity from European slaving raids also raised the 'free market' value of fecundity when children were so frequently kidnapped or pawned. In sum, mega-childbirth is more than a poor lifestyle choice of misguided women, it's a socio-ethical imperative that the *Economist*-favored 'discipline' of the Washington Consensus and its national subcontractors does nothing to discourage amid the crescendo of neoliberal precarity. Compared to global financial capitalists, pentacostal quacks are mere opportunistic parasites who vie with poetic African mystics for peanuts in commissions on the booming baby trade.

www.economist.com/middle-east-and-africa/2018/07/21/nigeria-has-a-high-fertility-rate.-why-are-infertility-clinics-booming

A bad place to be barren. Nigeria has a high fertility rate. Why are infertility clinics booming?

Treatments range from modern IVF to prayers and blessed water

by Anonymous

19 July 2018

[...]



Undocumented *Reuters* image of Ojúbọ̀ Ọ̀sogbo architecture by Susanne Wenger, statue of *Ìyá ibéjì* 'Mother of Twins' by [unknown]

UPDATE 1 January 2024: *Another cartoon-y journalist does the Groves*

Following “*Arugbá*” [Calabash-carrier] (2008), a feature-length drama about the lead actor of Òsogbo’s annual fertility procession, a cineaste working at the quality end of the Nollywood spectrum published on his platform *tundekelani.tv* a half-hour episode “Susanne Wenger/Àdúnni Oló.riṣà” (2015), produced in Tùndé Oládimé.ṣi’s *Aràmbarà* series and viewable here:

youtube.lurkmore.com/watch?v=VLuDXPTpQOk

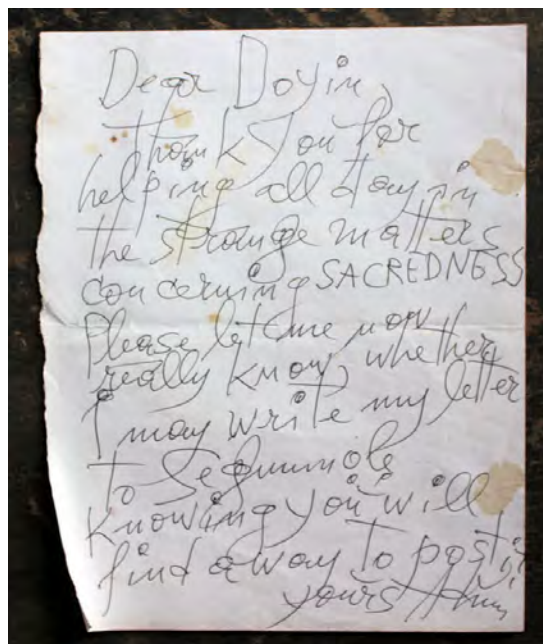
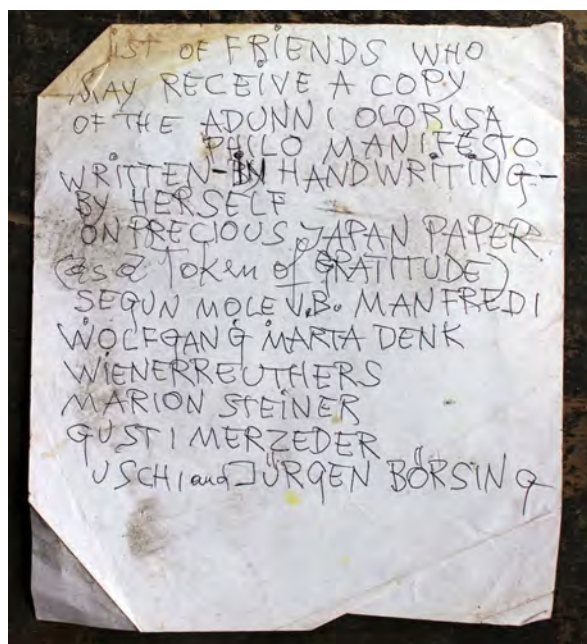
The film’s Yorùbá voiceover closely matches the English subtitles, but in the Yorùbá interviews the English text fails at spots, whether for technical reasons or reluctance to spoil the simple storyline. Also incongruous is a soundtrack that strings together a half dozen famous Yorùbá pop tunes, none with the least relevance to Mòmò’s life or work. Mòmò herself actively disliked this musical genre and instead hosted folkloric *ìgbìn*, *bàtá* and *dùn-dùn* ensembles in her monthly salon.²⁶ The film’s background hum of hackneyed hits by Ebenezer Obé[y], Sunny Adé and Àyindé Barrister may be explained by low-budget expediency, but it also conveniently forestalls the outrage that pagan sounds tend to arouse in a ‘Chrislamic’ (Muslim or Christian identified) audience.²⁷ Intentionally or not, the mellow mood music reinforces two overt messages: (i) that Mòmò either “became” or “was” ethnically Yorùbá and (ii) that her artworks belong to the heritage of the “Yorùbá race” (quotes below). Both propositions are false:

(i) was denied by Mòmò at every opportunity and embarrassed her as an instance of the colonial belief that a non-African who respectfully adopts the behavior of an African host has ‘gone native’ and chosen to erase their prior cultural identity, performing the inverse of so-called religious “conversion” (Horton 1971, Fisher 1973, Thornton 1984).²⁸ On the contrary, Mòmò was a lifelong bohemian communist and enthusiast of Jungian psychology, beguiled in later life by the peyote shamanism made popular in New Age circles. Her summary esthetic ethos was at last expounded in the *Philo-manifesto*, a challenging manuscript now conserved by the Susanne Wenger Foundation (first distribution list, below left).²⁹

(ii) has been repeatedly rejected by high Yorùbá eminences, whether with the crude insult quoted in footnote 19 above or the lofty condemnation that “Susan Wenger’s wall hangings and altar cloths and batik-like paintings... ha[ve] no connection whatsoever with Yorùbá traditional art, which is so greatly inspired by Yorùbá religion” (Abímóbá 1973, 246). The most sensational of all put-downs was Mòmò’s official banning from the groves (never enforced) during the male nudity scandal of 1985, as recounted in the main text above.³⁰

Q: *Why would a TV show embrace such gaffes?* A: *If Mòmò’s reputation was being hijacked and re-branded as the vehicle of an ethnic career.*

Chief Doyin Tàlábí Fáníyí *née* Oló.ṣun, daughter of ’Láyí àwòrò Òṣun of Ìyá Dúdú compound, is the sister of Àdígún Oló.ṣun (photo further below), both among many children that Mòmò fostered in her Àgùdà-legacy stone house through half a century. Doyin’s self-fashioning as Mòmò’s successor began while acting as her main caregiver during the late years of dementia and semi-blindness, such that Mòmò could write the plaintive note below right asking Doyin’s permission even to *write a letter* to me.



Manuscript pages photographed in Susanne Wenger’s apartment, 41A Ibokún Road Òsogbo, on 5 April 2016

Doyin is an *Ìyá-níFá* (female priest of the 8-bit binary oracle) but neither a sculptor nor a graphic artist, so her views of the “traditional Yorùbá” quality of Mòmò’s art range from secondary to erroneous. At 11:43 she tells the interviewer that Mòmò used “about three years” to make various icons displayed in the room in front of them, but none of these pieces was made by Mòmò at all. Doyin knows this but doesn’t go off-script. Praising Mòmò’s monumental shrines, Doyin ignores that most of them were *joint* work with a large team of collaborators as credited in Mòmò’s 1990 map of the groves (Appendix below). And so on.

The previous paragraph can be substantiated with notes about specific (time-stamped) quotations from the film, as follows.

26. She called the event *òṣẹ*, maybe because the 4- and 7- day calendric weeks coincide once a month. Some out-takes are streamed at manfredi.mayfirst.org/OtherLongplayingFieldRecordings.html. The only other music in the house emanated on the second storey from scratchy LPs of Stockhausen, Schönberg and the Art Ensemble of Chicago, or on the ground floor from Šangódáre’s AM radio set.

27. “Chrislam” was a favorite jest of late Prof. Omọ Omọruyí. The musical genre label *jùjú* may coincidentally sound like the pidgin English term for paganism (Fyle & Jones 1980, 159) but historically it references the modern tambourine featured in 1920’s Lagos bands before *dùn-dùn* took over as lead ‘talking’ instrument in Délé Òjó’s ensemble (Thieme 1969, 268-72, Alájá-Browne 1985, 29-35).

28. After ‘going native’, the government ethnographer Northcote Thomas was deported from Nigeria in 1913 (Lackner 1973, Basu 2016).

29. Proposition (i) was less forthrightly disowned by Ulli Beier and his second wife Georgina Betts, with whom Mòmò is often lumped together or outright confused (examples below).

30. Mòmò riposted to Abímóbá, “I agree with Wándé that I am not an almighty authority who can validate works of scholarship. Nor is he or anybody. ... I have not been scholarly but deeply committed” (Wenger 1974, 319).

(00:35) Voiceover: Mòmò “devoted her life to promoting the cultural heritage of the Yorùbá race”. Rephrased less ideologically: Mòmò devoted money from her local and foreign patrons to buy cement, iron bars and roofing sheets and to pay artisans and night-time guardians to protect and extend the groves’ monuments and walls, flora and fauna. She was entrusted with this task by the Antiquities Department/National Museum directed by Prof. Èkpo Eyò (1968-86) long before *Atájà Mátánmi* added his imprimatur (“Letter of Authority” 16 February 1987). Anticipating UNESCO’s universalism, Mòmò accepted the duty on behalf of the entire human race and risked her life to help initiates defend Òṣun’s natural/cultural wealth *against* the appetites of the palace and its business clients. Waving an ethnic flag expropriates that struggle. Mòmò also spent continually on the medical and educational needs of the many children who, some with their single mothers, made her home into a refuge from paternal irresponsibility—not the favorite topic of “Yorùbá race” ideologues. It’s fair to blame the “momentous” patriarchal oppressions of modern Nigeria on “the advent of Islam and Christianity”, but retrospective reckoning does not lift the present “imperative need for Yorùbá women to re-evaluate their heritage” so as to “retrieve their true personhood” (Ọlájùbù 2003, 41f.).³¹

(01:35) The next “race” card played in the script is “Oló.dùmarè”—a figure absent from Òṣun groves because “the Yorùbá do not erect temples for the cult of Oló.dùmarè, neither are images dedicated to Him [sic]” (Ìdòwú 1962, 141 cf. Ellis 1894, 36f., Abímíbólá 1976, 37). Historically it may be a late medieval/early modern emulation of Islam (Talbot 1926, 268, Verger 1966, Bámgbósé 1972, Shaw 1976, 61, Gbàdàmósí 1977, Matory 1994, 496, Olúpòná 2014, 2016, 178, Peel 2016a, 543). Mòmò writes: “Before the spiritual slovenliness of our time, the word ‘Oló.dùmarè’... was almost never spoken...” (Wenger 1983, 62).

(01:47) Voiceover (screengrab below) says that “she [Mòmò] is [was] one of the religious leaders of the Òṣun religion”—another trite mistake. In fact Mòmò held no initiation in Òṣun and maintained a so-to-say ‘religiously’ inconspicuous public profile throughout all five editions of the Òṣun Òṣogbo festival that I witnessed as her guest (1980-83, 1997).



[still from <https://invidious.projectsegfau.lt/watch?v=VLuDxPTpQOK>]

(02:08) Doyin becomes the chief protagonist of the show.

(02:20) Doyin’s “Ọlọ.run”, a near synonym of Oló.dùmarè (01:35), has equally questionable relevance to the groves or to Mòmò, whose raised eyebrows and wry grin I still recall, whenever somebody spoke this word to her. In her *magnum opus* she wrote:

In the *milieu* of Yorùbá tradition, God should not be named. He is surrounded by total taboo. ... Today, unfortunately, “Ọlọ.run”, like a jack of all trades, is meddling on anybody’s lips at any time and any place. He is just as willing to sanction curses as prayers and is drawn into any banality of everyday business. (Wenger 1983, 64)

(03:24) Camera repeatedly pans the interior of 41A Ibokún Road while voiceover talks about Mòmò’s art, falsely implying that Mòmò sculpted the objects shown. In fact, she encouraged the actual artists/artisans to work freely and then bought, without haggling, her favorite pieces for the collection of the house. It’s difficult to know if Wáńdé Abímíbólá would also declare that these icons, like Mòmò’s graphics and textiles, “ha[ve] no connection whatsoever with Yorùbá traditional art” (1973, 246) even though the makers are all co-ethnics of the eminent professor-*babaláwo*. Mòmò’s colleagues of *Àṣẹṣẹ* shared her stance that imitation of a static template is not art, and mere repetition of the past is at best perfunctory respect, but Beier (1975) packaged a revolutionary cosmopolitan as a romantic restorationist and this marketable misinterpretation dominates popular perceptions.

(04:04) Voiceover: Mòmò’s childhood love of nature “encouraged her to reside in Yorùbá land that is rich in abundance of the natural environment”. In fact, throughout her Òṣogbo years, she marveled aloud at public tolerance for ubiquitous deposits of *ìdòtí* (filthy mess) that the citizens would somehow manage to navigate without soiling their exquisite male *agbádás* and *asọ araròò* (female wrapper cloths) of *jàkàáàdì* lace. When I asked Prof. Abímíbólá in 1998 why his hometown of (New) Ọyó resembled a garbage dump, he grinningly responded: “love of liberty!” In recent decades, anyone attempting to sip Òṣun’s “sacred” water risks typhoid and other pathogens (Akinwotú 2022, Abubakar 2023). Mòmò often lamented the simultaneous veneration and despoilation of nature, as she experienced this in Nigeria no less than in Europe, but nonetheless resisted imposing physical barriers to pollution. Instead she preferred to raise visual symbols like the Flying Tortoise Arch (illustrated above) evoking *ẹ̀ẹ̀mọ̀* ‘prohibitive taboos’ against the approach of non-initiates (*àwọn àgùntàn*, literally ‘sheep’). She only reluctantly agreed to install low and sinuous walls between the groves and the old Àkúré road, conceding the point that money impressively expended on cement is nowadays more effective as a psychological barrier to encroachment than any oral or written laws.

(04:37, repeated 05:56) Doyin says “she [Mòmò] converted to the Yorùbá traditional religion” without disclosing what was Mòmò’s “religion” before she set foot in Nigeria—a question with no easy answer—and while overlooking Mòmò’s ecumenic invocation throughout her interviews and essays of at least a dozen other “religions” and scientific/philosophical systems.

31. Mòmò’s unflinching feminist agenda is recognized indirectly in a few words from Chief Ní.kẹ Davies-Òkúndáyé (see 18:08 below).

(06:15) Voiceover: "...before being permitted by the then *Atàja* of Òsogbo, King Samuel Adéléyé Adénlé Alákókó [the 1st] to carry out her works of arts [sic] in the grove...". That was permission *after the fact*, because Mòmó's first, spontaneous invitation was from Òṣun initiates whose alliance forced her in confrontation with palace agents avidly clearcutting and selling off old giant trees and replanting with commercial teak. The monoculture plantation did devour Òṣun groves up to the old schoolhouse that Mòmó and seven colleagues rebuilt as Ilé.ḍi Ontótóo. The film erases this epic struggle with the palace.

(07:58, 08:09) The shiny bas-reliefs shown here are not Mòmó's work, they belong to the post-UNESCO era, after the National Museum added stadium-style fee-gates and the palace imposed "business friendly" ritual titleholders—both steps resisted by the batik artist Àdigún Ọlọṣun (photo below, cf. footnote 13 above) who told the press, "The king now appointed a Chief Imam, *Alhaji* Adébayọ Adésina (Ọṣúnymí Ifábòdé) as *Bàbá Ọṣun* and an *Alhaja* (*Alhaja Ọṣúnwèdé*) as *Iyá Ọṣun*" (Jibril 2018).



Àdigún Ọlọṣun escorts Arugbá from the palace to Òṣun [foto: *Sun* newspaper [Lagos] 29 December 2018]

(09:05) The subtitles for Jímọ Bùràímọ's contribution are too sparse. Diplomatically he credits "Oló.kukù" (paramount of nearby Òkukù) with guiding Mr & Mrs Beier's relocation to Òsogbo, before Mòmó was accorded the symbolic status of *Atàja* Adénlé's adopted child—an arrangement that casts Ulli Beier as a royal son-in-law (*ọkọ omobinrin ọba*) and makes the story sound less like *Atàja*'s "invitation" to Mòmó than a case of two privileged males cutting a deal over how control a potentially disruptive female.

(10:26) Doyin directs the camera to the photo of an *elégún* masked performer in Èḍe, taken within seconds of a shot published by Beier (1956, 382), but confuses it with "Gogorù" ("tall as a pole"), an unrelated mask photographed decades later in Òsogbo by Gert Chesi (Wenger 1983, 200). The error is both commission and of omission. Commission, when Doyin riffs disinformation that the journalist takes on faith because it's framed as "religion" which is Doyin's real *métier*, while Mòmó's was art. Omission, if the goal is to report Mòmó's biography. In Èḍe, Ulli and Mòmó were sponsored by the paramount *Tìmi* Láoýè, an *àyan* (initiated virtuoso) of *dùn-dùn* who welcomed *elégún* to sit beside him (Beier 1956, 387; 1959 *frontis* and plates 15, 45, Láoýè 1959). In Òsogbo by contrast, the *elégún* were restricted by Islamic authorities and *Atàja* Mátánmi (1976-2010), prolonging historic competition over public space between the mosque and the groves, as diplomatically disclosed by Láyíwólá (1995, 114, 119).³² In March 1977, when I asked Mòmó how to watch the *eégún ọlẹlẹ* festival, she sent me to Èḍe where I saw them take over the main roads throughout the daylight hours. In 1983, the Ògún chief of Òsogbo was naged by his embarrased children into attending mosque. In 2021, Èṣùlẹkè the Baálẹ Èṣù of Òsogbo was charged (together with his son) for murder, after a fatal gunfight with the Qamaruden/Kamorudeen Society at Olúòde Arányin (News Agency of Nigeria 2021). Mòmó's friends knew that the best house gift—other than fresh coffee beans—was wax earplugs to help her sleep through the dawn call to prayer weaponised to blast from heavy loudspeakers aimed directly at her window (recording available on request). Such examples of perpetually roiling "religious" conflict in Òsogbo vanish under the film's ethnonational veil.

(11:43) Voiceover for a stroll through the house's collections: "How long does it take Mòmó to create these works?" Doyin: "She normally spend[s] at least three years to create an image." In fact Mòmó made none of the sculptures or paintings in this scene.

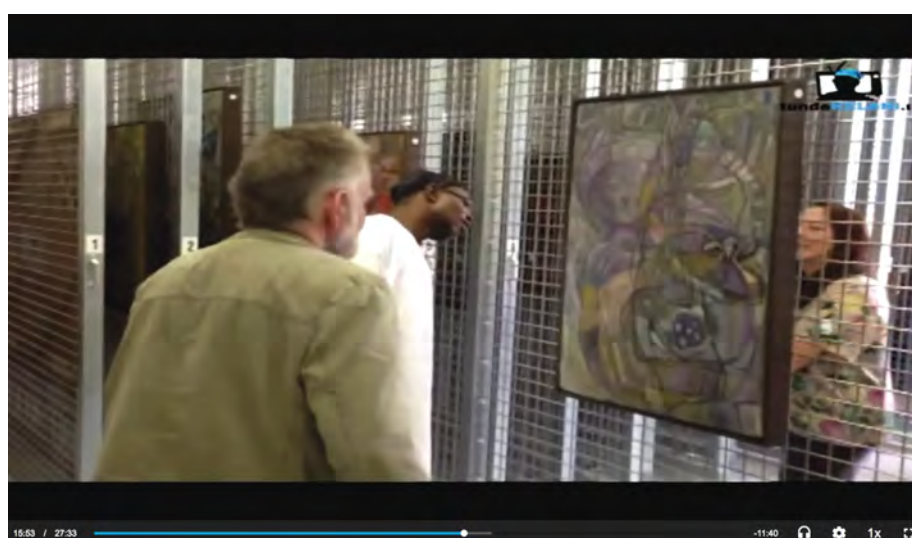
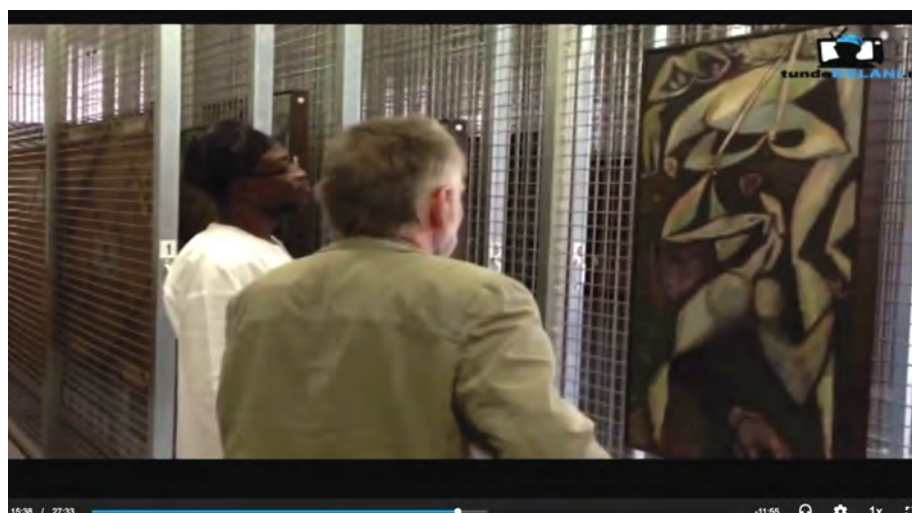
(12:45) Doyin says *correctly* that most of Mòmó's non-monumental works are kept not in the Òsogbo house but in the Susanne Wenger foundation in Krems, Austria, but without recanting the confabulations of one minute before.

(13:22) "Mòmó has done several arts works on cloth[] in the Yorùbá traditional way" — This refers to what? Since the 1970's Mòmó's batiks used the *Indonesian wax* technique that she introduced to Òsogbo, and those she made previously with indigenous *alá.dirẹ ẹlẹ.ọ* (starch-resist indigo) are the ones that Abímólá (1973) placed beyond the pale. It's also well known that Mòmó introduced the painterly style of "compositional batiks... depicting the stories of Yorùbá gods" but "[h]er batiks made no use of traditional forms" as when "Yorùbá women use *àdirẹ* to decorate wrappers with geometric designs" (Pogoso 1995, 157, 159).

(14:21) To the tune of Sunny Adé's "Easy Motion Tourist" (1998), Òṣun Governor Malam Rauf Arẹgbẹṣọlá inspects the Wenger Foundation premises in Austria. As a crouching media aide snaps selfies, the boss flips cursorily through racks of abstract *Ọgẹmàlden* until he lands on a priapic figure and exclaims with audible relief, "This is a man!" Correct, *ọgá*, but the next canvas is a

32. The *elégún-Atàja* conflict is alluded to in the caption of the "Gogorù" photo (Wenger 1983, 201), where the *bàtá* ensemble is the same one that drummed in Mòmó's monthly salon, *except* for the *iyá ilù* player who is not *àyan* Sípẹ but Bùràímọ Gbàdàmọṣi alias "*bàbá* Oló.kúta".

cubist blend. His Excellency asks “What is this one?” (15:53) and is told “This is Qbàtálá and Odùduwà, she [Mòmò] wrote it on the back.” “Aaaah! Qbàtálá and Odùduwà, this is *interesting*, ooo” — but frankly he found the phallic image easier to authenticate.



“...which further promotes the culture of the Yorùbá race throughout the world.”

(16:30) “Apart from being a renowned artist, she wrote the first book on the alphabets [sic] of the Yorùbá language for primary school students”. Yes, and Mòmò also invented *àkàrà* and ice cream. After this, who needs the “hallucinations” of ChatGPT?

(17:12) Jímò Bùràímò and Twins Seven-Seven learned painting not from Mòmò but from Georgina Betts, Beier’s second wife who taught how to make commercial objects “cleansed of traditions” and “reorientated towards individual creativity” for sale to galleries and private collectors (Adépégba 1995, 170). Is it so easy to confuse these two madames?

(18:08) Chief Níkè Davies-Òkúndáyé: “Most of the artists in Òṣogbo are males, [I] am the only female. Our teacher was Mòmò Adùnní. She is a *woman*.” In fact, Òṣogbo women are the main dyers of world-famous *àdìrẹ* and painters of shrine walls and *ère* ‘memorial images’ (Beier 1957 plates 1,3, Wenger 1983, 50-53, 55, 122-23, 130f., 192-94, cf. Adépégba 1983a, 16), but somehow all these women fail to qualify for the English title “artist”, in which category Níkè uniquely counts herself. Mòmò never endorsed that definition of art.

(18:44) Voiceover: Mòmò “has left children who are sustaining her legacy.” Doyin: “I am a chief with a lot of responsibilities. Also I take care of responsibilities that Mama left behind.” Yes of course, but these responsibilities are not *artistic* ones.

(19:30) Voiceover: “Apart from the colour of Mama’s skin, she is [was] totally Yorùbá” — Not according to Mòmò herself.

(19:42) Doyin: “Most of her art[]works are in line with the norms of the Yorùbá tradition. At the Òṣun river you will see her works being named after the traditional beliefs of Yorùbá.” As the subtitles struggle with Doyin’s discourse, the film pairs the words with icons made not by Mòmò but by her *Àṣẹṣẹ* colleagues. The assumption that any work with a Yorùbá *name* satisfies *ilàna òṣẹṣẹ* ‘principles of original folkloric activity’ ignores Mòmò’s doctrine of “obligatory violation of taboo” (1983, 235 *fn* 14) discussed in the main text above, underlined when the video (20:20) flashes the nude Èlà statue in its *un*-emasculated state. Adépégba even sees “two budding female breasts on the chest” of the statue although “[t]o the Yorùbá, Ifá is a man” and then infers that this perceived “hermaphroditic appearance in Susanne Wenger’s sculpture probably stems from her [own] conviction that wisdom and knowledge are not exclusive to men” and more generally to conclude that “the images in the groves are Susanne Wenger’s *personal* expressions. Undoubtedly they are *new*, *strange* and made by a *foreigner*” (Adépégba 1983b, 12, 20f., italics added).

(20:41) Doyin: “We speak [spoke] Yorùbá at home” — Which home, Láyí’s *Ilé Ìyá Dídú* or Mòmò’s *Ilé Abólúbòdè*? “Even some people do say she pre-existed as a Yorùbá person” — as if international multilingualism appears only when an African learns the language of the colonizer, such that, if any eccentric European ever learns Yorùbá, the explanation must be mystical.

(21:04) Doyin: “She rarely put on foot wears [sic] when indoors and she was always on Yorùbá traditional attires.” What a hippy.

(21:43) Doyin: “Her efforts towards culture and tradition had [sic] made Òṣogbo a tourist attraction.” *Òṣun Disney yèè!*

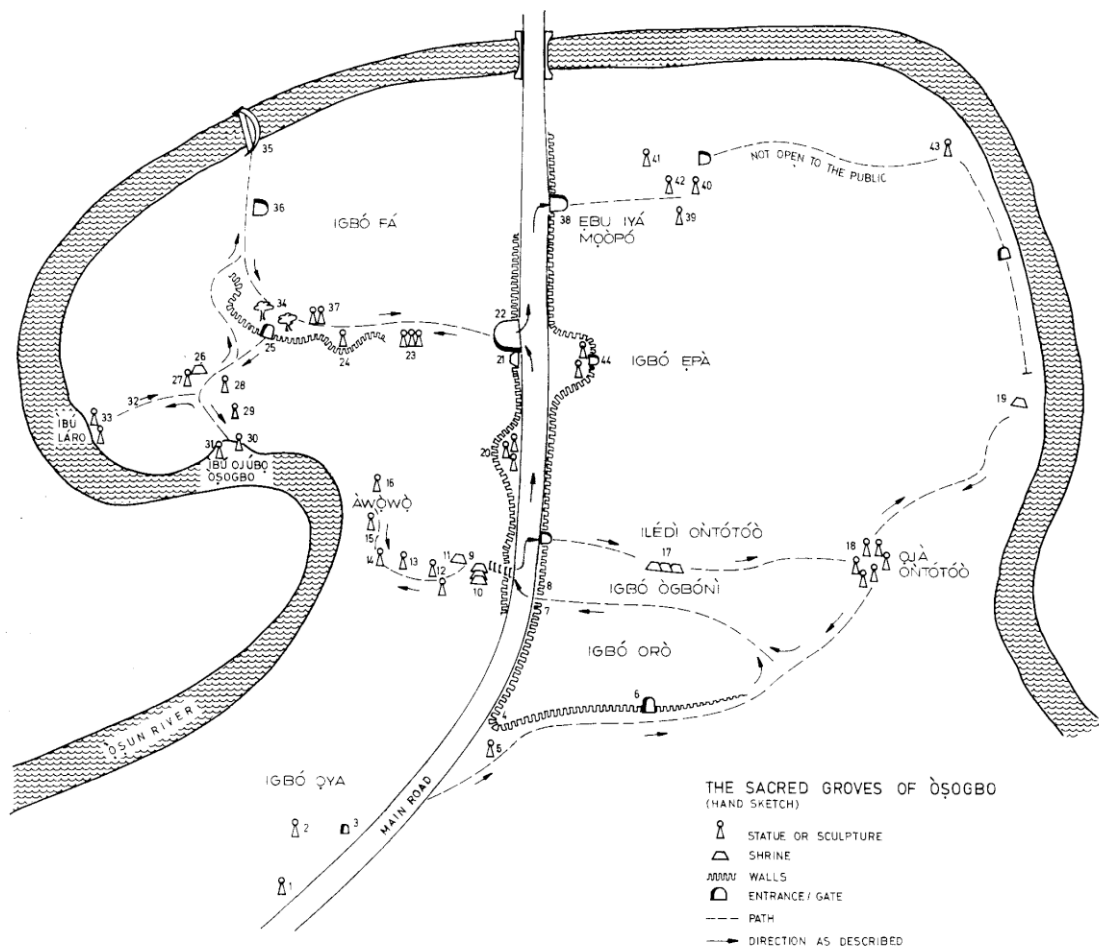
Appendix: Mòmó's sketchmap of Òṣogbo's Òṣun groves, with artist attributions

- 1 Efòn, sculpture of a buffalo, the goddess Oya's mythic father (Ojewale Amoo)
- 2 Oya and Sòngó, wooden double altar image symbolizing the ritual and emotional closeness of the goddess and her beloved husband (Kasali Akangbe)
- 3 Entrance gate to Igbó Oya, made of bent ironrod (Adebisi Akanji)
- 4 The walls surrounding the groves commence here and continue according to the individual boundaries of the different groves – Igbó. They are to protect the gods' intimate private spheres. (Complex and individual conception by Susanne Wenger)
- 5 Idí Èsù, statue of Èsù who is always ritually remembered on crossroads. (Saka)
- 6 Walls and entrance to Igbó Orò. The Orò Grove is not open to the public.
- 7 Igbó Orò street front, walls adorned by representations of some important sacred Egúngún masks (Ojewale Amoo)
- 8 Egun walls, street front to Ilédì Ontótóò (Ojewale Amoo)
- 9 Obátálá Shrine Complex, consisting of:
 - 10 Òrìsà Aajagemo Shrine, this shrine is named "Ayé dákun y'padà" – world go back into your spiritual timeless source, i.e. consider your ways; and the
 - 11 Shrine of Alájeré in his Sònpónná dimension (Susanne Wenger and Adebisi Akanji)
 - 12 Alájeré sculptures representing elements of his myth (Susanne Wenger)
 - 13 Statue of Obátálá gesturing atonement and welcome to Alájeré, his ideal son. (Susanne Wenger)
 - 14 Sculpture of two Pythons crossing the path (Susanne Wenger)
 - 15 Statue of Alájeré dancing for Òṣun (Susanne Wenger)
 - 16 Statue of Alájeré jumping over the cliff (Susanne Wenger)
 - 17 Ilédì Ontótóò, assembly ground and hall, respectively altar room (strictly not open to the public) of the Ògbónì (earth) cult. (Carved posts by Buraimon Gbadamosi, Kasali Akangbe, Rabiú Abesu, Lamidi Aruísá, Saka and Adebisi Akanji. Wooden sculpture of Obátálá in front and of Alájeré at the back of the building by Kasali Akangbe. Cement figures by Ojewale Amoo)
 - 18 Ojà Ontótóò, market for spirits and gods (Saka)
 - 19 Òṣun Lákókón, river shrine and altar named after the hunter, who first encountered, "saw" the river Òṣun as an epiphany of the great goddess Òṣun here. (Concept and execution by Susanne Wenger, roof construction by Kasali Akangbe)
 - 20 Òṣun and entourage, group of small cement figures (early work of Adebisi Akanji)
 - 21 Ilé Iyémòwò, small shrine beside the big arch, representing the goddess' sacred womb, birth into another dimension of reality. (Susanne Wenger, Adebisi Akanji)
 - 22 The arch of the flying tortoise (Susanne Wenger, Adebisi Akanji)
 - 23 Procession to the river, group of small cement figures (early work of Adebisi Akanji)
 - 24 Omoyoyo, "The one who enjoys many children", cement figure on top of the stump of a giant tree (Saka)
 - 25 Walls and entrance to Ojúbo Òṣogbo (Artwork on the walls first works of Ojewale Amoo and Laani, entrance by Adebisi Akanji)
- 26 Ojúbo Òṣogbo, central shrine of Òṣun worship.

PLEASE NOTE that visitors can only be admitted to the inner shrine premises by the priests who may be compensated for the disturbance with a gift of money. This is traditionally due to them, only the amount depends on the visitor's discretion.

(Artistic concept of all pillars, depicting the aesthetic and recreative aspect and rebirth through decline and decay, by Susanne Wenger, assistant Adebisi Akanji. Carved posts and stone sculpture by Buraimon Gbadamosi, wallpaintings by Foyeko and Songo Tundun)
- 27 Altar in the roots of the sacred tree of Alájeré (Statue by Laani, reliefs and mosaics by Adebisi Akanji)
- 28 Ègbé Láylí, tree altar named after Láylí Olosun, the famous saint of Òṣun worship.
- 29 Statue of Òṣun, indicates the place where Òṣun worshippers, who take part in the annual Òṣun procession as a group, use to rest. (Saka)
- 30 Statue of Òṣun standing on the edge of Ibú Ojúbo Òṣogbo (Ibú means underwater altar) which is the goal of the annual procession where the sacred river is "fed" with offerings brought by the participants. (Saka)
- 31 Òkà, stone figure (Buraimon Gbadamosi)
- 32 The Atájeré's forest throne where he ritually changes dresses as a symbolic act of transmutation during the annual procession.
- 33 Ibú Lárò, this is the site where members of all royal families of Òṣogbo take their ritual bath. (Statues by Laani)
- 34 Giant trees
- 35 Suspension bridge, built – as the fulfilment of a lifelong dream – by a Welsh District Officer. In those days there were no roads, no other means of transportation and building other than manpower.
- 36 Entrance to Igbó'fá, the Ifá Grove which is not open to the public (Lasisi Isola)
- 37 Side entrance to Igbó'fá, stone figures (Buraimon Gbadamosi)
- 38 Entrance to Ebu Iyá Moòpó, the sacred potterfield. The entrance depicts a chameleon which plays an important part in the creation myth. (Susanne Wenger, Adebisi Akanji)
- 39 Iyá Moòpó, this monumental statue is the shrine of the goddess Iyá Moòpó, patroness of all women's occupations including childbirth (Susanne Wenger, Adebisi Akanji)
- 40 Èlè, tall statue of Ifá, the god of divination, as a youth. (Susanne Wenger, Adebisi Akanji)
- 41 Alájeré-Alájeré-Obálúáyé, sculpture complex depicting Sònpónná. (Susanne Wenger, Adebisi Akanji)
- 42 Iyá Idé, stone sculpture (Buraimon Gbadamosi)
- 43 Odí, sculpture complex in progress and therefore not open to the public. (Susanne Wenger)
- 44 Entrance to Igbó Èpà, the Èpà Grove is reserved for the death rituals for hunters and Òṣun priests. Not open to the public. (Entrance and statues by Ojewale Amoo)

Òṣun Bússeyin, see street map of Òṣogbo (page 24)



[source: Wenger (1990, 86)]

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