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À Yà Gbó, À Yà Tó: New Perspectives on Edan Ògbóni

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À YÀ GBÓ, À YÀ TÓ

New Perspectives on *Edan* Ògbóni

BABATUNDE LAWAL

Edan Ògbóni is a pair of male and female brass figures with iron stems, usually joined at the top by an iron chain (Figs. 1–3, 13). It is an emblem of membership in the Ògbóni society, which wielded considerable political, judicial, and religious

Much of the society's authority derives from its role as the vital link between the community and the Earth that sustains it. Membership, which brings power and prestige, is restricted to a few individuals who have attained distinction in their professions and have proven to be people of

for the figures and iron (*irin*) for the stem of *edan*. Brass is distinctive for its luster and permanence. Moreover, it is sacred to and attracts the blessings of Òsun, the river goddess associated with health, wealth, beauty, and fertility. Iron, on the other hand, is sacred to Ògún, the deity of valor,

CALL:

Ògbóni

The old ones

Erelú

Titled female elders

Eriwo yà!

The Lord of secrets, descend!

RESPONSE:

Ògbóràn

Increase with age

Àbíyè

May children be born to live

À yà gbó, À yà tó!

For longevity and prosperity!

(Chant of the Ògbóni society)¹

powers among the Yoruba in precolonial times and still does, to some extent, today. In the past the society (known as Òsùgbó among the Ègbá and Ìjèbú Yoruba) functioned as a town council, a civic court, and an electoral college for selecting a new king and dethroning a bad or unpopular one. It imposed curfews in times of crisis and also executed serious offenders (Biobaku 1952:38).²

Opposite page: 1. *Edan* Ògbóni. Yoruba, Nigeria. Bronze, 27.9cm (11"). The University of Iowa Museum of Art, Fig. 2. COURTESY OF ERIC ROBERTSON

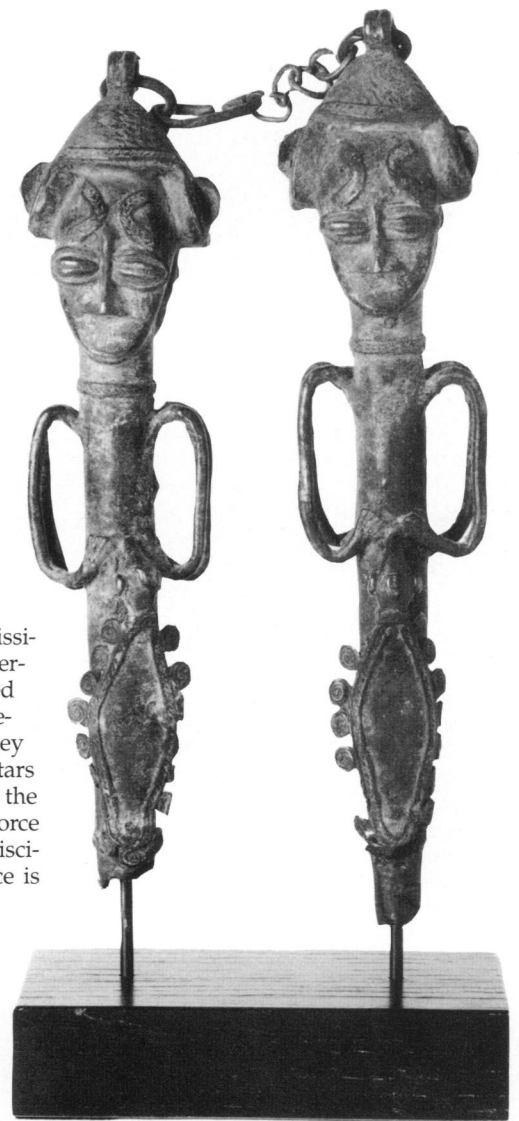
An emblem of Ògbóni, a society that venerates the Earth (Ìlè), these paired staffs signify the dignity and bearing of wisdom and old age as well as the interdependence of male and female.

Right: 2. Janus *edan* pair. Brass; left 19.7cm (7 3/4"), right 21.6cm (8.5"). Collection of Eric Robertson, New York.

The bird motif on the abdomen of each figure alludes to *àse* (divine authority) and *agbára awon iyami* ("the power of the mothers"), the mysterious power associated with femaleness by which certain specially endowed women called *ájé* change into birds and fly at night.

high integrity and mature judgment. In the course of participating in various deliberations, a member gains considerable insights into human nature as well as local politics, traditional lore, religion, and philosophy. Above all, membership provides access to certain occult knowledge and powers for coping with the vicissitudes of life. Bigger, free-standing versions of the *edan* pair (Fig. 4) are called Onílè (Owner of the house) and, sometimes, Onílè (Owner of the land). They represent the earth deity on special altars inside the Ògbóni lodge, witnessing the secret proceedings of the society to enforce confidentiality, fair play, and self-discipline. Regardless of size, an altarpiece is considered more powerful than *edan* because of the sacred substances used in consecrating it.

In essence, the Ògbóni venerates the Earth (Ìlè) to ensure human survival, peace, happiness, and social stability in the community. The desire for longevity and well-being is evident in the choice of brass (*ide*)





creative energy, industry, hunting, and warfare. Although it rusts easily if abandoned or buried in the ground, iron is quite durable when treated, sheathed, or kept in frequent use. One of the strongest metals, it is fabricated into different hardware for hammering, cutting, securing, bracing, and other purposes. The iron stem reinforces the brass figures of *edan*, indicating the strength, vigor, and "cutting edge" one needs not only to succeed in life but also to live to ripe old age. This symbolism echoes in the Ògbóni catchword *Ogbódirin!* ("Age, and still be strong like iron!"), a nickname for Obàlùfón, one of the ancient kings of Ilé-Ife credited with introducing the art of brasscasting to the city and reputed to have lived for more than a century. The enduring and dynamic qualities of brass and iron thus buttress the talismanic functions of *edan*, inspiring the following incantation:

Edan never dies, *edan* never
decomposes
The vulture never dies young³...
Never shall we hear that
Olódùmarè is dead
Old age abides in *edan*
May I grow old, and be blessed
For a long time will the feet walk
on the land.

(Collected at Ìtokò,
Abèdókúta, 1988; my translation⁴)

The Ògbóni concern with longevity is also evident in its name. Although it has several meanings⁵ and commonly refers to a gentleman (*ògbéni*), the term Ògbóni implies a mature, elderly person: *ogbó* = aged; *eni* = person. Even *Osùgbó*, its synonym among the Ègbá and Ijèbú, has the same connotation: *òsù* = tufts of hair on the head; *gbó* = old/gray. The crucial role played by the feminine principle in Ògbóni rituals is apparent in the word *Àbíyè*, the cognomen for the titled female members of the society. It is more or less a prayer—"May the young ones live to old age" to take over from their predecessors—an idea also implied in *Ògbóràn*, the nickname for male Ògbóni members, which means "Increase with age." The high rate of infant mortality among the Yoruba in the past is reflected in *Àbíkú* ("born to die")—a belief in the existence of spirit children who die continually only to return to the same mother (Molade 1973:62–64; Houlberg 1973:20–27, 91–92). The cognomen *Àbíyè* (literally, "born to live") identifies the female members of the Ògbóni (*Erelú*) not only as good midwives but also as possessors of the spiritual power to minimize infant mortality, a power that links them directly with the

earth deity (Ilè), who is often addressed as Ìyá (mother). All Ògbóni members regard themselves as Omo Ìyá, "children of the same mother" (Daramola & Jeje 1967:132–33; Ojo 1973:51), and as privileged ones, for that matter, because of their closeness to Ilè.

The style of the *edan* leaves no doubt about the Ògbóni's concern with the continuity of human life and institutions. Unlike the Yoruba woodcarving style, which tends to project humanity in its prime (Thompson 1973:56–57), that of *edan* stresses the dignified bearing of old age, recalling the favorite slogan of the Ògbóni: *À yà gbó, À yà tó* ("For longevity and prosperity").⁶ The imagery is evocative of the ancient beginnings of humankind while projecting at the same time the aspiration of the present generation to live far into the future, beyond the physical present into *èhin-Ìwà*, the afterlife. The human figure is often rendered in the nude, standing, seated, or kneeling, with genitalia exposed

(Figs. 1, 3) to emphasize their importance in perpetuating life. There is a hint of the eternal in the enlarged head, stylized beard (regardless of gender), frontal pose, and schematized body.

Edan Ògbóni: The Yoruba Equivalent of Adam and Eve?

Since many Yoruba regard the Earth as female, there is controversy about whom the male figure represents. In view of an Ògbóni myth which tells of a seniority dispute between "Heaven" and "Earth," Denis Williams equates the male figure with the former and the female with the latter; to him, the *edan* pair signifies the "union of heaven and earth on which all human existence is based..." (1964:142; see also Roache-Selk 1978:17–18; Gosline 1991:31–45). This interpretation ignores the fact that the Yoruba identify "Heaven" with the Supreme Being (Olódùmarè/Olórún), who is rarely represented in



3. *Edan* pair. Brass; left 30.5cm (12"), right 29.8cm (11.75"). Collection of Eric Robertson, New York.

The display of genitalia emphasizes their importance in the perpetuation of life. For the significance of the spiral motif on the forehead, see Figure 11.

PHOTO: COURTESY OF ERIC ROBERTSON

sculpture. Peter Morton-Williams, on the other hand, concurs with the explanation given by his informants that the *edan* pair represents the male-female membership of the society (Morton-Williams 1960:369). This explanation, though supported by the use of *edan* as a staff of office, does not account for the large male and female altar figures in the Ògbóni lodge, both of which are treated as one unit and addressed as “Ìyá.”

In two widely quoted publications, Henry Drewal traces the inconsistencies in the interpretation of the *edan* pair to what he feels is a misconception by scholars that the Yoruba earth deity is female (1989a:151–74; 1989b:117–45). On the basis of data recently collected from parts of Ìjèbùland, he argues that the Ògbóni/Òsùgbó society in Yorubaland “first developed” (1989a:151) among the Ìjèbù “before being adopted and adapted by other Yoruba peoples” (p. 167). To support this hypothesis, he draws attention to the fact that “the Ògbóni lodge at Ifè is located in the Ìrémó ward where presumably a group of Ìjèbù people from Rémo district first settled” (p. 154). Drewal contends that the Ìjèbù do not recognize the Earth as a goddess, but rather view it as the abode of earth spirits called *imolè* or *irúnmolè* (p. 153). In his words,

Nowhere in the oral literature, Ifa divinatory verse, or lore about the *orisa* in Yorubaland is there a corpus of praises, prayers, stories, myths, rituals, or images devoted to an “Earth Goddess.” The concept of an earth divinity has probably never been a central part of Yoruba belief.

(Drewal 1989b:136)

According to Drewal, the male-female imagery in *edan* Ògbóni “refers specifically to the couple as the original founders of the community, the male and female Òsùgbó society members” (1989a:161). Although other scholars have identified the altar figures (Figs. 4–6) as Onílè (“Owner of the Earth”),⁷ he rejects the use of this name, arguing that the correct name is Onílè (“Owners of the house”) (Drewal 1989a:161). He also contends that the prominence of the left hand in Ògbóni/Òsùgbó symbolism has nothing to do with the female (p. 166), as suggested by Robert Farris Thompson (1971: chap. 6, 1–2) and other scholars. In view of the “new” data from Drewal questioning the deity status and gender of the Earth, some scholars have started modifying their conception of *edan* Ògbóni, now regarding it as an image of the “founding ancestors” or the Yoruba equivalent of Adam and Eve (Witte 1988:9–11, citing pers. com. with Drewal; Cole 1989:55–58; see also Gosline 1992:34–35). Several art museums and galleries have changed their display labels for *edan* to reflect the new interpretation.

4. Male and female altar figures (Onílè) representing the Earth. Brass, 27.9cm (11”). Museum of the Institute of African Studies, University of Ibadàn.

The beard, like the pipe, symbolizes experience, wisdom, and ripe old age. On the female figure, the beard also alludes to occult powers and recalls the image of the earth goddess as a manlike woman. The spoon she holds alludes to renewal and replenishment. The male figure holds a stylized *edan*.

A critical review of the evidence shows that there is nothing significantly wrong with the previous identification of the Yoruba earth deity as female, although the association of the male *edan* with Heaven is questionable. The current confusion regarding nomenclature and the sex of the deity can be blamed on the conflicting data and testimonies given by various informants whose perception of Ògbóni has been changing over the years.

To begin with, the fact that the Ògbóni/Òsùgbó society is highly developed and very powerful among the Ìjèbù does not necessarily mean that they originated it. The consensus in Yorubaland is that the society was founded in Ilé-Ifè, where it is also known by the name Molè (Idowu 1962:23–24; Fadipe 1970:243; Agiri 1972:52; Adeoye 1989:337; Adepegba 1991:34). A terracotta vessel in the Museum of Antiquities, Ilé-Ifè (ill. in Adepegba 1991: pl. 31), which presumably belongs to the same period as the Ifè bronzes (twelfth to fifteenth centuries A.D.) displays what may very well be one of the earliest renderings of the *edan* motif in Yoruba art (Adepegba 1985:35, quoting Williams 1964:152). The Ògbóni society attained its highest form of development among the Ègbá and Ìjèbù apparently because, as Fadipe has noted (1970:243–47), political groupings in these areas were small and could easily be controlled by an association of elders. But in bigger towns (as in central and northern Yorubaland) ruled by powerful kings, the society was not as strong; even in Ìjèbù-Òde it was weaker than in the smaller towns that surrounded it (Fadipe 1970:243–47). Admittedly, most of the Ìjèbù in present-day Ilé-Ifè live in or very close to the Ìrémó ward—an area popularly regarded as the original homeland of the people of Ìjèbù-Rémó before they dispersed southward. The location of the Ògbóni lodge (Ilé



PHOTO: BABATUNDE LAWAL

Molè) at Ìrémó does not, however, support the theory of an Ìjèbù origin for the Ògbóni. The Ìrémó lodge is not under the control of the Ìjèbù, and furthermore it belongs to a modernized version of the Ògbóni, the Reformed Ògbóni Fraternity (R.O.F.). The inscription on the red iron gates reads: “Reformed Ogboni Fraternity. West ‘F’ Divisional Headquarters. Incorporated in Nigeria.”

The Aboriginal versus Reformed Ògbóni

Two factors seem to have caused the current confusion about Ògbóni symbolism. The first is traceable to the formation in 1914 of the Reformed Ògbóni Fraternity by an Anglican priest, Reverend Thomas Adésinà Jacobson Ògúnbíyì, who revised the rituals and symbolism of the traditional Ògbóni (now known as the Aboriginal Ògbóni Fraternity, or A.O.F.) to make them acceptable to Christians, Moslems, and non-Yoruba.⁸ The introduction of European masonic lodges into Nigeria by some British citizens had led Rev. Ògúnbíyì to see similarities between foreign lodges and the traditional Ògbóni. It was in the process of modernizing the traditional Ògbóni that many of the female associations were either downplayed or reformulated. For example, the emphasis on the male-female pair in *edan* Ògbóni was reinterpreted by the R.O.F. to tally with the story of Adam and Eve as the pri-



PHOTO: ANDRE HELD

mordial couple and the founders of the human community; the fact that the Ògbóni regard themselves as Omo Ìyá ("children of the same mother") "is traced back to the common motherhood of mankind in Eve" (Parrinder 1953:180). Also, the persistence of the female principle in the society's symbolism led the R.O.F. to declare "Christianity...as the 'mother' of Ogboni" (Ayandele 1967:274).

Because the Reformed Ògbóni Fraternity at its inception had many educated and influential Yoruba and non-Yoruba in its fold, it soon overshadowed its traditional counterpart, forcing the A.O.F. to modify some of its rituals and symbolism. The "new" data published by Henry Drewal tend to suggest that the Ìjèbú do not recognize the Earth as a deity at all, not to mention a goddess. This was not the case in 1967, when Osùgbó elders in many parts of the Ìjèbú and Rémo districts told me that the Earth was a powerful goddess. In 1984 Sheldon Gosline documented a similar testimony at Ìjèbú-Òde that "ile is female," although some of his informants insisted that "it is neither male nor female, but is collectively ancestral" (1989:34-35). There is thus an urgent need to separate older from more recent layers of meanings in Ògbóni rituals and symbols.

The Odùduwà Question

The second factor that seems to have contributed to the current confusion over the sex of the Earth is the age-old controversy surrounding the mythical character called Odùduwà. While some legends identify him as the deity who created habitable land out of the primordial sea at Ilé-Ifè, others portray him as the leader of an immigrant group from the "northeast" which conquered the early inhabitants of Ilé-Ifè and established a new dynasty there (Johnson 1921:3-25; Smith 1988:9-11; Beier n.d.:25-32). Odùduwà (also called Oòduà) is venerated as a god in Ilé-Ifè and its environs, but as a goddess in other areas of Yorubaland (Lucas 1948:93-95; Idowu 1962:26-27; Parrinder n.d.:33). Bóláji Ìdòwú has suggested that the male conception of Odùduwà may very well be the consequence of a political episode, if not a dynastic change, in ancient Ilé-Ifè. According to him, it is possible that the leader of an invading party that conquered the aboriginal population of Ilé-Ifè thought it politically expedient to identify himself with a preexisting earth goddess, thereby grafting a male aspect onto her. To buttress his argument, Ìdòwú cites the fact that although Odùduwà is male, in Ilé-Ifè his devotees sometimes address him as

5. Female altar figure (Onilé). Brass, 74.9cm (29.5"). National Museum, Lagos.

The horned coiffure attests to the manlike attributes of the earth goddess; in non-Ògbóni contexts, it usually identifies women thought to have masculine characteristics.

Iye 'malè, the "mother of the divinities." He suggests that those who now worship Odùduwà as an earth goddess might have migrated from Ilé-Ifè before the syncretism occurred, and that the Ògbóni society came into being in Ilé-Ifè probably as a result of the need "to protect the indigenous institutions of the land from annihilation under the influence of the new regime..." (Idowu 1962:24, 26–27; see also Blier 1985:389–90).

Be that as it may, the femaleness of the Earth is clear from the popular Yoruba invocation *Ilè, Ògéré, af'okó yeri...*; *Ìyá mi, arànbalè kàràrà* ("Earth, Ògéré, who combs her hair with a hoe; My mother, the Extensive One") (see also Verger 1966:35; Adeoye 1989:357; Adepegba 1985:35; Adewale 1988:6–7). Pottery is sacred to her, and any treasure kept in a pot is believed to be preserved in her womb (Ibigbami 1978:129). The same Ilè is the focus of the Ògbóni.

The Earth as a Goddess

Fortunately there is a body of sacred literature, *Odù Ifá*, used in divination that is believed to contain all the secrets of the Yoruba universe, including those of the Ògbóni. Some of these verses have something to say about Ilè as it relates to the Ogboni society.

The divination verse *Odù Òyèkú Logbè* identifies the Earth (Ilè, also called Etígbiṛe and Àbèní Àdẹ̀), as the mother of all the deities (*irúnmolè* or *òrisà*) in the Yoruba pantheon. Without her consent, nothing can be successful in the physical world (Babayemi & Adekola 1988:12). Another verse, *Odù Èjìogbè*, identifies her as Molè (earth spirit), who must be pacified by all the deities (*irúnmolè*) so that goodness may multiply on earth (Abimbola 1968:21–22).⁹ In yet another section of *Odù Èjìogbè*, she is described as the one destined to survive all the elements in the physical world (Adeoye 1989:356–58). With regard to the Ògbóni, one verse (*Odù Idingbere*) identifies the Earth (Ilè) as the mother of Erelú, who originated the rituals of Ògbóni (Babayemi & Adekola 1988:50–51). The references to the Earth as a goddess are so numerous in Ifá divination literature that it would be superfluous to pursue the matter further.

A praise-poem (*oriki*) to Ilè runs thus:

Earth, Ògéré, who combs her hair
with a hoe
Owner of a bagful of evil
She has a stomach big enough to
swallow human beings...
"The big pot that rolls continuously
without breaking"
Is the father of Lánní
Pòrúkú Poóyè
Is the father of Àbèní
Olódù of Ifè is the progenitor of
the *àjé* (witches)¹⁰
Earth gave birth to all of them



PHOTO: BABATUNDE LAWAL

6. Altar figure (Onilé) of undefined gender. Brass, 24.5cm (9.6"). Museum of the Institute of African Studies, University of Ibadán.

As with the androgynous Ògbóni figures (Fig. 9), this Onilé illustrates how the earth goddess transcends the manifestations of gender in the physical world.

Edan who, on behalf of Ilè, passes judgment in the Ògbóni lodge. Small wonder that the brass figures bear her name. Edan's mediatory role between Ògbóni and Ilè may explain why Ilè is rarely personified in sculpture but is frequently symbolized by sacred substances concealed in the ground beneath an altar displaying the large male and female brass figures (Onilé or Onílẹ̀). It is probably because of this concealment that the Ògbóni lodge is known as *Ilédi*, that is, "the house of secrets" (*Ilè odi*) or "the house of concealment" (*Ilè tí a dí nkan sí*) (see also Biobaku 1949:257).

According to the verse *Odù Ìwòrì-Òwórin*, it was the divination deity Òrúnmílà who escorted Edan from heaven to Ilé-Ifè to help put the city in order after it had fallen into a state of anarchy. All the inhabitants of Ilé-Ifè were then made to appear before Edan and swear to be of good behavior (Adeoye 1989:338–39). She is a strong-willed, nonsense woman:

Lánní
Àdẹ̀ [another name for Ilè] is as
succulent and erect as the
Òdúndún plant
The Mother of the World is a spirit.
The nursing mother who carries
her child in an unconventional
manner.
It is in an unconventional manner
that the Mother of the World
always carries her child.
The Mother of the World is
always present at Aké
The Mother of the World is
always present at Òkò
She is never absent from the
house of Òràngún
Òràngún, offspring of Ògbóyè
[the aged-one].
Do not go back on a promise
Please, do not disappoint
All the promises of the Ògbóni
Do not fail.
Daughter of the "One who
stretches across the world"
[Earth].

(Adeoye 1989:344–45;
my translation¹³)

This praise chant reflects the ambivalence with which the Yoruba regard Ilè. She is both the giver and taker of life, swallowing back into her womb (at interment) some of her own children. She is the grand-matron of witches. Her dual identity as the father and mother of Lánní hints at her androgynous nature and may partly account for the pairing of male and female figures in *edan* Ògbóni. Lánní is Edan, the "landlady" of the Ògbóni lodge. The reference to the "eyes that never go blind" recalls the bulging ("all-seeing") eyes of *edan* Ogboni. It is

This verse depicts Edan as the Mother of the World—which explains the recurrence in the Ògbóni art corpus of the motif of a materfamilias surrounded by small and grown-up children (Figs. 7, 8) (Beier 1963: pls. 2, 3) or of a mother flanked by two (frequently male and female) figures. By being ever-present at Aké, Òkò, and Ìlá-Òràngún, she seems to



PHOTO: COURTESY OF ERIC ROBERTSON

7. Female *edan* figure holding a ritual bowl. Brass, 25.4cm (10"). Collection of Eric Robertson, New York.

The figure is flanked by children, alluding to the importance of threeness in *Ogbóni* symbolism and the concept of *Omo iyá* ("children of the same mother").

with *Ilè* as to make it extremely difficult to separate the two.

The fact that many Yoruba do not regard the Earth (*Edan* or *Ilè*) as an *òrisà* does not imply that it is a "thing" or an ordinary abode for other spiritual beings, as Henry Drewal implies. It simply means that the goddess is much more powerful than the deified ancestors or culture-heroes commonly subsumed under the rubric *òrisà* (see also Morton-Williams 1960:245). As the guardian spirit of the physical world, she is frequently addressed as *Molè* or *Imalè*, a term also implicated in *irúnmolè*, a synonym for the *òrisà*. Although informants often interpret *irúnmolè* to mean "four hundred divinities" (see also Idowu 1962:67; Adepegba 1985:34),¹⁶ there is no consensus on the exact meaning of *molè* or *imalè*. According to Bólájí Ìdòwú (1962:61), it refers not to the ordinary divinities but rather to what he calls *Èmò-tí-mbe-n'ìlè*, the "supernormal beings of the earth." On the other hand, Aíná Adéwálé-Àbáyòmí gives the etymology of the term as *Eni òrun tó wá mo ilé ayé*, or "Heavenly beings on earth." She argues that it refers to primordial beings such as *Èsù* (divine messenger), *Ògún* (iron deity), and *Orúnmilà* (divination deity), who were commissioned directly by the Supreme Being, whereas the *òrisà* are deified ancestors or "specially endowed human beings" (1987:39–40). Regarding *molè* and *òrisà* as synonymous, Onàdéle Epegà (n.d.:23) interprets *molè* or *imalè* as "the knowledge of the secrets of this world" (*imò* = knowledge; *Ilè* = Earth). In Ládògún Adeoyè's view (1989:341), *molè* derives from the words *omo* (child) and *Ilè* (Earth) in reference to *Edan* as the daughter of *Ilè*. Whatever the ultimate connotations of *irúnmolè* and *molè*, the recurrence of the syllable *lè* (of the Earth) in their etymologies underscores the importance of *Ilè* in the physical world. As Afolábí Òjò has aptly observed:

The earth is everywhere regarded as the support of the living and the dead, as well as that of the existing order of things... In other circumstances the earth-god is always called to support or bear witness to statements or contracts. Over and above all, it gives power to the unique Yoruba bond of secrecy and sacred oaths.

(Ojo 1966:168)

As noted earlier, *Edan* witnesses all oaths, secrets, and agreements on behalf of *Ilè* because she is as vigilant as ever—

have more direct dealings with human beings than does *Ilè*. She is a guardian of human morality, and the *Ogbóni* act on her behalf. The reference to *Edan* as the nursing mother who carries her child "in an unconventional manner" alludes to her unpredictable nature. Like *Ilè*, she is an *àjé* (witch). Strapping a baby to the bosom rather than to the back, as most Yoruba women do,¹⁴ not only allows the child to suckle at will, but also enables

Edan to monitor it very closely. Paradoxically, the same position that signals maternal generosity and attentiveness exposes the child to the risks of choking as well as to the moods of a capricious and no-nonsense mother like *Edan*, who will visit her full wrath on any offender, including her own offspring.¹⁵ Some Yoruba perceive *Edan* as a goddess in her own right (Roache 1977:51; Simpson 1980:59–60), identifying her so closely

her “eyes never go blind” in the Ògbóni lodge. In some lodges, the paired brass figures representing her lie in a pot (see Drewal 1989a: fig. 3), the symbolic womb of Ilè otherwise known as *Òdù gbirigbiri máfò ó* (“The big pot that rolls continuously without breaking”). The reference to the paired figures as *Ìyá*, “mother” (Daramola & Jeje 1967:132–33; Ojo 1973:51), clearly shows that they are two sides of the same coin rather than husband and wife, or what Henry Drewal calls “the couple as the founders of the community” (1989a:161). His admission that members of the Ògbóni always use the term *edan* or *Onílé* in the singular and view the pair “as one object” (Drewal, Pemberton, & Abiodun 1989:39) contradicts the Adam and Eve (or male-female founders) theory. The fact that the male and female figures of *edan* are also called *Olóló*, a feminine name (see also Morton-Williams 1960:369), affirms not only their oneness but also the femaleness of Ilè.

The frequent representation of androgynous or Janus figures in Ògbóni art hints at the same phenomenon (Fig. 9). Some lodges have only one female altar figure with two heads—male and female. The art museum at Obáfémi Awólówò University in Ilé-Ife has a female brass figure with a similar feature, although its original context is uncertain. The prevalence of androgynous and sometimes genderless figures (Fig. 6) underscores the fact that the sexuality of the earth goddess transcends the manifestations of gender in the physical world. As the androgynous parent of Edan, the “Mother of All,” and the sustainer of life in the physical world, she is a paradigm of procreativity, longevity, and prosperity.

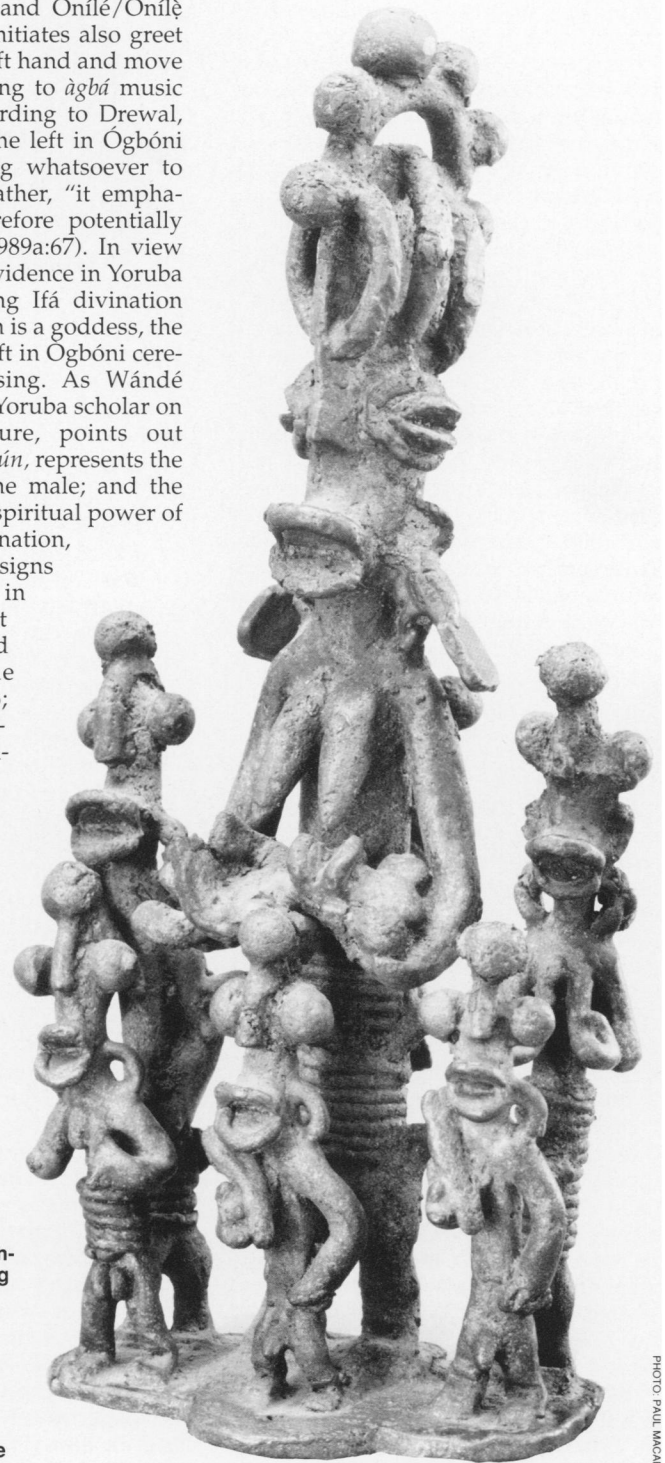
By calling the ancestral dead *ará òrun* (celestial beings), the Yoruba imply that the afterlife (*èhin iwà*) is in heaven. Yet, access to *èhin iwà* is subterranean, hence the grave (*ojú oróri*) links the living with the dead. In fact, a good majority of deified culture heroes (*òrisà*) allegedly did not die like ordinary mortals. They either turned into a stone, or their disembodied spirits simply disappeared into the womb of Ilè, the Great Mother who “recycles” life, at both the material and spiritual levels. Little wonder, in the divination verse *Odù Èjìogbè* cited earlier, all the divinities assembled to placate her. According to one informant, since Edan is an extremely influential intermediary between humanity and Ilè, her symbol may be used to empower the altars of any *òrisà*. As Òsun (river goddess), Ògún (iron deity), and Obàlùfòn (patron deity of brasscasters and weavers) are associated with fertility, strength, and longevity respectively—three important goals of the Ògbóni—it is not surprising that brass figures resembling *edan* occur frequently on the altars of these *òrisà*. Moreover, as mentioned earlier, brass

and iron—the materials for fabricating *edan*—are sacred to Òsun and Ògún respectively, and Obàlùfòn is the patron deity of brasscasters (*asúde*).¹⁷

Òsì: The Significance of the Left Side

That the left side (*òsì*) has a special meaning in Ògbóni rituals is unmistakable, indicated by the customary gesture of initiates, who place the left fist over the right one (with thumb concealed to signify secrecy and covenant) when paying homage to the Earth (Fig. 10). This gesture occurs on many *edan* and *Onílé/Onílè* figures (Figs. 1, 4–6). Initiates also greet one another with the left hand and move to the left while dancing to *àgbá* music inside the lodge. According to Drewal, the predominance of the left in Ògbóni symbolism has nothing whatsoever to do with the female; rather, “it emphasizes sacred, and therefore potentially dangerous matters” (1989a:67). In view of the overwhelming evidence in Yoruba oral tradition, including Ifá divination literature, that the Earth is a goddess, the predominance of the left in Ògbóni ceremonies is not surprising. As Wándé Abimbólá, the leading Yoruba scholar on Ifá divination literature, points out (1991), the right side, *òtún*, represents the physical strength of the male; and the left, *òsì*, the concealed, spiritual power of the female. In Ifá divination, the symbols of the *Odù* signs are always arranged in pairs: those on the right signify the male, and those on the left, the female (Epega n.d.:16; Bascom 1969:40). Moreover, the Yoruba associate the big toe of the right foot with the ancestral spirit of the male, and the left one with the female’s (Idowu 1962:173; Abimbola 1992), both interacting to guide the individual toward the realization of his or her destiny. Partly for

this reason and partly for others to be discussed shortly, the Yoruba consider it improper to use the left hand to point to things belonging to one’s father. Hence this common saying: *Omo àlè ní í f’owó òsì júwe ilé bàbá rẹ̀* (“Only an illegitimate child uses the left hand to point the way to his/her father’s house”). Because of its identification with maleness and physical strength, the right hand signifies “hardness” (*èlè*). The left signifies “softness” (*èrò*) and metaphorically is *owó àlááfà* (“the hand of tranquillity”).



8. Group of figures with nursing mother, by Yemí Bisirí of Ilobu, near Osogbo. Brass, 29.8cm (11.75"). Seattle Art Museum, Gift of Katherine White and the Boeing Company.

This group apparently alludes to the earth goddess as the Mother of the World (*Ìyá Ayé*). The tripartite arrangement stresses the significance of the number three in Ògbóni symbolism.

PHOTO: PAUL MACPHERA

9. Janus altar figure (Onilé?). Brass, 17.8cm (7"). Museum of the Institute of African Studies, University of Ibadán.

The frequency of androgynous figures in Ògbóni art underscores the fact that the sexuality of the earth goddess transcends the manifestations of gender in the physical world.

However, the symbolism of the left is not exclusive to the female or the Ògbóni. It has multiple meanings, depending on the context. Since right-handedness is the norm in Yoruba culture, the left hand is seldom used in social transactions. Being employed mainly for handling dirty things, in the public domain it is *owó idótí* ("dirty hand"). In the past, in towns such as Kétu and Àkùré, left-handedness was reason enough to bar a prince from the throne; as king, and the chief priest of the community, he might offend the *òrìsà* by inadvertently using his left hand to offer sacrifices to them (Parrinder 1967:27–28; Arifalo 1976:161).¹⁸ However, because of its infrequent use, the left hand is *owó isúra* or *owó ipamó* ("reserved hand"); keeping something in mind is "hiding it in the left hand." In the realm of the occult, the left connotes concealment; hence it is *owó awo* ("hand of secrecy"), and the left handshake affirms cultic knowledge and solidarity (*imùlè*). Thus, in Ògbóni iconography the left signifies the female and the bond between mother and child and among the "children of the same mother" (Omo Ìyá), the mystique and ambivalence of the earth deity, and the spirit of togetherness and self-discipline expected of initiates.

Eéta: The Symbolism of the Number Three

The number three (*eéta* or *èta*) has a special meaning in Ògbóni rituals. For example, a special string (*okùn*) with three cowrie shells is tied to the wrist of a new member during initiation. The conventional Ògbóni salute consists of placing the left fist over the right one three times (Fig. 10), and before entering the lodge, members stop and move the left foot forward three times. In another ceremony inside the lodge, members touch the ground or *edan* three times, reciting each time the slogan "Mother's breast milk is sweet." In some Ògbóni sculptures the importance of threeness is evident in the large female figure flanked by two smaller figures (Fig. 7), or in a tripartite arrangement of human figures (Fig. 8). The iron chain joining the paired *edan* (Fig. 1) also hints at a third element implied in a well-known Ògbóni saying: *Agbàgbà méjì ló mo ìdi eéta* ("Only two elders know the secret of the number three"). The most popular interpretation of this saying in the scholarship on *edan* is that it alludes to the Earth as the invisible third party to the secret deliberations of the male and female Ògbóni inside the



PHOTO: BABATUNDE LAWAL

lodge. This is logical, although it does not explain the exact significance of the number. In an attempt to do this, Morton-Williams has hypothesized:

In the rest of Yoruba religion, three is avoided; there is an emphasis on dualism—in for example, the pairing of many of the gods—and stress on the number four and its square, sixteen....

One can see in the image of three, set against what we know to be the significance of four for the Yoruba, a sign of incompleteness and therefore a concern with process and time. It accords with the Yoruba conception of the stages in the existence of man: his departure from the sky (*orun*) to live in the world (*aiye*) and eventually to become a spirit in the earth (*ile*)....

(Morton-Williams 1960:372–73)

Although Morton-Williams is right about the emphasis placed by the Yoruba on dualism and the three stages of man, contrary to his assertion, the number three is *not* avoided in the rest of Yoruba religion. Neither is it always "a sign of incompleteness." Odd and even numbers complement one another in Yoruba culture, depending on the context. For instance, making up one's mind is, in a Yoruba idiomatic expression, "putting two and three together" (*fi eéjì kún eéta*).¹⁹ However, the number two (*eéjì*) suggests harmony or equilibrium; hence *èjiré* (an epithet for twins) means "the friendly and compatible two." The number three (*eéta*), on the other hand, signifies dynamic power (*agbára*), both physical and metaphysical. Thus, a strong man is called *okùnrin méta* ("three men in one"),

and according to popular belief, such a man should be buried at the crossroads: *Oríta méta lá nsin okú alágbára sí* ("An intersection of three roads is the most appropriate place to bury a powerful man") (Lawuyi 1986:305).

Because the word for three (*eéta* or *èta*) derives from the root verb *ta*, meaning to trigger, sting, spin, kick, sprout, expand, cast, and so on (see also Adewale 1988:60), many Yoruba believe that a compelling force is immanent in three things. The Ifá divination verse *Odù Èjìogbè* reinforces this notion:

Ifá says "it is three"
The hunter "shoots to kill" an animal
Thus declared the oracle to "Born to Shoot"
Who was an apprentice under Agbonnirègùn...
(Collected in Ilé-Ifè, 1987; my translation²⁰)

The connection between *ta* (to shoot) and *èta* (three) in this verse hinges on a symbolic wordplay in Yoruba incantations attributing the action suggested by a verb to the noun derived from it.²¹ In any case, the number three features prominently in all aspects of Yoruba rituals primarily because of its association with *àse*, the "power to make things happen." According to one informant, an herbalist, threeness was empowered at creation by Olódumarè to link cause with effect, the physical with the metaphysical, the visible with the invisible, and the human with the superhuman. The nature of this dynamic is a secret known only to a few:

Three is to the initiate
As two is to the novice
Rams always knock heads three times
It is at the third invocation that the "chief of the spirits" responds.

(My translation²²)

To the Yoruba in general, a secret is best kept by two people; hence the proverb *Òré ò gb'elèta, elèjì l'òré gbà* ("A third party can ruin a friendship; ideal friendship is between two people") (Kosemanii 1987:26–27). To the Ògbóni, on the other hand, the third party—Ilè/Edan—is the binding force of a promise, fellowship, contract, obligation, or moral responsibility. For, as Wande Abimbola puts it, "Ilè (the earth) herself punishes those who betray their friends" (1978:240). Thus the mystical union implicit in threeness transcends the intimacy and equilibrium commonly associated with twoness—a phenomenon not apparent to the general public but stressed in the Ògbóni dictum *Agbàgbà méjì ló mo ìdi eéta* ("Only two [Ògbóni] elders know the secret of the number three"). Consequently, even though a gift of three things is acceptable in occult circles and as an offering to

deities, it is suspect at the level of ordinary friendship. As S. A. Adewale has pointed out, the verb *ta* (to shoot, cast, etc.) is implicated in the number three (*eéta*); a gift of three things to a friend therefore means much more than meets the eye, and might be misconstrued as a sign of hostility, if not a veiled curse (1988:60). To an average Yoruba, then, the ideal gift should be divisible into two equal parts; for the number two (*eéji*), implicated in *èjiré* (an epithet for twins), connotes fondness and balance (Lawal 1989:12).

An intersection of three roads (*oríta méta*) is the prime spot for offering important sacrifices because it is the domain of Èsù, the custodian of *àse* and the mediator between all the *òrisà* in the Yoruba pantheon and Olódùmarè, on the one hand, and between the *òrisà* and humanity, on the other. According to a senior Ifá priest in Ilé-Ifè, Èsù is the link between Ilè/Edan and the oracular deity, Orúnmilà, who interprets the wishes of the earth deity to the Ògbóni—a point emphasized by the following Ifá divination verse from *Odù Ògúndàse*:

“Rumbling thoughts inside the elders”...
 Thus declared the Ifá oracle in the forest of Imolè
 Where the elders were running about in confusion
 Running helter skelter
 Orúnmilà told them not to run helter skelter again...
 He said, “It was I who used an inverted pot to create an altar inside the forest of the ‘four hundred divinities.’”
 He advised the elders to eat three Olúwéré rats
 He advised them to eat three Olùgbònà fish
 He advised them to eat three alligator pepper...
 Because it is Èsù who delivers sacrifices to the *òrisà*
 It is he who delivers sacrifices to the ancestral spirits
 Èsù Elégbára, do not harm me, harm somebody else
 Owner of the Crossroads.
 (Collected in Ilé-Ifè, 1987; my translation²³)

Nevertheless, threeness has many levels of meaning in Ògbóni rituals. Among others, it refers to (1) Èsù as the link between Ilè and Orúnmilà (as indicated in the foregoing divination verse), (2) Edan as the mediator between Ilè and Ògbóni, (3) the Ògbóni as the link between Edan and a given town (*ilú*), and (4) Edan/Ilè as the third party to the secret proceedings inside the Ògbóni lodge. In other words, threeness in Ògbóni symbolism alludes to a dynamic force uniting two elements toward a common purpose. The same idea is evident in another Ògbóni saying: *Ààrò méta kì í da obè nù* (“The three

hearth stones shall never destabilize the soup pot”). As the three hearth stones and soup pot belong in the kitchen—the domain of the womenfolk—this saying clearly identifies the Ògbóni with the maternal principle. In fact, these two motifs also figure in rites aimed at separating the spirit of a deceased mother from her children and ensuring her continuous spiritual support. In these rites, called *ààrò* (the hearth stone), the children present, as a parting gift to an *egúngún* (masked figure) representing their deceased mother, a calabash containing three miniature hearth stones supporting a small soup pot (Babayemi 1980:50–52). Incidentally, one Yoruba riddle portrays the three hearth stones (*ààrò méta*) as “the three children of the same mother” (*omo iyá méta*),²⁴ thus attributing their unity of purpose to a spiritual bond. The blood oath of the Ògbóni has a similar objective, relating all members as *Omo Ìyá*, “children of the same mother.”

In addition to its association with dynamism, occultism, secrecy, and spiritual bonding, the number three connotes completeness with regard to the span of life:

There are three phases of life on earth
 The morning phase, the afternoon phase and the evening phase...
 Everybody’s prayer is that
 “May the evening be better than the morning.”
 (Collected in Ìjjió, 1991; my translation²⁵)

The three phases are synonymous with childhood (morning), the prime of life (afternoon), and old age (evening). In Yoruba culture, to have lived a profitable earthly life is tantamount to completing the three phases blessed with wealth, good health, and many children. One can then look forward to joining the ancestors in the afterlife and partaking of their power and glory, including the privilege of reincarnating (*àtúnwá*) in a grandchild. An uncanny smile is often seen on the face of a Yoruba who has led an accomplished life and died peacefully, surrounded in the last hour by sobbing children and relations. The life ambition of every Ògbóni member is to depart with this proverbial smile—hence the prayerful slogan of the society: *À yà gbó, À yà tó* (“For longevity and prosperity”).

“Owner of the House” or “Owner of the Earth”?

Henry Drewal is certainly right to have called attention to the fact that the most common name for the large brass altar figures in the Ògbóni lodge is Onílè (Owner of the house)—contrary to the undue emphasis placed by many scholars on the term Onílè as “Owner of the Earth.” Only a few scholars such as William Fagg (1963:93), Bólájí Ìdòwú

(1962:24), Onàdélé Epega (n.d.:24), and Elizabeth McClelland (1982:71) have used the term Onílè in their publications. However, this is not to say that non-Yoruba scholars who emphasized Onílè in their publications are wrong, so long as the word “Earth” in the English translation refers to “land.” The point is that the Yoruba themselves use both terms interchangeably to mean “the landlord.” When asked to explain the difference between these names, a senior female Òsùgbó member from Ìjèbú replied: “Before people call someone Onílè (Owner of the house) that person must be Onílè, the owner of the land on which the house stands.” In other words, both terms refer to the same phenomenon, and to beings associated with the Earth or the underworld. For instance, in Ilé-Ifè the chthonian deity Èsindálè is called Onílè because it can be worshiped anywhere there is solid ground (Eluyemi n.d.:41). On the other hand, some Ìjèbú Yoruba, in non-Ògbóni/Òsùgbó contexts, address their aboriginal ancestors as Onílè (Ogunpolu 1975:566), primarily because they founded the community.

By and large, since the Earth has different aspects and several names (Alè, Apèpè Alè, Etígbíre, Àbeni Àdè, Ògòdomùgbò, Ògéré, etc.) and different aspects, it is not surprising that informants interchangeably use the terms Onílè and Onílè for the large brass altar figures in the lodge. The phrase “Owner of the land” is nonetheless a better translation for Onílè than “Owner of the Earth.” The latter tends to reduce Ilè (earth with a capital E) to a property of the altar figures, contrary to their symbolic function, which is to signify the goddess as Onílè, the “landlady” of the Ògbóni lodge and, by extension, as the “mother” who provides an abode for both the living and the dead. This is why, among the Ògbóni, the term Onílè is used more frequently than Onílè and, as Drewal has suggested, should be the standard term for the altar figures in the scholarship on Ògbóni art. I will hereafter call the altar figures Onílè, and will identify their photographs as such.

Form and Meaning in Edan Ògbóni

According to an Ògbóni elder, *edan* must be paired or androgynous for it to be ritually effective, because, in his words, *Tako, tabo, èjìwàpò* (“Male and female go together”). Apart from stressing the fact that the perpetuation of the cycle of existence depends on the union of the sexes, this saying—often used interchangeably with *Tibi, tire, èjìwàpò* (“Good and evil go together”)—hints at the Yoruba association of the male with hardness (*èlè*) and the female with softness (*èrò*). Although the ultimate implication of this saying is that the Yoruba cosmos is a delicate balance of good and evil,²⁶ the female aspect

indicates the positive, and the male, the negative. A popular prayer among the Yoruba is *Kí odún ó ya abo* ("May the year be female"), a wish for a pleasant, prosperous, and trouble-free year. Therefore, paired male-female *edan* allude not only to the Yoruba conception of the earth goddess as androgynous (hence the exposure of the genitals in many Ògbóni figures), but also to the fact that she is both firm and tender, good and evil, generous and dangerous. She is the giver of life and receiver of the dead, the "Mother of All" and yet the originator of witchcraft.

Indeed, paired male and female figures are not exclusive to Ògbóni. They also occur in the iconography of Orò, the nocturnal spirit representing the collective power of the ancestral dead, and in that of Èsù, the divine messenger and agent of change. Orò is symbolized by a carved rhomb (the bull roarer) that produces an eerie sound when whirled on a string. The rhomb is usually carved in pairs, male and female (Ojo 1973:52, pl. 3). The male rhomb has a deep sound, and the female a high-pitched one. The interplay of the two constitutes the voice of Orò; hence the Yoruba saying *Tako, tabo l'Orò nké* ("The Orò has male and female voices").

According to an Èsù devotee from Edúnàbòn (near Ilé-Ife), the paired figures in Èsù sculpture do not represent the deity and his wife, but rather signify the paradoxical and unpredictable nature of a deity who can appear as male at one moment and as female at another, who can favor you one minute and hurt or punish you the next. The devotees of Èsù sometimes wear the paired figures of the deity around the neck in the same manner that Ògbóni members put on the *edan* (Berns 1979: fig. 6).²⁷ Hans Witte has suggested that the recurrence of paired figures in the symbols of Èsù and Ògbóni constitutes "one single iconographic sign" that transcends the common correlation of the male with the negative and the female with the positive (1984:9). Although this is a possibility, Witte does not provide any corroborative evidence beyond his speculation that the male figure probably identifies Èsù with the *òrisà* (deified ancestors), and the female figure with Onílé or "earth spirits" (pp. 19–20).²⁸ In any case, that *edan* Ògbóni is "one single iconographic sign" alluding to two (opposite) aspects of the earth goddess is evident in the eponym Edan and the reference to the paired figures as *Iyá* (mother). This is not to say, however, that *edan* has only one meaning. At a secondary level, it reflects different aspects of the Ògbóni society, such as its male-female membership and concern with procreation, wellness, justice, and human survival in the universe.

A typical *edan* has a serene, dignified, and somewhat withdrawn look, communicating the composure and self-discipline expected of an Ògbóni. Some fig-

ures place their hands close to the mouth (Fig. 3), recalling the Ògbóni maxim *Kí ojú rí, kí etí gbó, kí enu sì wo*, "Let the eyes observe, let the ears listen, let the mouth be mute" (Adeoye 1989:341). An Ògbóni must not divulge confidential matters: *Wíwo ni enu awo ó wo*, "The mouth of an initiate does not leak" (p. 341). Nevertheless, *edan* is a public-oriented symbol



10. Male figure. Wood, 103.5cm (40.75"). William Arnett Collection, Atlanta.

The figure wears a wristlet and demonstrates the salute of Ògbóni—left fist over right, with the thumb concealed—signifying secrecy and covenant. The emblem on the right shoulder represents the *sàki* (also called *itagbè*), the special tasseled cloth worn by the Ògbóni as a badge of office.

used for communicating coded messages within and outside the community. When worn around the neck or fitted to a long iron rod (and used as a scepter), it denotes membership in the Ògbóni. As a medium of communication, the pair may be held in the hand or wrapped in a cloth or leaf, depending on the nature or seriousness of the message. The altar figures (Onílé), on the other hand, remain permanently concealed in a shrine (*odì, ilé awo*, or *ilé imolè*) accessible only to the most senior members.

Specific iconographic motifs reinforce visually and metaphysically the attributes of *edan*. In many instances, both the male

and female figures have beards (*irùngbòn*), signifying old age, experience, knowledge, and wisdom (Figs. 1, 4, 11, 13). Hence the saying *Ewú logbó; irùngbòn lagbà; mámu ni táfojúdí* ("The gray hair bespeaks old age; the beard bespeaks maturity; the mustache betrays insolence"). However, since the beard is a male attribute, its depiction on the female figure says much more than meets the eye. In Yoruba culture, women who have even the slightest trace of hair on the chin risk being suspected of having supernatural powers or of practicing witchcraft. In the female *edan* and Onílé figures (Figs. 1, 4, 11) the beard motif recalls the image of the goddess Edan as *Obirin bí okúnrin* (Adeoye 1989:336), a "man-like woman," the wise judge of human morality who possesses the supernatural powers of *àjé* with which she protects members of the Ògbóni. Sometimes the female *edan* or altar figure wears a horned coiffure (Fig. 5), alluding to supernatural powers. In non-Ògbóni contexts, the horned coiffure usually identifies females thought to have male characteristics (Ogunba 1964:256). This association of maleness is most conspicuous in Egúngún Oya, the mask (with buffalo horns) dedicated to Oya, the tornado goddess popularly known as *Obirin t' ó t'orí ogun dá 'rùngbòn sí*—"The woman who grows a beard because of war" (Idowu 1962:91).

Frequently the male figure carries a pair of smaller *edan* or a small bowl, while the female holds her breasts (Figs. 11, 13) or a baby (Witte 1988: pl. 3). According to one Ògbóni elder in Ilé-Ife, neither figure represents a specific individual, but the male figure recalls the role of the *Olúwo* as the chief priest of the Ògbóni, and the female recalls the symbolic role of *Erelú* as *Iyá Àbíyè* (the good midwife). At *Ìkòròdú*, however, an informant told me that the male figure alludes to the function of the *Apènà* (the secretary) as the custodian of the communally owned *edan* and Onílé figures in the Ògbóni lodge. The small bowl (*opón*) sometimes held by the male figure is used for various rituals inside the lodge. The breast-holding and breast-feeding female motifs (Figs. 8, 11, 13) emphasize the maternal affection and generosity of *Ilè* and *Edan*, recalling the Ògbóni slogan: *Omú iyá dùn ún mu; gbogbo wa la jo nmu ú* ("The mother's breast milk is sweet; we all suck it"); it is usually recited three times by members when greeting each other or touching *edan* with the tongue. So important is the mother's breast milk in Yoruba culture that an *Ifá* divination verse could declare that *Omo tí kò bá tí í fenu kan lára iyáa rẹ/Kò ní í se ànfàntí láéláé* ("Any child who has not tasted of his mother/Will never become useful in life") (Abimbola 1975b:288). The baby occasionally held by the female figure is a metaphor for the procreative and nurturing role of a mother signified by the term *Àbíyè* ("May children be born to live").

Top: 11. Female *edan* figure. Brass, 26cm (10.25"). Indianapolis Museum of Art, Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Harrison Eiteljorg.

The crescent motif (*osù*) is associated with regeneration and newness. According to some informants, the spiral or concentric circles motif signifies the spin of the small snail shell (*òkòtó*) associated with the transformative power of Èsù, the divine messenger, and Olókun, the goddess of the sea (another aspect of the Earth, *Ilè*). The rings on the cone-shaped headgear are reminiscent of an *òkòtó*. The breast-holding motif recalls the popular Ògbóni slogan "Mother's breast milk is sweet; we all suck it."

Bottom: 12. Left to right: (1) Snail shell (*òkòtó*); (2) children's toy (*òkòtó*) made from the cone-shaped bottom of the snail shell; (3) spiral; (4) concentric circles. Both the spiral and concentric circles motifs signify the spin (*ranyinranyin*) of *òkòtó* associated with Èsù, the Yoruba deity representing the principle of dynamism.

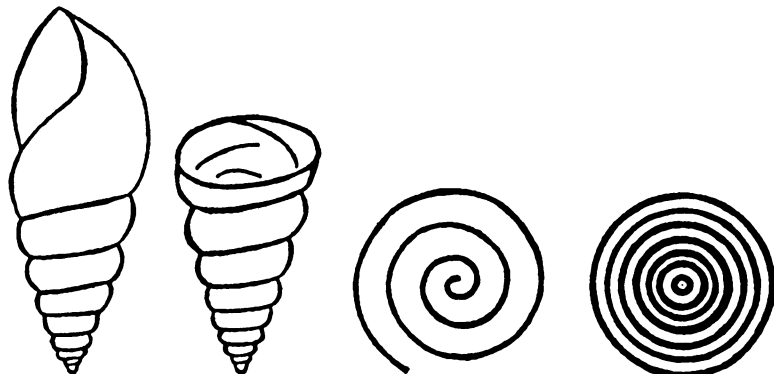
A crescent motif recurs on the forehead and body of many *edan* (Figs. 2, 3, 11, 12). Although Drewal interprets this motif as an abstraction of a bird (1981:91), my informants identify it as *osù*, the crescent moon, a symbol of newness and regeneration. The Yoruba refer to menses as a "sign of the moon" (*nkan osù*) because the women use the waxing and waning of the moon as a calendar for the menstrual cycle. Moreover, during its waxing phase, maidens and newly married women pray to the moon to make them fertile and give them the strength with which to carry a baby on the back (Ojo 1966:174). Apart from its menstrual and fertility associations, the crescent motif, according to an elder of the Ògbóni society, empowers a special ritual called *àjídèwè* ("Wake up and feel like a youth") performed in ancient times to ensure longevity, making an individual look and feel younger with the waxing of the moon. The *àjídèwè* is apparently predicated on the Yoruba equation of the phases of the moon with rejuvenation. Hence the common saying *Lótun, lótun là á b'ósù* ("The new moon will always look fresh"). Popular Yoruba names such as Alébiósù ("As distinct as a crescent"), Oládosù ("Honor transforms into a crescent"), and Osùolálé ("The crescent of honor rises") are by-products of this equation. It is significant that the crescent motif recurs on the headdresses of the Èfè (illustrated in Harper 1970:89), the Gèlèdè mask that performs at night in honor of Ìyá Nlá (another aspect of the earth goddess),²⁹ beseeching her to ensure increase as well as the well-being of the community.

Also linked with renewal and replenishment is the spoon motif (*síbí* or *ìgbáko*) held by or attached to some female *edan* or Onílé (Fig. 4). Since it is the female titleholders (*Erelú*) who prepare and serve the food eaten in the Ògbóni lodge, the female *edan* symbolizes the maternal role of women and, by extension, the care which Mother Earth provides for humanity.

The spiral or concentric circles motif appears prominently on many *edan* (Figs. 3,



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13. *Edan* pair. Brass, 27.9cm (11"). Museum of the Institute of African Studies, University of Ibadán.

For *Ògbóni* members the pipe motif signifies experience, wisdom, and old age, but in other contexts it usually refers to *Èsù* (the divine messenger).

11). Informants offered two different but related interpretations for it. According to some, it represents the spin (*ranyinranyin*) of the cone-shaped bottom of the small snail shell (*òkòtò*), a children's toy (Fig. 12) associated with increase, dynamic motion,³⁰ and, by extension, with the transformative power of *Èsù*, the divine messenger who mediates between the *òrìsà* and *Ilè*. Others identify the motif with the motion of a whirlpool, signifying the expansive power of *Olókun*, the goddess of the sea and abundance. Since *Odùdúwà* reportedly created habitable land out of the primordial sea at *Ilé-Ifè* (Idowu 1962:22; Ojo 1966:194), it is apparent that Earth and Water are, in essence, two aspects of the same phenomenon venerated by the *Gèlèdè* society as *Ìyá Nlá* (Mother Nature), alias *Olókun àjàrò òkòtò* ("The sea goddess, who whirls like *òkòtò*"). Indeed, the snail shell motif occurs on *Ògbóni* doors (Dobbelmann 1976: pls. 156).³¹ Moreover, black mud from a river or lake is a vital part of the ingredients used in consecrating an altar to *Ilé*, and a fish-legged figure often dominates the relief decoration on *Ògbóni* doors (Dobbelmann 1976:156–57) and drums (Ojo 1973:50, pl. 1), thus linking the terrestrial realm with the aquatic. In any case, as a metaphor for the rhythm of life, and increase (*irèsi*), the spiral or concentric circles motif reinforces the ritual power of *Edan* *Ògbóni*.

The pipe-smoking figure in some *edan* (Fig. 13) denotes ripe old age—the prayer of every Yoruba—although it usually identifies *Èsù* in other contexts. The bird motif (Fig. 2) alludes both to the transformative power of *àse*—divine command—and to the earth goddess as the custodian of *àgbàra awon iyàmi*, "the mysterious power of the mothers," enabling the soul of an *àjé* (witch) to turn into a bird and fly about at night.³²

Functions of *Edan*

Upon initiation, every member of the *Ògbóni* receives a pair of *edan* to identify him or her within and outside the community as an honorable member deserving special courtesies. Its possession is expected to attract innumerable blessings. By identifying a member with the earth goddess, an embodiment of the good and evil of the physical world, *edan* provides immunity from witchcraft and at the same time attracts the desirable things of life, such as good health, longevity, many children, wealth, and fame. It offers protection against physical injury, food poisoning, bad luck, and infectious diseases. It may be



PHOTO: BABATUNDE LAWAL

used as a lie detector, for administering oaths, for predicting the life span of a member, and for curing mysterious illnesses.

According to one *Apènà*, the *edan* is ideally worn with the female figure resting on the left shoulder, because the left belongs to *Ilè* and *Àwon Alayé*, "the owners of the world," otherwise known as *àjé*. At the death of a member, the family must return the deceased's *edan* to the *Ògbóni* lodge. Although a chain usually joins the male and female figures, they may be detached and used as a semiotic device called *àrokò* to communicate certain official decisions of the *Ògbóni* to members and nonmembers alike. A male figure has a negative connotation, indicating that an individual has committed a serious offense and will be hearing soon from the *Ògbóni* (Opatodun 1986:30). A female figure indicates good news, such as being appointed a chief, exonerated from false accusations, or granted special favors by the *Ògbóni* (p. 32).³³

The *Ògbóni* uses *Orò*, the spirit of the collective power of the ancestors, to execute many of its decisions. It may, for example, wish to impose a curfew during special rituals or when force is needed to apprehend a dangerous criminal; the sound of *Orò*'s bullroarer in the night (and occasionally during the day) warns the general public to stay indoors during the operation. In the past, defying or spying on *Orò* was an offense punishable by death.

Shedding human blood unnecessarily is a serious offense against *Ilè*. Whenever such an incident is reported to the *Apènà*, he immediately sends a messenger to place *edan* beside the blood. This signals that all the warring parties must return to

the spot. The messenger then takes them to the *Apènà*, who brings up the case before the *Ògbóni* court (see also Morton-Williams 1960:366). In situations involving land disputes, the *Apènà* imposes a truce by placing *edan* on the piece of land in question while the *Ògbóni* looks into the matter. Thus *edan* functions as a symbol of law and order, embodying the principle of punishment (male figure) and redress (female figure) in the administration of justice. A similar phenomenon occurs at the family level: in bringing up a child, the father figure (symbolized by the right hand) is associated with discipline, and the mother figure (the left hand) with indulgence or with consolation after a father's displeasure with an erring child has subsided. This conflict of parental attitudes toward the child echoes in the saying *Bí a bá f'òtún b'ómo wí/A á f'òsì fà á m'ra* ("If we spank the child with the right hand/We use the left to pet the same child").

Individual Invention within Stylistic Convention in *Edan*

Because it reflects various aspects of social life, traditional Yoruba woodcarving is descriptive in idiom (Williams 1964:139). *Edan*, however, is concerned with the essence and timelessness of being, and therefore is metaphorical in its imagery; its form, though inspired by the human figure, has a meta-empirical reference. The *Ògbóni* convention requires *edan* to look frontal and ancient and to have protuberant facial features, an elaborate coiffure, schematized body and limbs, as well as stock gestures and postures like standing, sitting, kneeling, and holding the breasts. Yet the emphasis on the esoteric provides the brass-smith (Fig. 14) with a unique opportunity to exercise his creativity and experiment with the human figure while still complying with these prescribed characteristics handed down over generations. A close examination of the *edan* corpus reveals variations on common themes and a great diversity in artistic skills, inventiveness, and temperaments. The handling of headgear and coiffures, facial expressions, and body decorations is individualized, and form ranges from the two-dimensional to the volumetric and architectonic. The society's concern with archetypes in its rituals and corporate emblems would seem to impose severe restrictions on the artist. Yet, it is the same concern that gives the artist the inspiration to operate at a higher level of creative consciousness, enabling him to dissociate the human figure further and further from the mundane. The result is a corpus of startling and highly original forms.

Since most Yoruba address *Ilè* as "Earth, *Ògéré*, who combs her hair with a hoe..." and since almost everywhere *Ògbóni*/*Òsùgbó* members regard themselves as "Omo *Ìyá*" ("children of the

same mother”), it is obvious that the society began with the worship of a goddess. Its current division into two factions (the Aboriginal and the Reformed) as well as the confusion over the sex of the goddess merely show that the society has not been static. For centuries it has been responding to the dynamics of change occasioned by environmental, social, political, and economic forces that in turn have affected the perceptions and meanings of its rituals and symbols. Indeed, the Reformed Ògbóni Fraternity, despite its Christianizing tendencies, continues to identify the Earth as female. According to Section 11 (17) of the 1979 (Revised) Constitution of the Fraternity: “All members duly initiated and exalted shall regard themselves as Omo Iya, children of the same mother, and shall act towards one another as such” (Anyebe 1989:68). Section 2 (4) requires every local branch “To see to the mortal remains of any deceased members, by providing a coffin, up to a reasonable limited cost, and to give his/her remains a decent deposit in the bosom of the mother Earth” (p. 64). The Honorable Justice Anyebe, a senior member of the R.O.F., explains, “Each brother is responsible to the other right up to the moment the remains of the other is given a ‘decent deposit in the bosom of Mother Earth.’ It is a reminder that Mother Earth is nearest to men and linked with them by many bonds” (p. 69).

Although the exact nature of the relationship between Ilè and Odùduwà (the mythical creator of land in Yoruba cosmology) is not clear, it is noteworthy that the pairing of male and female figures in *edan* Ògbóni parallels the worship of Odùduwà as a male deity in some parts of Yorubaland and as female in others. The correspondence clearly shows that Ilè and Odùduwà are beings with a double identity, if not one and the same phenomenon. This dualism, as we have seen, also occurs in the iconography of other Yoruba deities such as Èsù and Ifá (Òrúnmìlà). Its manifestation in the *edan* Ògbóni should therefore not be misconstrued as the Yoruba equivalent of the biblical Adam and Eve.

At the turn of the century, the need to rationalize and reconcile myths and symbols with new historical and social realities ushered in by missionary activities, colonialism, and Westernization—all of them emphasizing male dominance—resulted in new permutations, reinterpretations, and syntheses. Not only did the colonial government ignore qualified women when making important political appointments, but both Islam and Chris-

tianity, which spread rapidly during the period, relegated them to the background (Awe 1977:145–46). In 1945, Yoruba students in London formed the Egbé Omo Odùduwà (The Children of Odùduwà), a cultural organization charged with the responsibility of uniting the Yoruba and advancing their cause in colonial Nigerian politics. This organization eventually developed into a full-fledged political party (the now defunct Action Group), promoting the image of Odùduwà as the “Father of the Yoruba” (Arifalo 1981:72, 88) and obscuring the female aspect of the deity.

The adaptation of the Ògbóni society to these changes in the Yoruba body politic is apparent in the attempt by some Yoruba to “de-femalize” the earth deity to reflect the spirit of the times. Robert Armstrong has observed a similar phenomenon among the Idoma, whose cosmology portrays the earth goddess (Aje) as senior to the male sky god (Owo); yet some Idoma elders are reluctant to discuss the issue because it is at variance with the patriarchal tenets of Islam and Christianity. Instead, they attempt to unite the two deities into Owoico, the great male God above (Armstrong 1982:8–11). These new developments constitute a challenge to art historians and anthropologists who must use synchronic and diachronic

methods to separate ancient from the more recent layers of meanings in African rituals and art.

Scholars of Yoruba art are fortunate to have a mine of information on Yoruba history, culture, and religion in the *Odù Ifá*. Unfortunately, much of the previous research on *edan* Ògbóni made little use of this body of sacred divination verses, relying mainly on formal analyses, field observations, and interviews with informants. Although informants are very helpful, frequently they are either reluctant to disclose “classified” information or simply do not know the original meaning of certain motifs and instead give researchers common-sense or contemporary reinterpretations. It is significant that some officials of the Ògbóni/Òsùgbó society referred me to the *babaláwo* (Ifá divination priests) for iconographic details; the latter, as their title implies, are the traditional keepers or, rather, “fathers” of secrets.

The “archival” importance of the *Odù Ifá* in the study of Ògbóni art cannot therefore be overstressed. Nevertheless, it is only when combined with fieldwork as well as linguistic, textual, contextual, formal, historical, and iconographic analyses that the *Odù Ifá* will yield reliable data on the evolution of form as well as changes in perception and meaning. □

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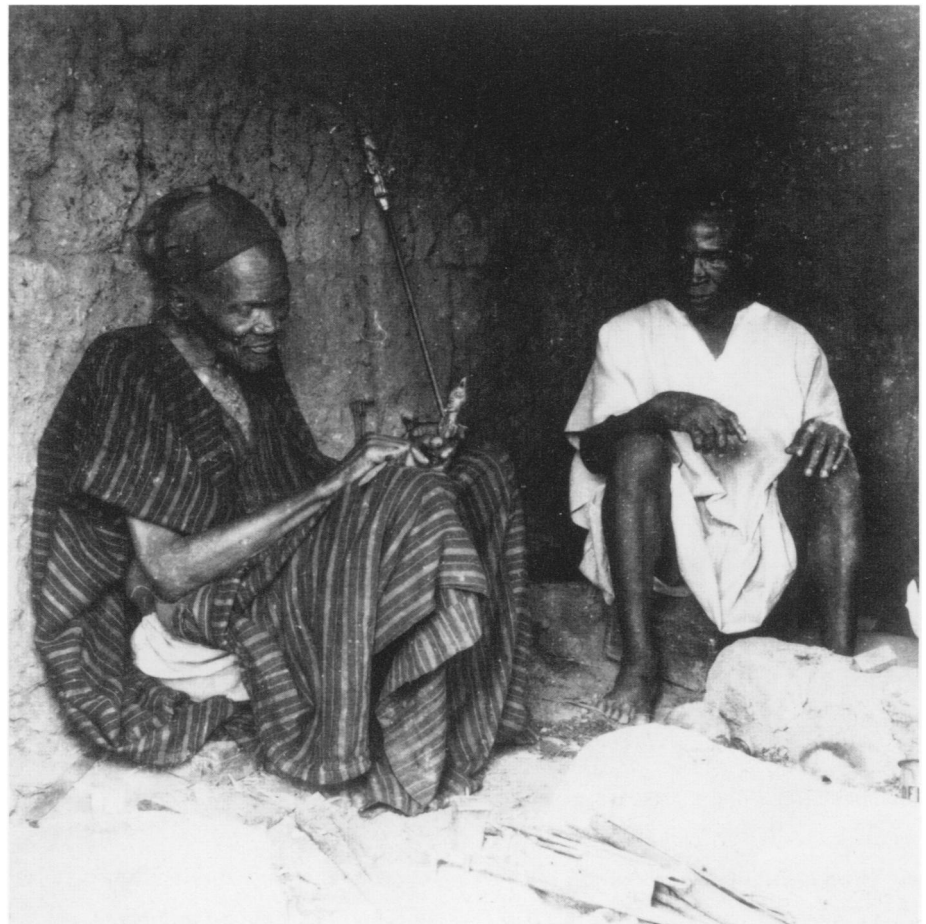


PHOTO: BABATUNDE LAWAL

14. Yoruba brass-smith Gbetu Asúde working on an *edan* in his workshop, Okiti Compound, Okéréwè Quarter, Ilé-Ife, 1971. He was over 80 years old when I interviewed him. Beside him is his son, Lámidi Òkè, who took over the workshop following his father's death in 1973.

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NEVADOMSKY: Notes, from page 73

[This article was accepted for publication in July 1993.]

1. Fashion has hardened into preference for the round-necked variant.
2. Under the influence of Benin, however, neighboring peoples such as the Esan to the immediate north and the Ika Igbo to the east adopted the *iwu* patterns. The people of Usen, who straddle the Bini-Yoruba border, also emulated this style, but left out the gender-defining mark. Frequent contacts between Benin and Owu, and Benin's influence on the latter, show up in the scarifications on small ivory statuettes from Owu (Fagg & Bassani 1988: fig. 264; Bedaux & Smits 1991:76-77; Ezra 1992:285). The figures display the typical five long abdominal marks; whether they mean the same thing is uncertain. Osugbo (Ogboni) torso markings on some male and female terracotta figures from Ijebu (Yoruba) are also like *iwu*, but the relationship, if any, remains cloudy.
3. There is only one living example of *Nobasoriwu*.
4. A fine set of tattoos on a woman would elicit *E ne o si erinmwini* ("that which causes a person to beg"; that is, it arouses a man to ask for sex with the woman).
5. As a negative instance, Nixon's attempt to create an emperor's guard out of White House police met with derision and had to be abandoned.
6. Traditional rulers know the limits of their authority in secular matters, as subtle as that line of demarcation may be. None would overtly contradict important government policy.
7. Some women's organizations have, since 1986, become involved in the *iwu* idea, and during their anniversary outings, members wear the *ewu-iwu*. Also, some female newscasters wear their *iwu* regularly on television when reading the news in Edo.

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