

The etymology of *ogan* (*ogã*) proves the Gùn-gbè origin of Candomblé Jeje*

Victor Manfredi
African Studies Center, Boston University
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ABSTRACT: Yorùbá *ògá* ‘boss’ (< *-gá* ‘stand aloof’) is not cognate to Fõn-Gbè *gán* ‘chief, patron’ (< *-gán* ‘support’), *pace* Herskovits (1956, 156). By standard criteria of form and meaning, the closest Westafrican correspondent of the AfroBrazilian ritual title *ogan* (Carneiro 1940, 274) is Gùn-Gbè *ògán*, its functional counterpart in the *vodun* of Xògbónù alias “Porto-Novo” (Rouget 2001, 97). This philological finding is demographically significant, because the most *vodun*-oriented *candomblé* tendency happens to be called *Jeje* (also spelled *Gége*), while *Jeje* (also spelled *Djédjé*) is also an exonym of the Gùn-Gbè population (Capone 1999, 15 *fn* 6).

In Salvadoran *candomblé* of the late 1930’s, the term *ogan* was a male title applied to “protectors of the cult with the special responsibility of providing prestige and money for the sacred ceremonies” (Carneiro 1940, 274). The translation is independently supported by the contemporary sociological observation that *ogan* referred to older men who, lacking authority in a matriarchal *terreiro*, contributed the functional equivalent of bridewealth/brideservice marriage payments in exchange for ritual citizenship and sexual access to younger female initiates (Landes 1940, 391; 1947, 142-55). Thus “the inclusion of people from the upper classes occurred through the growth of the ‘*família de santo*’ through the figure of the *ogã* who, in certain *terreiros*, is legitimized by way of... an ‘African tradition’ introduced in the 1930s... submitting to initiation rituals and establishing a permanent protective tie to a *filha de santo*” (Dantas 1988, 234, 174 *fn* 15/2009, 145, 171). The English gloss closest to this usage is *patron* in the sense of honorary chief, where the concept of honor spans material and relational dimensions (Bourdieu 1972, 1980). The source language is clearly not Portuguese; instead, the etymology invokes loanword transmission by captive Africans during European colonization of northeast Brazil (Verger 1968). Specifically, it brings in focus the relative roles of speakers of Yorùbá (in Brazil, called *Naqó*) venerating *òrìṣà* (*orixá*) versus those speaking Gbè varieties (*Gége* = *Jeje* = [ʒeʒe]) and venerating *vodun* (*vodum*). How the two cultural systems interacted continues to be keenly researched by transatlantic historians (Parés 2005, 2011).

Herskovits glosses rapidly over the matter:

The derivation of the word *ogan* is clearly Yorùbá-Dahomean. The former kingdom of Kétu, which has given its name to the Bahian ‘nation’ currently most numerous among the *candomblé* groupings, lies on the border between these two African peoples. In both these tongues, the word *gã* [cited with a tilde] signifies ‘chief’. More specifically, we find the word *oga* [cited without diacritics] in the *Oxford Yorùbá Dictionary* with the translation ‘a distinguished person in any sphere, chief, superior officer, headman, master’—meanings which quite fit the application of the word in its Bahian *candomblé* usage. (1956, 156)

This assured explanation fails with respect to Yorùbá on three separate points.

- (i) syntax: in Yorùbá, “the word *gã*” does not—indeed, cannot—occur as a noun.¹
- (ii) phonetics: the Yorùbá word *ògá* ‘boss’ contains no nasal feature and cannot acquire one short of magic.²
- (iii) semantics: the Yorùbá word *ògá* ‘boss’ does not “quite fit the application of” Bahian *ogan*.³

Herskovits is at least correct that a free form “*gã*” exists in the Fõn variety of Gbè. This bears H tone on the root vowel (with an implied L tone on the voiced onset, responsible for the rising contour of the H, cf. Stahlke 1971, Gbeto 2010). The standard gloss in Fõn explicitly includes the concept of ‘patron’, which is no surprise since it’s transparently derived from a homophonous root meaning ‘to support’ (Akoha 2010, 264, cf. Hoefmann & Ahohounkpanzon 2003, 183). In Yorùbá, by contrast, ‘patron’ is best translated in a totally separate lexical item *alá.tilé.yìn* ‘back-er’—with the metaphor of ‘support’ supplied by the root *-tì* ‘push, prop

* Ìbà ni mo jú fún *ogan* Pierre Verger tí wón di òrìṣà. *Èkú ìyèrè kíkà!* Thanks for generous inspirations to Professors H. Capo (U. d’Abomey-Calavi), S. Capone (UParis-10), A. Lühning (Fundação Pierre Verger), L.-N. Parés (U Federal da Bahia) and G. Rouget (Musée de l’Homme). Orthographic note: here I harmonize Gbè with Yorùbá by marking nonhigh tone overtly as L, and by using Crowther’s subdot to mark nonroman [ɛ, ɔ] as *e, o* — so I’m twice guilty of *naqoiṣaṣa*! This manuscript is posted at people.bu.edu/manfredi/OganGungbeJeje.pdf.

1. Yorùbá rigorously lacks monosyllabic free items of argument type—the ‘nouns’ of traditional grammar (Ward 1952, 26f.)—hence “*gan*” as a free form is necessarily of predicate type i.e. a traditional ‘verb’, e.g. *-gán* ‘cut, tack, catch’, *-gan* ‘harden’, *-gán* ‘despise’ (Abraham 1958, 256). Even in languages like Yorùbá which require an overt ‘noun prefix’, typically a formative of V- or CV-shape, as part of the traditional ‘word’ identified by translation equivalence, this constituent displays segmental and pitch alternations more consistent with its historic origin in the Benue-Kwa protolanguage as a nounclass marker, attached outside the lexical root in phrase-level syntax (Welmers 1973; Manfredi 2012b).
2. In Yorùbá roots, the vocalic nasality feature is distinctive and not facultative—albeit with an incomplete and historically complex distribution in mid vowels, depending on dialect (Ward 1952, 10; Adétúgbò 1967; Oyèláràn 1973; Stewart 1983, 1994; Capo 1985).
3. *Ògá* ‘boss’ is a transparent agent nominalization of the predicate root *-gá* ‘stand aloof’, with no connotation of benevolence (Awóyalé 2007). As to the most recent Bahian usage of the African loanword *ogan*, Professor L.-N. Parés (email of 29/11/2012) interestingly observes that there are also *ogans* in many *terreiros* headed by men. Moreover, their function exceeds the notion of patronage. In contemporary Candomblé, *ogan* is more than just ‘patron’, a mere ‘honorary chief’, ‘supporter’ or even ‘protector’ (cf. Rouget). Any male initiate who is not *elegun* (does not go into trance) is considered and named as an *ogan*, including key priests responsible for sacrifices, divination, drumming, singing etc.

In the same vein, Parés (2011, 141 *fn*. 65) quotes Rodrigues’ glosses of *ogan* as “senhor” and “chefe” (1932, 138). Aside from the fact that on the same page Rodrigues himself judged *ogan* as among the “palavras gèges indiscutíveis”, there are two independent reasons why such usage doesn’t let Yorùbá *ògá* ‘boss’ into the Bahian etymology. (i) The observed meaning of “protector” (Carneiro 1940, 274) is outside the denotation of Yorùbá *ò-gá* ‘s/he who stands aloof’ (even though some bosses can be benevolent), whereas the etymology of Gùn-Gbè *ò-gán* as ‘s/he who supports’ is a closer semantic match. (ii) It’s vanishingly unlikely (statistically impossible) that Yorùbá *ògá* spontaneously ‘grew’ a nasal a few centuries ago *only* in the border area where Gùn-Gbè *ògán* is used and thereafter spontaneously ‘shed’ this same nasality again, leaving no reported trace in any modern Yorùbá variety. Multiplying the low probabilities of historical identification on these two points of comparison between Bahian *ogan* and Yorùbá *ògá* yields combined odds worse than *jogo do bicho*. Conceivably, Herskovits’ Yorùbá-centric fancy was fed by modern *naqoiṣaṣa*, then fed back by him to literate *candomblistas* who now accept the folk etymology.

up' plus *ẹ̀yìn* 'back' (Abraham 1958, 181, 642; Awóyalé 2007). Even setting semantic troubles aside, Herskovits would have to say that the Brazilian word got its initial vowel from Yorùbá but its final vowel from Fòṅ—a morphological alchemy that might be thinkable only in a creolist theory of “multiple etymology” (Cassidy 1966).

Fortunately however, the regularly expected pronunciation of the Gùn-Gbè version of this word is *ògán*, exactly as required (Frechet 1994, 32). Rouget observes as much, further adducing Gùn-Gbè *hùn-gán* 'chef du secret' (compounded from *òhùn* 'sang, secret, divinité' plus *ògán*) and commenting insightfully on wider comparanda:

Curieusement, *hùngán* ne figure pas dans Westermann (1954). En Haïti, *houngan* désigne en revanche le clerc qu'on appellerait en gùn *vòdúnò* (Métraux 1958, 53f.). Au Brésil, dans le Candomblé (Bastide 1958, 43f.), le terme *ogan* (cf. *ògán*) désigne des personnalités laïques servant de «protecteurs de la secte» et donc correspond à ce qui vient d'être dit du *hùngán* chez les gùn. (2001, 97)

Also relevant is the existence of a strong sociolinguistic boundary between the two aforementioned communities, which share six phonological characters (Capo 1991, 13f.) in common within a compact subgroup of the large Gbè cluster:

The Fòṅ section comprises lects spoken mainly in Bénin and Nigeria such as Gùn, Kpàsè, Màxi, Àgbómè, Wémè, Àròhún etc. One observes, however, that Gùn speakers do not consider it proper to include their speech form in Fòṅ, although they recognize a closer linguistic relationship with the other lects listed under Fòṅ. This reluctance has a socio-historic overtone since the Àgbómè ["Abomey"] kingdom was known as *Fòṅ* and was antagonistic to the Gùn kingdom of Xògbónù ["Porto-Novo"]. (Capo 1991, 14)⁴

One more African thread ties the Brazilian strands together:

Le mot *jeje* (ou *djédjé*) désigne l'un des groupes fòṅ du dahomey, les Gùn, groupe fortement marqué par les influences culturelles des Yorùbás (Ceccaldi 1979) [citing Cornevin 1962, 46, 198, 201]. (Capone 1999, 15 *fn.* 6, cf. Parés 2001, 95; 2011, 52)

Thus candomblé *ogan* can't be dismissed as an isolated Gùn-Gbè-ism: it's accompanied by the Gùn-Gbè-specific ethnonym, *Jeje*.

Other lexical traces of Gùn-Gbè in Candomblé Jeje have also been proposed:

Comme le suggère Lima [1977, 72f.], citant Akindélé et Aguessy [1953], les noms initiatiques utilisés au Brésil correspondraient approximativement à ceux utilisés dans les cultes voduns de Porto Novo [Xògbónù], «*boundjènoukon, dométien, nogamou, nogamoutien, yomou, yomoutien, gamou, gamoutien, notien*». (Parés 2011, 140)⁵

"Houndjènoukon", the first title in Lima's list, shows up in Rouget's Gùn-Gbè glossary as *hùnjènúkòṅ* "celui ou celle qui est entré(e) le (la) première en réclusion et qui ouvre la marche des novices" (2001, 98).

From the foregoing it follows that *ogan*, a technical candomblista term, attests in and by itself the transmission of this ritual formation to Brazil: by speakers of a localized Gbè variety, not by a blurry "Yorùbá-Dahomean" population.⁶ Despite the undisputed fact that Gùn-Gbè was—and is— "fortement marqué par les influences culturelles des Yorùbás", such emulation doesn't qualify *ògán* and *ògá* as cognate expressions: they are not. The mistake was more excusable in the 1950's, before either language could boast a modern dictionary or indigenous linguistic *cadre*, but fortunately such is no longer the case. Greater philological adequacy can now contribute more reliable inferences in reconstructing *candomblé's* transatlantic demography.

To be sure, this conclusion does not clash with ample evidence that "relational dynamics of ethnic identities" continuously inflected the form and nomenclature of Westafrican-derived ritual associations on both Atlantic shores throughout *candomblé's* formative era (Parés 2008, 181). Nor did such processes abate—they only accelerated—when the colonist's preferred logic of *divide et impera* met its dialectical answer of *unite et résistite*, and ethnolinguistic ideas of 'nation' blended into those of 'race' and class (Hall 1986, Tall 2012). Such dynamics operated throughout the Caribbean, e.g. in western Cuba (Moliner 1992; Miller 2009) where, as in Salvador, claims of Africanist "religion" were a strategy by which "intellectuals and *pais-de-santo* attempted to rid the cults of police control" (Dantas 1988, 186/2009, 112). And as with the broadened Cuban usage of *Yorùbá*, so the Bahian term *Jeje* has plainly become ever more "generic" and ambiguous, subsuming a growing number of more specific—but also increasingly "hidden"—geolinguistic characteristics (Parés 2008, 192). But despite such well-documented evolution, *candomblé's* neoYorùbá (neoNagô) trend can't erase the Gùn-Gbè etymologies. Such evidence unequivocally manifests the "unconscious character of linguistic phenomena", intrinsically resistant "to secondary reasoning and to reinterpretations" (Boas 1911, 67).⁷

4. Ceccaldi (1979, 451) cites Bourgoignie to the effect that Fòṅ and Gùn "présentent des différences minimes" (1972, xv). Individually, each of the six sets of Gbè-internal soundshifts that jointly apply in Fòṅ overlaps up to three of the other four Gbè dialect zones (Capo 1991, 15). The five historical subgroups thus reconstructed could as well be called "Gbè 1-5" in order to avoid ambiguity with modern ethnolinguistic labels. Intersecting areal groupings of this kind are the norm in language evolution, especially on a small scale where the distinction between borrowing (horizontal transmission, Schmidt 1872) and inheritance (vertical transmission, Schleicher 1863) most easily 'leaks'.

5. This reference was kindly brought to my attention by Professor Parés (email of 29/11/2012). Parenthetically, it seems that the author name francophonically spelled "Aguessy" represents Yorùbá *Ageṣin(wáyé)* denoting someone "who came to the world riding a horse: a one-word *oríkè* for a baby born with the umbilical cord wound round the lower right arm" (Babalólá & Àlàbá 2003, 80). That would be ironic, given the critical importance of the nasal feature of *ogan* to its Gbè origin, insofar as the pronounced form of Yorùbá *Ageṣin* contains a nasal feature which was apparently unparsed in the conventional alphabetization in the former Dahomey!

6. Herskovits' "Yorùbá-Dahomean" construct mirrors another polyglot identity on the opposite side of the Yorùbá zone: the "Ifè-Benin interaction field" or "Yorùbá-Èdó world system" (Ògúndiran 2002, 27; 2003, 57). Such large-scale frames blend real, transient spheres of influence with timeless fictive kinship claims grounded in modern political imperatives—whether from above or below. Projecting present alliances indefinitely into the past, beyond empirical disproof, grossly undermined much of Egharhevba's Èdó historical works as well as a huge derivative literature of speculative and wishful archaeology and art history (cf. Eisenhofer 1995, 1997; Manfredi 2012a).

7. In a gossipy takedown of their predecessor in Afroamerican studies, Price & Price rightly note that "Herskovits... blackballed" Ruth Landes "from receiving any permanent job in the United States" but then go on to paint this as "her reward for a book that... largely ignored Herskovits' agenda of seeking African connections" (2003, 84f.). It would be less tendentious to name Landes' transgression as that of having rejected Herskovits' specifically *Yorùbá*-centric patriarchy re regarding *candomblé* houses, whose African matrifocality Landes didn't fail to see. Just as misleadingly, the Prices allege that "[t]he Herskovitses' genealogical orientation, their search for African origins, was part and parcel of the Boasian legacy" (2003, 85), ignoring that Boas consistently stressed the *non*correspondence of genetics and culture; it's rather the Prices who're hung up on ancestry, in this case on finding an intellectual parent to blame for Herskovits' Africanist orientation in the Americas.

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