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Karin Barber, *I could speak until tomorrow; Oríkì, women and the past in a Yorùbá town.* (International African Library, 7.) Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press for the International African Institute, London, 1991. xi + 375 pp. £40.

Reviewed by Victor Manfredi

This book, revised from a 1979 dissertation, interprets oral narratives and verses from the Ọ̀tìn River town of Òkukù, Nigeria, in relation to local history, biography and social life. Like much recent anthropology, it blends reflexive, transactional analysis with postmodern literary criticism. Barbers study stands out, however, for its deep linguistic expertise, gained during three years in Òkukù and seven years at the University of Ifẹ̀ (now Ọbáfẹ́mi Awólọ́wọ̀ University). The reader is introduced to a fascinating discourse on the nature of oral culture—a discourse which flourished in the decade when Ifẹ̀ set the pace in Yorùbá studies, before the I.M.F. placed Nigerian higher education on a crash diet.

The author establishes two main claims. Knowledge and practice of **oríkì** are "a central component of almost every significant ceremonial in the life of the compound and the town" (p. 1). Though they pertain to, and are used by, both women and men, and have "no womens style, no special womanly content" (p. 277), **oríkì** are nonetheless womens main voice in the public sphere dominated by men.

Both observations can be said to follow from the "fluid" boundaries and "dispersed" organization of **oríkì**, as opposed e.g. to hierarchically controlled *ẹsẹ Ifá* divination verse (Abímbọ́lá 1976). But the author does not make this case in a straightforward way. Because virtually any text can be incorporated in **oríkì**, and conversely because **oríkì** are essential in most ritual styles of oral literature (even in *ẹsẹ Ifá* itself, cf. fn. 35, p. 313), she does not choose the path of formal definition. After addressing the definition question (raised in chapters 1–4 and 7), I will summarize the books core chapters (5 and 6), and conclude by criticizing editorial decisions which harm the book and negate its goals.

1. WHAT ARE **ORÍKÌ**?

The author comes closest to defining **oríkì** in parts of chapters 3 and 7:

> [W]hen the performer utters **oríkì**, what she is doing is bestowing on the subject a plethora of elaborations of, and equivalents to, his own names. And the subject is visibly affected. **Oríkì** call a subject's qualities to life, and allow them to expand. (pp. 74f.) The underlying idea seems to be that a person occupies a place created by someone who went before. (p. 252) Thus the present-day individual lives in his ancestors and his ancestors live in him. (p. 254)

These descriptions do not, however, directly explain why **oríkì** predominate in so many ritual-poetic styles. For example, Barber cites ~~Babym~~ Babáyẹmí (1988) for a list of "countless localised chants based on **oríkì** of one kind or another" (fn. 5, p. 306). Her own glossary includes the following entries (pp. 336–40):

(1)		
	alámọ̀	type of *oríkì*-based chant from Èkìtì
	ẹkún ìyàwó	brides *oríkì*-based lament (Standard Yorùbá)
	ìjálá	*oríkì*-based hunters' chant
	ìrèmọ̀jé	type of *oríkì*-based hunters' dirge
	iwì	*oríkì*-based **egúngún** chant
	olele	type of *oríkì*-based chant, found in Ìjẹ̀ṣà
	òrìṣà pípè	*oríkì* chant addressed to **òrìṣà** [divinities]
	rárà	royal bards *oríkì* chant
	rárà ìyàwó	brides lament (local name; see **ẹkún ìyàwó**)
	Ṣàngó pípè	*oríkì* chant addressed to Ṣàngó

Barber agrees with Ọlátúnjí (1984) that **oríkì** display a maximal degree of nominalization (p. 71):

> In some cases **oríkì** go beyond the rules of ordinary grammar, and attach nominalising prefixes to whole sentences without first converting them into noun phrases.

At some length, however, she disputes Ọlátúnjí's view that formal "feature types" such as **ọfọ̀** 'incantation', **òwe** 'proverb' and **oríkì** cross-classify with situationally based "chanting modes" such as **rárà**, **iwì** and **ìjálá** (glossed above). While tacitly assuming Ọlátúnjí's framework at various points (e.g. p. 143 refers to "the *rárà ìyàwó* version of the *oríkì*"), Barber cites displays by Ṣàngówẹ̀mí, "the towns only professional performer" (p. 16) to argue that **oríkì** is the mother of all forms (p. 85):

> [O]ther genres provide ready-made materials which can effortlessly be incorporated into *oríkì* chants... 'Oral tradition' appears less like a hierarchy of classified and bounded genres and more like a vast pool of textual resources into which the performer can dip at will. An *oríkì* chant, then, is *essentially* incorporative; its

centreless and boundariless form makes it endlessly accommodating. Its mode is to subsist by swallowing other texts.

Why take Ṣàngówẹ̀mí's "extreme pole of the fluidity-fixity continuum" (p. 96) as the **oríkì** prototype? Evidently, this choice was made early in the fieldwork process (p. 101):

> During the early days of my research I found my recordings monopolised by Ṣàngówẹ̀mí; she was always there, always twice as vociferous as anyone else. But then a kind advisor, a **babaláwo** [divination priest], told me "There's too much Ṣàngówẹ̀mí, she in your recordings. She is fluent but she is superficial. She doesn't know as much about any compound as the people of the compound itself."

Despite the warning, Barber uses "the disjunctiveness of the discourse of *oríkì*" (p. 248) as a highly abstract emblem of women in a patrilineal, patrilocal society (p. 261):

> *[O]ríkì* are above all a means of crossing boundaries and transcending divisions in the very act of affirming differences.

Yet Ṣàngówẹ̀mí's route to **oríkì** mastery is quite atypical. Her mother was "a fully qualified practising *babaláwo,* the only female one Òkukù remembers" (p. 103). Her career took off after a 1952 audition for the District Officer, when the artist Susanne Wenger selected her to enter a divisional singing competition (p. 104). Most women follow a different, nonprofessional apprenticeship (p. 99):

> In learning to perform *rárà ìyàwó,* young women mastered extensive passages of oríkì *orílẹ̀* and sometimes also of personal *oríkì.* The young wife would attend funerals and family rituals both in her parents house and in her husbands. All of these involved chants, made up chiefly of *oríkì orílẹ̀* and personal *oríkì* of famous ancestors. Eventually, if the need arose, she would be able to lead the performance herself.

Put another way: Barber observed women gradually become skilled chroniclers of male emblems and biography while moving from the natal to the marital sphere. Although the "simple" (p. 87) **oríkì** style of **rárà ìyàwó** describes womens experience, it is less "characteristic" than the more "full-blown" (p. 92) styles which refer to patrilineal origins (**oríkì orílẹ̀**) and male achievements (**oríkì bọ̀rọ̀kínní**).

In the Derridean flux of literary jargon, these observations get turned on their head (p. 248):

> It is the woman that makes differentiation possible and that offers the social actor alternative paths to pursue. It is the disjunctiveness of the discourse of *oríkì* that makes it possible for them [*sc.* women] to assert identities and at the same time to cross boundaries between individuals and groups.

To reconcile the fragmentation of Ṣàngówẹ̀mí's style with prototypically male **oríkì** content, Barber resorts to structuralist wordplay and French and Russian name-dropping (p. 286–88):

> [H]orizontal difference and vertical hierarchy are simultaneously upheld (by being built into the structure of *oríkì* as well as being explicitly stated) and ironically subverted. ... If human differences are legitimised as natural, at the same time the whole of nature is brought within the sphere of the cultural. In this moment, the text seems to contain a hidden acknowledgement that divisions, difference (and by implication, hierarchy) are not naturally given, in-born social characteristics but social products. They could therefore be changed. ... *Oríkì* never criticise the community's orthodoxy, for as Bourdieu suggests, they cannot. But they always hold open, by the oppositions and contradictions embedded in them and deliberately held unresolved and suspended, a tiny 'loop-hole', as Bakhtin (1984b) put it: the possibility of things being otherwise.

A less acrobatic approach to **oríkì**'s literary semantics and pragmatics would be founded on well-documented indigenous concepts. Such an alternative can be briefly sketched. The term **oríkì** is plausibly a contraction of the VP gerund **orí-í-kì** 'head-praising'—from the noun **orí** 'head' and the verb **kì** 'praise' linked by the nominalizing H-tone. **Kì** (L tone) is closely related to **kí** 'greet' (H tone); the minimal difference is that L-tone **kì** entails that the addressee is affected, while H tone **kí** does not. Ten or more similar pairs of verbs in Yorùbá, where the L-tone member entails an extra semantic component of affectedness, can be found in Abrahams 1958 dictionary:

(2)				
	bá	'meet'	**bà**	'hit'
	dé	'cover'	**dè**	'tie up'
	dí	'block'	**dì**	'close up'
	ló̩	'twist'	**lò̩**	'grind'
	má	'be clear/clean'	**mà**	'know'
	pé	'say'	**pè**	'call, summon'
	ṣán	'eat without sauce'	**ṣàn**	'rinse clean'
	té̩	'spread out'	**tè̩**	'press down'
	tí	'hit, contact'	**tì**	'push/lean on'
	wó̩n	'be expensive'	**wò̩n**	'measure'

The head in question is not the physical cranium but the **orí inú**, i.e. the "inner" or spiritual head (Abíọ́dún 1990:257). The following *Ifá* excerpt (from Abímbọ́lá 1968:100, translation modified from Abímbọ́lá 1975:390) portrays the **orí** as "the individual's personal divinity":

(3)		
	Orí, pẹ̀lẹ́,	'Head, hail to you,
	Atèténíran,	'You who will always quickly bless your own,
	Atètégbenikòọ̀ṣa.	'You who blesses a person before any divinity.

Kò sóòṣa tíí dá 'níí gbè lẹ́yìn orí ẹni. 'No divinity blesses someone unbeknownst to their Head.'

Also pertinent are some phrases of **oríkì** for the **Orí** divinity (Abíọ́dún 1990:264; translation modified):

(4)	**Orí bàbá ohun gbogbo,**	'Head, master of all things,
	Orí ni a bá kí.	'Its the Head we should praise,
	Gbogbo ara kò jẹ́ ǹkankan.	'The rest of the body amounts to nothing.'

Some observations in Barber's book reinforce the pragmatic relevance of the 'head-praising' etymology. "To describe the experience [of hearing ones *oríkì*], people say *Orí mí wú*, 'My head swelled' " (p. 75). **Oríkì** are chanted to reinvigorate an **egúngún** mask while "making a sacrifice to its head" (p. 77).

Orí 'head' as a constituent of the word **oríkì** may (*modulo* phonetic labialization) also underlie the general term for 'name'— **orúkọ**. Notice that **orúkọ** can be qualified to denote birth **oríkì** (p. 339):

(5)	**orúkọ àbísọ**	name 'given after the child is born', i.e. reflecting circumstances or feelings of [the] family at [the] time of birth
	orúkọ àmútọ̀runwá	name 'brought from heaven', i.e. relating to birth order or manner of birth

The role of **orí** in the concept of **oríkì** may help to explain the ritual diversity of **oríkì** styles. Particular genres evoke and affect the distinctive **orí** of their addressee by means of stereotyped sound symbolism phonetic patterns which the performers themselves call **àfàdùn** (Ìṣọ̀lá 1975:782). Thus, Babalọlá remarks (1966a:23, fn. 2):

> Each genre has its distinctive style of vocalization or technique of vocal performance. ... [A]n experienced listener to recitals of the various types of Yorùbá vocal art can name almost immediately, from the sound of the recital, the particular style of vocalization being employed ...

For example, **Ṣàngó pípè** (in the **Ọ̀yọ́-Ẹdẹ** style) is sung with creaky larynx, glottalized consonants and halting tempo. **Ìjálá** (associated with **Ògún**) exhibits "profound" shifts among three tempi (Yáì 1973, cited by Oyèláràn 1975:733). **Iwì** is delivered either "in a high pitched voice" or in "a sepulchral or croaky voice ... the real voice of the *egúngún* [ancestral masks]" (Ọlájubù 1975:914f). Like the rhythms of ritual dance and the gestures of spirit possession, each **oríkì** style mimics the divinity's **orí**.

Barbers post-structuralist rhetoric mirrors Ṣàngọ́wẹ̀mí's deconstructive delivery. Neither of these virtuosic performances, however, directly illuminates the main **oríkì** traditions in Òkukù town, traditions which the author documents thoroughly and interprets with much skill. To these I now turn.

2. "ORÍKÌ OF ORIGIN"

Oríkì orílẹ̀ "affirm the distinctive attributes of the place and its people" (p. 135) from which and from whom members of a residential compound trace their earliest beginnings. Such attributes include "characteristic natural features and resources" (p. 138), as well as specific occupations, religious observances, dietary restrictions and facial markings.

What determines the transmission of **oríkì orílẹ̀** is not patrilineal descent—as in the segmentary model of Lloyd (1955)—but the looser, "emblematic" (p. 145) notion of legitimate inheritance. **Ọmọ bíbí inú** the 'freeborn' inheritor is explicitly contrasted to **ìwọ̀fà** the pawn and **ẹrú** the slave. Thus (p. 145):

> *Oríkì orílẹ̀* do include allusions to illustrious men and women among the ancestors of the group, but do not trace genealogies, nor do they revolve around the notion of a lineage founder.

Barber traces the focus on ancient residence—as opposed to genealogy—to "inter-urban rivalry and warfare ... [and] alliances" (p. 146) which triggered mass migrations throughout the 16th–19th centuries (cf. Johnson 1921). Despite the fact that "[t]hey are more stable than other *oríkì*" (p. 137), **oríkì orílẹ̀** contain references to the town of arrival (p. 152f).

In Òkukù today, "the main administrative unit" (p. 155) for taxation, landholding and accession to chieftaincy titles is the domestic compound: **ilé**. Yet compound boundaries are ambiguous (p. 158f):

> When I first arrived in Òkukù I was told authoritatively that there were seventeen compounds in the town. ... By the time I left Òkukù three years later I had arrived at a list of twenty-nine *ilé* which seemed to be generally accepted, for most purposes, as independent compounds, and a further twenty-one units which though attached to 'host' compounds nevertheless had varying degrees of autonomy.

Preservation of distinct **oríkì orílẹ̀** guards the separate identity of a dependent compound, but also disqualifies its members from lineage-based titles. In a recent case (p. 165), "newcomers ... abandoned" their ancient **oríkì orílẹ̀** in order to permit a successful migrants accession to *de jure*

leadership of the host compound. Texts reveal other such cases in "remote history" (p. 166, cf. Babalọlá 1966b).

Another exception to the agnatic model of **ilé** membership is posed by matrilocal **oríkì orílẹ̀**, which commemorate "far-reaching and long-maintained relationships 'on the mothers side' " (p. 170). One recent example is an annual meeting of individuals—spanning two towns, three generations and four patrilineages—who are the descendants of two sisters (p. 170f). A reason for the groups cohesiveness may be the fact that the two sisters were themselves the daughters of a famous 19th-century herbalist.

Chapter 5 concludes with a cogent analysis of some "ways ready-made lexical sets are drawn from the current literary tradition and used to build the structures typical of **oríkì orílẹ̀**" around an "embalmed wealth" of motifs which "appears to be imperishable" (p. 182). Such stability survives even the de-centered performance "flux" described in previous chapters.

3. "ORÍKÌ OF BIG MEN"

Some twenty senior, ranked political titles in Òkukù are "owned" by specific compounds, from which potential aspirants are drawn. Traditions of **ìtàn** narrative history reveal that (p. 193):

> much of the political struggle that went on in Òkukù throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries revolved precisely around efforts by chiefs and the *ọba* to rewrite the order [of title ranking] or resist such rewriting.

Oríkì bọ̀rọ̀kìnní (p. 184) "were the main instrument through which reputation was publicly acknowledged and enhanced" in pursuit of these titles. Here too, gender divides (p. 186): while the accumulation of prestige was "conducted largely by men", the "agents ... of the process of aggrandisement" were—and "by and large" are—women.

Two prototypical "big men" of early 19th-century Òkukù were Wínyọmí Enípèèdé, a renowned hunter and herbalist, and Oba Adéwálé Adéọba (who reigned c. 1830–61). The dominant images in these men's **oríkì** trace "a circling metaphorical path" around "a total state of sufficiency and command over their social environment, a state called **ọlá**" (p. 202f)

Starting around the 1850s, with warfare and slave-raiding on the rise, the central idiom of the texts became "personal aggression and immunity from attack" (p. 204). **Oríkì** of Ẹgbẹ́ Balógun, the town militia, portray them "not as communal champions, as Wínyọmí was, but as magnificent, frightening forces" (p. 205), represented as a horse in its aspect of "an engine of destruction, flattening the grass and churning up the dust under

its mighty hooves" (p. 212). This heroic era ended in 1878 when the Ìbàdàn-Ìlọrin war drove the Òkukù population to take refuge in Ìkìkrun.

The reconstruction of Òkukù, beginning in 1893, coincided with the colonial cash economy and British intervention in decision-making. The door was thrown wide open to "self-made men who bypassed the chiefly hierarchy and challenged the *ọba*'s authority" (p. 222f). "*Ọ̀tẹ̀* (intrigue or plotting) was the word used most often to describe political processes" (p. 229).

In the 1920's and '30's, new opportunities in the cash cultivation of kola and palm nuts, and in the mass importation of consumer goods, were seized upon by "big women" such as Àyántáyọ̀, Ọmọlọlá and Ìyá Rẹkẹ. Yet, these women "had no *oríkì*" (p. 236). "[T]he male cycle of aggrandisement" required "a great household of wives and children" (p. 235), and a woman "who threatens to alienate her fertility to her own project of self-aggrandisement" (p. 236) was regarded as a witch.

A nationalist class of literate "big men" came to the fore in the 1940's and '50's. With them, **oríkì** parameters changed from wealth and medicine to patronage and "progressive" views (p. 239f). "The disappearance of the great household meant that one of the primary fields of reference in *oríkì* was lost" (p. 243). This change has made "the creation of new personal *oríkì* to commemorate the activities of new personalities in Òkukù ... rather rare" (p. 245). Barber relates the decline of **oríkì** composition to a gap between the thematic content of oral traditions and new "zones of social experience" such as "the ruthless struggle for the new cocoa and oil wealth, and the alienation attendant on massive urban expansion" (p. 246). Now, "those who make 'progress' are hailed in the language of nostalgia" (p. 247).

4. NOT YET ỌRTHOGRAPHY

Unfortunately, this work of solid and committed scholarship is marred by editorial conservatism. A "Note on Orthography" (p. x) states that "isolated Yoruba words are not tonemarked, because the frequency of their occurrence would cause problems for the typesetters." To a linguist, this pseudo-technical complaint begs several questions. What problems? Subdots are successfully placed throughout the book, even on "isolated" words, wherever orthographically required. The two basic tone marks of Yorùbá are not exotic: they are identical to the acute and grave accents of French. What typesetters? "Frequency" of accent placement does not inconvenience silicon chips or cathode rays. If diacritics are too expensive, why indulge the nonorthographic haček some 20 times on the transliterated Russian name *Vološinov* (where *sh* would have sufficed)? Hundreds of

lines of poetry, and dozens of words in running text, are accurately and unobtrusively tonemarked in this book. Why stop at 80%? Tonemarks also appear thoughout the index (except, for some reason, on personal names and the word Yorùbá itself) and in the glossary. Why not add these *already extant* tonemarks to the running text by means of a computerized search-and-replace function?

If university presses in Ilé-Ifẹ̀ and Ìbàdàn can achieve full tonemarking, no less should be expected from a European counterpart which boasts "[t]heoretically informed ethnographies which are sensitive to local cultural forms" as a complement to "the premier journal in the field of African Studies" (p. ii). To date, the International African Library of the London-based International African Institute includes eight titles. When will this series publish a book by an African scholar, or devise a consistent policy for African languages? The following **oríkì** applies (p. 102f):

> **Ọmọ Awóyẹmí, ta ni í mọ ilé ẹni ju ẹni í lọ?**
> 'Child of Awóyẹmi, who knows a persons house more than the person herself?'

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