

WHAT IS ORI ALL ABOUT?

The emphasis on the head (Ori) in Yoruba goes beyond its biological importance as the seat of the brain that controls the body. It reveals the nature which identifies the Supreme Being, Olodumare, as the head of a of deities called òrìsà, who act as the agents of its enabling power (àse). This Supreme Being is sometimes called Oba Orun, the King of Heaven, and Olu Iwa, Lord/Head of Existence.

Olodumare is reflected in the common sayings Ori lo da ni, enikan o ' d'Ori o (It is the Head that created us; nobody created the Head) and Ori eni, l'Eleda eni (One's head is one's creator). As these sayings indicate, the position of the physical head resonates in the traditional Yoruba system of government. For example, all members of an extended family living together are under the authority of the head of a compound (Baálè ilè) in which they live, and all compound heads are responsible to a district head (Olori adugbo). Any matter that the latter could not resolve would be referred to a higher authority such as the village head (Báálé or Olu). At the top of this hierarchy is the Oba, a divine king, high priest, and the ruler of a given town, who is assisted by a council of elders or chiefs. Thus the head is to an individual what Olodumare is to the cosmos and a king to the body politic—a source of power in order to fully understand the significance of this metaphor, it must be noted that the Yoruba creation myth traces the origin of the human body to an archetypal sculpture (ere) modeled by the artist-deity Obatala and then activated by the divine breath (emi) of Olodumare, located in the sculpture's head. This creative process occurs inside a pregnant woman's body and takes about nine months to mature. According to the myth, every individual, before being born into the physical world, must proceed to the workshop of Ajalamopin, the heavenly potter, to choose one of several undifferentiated, ready-made Ori Inu, or "inner heads" on display in Ajalamopin's workshop. Each inner head contains Olodumare's àse (enabling power), and the one chosen by an individual predetermines his/her lot (ipin) in the physical world. Hence the popular Yoruba slogan, Orilonise, "One's success or failure in life depends on the head."

Yoruba religion focuses on the worship of the òrìsà because of the belief that they act on behalf of Olodumare, who is too exalted to be approached directly. Yet Olodumare is indirectly involved in the day-to-day life of an individual through his/her Ori Inu, which is also called Ori Apere, Asiniwaye (Venerable head, one's guardian spirit in the physical world). Thus, in the past, every adult Yoruba dedicated an altar to the Ori Inu. The practice continues today in the rural areas. Called ibori, this altar is a cone-shaped object containing divination powder (iyerosun) mixed with earth into which a diviner has chanted sacred incantations and verses meant to attract good luck to its owner. It is encased in leather and adorned with cowrie shells (owo eyo). The ibori is kept in a crown-shaped container called ile ori (house of the head), which can be lavishly adorned with as many as 12,000 cowrie shells. The size and ornateness of the container depend on the social or economic status of its owner. It is to the ibori that an individual offers gifts and prayers every morning before turning to the family òrìsà, again underscoring the preeminence of Olodumare, whom the inner head represents in an individual. Hence the popular saying, Ko s'òrìsà ti i da ni i gbe lehin ori eni (No òrìsà can help an individual without the consent of his or her head) The òrìsà themselves are said to be subject to their own Ori, meaning that despite their popularity as the agents or manifestations of àse, they have the ability to assist an individual only within the boundaries already predetermined by Olodumare (the lord), the Ultimate Head. Although the physical head is highly valued because of its social and biological importance as a site of perception, communication, and identity, it is regarded as no more than the outer shell for the inner head. It is called Ori Ode (external head). The desire for harmony between the two aspects of the head is expressed in the popular prayer, Ori inu mi ko ma ba ti ode je (May my inner head not spoil my outer one). The degree of realism in Yoruba portraiture depends on which aspect is being emphasized. Naturalism is favored in most of the sculptures meant to recall the physical likeness of an individual, such as the terra-cotta and bronze heads from Ife, as well as the ako second-burial effigies that mark the last symbolic appearance of a deceased ancestor among

the living. Sculptures placed on altars to communicate with the òrìsà, or the spirits of dead ancestors, are often intentionally stylized to emphasize their non-material state of existence, even if they have a human essence. The importance of the head is apparent in both naturalistic and stylized representations, not only through its size but also through the detailed and elaborate treatment of the coiffure, which often rises like a crown, proclaiming the head's lordship over the body. The Yoruba sometimes refer to Homo sapiens as Eda, Omo Adárihurun (Humanity, the species that grows hair mainly on the head), partly because the human body is not covered with hair like that of the lower animals, and partly because the hair that grows on the lower part of the abdomen is usually covered by dress. Only the hair on the human head and face is noticeable. The hair on the head (irun Ori) is often likened to a grove that must be well maintained to hallow the sanctuary that the physical head constitutes for the Ori Inu, the inner head. This is why Yoruba women have traditionally regarded hairdressing as a mark of honor to the inner head, apart from its social significance. The Yoruba creation myth identifies the human body as a work of art produced by the artist-deity Obatala. One implication of the myth is that the human body encapsulates àse, the special power that continually inspires and sustains the human "will to adorn," as well as the creativity manifest in the visual, performing, and applied arts. It is responsible for transforming much of what was once a wilderness into the civilization it is today. It is pertinent to note that the Yoruba word for civilization is òlájú, which can be broken up etymologically as o-là = to cut, ojù = face/head, that is, "to give the earth a human face." In other words, the Yoruba have not only redesigned their habitat, they have personified the earth as a beauty-conscious goddess whose cognomen is Ilè, Ogere, A foko yeri (Earth, the goddess who combs her hair with a hoe), an allusion to the farming and building activities that continually shape and reshape the human environment. below. The earth, as a goddess, is thought to have two aspects, the hard (negative) and the soft (positive). These are represented by paired male and female figures, respectively . The town (ilú) denotes the ordered, cultured, and predictable, and the jungle (ìgbó) the unordered, uncultivated, and unpredictable. By the same token, a sloppily dressed person is ridiculed as ara oko (literally bush creature), unkempt hair is likened to a jungle, and the individual concerned is easily mistaken for a psychopath. To be socially acceptable is to be well groomed, paying special attention to one's behavior, clothes, and hair. This accounts for the emphasis on appearance in Yoruba culture. It is believed that taking good care of one's hair is an indirect way of currying favor with one's Ori Inu. Thus, the Yoruba have created a wide range of hairstyles that not only reflect the primacy of the head but also communicate taste, status, occupation, and power, both temporal and spiritual. The richness of the tradition can be gleaned from Yoruba masks and figure sculptures that will be used to illustrate the major styles, though they are often idealized in art for aesthetic reasons. In the past and even until present, the parents of a new baby often consulted a diviner on the third day after its birth to find out, among other things, the nature of the baby's inner head and what should be done to preserve a good destiny or to rectify a bad one. This ceremony is called imori (know the head) or ikose waye (the first steps on earth). To formally welcome the baby to the world of the living (Ilé Ayé), there is a naming ceremony on the seventh or ninth day after its birth during which its head is completely shaved. Until the ceremony, the baby is often addressed as Omo titun, alejò ayé (New baby, a stranger to the physical world). Babies born with knotted or curly hair are considered sacred and are automatically given the name Dàda or Ekine. Partly because they are thought to be special gifts from the orisa and partly because their knots of hair are likened to cowrie shells (money), these children are thought to attract wealth to their parents, as indicated in this Dàda's panegyric (oriki): A Dàda's head is not shaved during the naming ceremonies because it is believed that the knotted hair has special powers. The hair may be washed but must not be combed. As Marilyn Houlberg has noted, the "heads of Dàda children are shaved only under special ritual conditions. The act of head-shaving may be said to mark the incorporation of the already sacred child into the world of the living". Like Dàda, twins (ibeji) are also regarded as sacred because of their unusual birth. Their heads too are usually

not shaved during their naming ceremonies, although it is done at a later date. In some areas of Yorubaland, especially among the Ijebu, the heads of twins are painted with special designs during the ritual that initiates them into

the cult of twins. As a male child grows older, the head is shaved clean (*irun fifa korodo*) about once a month or when it appears overgrown. Sometimes the back and sides of the head are shaved, leaving a strip of hair called *jongori* running from the front to the occiput. A patch of hair left on the crown is called *osu*. Young girls, on the other hand, are usually allowed to wear their hair long, though it is knotted or braided into designs similar to those worn by maidens and older women. Identical hairstyles easily identify a pair, male or female, as twins. By and large, parents endeavor to keep their children's hair as clean and decent as possible, because it is they who will be accused of negligence if a child's hair looks unkempt.

While most males shave their heads, females, young and old, are expected to keep their hair very long. The head of a female initiate or patient, however, may be shaved to allow ritual substances to be rubbed onto or incised into the scalp. Otherwise, a majority of Yoruba women fashion their hair into an assortment of crown-like designs (sometimes adorned with colorful beads) both to honor their inner head and in keeping with the popular adage *Irun l'ewa obinrin* (The hair adds to a woman's beauty). There are three principal methods of shaping the hair: (a) loose weave (*irun biba*), a casual and temporary parting and knotting into big buns or cornrows until the styling can be done by a professional; (b) tight weave (*irun didi*), a detailed plaiting of the hair into intricate designs; and (c) the relatively recent practice of binding (*irun kiko*), using a black thread to tie strands of hair into filaments that are then gathered to form intricate designs.

Except for occupational or ritual reasons, most males shave their head, moustache, and chin until old age, when gray hair (*ewu*) and beard (*irugbon*) are considered marks of experience, wisdom, and maturity, as reflected in the popular saying *Ewu l'ogbo, irugbon l'agba, mamu l'afajudi* (Gray hair bespeaks old age, the beard bespeaks maturity, the moustache betrays insolence). Certain hairstyles, however, may indicate social status or unusual power. For example, instead of sporting the common *jongori* (the strip of hair in the middle of the head that runs from the front to the back), young princes as well as the children of the rich may wear the *ààsò*, which consists of three round patches of hair arranged in the front, center, and back of the head. Another variation of the *ààsò* identifies powerful hunters and warriors, especially the *èsó* (leaders of the military guards). Called *ààsò oluode*, it is a patch of hair growing on a spot in the middle of the head into which potent medicine has been infused to empower the body both physically and spiritually. More often, this patch of hair is braided into a knot, and may be made to hang down on the left side of the head. In order to accommodate the hair, some hunters and warriors wear a long, pouch-like cap called *àdirò*, which is also used to store small charms. As a result, the cap hangs heavily on the left side of the head, almost touching the shoulder. Another peculiar male hairstyle, called *ifari apakan*, leaves the head half-shaved. It can identify an individual as a member of the *Aragberi* clan, a branch of the *Aresa* royal house of the Old Oyo Empire whose leaders were noted for their deep knowledge of herbal medicine and magical charms).

It has another important meaning as well, which will be discussed below. My head, please, fight for me, my spirit, please fight, fight for me My father's head, fight, fight for me, my mother's head, fight, fight for me because the Blue Touraco's head fights for the Blue Touraco, the head of the Aluko bird fights, oh. . . .My Creator, don't forget me, please, it is better that you fight, oh.

In view of the common saying *Ori buruku ko gbose; Ayanmo o gbogun* (A bad head cannot be washed clean with magical soap; destiny cannot be altered with charms), one might be led to assume that an individual is powerless against the fate supposedly assigned to him or her before birth. Yet a close reading of the Yoruba notion of the inner head reveals the contrary. According to a divination verse, *Iwa nikan l'o soro; Ori kan kii buru l'Otu Ife* (It is character that matters; there is no recognizably bad head in Otu-Ife city). A popular adage puts it differently: *Eni l'ori rere ti ko n'iwa, iwa l'o ma ba ori re je* (Even if someone is born with a good

head, but lacks good character, this shortcoming will spoil his or her good head) . In other words, since all the inner heads made by the heavenly potter Ajalamopin look alike, and since one's destiny is concealed, it is difficult to differentiate a good head from a bad one. So one should strive in life to improve one's worth and character. One Yoruba proverb puts it succinctly: *Owó ara eni l'a fi í tun iwa eni se* (It is up to an individual to make the best of his or her existence and character). A similar message is evident in the emphasis on the head in Yoruba art, since making headway in life depends, for the most part, on how well you utilize your head:

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