

Ogun in Precolonial Yorubaland

A Comparative Analysis

Clerical intellectuals like Samuel Johnson prided themselves on being the constructors of a more nearly unified concept of Yoruba society and culture,¹ including something that they called “Yoruba heathenism.”² Yet they were well aware of the variety that stood in the way of this task, since their very activity as evangelists introduced them to religious practices in dozens of communities across a large swath of Yorubaland, and their detailed reports necessarily document it. In this chapter my aim is to use this evidence in a deconstructionist spirit, suggesting that the sheer extent of regional diversity in Yoruba religious practice calls into question whether we should be speaking of Yoruba religion as a single entity at all. We have to deconstruct Yoruba religion if we are to see it as an entity with a history rather than (as most of the literature presents it) as a pantheon of deities with unchanging, even eternal attributes, as first manifest in the archetypal setting of primordial Ile-Ife.

Ogun, the Yoruba god of iron and war, makes an excellent subject for this purpose, since his cult is spread all over Yorubaland, placing him clearly in the quite small number of truly pan-Yoruba *oriṣa*. In this task, comparison will play a key role, in two dimensions: between the manifestation of Ogun in different areas/locations and between the functional attributes of Ogun and other *oriṣa*. What will emerge is a view of Yoruba traditional religion as less a single pantheon of deities with fixed attributes in relation to one another, spread evenly across the whole country, than a spectrum of varying cult complexes, each one the product of a unique set of local and historical circumstances.

EVIDENCE FROM THE CMS JOURNALS

The great bulk of the evidence will be drawn from the journals and reports of missionary agents—in the great majority, Yoruba ones—of the Church Missionary Society, active since 1845 and the richest contemporary source for almost any aspect of Yoruba life. These men were hardly disinterested observers of what they considered to be “idolatry,” and only rarely can their observations be called ethnographic, in the sense of attempting to portray “heathen” religious practices in some detail as being significant in their own right. There is, for example, little detailed description of the rituals of *oriṣa* worship or record of myths or prayers. What we have is hundreds of mostly brief references to the *oriṣa* and their devotees as they came to the attention of CMS agents proceeding about their pastoral and evangelistic duties. These fall into several main categories: observations of *oriṣa* worship by individuals encountered in streets or houses; references to public festivals, sacrifices, or oracular consultations; conversations and arguments with devotees or priests about their *oriṣa* or about *oriṣa* worship in general; itemizations of which idols have been given up by new converts; and, very occasionally, general characterizations of particular *oriṣa* or of the cults of a particular community. In contrast to much of the large existing literature on *oriṣa*, which is strong on general characterizations of the *oriṣa* drawn from oral sources such as myths, Ifa divination literature and other kinds of religious poetry, and on analyses of their rituals, particularly the great annual festivals, as observed in the present, the CMS data focus our attention on the more prosaic, day-to-day character of *oriṣa* worship. Where modern studies of traditional religion commonly present it as detached from the main preoccupations of daily life, the CMS journal writers, even if their accounts do not often penetrate very deeply, cannot but forcefully convey the omnipresence of the *oriṣa* in the lives of ordinary Yoruba in the nineteenth century. Their evidence, taken as a whole, tells us a great deal about both the settings wherein and the occasions when Yoruba people entered into relations with the *oriṣa*.

So this body of source material has weaknesses of which we must be aware, as well as strengths that we should try to exploit. The most significant strength is the sheer number of references to *oriṣa* cults—in my reading of the entire archive, I have noted 778 of them and have doubtless missed some—made under broadly similar assumptions over a large swath of Yorubaland. This makes possible systematic comparison between different towns and regions in terms of their cult profiles and between the manifestations of particular *oriṣa* in different places. Through comparison, and particularly through the use of appropriate contrast cases (e.g., Sango vs. Ogun, Ogun in eastern vs. in western Yorubaland), we can make much more out of what are often rather passing observations. And just as a determined historicism is the best antidote to the tendency to essentialize Yoruba religion

TABLE 3.1 *Oriṣa* Reported in Church Missionary Society Journals, 1845–1912

<i>Oriṣa</i>	Abeokuta		Coastal Southwest		Ibadan		Other Oyo		East		T O T A L (n)
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	
Ogun	11	4	6	4	10	7	5	6	21	14	53
Sango	41	16	23	16	41	27	29	38	12	8	146
Oya	3	1	1	1	9	6	7	9	1	1	21
Orisa Oko	14	6	1	1	12	8	5	6	0	—	32
Obatala	30	12	4	3	11	7	2	3	8	5	55
Other white <i>oriṣa</i>	13	5	8	6	4	3	3	3	1	1	29
Ifa	40	16	31	22	25	17	15	19	29	19	140
Esu/Elegbara	19	8	14	10	9	6	2	3	27	17	71
Osun	15	6	6	4	8	5	0	—	13	8	42
Yemoja	12	5	6	4	1	1	1	1	0	—	20
Other water <i>oriṣa</i>	5	2	5	3	2	1	1	1	4	3	17
Osanyin	3	1	8	6	1	1	0	—	1	1	13
Sopona	9	4	3	2	2	1	0	—	6	4	20
Buruku	6	2	1	1	2	1	0	—	0	—	9
Ori	6	2	4	3	3	2	3	4	0	—	16
Ibeji	5	2	3	2	2	1	0	—	0	—	10
Other	21	8	20	14	8	5	4	5	31	20	84
T O T A L	253	100	144	102	150	99	77	98	154	101	778

NOTE: Percentage totals may exceed or fall short of 100 percent on account of rounding. *Abeokuta* includes all Egba and Egbado towns and villages, but more than 90 percent of references relate to Abeokuta itself. *Coastal Southwest* means Lagos, Badagry and vicinity, Awori towns (Ota, Igbesa, Ado Odo). *Ibadan* is just Ibadan and its farm villages. *Other Oyo* means (in order of importance) Ijaye, Iseyin, New Oyo, Oke Ogun settlements, Ogbomosho, and observations made on journeys through the Oyo towns to the east of Ibadan. *East* means (in order of importance) Ondo, settlements on the Eastern Lagoon (Leki, Itebu, Ikale), Ilesha, and a small part of western Ekiti.

across time, so is regional comparison to the too easy assumption of pan-Yoruba uniformity. It is not that pronounced continuities do not exist in Yoruba religion across both time and space but that they need to be seen as existing in the face of historical vicissitudes and variable local circumstances.

Table 3.1 presents references to the main *oriṣa* in the journals and letters of CMS agents organized according to five distinct regions, each of which has its own cultural character. Because of the uncertainties attaching to the figures, they are better used comparatively with one another—because the effects of the uncertainties will then tend to cancel one another out—rather than treated individually as indicators of an objective state of affairs. Moreover, because they are biased by where the CMS was active, as well as by the number of mission agents and the length of time they served—nearly a third of the references relate to Abeokuta, and just over half to the southwestern corner of Yorubaland, while Ijebu and large parts of the farther north and east are missing—cross-regional comparisons need

to be made on the basis of the proportion of references that each *oriṣa* receives in a particular region. Thus we can compare the 4 percent of references to *oriṣa* that Ogun receives in Abeokuta with Obatala's 12 percent in the same town or the 14 percent that Ogun reaches in the East. The table needs to be read down (comparison within a region) before it is read across (comparison between regions).

Of course, these kinds of data present certain problems in their use. Most important, the aggregate references to *oriṣa* in the CMS agents' reports can be at best only an approximate measure of their actual significance in the lives of communities, since strictly speaking they record not the real frequency of cult observance among the Yoruba but rather what struck missionary observers most frequently as worthy of report. Religious prejudice, as such, seems less of a problem than less obvious forms of bias, such as a tendency to give more space to what caught the eye or to neglect those aspects of religion that were private or implicit in other activities. Doubts about arguments that proceed largely from silences or thinnesses in the sources are well recognized in principle in historical methodology but are less easy to quell in practice. I simply say that I am very aware of them, and I will address them as they become pertinent at particular points in the argument.

TWO QUESTIONS ABOUT OGUN

So what do the figures tell of Ogun? To begin with, they clearly confirm what is often remarked on in the literature, that the cult of Ogun is especially strong in eastern Yorubaland. From the Eastern Lagoon up through Ondo to Ilesha and the edges of Ekiti, Ogun accounts for 14 percent of *oriṣa* reported, third after Ifa (19%) and Esu (17%). Ogun's important cult center at Ire³ is unfortunately unreported—most of Ekiti was not visited by evangelists until the twentieth century—and so is the famous Olojo festival of Ogun at Ife.⁴ But Ogun's importance at Ondo and Ilesha is strongly attested. At Ondo, unlike Abeokuta or Ibadan, the annual festival of Ogun is referred to as a major event in the public life of the town.⁵ Though references to Ilesha are relatively sparse compared with the rich documentation available for Ondo from 1875 onward, the CMS agent there wrote in June 1889 of "the annual festivity of Ifa . . . which with Ogun, wh[ose] festivity is always kept about six [months] after this, make the two great idols worshipped in common by the whole town from the king to the poorest man."⁶ Ifa and Ogun still structure the Ilesha year in this fashion, and the dominance of precolonial religion by these two *oriṣa* is strongly confirmed by the responses to a question put to household heads in a sample survey that I conducted in Ilesha in 1974: Ifa and Ogun each made up 26 percent of all *oriṣa* named as those worshipped traditionally in the household, followed by Osun at 8 percent and Orisa Onifon (the local equivalent of Obatala) at 7 percent.⁷ It so happens that the agents who provide us with information about the cults of these eastern Yoruba towns were themselves mostly Egba, and they

clearly understood that the cult profiles of this area were significantly different from what they knew at home in Abeokuta. So the first question is: Why is Ogun more prominent in the religious systems of eastern Yorubaland?

The second question concerns the nature of Ogun's presence in western Yorubaland. My initial reaction on collating the evidence of the CMS reports was one of surprise that in the whole southwestern area Ogun accounted for only 4 percent of references and was outstripped by Sango in the ratio 4:1, even though Sango was a deity associated with the Oyo enemies of the Egba.⁸ In Abeokuta itself, Ogun also came behind such *oriṣa* as Ifa, Obatala, Esu, Osun, Orisa Oko, and Yemoja. In Ibadan and the Oyo areas, Ogun came up somewhat more often but at 7 percent still did not reach more than half the level reported for the east. This was the more surprising since Ogun appears to occur far more often as the main element in personal names than any other *oriṣa* (with the possible exception of Ifa). Notable examples include Ogunbona and Ogundipe, the two *balogun* (war chiefs) who successively between the 1840s and the 1880s were the chief patrons and protectors of the CMS at Abeokuta; Ogunmola, the *Başorun* of Ibadan; Ogunkoroju, the *Balogun* of Ijaye who gave quiet support to the mission there; and Ogunbiyi, the first Lagosian chief to become a Christian. The explanation I shall propose will be partly a matter of religious *realities*, that Ogun was part of a more complex cultic division of labor in the Center and the West, and partly one of religious *appearances*, that Ogun was of a particularly immanent character, which reduced his saliency to the missionary gaze.

OGUN AND IRON

Ogun is most commonly glossed by the CMS journal writers as the god of iron and war, and the relations between these aspects have provided a primary focus for discussing Ogun's place in the cultural and political development of forest-belt West Africa. Ogun appears as god of iron in a more direct and unmediated sense than as god of war, since he is not merely *of* iron, in the sense of being the force or principle behind iron technology, but virtually iron itself, worshipped as a personal force. The epithet god of iron sounds analogous to such expressions as god of brass or god of palm nut, applied to Osun and Ifa, respectively, which missionaries sometimes used to make their point that the *oriṣa* were *merely* idols: inanimate material objects or artifacts taken to represent imaginary beings. Ogun is sometimes described in this way as god of stone,⁹ which refers to the blacksmith's anvil stone, taken as one of his symbols. But with iron, it seems less fitting to say that Ogun was represented by iron than that Ogun *was* iron. Perhaps this would explain why Ogun, despite the very personalized way in which he appears in myth, is never portrayed in carved human form, as such a representation could only be inferior to iron itself.¹⁰ Such thoughts appear to have been in the mind of the Ibadan catechist

James Barber when, in his report of a deep discussion with a diviner or *babalawo*, he first wrote “Ogun (the god of iron, which is of hunting and war),” and then crossed out the first “of,” so that it reads simply “Ogun (the god iron).”¹¹

This is consistent with the common practice of Ogun’s cult as CMS evangelists observed it. At Erinla, near Ondo, a man worships Ogun in the form of some iron implements with a piece of skin from an elephant’s tail,¹² and at Leki, on the Eastern Lagoon, a pastor encounters six men in an enclosure next to a house worshipping Ogun as “twelve guns arranged horizontally in a row, an animal having been sacrificed to worship them.”¹³ But what particularly underscores how much Ogun is identified with iron is that clear instances of Ogun worship are often described without Ogun being named as such—something that happens with no other deity. A Lagos pastor sees a dead fowl hanging over the anvil and bits of kola lying around in a blacksmith’s shop. Asked why he doesn’t eat them instead, the blacksmith replies that he must be “paying religious homage to his tools as such acts make him to be always lucky.”¹⁴ The German missionary J. A. Maser gives a more detailed account of a rather similar ritual at Abeokuta:

Abroad in the town, he encounters a family group gathered in a blacksmith’s shop for an oracular consultation. Seven “country hammers,” the blacksmith’s tools, are set up erect, and he addresses each in turn, breaking kola as he does so. As the pieces fall, the answers are lucky or not. The sacrificial fowl is held up in front of the hammers. As Maser retires, not wanting to disturb the ceremony, the blacksmith calls him back to partake of the kola, which he declines.

Maser does not say that the ritual here is addressed to Ogun, but this is confirmed when he calls back ten days later to find the blacksmith in the “house of Ogun” close by, “making *odun* [festival]” with his fellow worshippers.¹⁵ Elsewhere, in the absence of the clinching presence of the blacksmith, iron objects of worship can be only presumptively attributed to Ogun, though I think the presumption must usually be very strong, as with the calabash with a plate, an old rusty sword, a mug, and half of a pair of scissors that made up the idol of a man at Palma,¹⁶ or the “new god of iron” that Chief Olikosi of Ota set up in the center of his house.¹⁷ A case that is less certain is a reference to people rescuing their “gods of iron” from their houses during a fire at Abeokuta, for the plural may have indicated other deities, such as Orisa Oko or Osanyin, whose cult objects were also made of iron.¹⁸

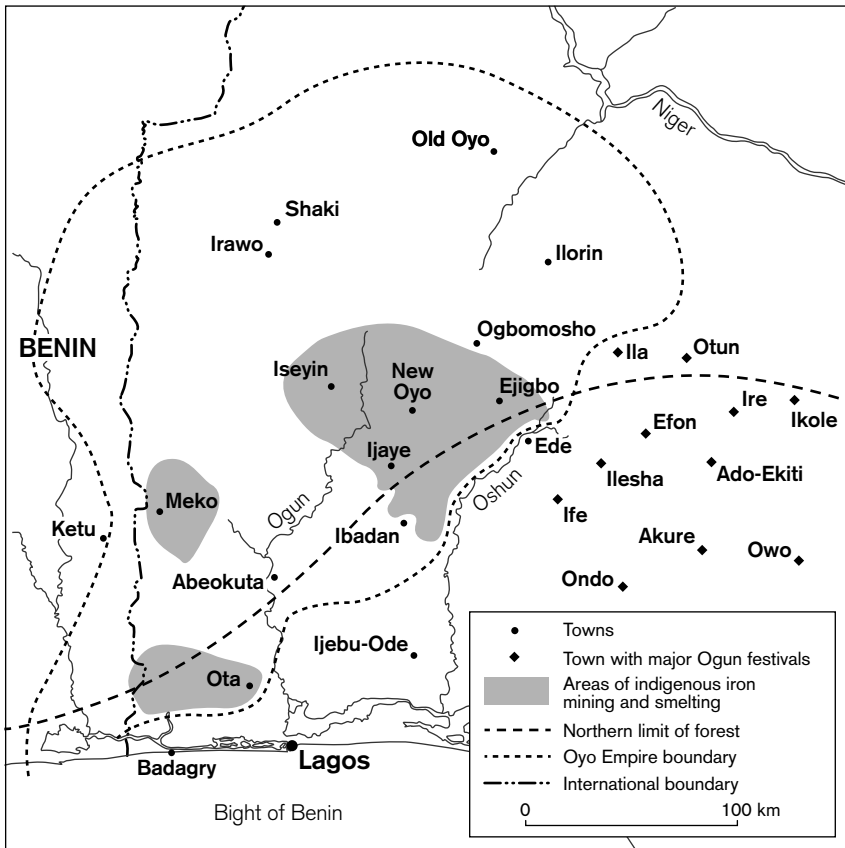
The links between Ogun and iron appear more directly in connection with blacksmiths, who are engaged in the mysterious transformations of ore and metal, than with other occupational groups, such as hunters, warriors, and farmers, who merely use iron tools. Here there is a very marked and curious bias in the CMS references. Although Ogun was more widely worshipped (both by individuals and as the major deity of the community) in the east, nearly all the references to blacksmiths, whether or not they also refer to Ogun, occur in documents relating to

central or western Yorubaland. This does not seem likely to have occurred randomly, and yet obviously there were many blacksmiths in the east, so it is a real puzzle that they are virtually missing from the detailed and continuous reportage that we have over more than thirty years from Ondo, for example.¹⁹

The most likely immediate reason has to do with the public saliency of blacksmiths, which would affect the frequency of missionary allusion to them. In central and western Yoruba, blacksmiths' shops are often mentioned in reports of public preaching about the town, for they were places where people liked to congregate, like markets, thus providing the evangelist with a ready-made audience. The processes of ironworking were also a rich source of useful metaphors. In one case the evangelist affects to accuse the blacksmith of cruelty for putting the iron in the fire and inflicting blows on it—"iron being worshipped by the people as the god of iron," he adds—and goes on to ask them: "To whom then . . . should we give thanks—He who makes the iron for our use or the iron which is made?"²⁰ In another case, a catechist chances on workers separating the dross from the pure iron and likens it to sin. "As this iron was useless before you smelted it, so is our body," he tells them. "We are to be purified before we are made fit for the kingdom of heaven and there is no furnace that would make us pure, but the blood of Christ which cleanseth from all sins."²¹

These two cases come from Ota and Ibadan, and apparently blacksmiths' shops were not the same kind of public place as this in Ondo. Weavers' sheds—again a venue suitable for the evangelist to make contacts²²—present something of a parallel case, being present in Ibadan and Abeokuta, but absent in Ondo. Here there is an obvious reason: the East lacked the tradition of men's weaving that existed among the Oyo and Egba.²³ Though this does not help us directly, it still suggests that regional comparison may clarify things. For as well as the contrasts between eastern and central/western Yorubaland in the prominence of the Ogun cult and in the frequency of reference to blacksmiths in missionary reportage, there is a third: the scale of ironworking activity itself. As map 1 shows, whereas the great civic festivals of Ogun are to be found in the East, especially in its forest regions, the centers of iron mining and smelting—the real seat of iron technology—are located in an arc running from the Awori country west of Lagos up into Egbado, to a large area of north-central Yorubaland between Ibadan, Iseyin, and Ogbomosho, possibly to Ilorin.²⁴

That blacksmiths' shops in the Center/West appear more prominently as public venues may be related to the practice here of a wider and more elaborate range of ironworking techniques, which included smelting. Though Eugenia Herbert in her comparative study of African ironworking has underscored the contrast between smelting and smithing, the correlations we have found for Yorubaland rather undermine her linkage of smithing with the public and smelting with the secret and isolated.²⁵ It was in the Yoruba East, which lacked a strong tradition of smelting, that blacksmiths appear to have worked inside their compounds, just as women did their weaving. Yet it was also here, where iron was most scarce



MAP 1. Yorubaland: Iron and Ogun.

because it was not locally produced and was imported from the smelting areas of the West and North,²⁶ that Ogun was held in the greatest honor.²⁷ For iron must have been particularly crucial in enabling agriculture and human settlement to take place in the formidable environment of the southeastern forests. *Eni pe Ilaje l'oko, ko ni irin ajo Ogun ye* (Whoever calls Ilaje a farm will not have Ogun to clear his journey's path) goes an Ilesha proverb, referring to a small village that was once the kingdom's capital before the foundation of Ilesha.²⁸ What this proverb declares, like the festivals of Ogun in towns such as Ilesha and Ondo, is how much the overall viability of the community depends on the use of iron. The festivals do this most emphatically through the parades of the male citizenry through the town, marshaled by their *egbe* or quarter-based bands of militia under their *ẹlegbe* chiefs, which are such a prominent feature of their title systems.²⁹ This tendency

to associate Ogun with the generality of the townsfolk rather than just with those whose work brings them into close contact with iron is perhaps the keynote of the cult of Ogun in eastern Yorubaland.

OGUN AS SNAKE: A LOST CULT?

Nothing that has been said so far—whether about the individual devotions of blacksmiths and others who worked with iron or about the communal importance of Ogun in eastern Yorubaland—challenges the notion, widespread in the literature, that (as R. C. Abraham's *Dictionary of Modern Yoruba* puts it) "Ogun is worshipped only by men, not by women." This may seem to make symbolic sense for a deity of iron and war, yet it is not true. Pierre Verger has given a detailed account of women's participation as "femmes dédiées à l'Oriṣa et qui chantent pour lui" in a festival of Ogun Igbo in the Nago villages of Iledo and Isede, and Margaret Drewal has described women possessed by Ogun not far away at Igbogila in Egbado.³⁰ For a more prosaic instance of female devotion to Ogun, there was the female butcher noted by E. M. Lijadu far away at Ondo in 1892.³¹ As she went into her stall in the market, she gathered up her iron implements, split kola and threw the pieces several times over them, and offered some incantations. To Lijadu's question, she said she was "consulting Aje the goddess of money through Ogun the god of iron [and that] Aje promises to send me many customers with much money to carry home after the market." This Ogun-Aje linkage is attested from elsewhere;³² and as a woman's ritual directed at personal wealth, it may perhaps be seen as practically analogous to the cult of Ori, which was popular among wealthy women in central and southwestern Yorubaland but apparently absent from the East.³³ As described here by Lijadu, such elements of the ritual as breaking kola over iron tools seem identical to those practiced by male workers with iron.

But the main way in which Ogun appears in the CMS journals as an object of women's worship is quite different: not as iron but as a snake. It was not exclusively a women's cult, though women were most active in it (as indeed in most forms of *oriṣa* worship). The most dramatic account of the cult of Ogun as snake comes from Ijaye in 1855:³⁴

It was the annual Ifa festival of the *Arẹ* Kurunmi, despotic ruler of the town, and large crowds had gathered before the gate of his compound. Most of them were said to be "worshippers of the orisa called Ogun or snake," for Kurunmi's late mother had been one of its principal devotees, and this was in remembrance of her. Lots of snakes of different sizes from different parts of the town were brought to "play" with Kurunmi, but he wouldn't allow them inside his house since (says the African catechist Charles Phillips) he was afraid of them. So they were displayed on a platform set up in front of it. The worshippers took them up and carried them in their arms: mild unless irritated, some were up to six feet long and as thick as a man's thigh. The people looked upon them with curiosity and praise.

Kurunmi's own premier *oriṣa* was Sango, and a rather similar (though reversed) family linkage of Sango and Ogun came up during a pastoral visit at Ota in 1855: a female devotee of Sango has a child dedicated to Ogun, whose snake is kept in a calabash, where it is fed with rats.³⁵

The cult was most publicly manifest when its members went about the town with their Ogun snakes, offering blessings in the god's name and receiving gifts (in essence, sacrifices) of cowries in return.³⁶ An African pastor in Abeokuta in 1852 met two women, "one of whom had a large snake curled round her neck, while the other as a crier went before singing and extolling Ogun the god of blacksmith [*sic*]."³⁷ Many years later another pastor, on the road to the Ibadan camp at Ikirun, met a "snake charmer" who had once even attended church at Ibadan with a Christian friend, and reproached him for "directing [people] to worship Ogun through the snake to earn his livelihood."³⁸ Back in Ibadan, a catechist told a woman sitting by the roadside with her snake and getting a few cowries from passersby that Ogun was not the true God to worship.³⁹ A traveling Methodist missionary was visited by a female "snake charmer" at Oyo in the early 1890s.⁴⁰ Our last glimpse of the cult is again in Ibadan, when a European woman missionary encounters "sitting by the roadside an old woman, an Ogun worshipper with a huge snake coiled round the body, and she asking alms of the people."⁴¹

This form of the cult of Ogun has gone almost unremarked in the secondary literature, save for the briefest passing reference in P. Amaury Talbot's *Peoples of Southern Nigeria* (1926) to "snake charmers, . . . who adore [Ogun] in the guise of a smallish snake called Mana-mana."⁴² This does not sound as if it derives from any very close acquaintance with the cult, since *mōna-mōna* means "python," which better fits the descriptions of the sometimes large snakes that occur in eyewitness reports from the nineteenth century. Evidently erased from the memory of Abraham's educated informants in Ibadan in the early 1950s (along with the memory that women also worshipped Ogun), it seems likely that it died out rather rapidly in the early twentieth century. The old woman whom Mrs. Fry met with her snake near Kudeti church in 1911 must have been one of a dwindling band. It looks likely that it died out sooner among the Egba than among the Oyo Yoruba: the sole Abeokuta reference is from the 1850s, whereas those for the Oyo areas continue into the 1880s and later. This seems supported by the confused reference to the cult in Rev. Tom Harding's summary account of Egba religion in 1888: he emphasizes the importance of Ogun in a listing of *oriṣa* that goes on to mention Orisa Oko and Yemoja, and right at the end notes that worship is also given "to a snake called Manumanu."⁴³ Harding's failure to link "Manumanu" explicitly with Ogun, if it is not due to misunderstanding or ignorance, suggests that this form of Ogun's cult was by then rare if not extinct at Abeokuta.

It is not easy, in the absence of evidence of other kinds from outside the CMS papers, to explain why Ogun's cult should take this form. But one final negative

clue gives us a little help. There is only one reference to Ogun as snake from outside the central and western areas, but it is an exception that seems to prove the rule that this cult was exotic to the east:⁴⁴

At Ondo in 1878 a man and a woman were seen to have brought from Ile-Ife several snakes which they publicly exhibited “as the god Ogun, blessing the people in its name . . . [and getting] large amounts of cowries in return.” But next day one of the quarter chiefs took against them when they started their display in his street, and threatened to cut the snakes to pieces. This triggered a popular clamor against them, and the *Lisa* [Ondo’s most powerful chief of the day] advised them to get out of town.

Since the site of Ile-Ife was all but deserted at this time, it seems quite likely that these two religious entrepreneurs were not themselves Ifes but Oyos from the adjacent settlement of Modakeke, where the cult must have been as prevalent as it was in Ibadan or Ijaye. However that may be, the Ondos clearly took it greatly amiss that strangers should come and present one of their most important deities in such an outlandish form.

So we need to seek an explanation in terms that apply specifically to the situation in central and western Yorubaland. Dahomey may seem a possible source, since it had two notable snake deities. There was the *vodun* Dangbe, represented by a large python at its major cult center at Whydah, and also worshipped along the lagoon eastward as far as Badagry;⁴⁵ and there was also the rainbow serpent Dan, otherwise known as Aido-Hwedo or (by the Yoruba) Osumare, whose origins were traced to the Mahi country north of Abomey.⁴⁶ But neither of these seems to have any affinity with Ogun (or with Gu, his Dahomean form). In any case, an explanation of a cult in terms of external origins is less helpful than one that deals with its intrinsic meaning.

Unfortunately, the lack of external evidence to supplement the thin accounts in the CMS journals prevents anything more than the most hesitant speculation. Snake symbolism in general can carry a number of different connotations, but one of the most widespread is of earth-rooted or chthonic power, and this would fit with the technologies of iron *production*, mining, and smelting, long practiced in central and western Yorubaland. Ogun as snake evidently had its heartland in the Oyo towns where Ogun, while not attaining the degree of civic recognition that it got in the iron-hungry East, was nevertheless an ancient cult, probably more so than Sango.⁴⁷ It was at Oyo in the 1950s that Peter Morton-Williams came across the *oriṣa* Alajogun, a refraction of Ogun known as the deity of fighting.⁴⁸ Alajogun, unlike Ogun himself, was represented in human form, and in one instance was accompanied by his wife Oke Ijemori, she standing with a snake around her neck (for she was said to play with them). Their children were hills (*oke*), and one wonders if iron-bearing hills were particularly intended. For what more appropriate as a symbol of this great power drawn from the earth than *mọna-mọna*, the python?

OGUN AND ORISA OKO

The prominence of any one of Ogun's potential meanings or functions in a particular place depends partly on local circumstances (such as the mining and smelting operations of the Center/West or the acute iron hunger of the East), but it is also affected by what other deities are present in any local complex of cults. By "local cult complex" I mean the ensemble of cults found in a particular place, which is likely to include both several *oriṣa* found more widely and others of more local currency, perhaps even locally unique. These complexes are the practical, concrete reality of Yoruba religion, rather than the pan-Yoruba pantheons—models or idealizations that give the *oriṣa* their particular characters, temporally and spatially standardized, and set them in a system of complementary relations with one another—that dominate the literature.⁴⁹

What is generally held to be distinctive of an *oriṣa* is also qualified by the fact that all *oriṣa* are required by their devotees to provide much the same range of general benefits: protection, health, guidance, children, wealth, and so on. This means that female *oriṣa* (such as the gentle and fecund river goddesses Osun and Yemoja) sometimes take on traditionally male qualities like fierceness, while *oriṣa* with predominantly male functions (such as Ogun or Sango) can also reward their female devotees with fertility.⁵⁰ The mobility of *oriṣa*, whether as a consequence of the migration of their ordinary adherents or through the promotional zeal of their priests, also promotes shifts in the character of *oriṣa*. An incoming *oriṣa* may find its special niche (as the deity of the new yam, or smallpox, or hunting) already occupied, or it may seek to carve out a new niche for itself. Even the thunder god Sango, who seems the most essentially male of deities, can come to be represented as female where he is a latecomer to a community that already has a male thunder deity.⁵¹ The unending push and pull between the homogenization and the differentiation of cults that takes place in the Yoruba religious marketplace means that no single cult can be considered in isolation.

As the god of the farm, whose main cult emblem was an iron stave made from hoe blades, Orisa Oko overlaps with Ogun in respect of the application of iron technology to agriculture. Though variously described as male or female, Orisa Oko is most commonly represented in myth as a hunter who turned to farming. His/her main cult center was at Irawo, a small town in the far northwest of Yorubaland, where there was an important shrine for the settlement of witchcraft accusations. According to the Rev. Thomas King, an Egba, Orisa Oko was the most esteemed and prominent deity worshipped by women at Abeokuta and was handed down in families, where its first acquisition "was always originate[d] from the accusation of witchcraft and sorcery."⁵² Initiation was expensive, but membership carried social privileges: devotees (recognized by red and white marks on the forehead) could not be seized for debt, might cross war lines, and were exempt from tolls.⁵³ The interdict against their coming into contact with corpses suggests the relevance of the same complex of ideas about pollution and death that pertain

to the cleansing role of the blacksmith's forge. A striking case of functional overlap at Abeokuta between Orisa Oko and Ogun was evident when, in order to promote cotton as a cash crop, the CMS introduced a roller gin to clean the raw cotton. Its erection and operation aroused great interest among the Egba, some reckoning it to be "a sort of mysteriously acting fieldpiece . . . for the use of the Egbas against their enemies," while others, contemplating it in silence, took it to be a manifestation of Orisa Oko.⁵⁴ In view of Ogun's celebrated adaptation to modern technology, it is noteworthy that in this instance from the mid-1850s it was Orisa Oko who took that part—as "a god represented by iron," explains our witness.

In the CMS reports from Ibadan, Orisa Oko figures rather differently. There is less emphasis on the elite status of Orisa Oko's devotees, and more on the communal importance of the cult. Because Abeokuta was founded as an amalgamation of many small towns, which kept each its cultic peculiarities, there was virtually no cult that embraced the whole town save that of Oro, the collective ancestors.⁵⁵ Ibadan's population was even more heterogeneous in its origins, but its early settlers were so scrambled that townwide festivals could coalesce more readily. The Egba pastor of Ibadan, Daniel Olubi, considered that, because "the whole town" was involved in them, the three principal deities of Ibadan were Orisa Oko, in whose honor "every gate and street are full of soup and pounded yams," along with Ogiyan (one of the "white deities," related to Obatala), and Oke'badan (Ibadan Hill, the *genius loci*).⁵⁶ Orisa Oko's importance, shown by his association with the New Yam festivities, rested on the Ibadan people's recognition of his key role in the annual reproduction of their community. When the second rains of 1883, much needed and expected, arrived in a nightlong downpour in mid-August, a pastor overheard many people in the street the next day attribute them to Orisa Oko, whose feast was due at the next new moon.⁵⁷

All this seems to be just what we would expect for the chief agricultural deity; and insofar as Ogun could also have agricultural functions, we can consider Orisa Oko to have taken some of the semantic space in the West that Ogun occupied in the East. The exact converse has been noted by J. R. O. Ojo in a western Ekiti town where Orisa Oko had been introduced from an Oyo source: finding Ogun already clearly associated with farming, Orisa Oko had to assume a much more general role, as healer and protector against witchcraft and the like.⁵⁸ Another illuminating case is provided by Ila-Orangun, the main Igbomina town, which stands on the border between the East (where Ogun is the major civic deity) and the Center/West (where Sango and Orisa Oko have a strong presence). Here, according to John Pemberton's careful analysis, Ogun stands in a complementary relationship to Orisa Oko as hunter to farmer, the two aspects of subsistence provision.⁵⁹ But the ceremonial placing of the New Yam ritual was not simply a matter of anchoring it to the festival of the main agricultural deity. While it *was* very widely attached to Orisa Oko in the Center/West and to Ogun in the East, other *oriṣa* figured too: most commonly Obalufon, but also Oro at Iseyin, Ifa at Ilesha, Oramfe at Ondo,

and even Sango at Ijaye.⁶⁰ Its linkage with a particular *oriṣa* seems to have been governed by local and practical considerations as much as by what was symbolically most appropriate, though in the towns of the East (as well as some old towns in the Center/West, such as Iseyin and Ede) Ogun was always bound into a ceremonial sequence that linked him with collective and royal ancestors, and with the forces of annual renewal, of which eating the New Yam was a powerful symbol.

OGUN AND SANGO

As a force to build empire, Ogun is challenged by Sango, the early *Alaḥin* of Oyo deified as the god of thunder. J. L. Matory has persuasively shown that Sango was much more than just the official cult of the Oyo regime: he was the very icon of the means and manner of the *Alaḥin*'s rule through his messengers (the *ilari*), the royal wives, and the Sango priests, who all stood symbolically as wives to the god-king as possessing husband.⁶¹ Matory goes on to contrast Ogun with Sango as a deity who was more effective as a pathfinder or culture hero than as a ruler, and whom myth represents as failing to sustain his marriage with Yemoja. This is fair enough for Oyo but does not capture the manner in which Ogun's cult realized its communal importance, particularly among the eastern Yoruba. The central feature is that, despite his linkage with royal ancestors, Ogun's was typically a civic rather than a royal cult: a deity worshipped "from the king to the poorest man," as M. J. Luke put it for Ilesha in 1889.⁶² A clear sign of this is the occurrence during Ogun festivals—as at Ilesha and Ila—of mock battles between palace and town chiefs, ritual dramas that present the expression and resolution of conflicts between the king and the people as lying at the heart of the public life of the community. At Ilesha, it was chiefs particularly connected with Ogun/iron who mediated the tensions between the king and the people.⁶³

In the 1820s the imperial order of Old Oyo gave way to seventy years of turbulence among its successor states and their neighbors, which Matory sees as an Age of Ogun following an Age of Sango. The newly dominant social forms of the period—the warlords (*ologun*) and their retainers or "war boys" (*omo-ogun*), their vast military households, their prominence in the title systems of new towns such as Ibadan, Abeokuta, and Ijaye—have been well described by historians.⁶⁴ Matory's is quite a Yoruba way of putting it, in terms of successive ages (*aiye*) that have each its distinct character, and there is some evidence that contemporaries saw it this way too. A *babalawo*, in discussion with an African catechist in Ibadan in 1855, put down the wars to God's having sent Esu (disorder) and Ogun (war) "to execute His vengeance on men upon the earth for their disobedience."⁶⁵ Two decades later, a rather similar diagnosis was made by another *babalawo*, also in Ibadan.⁶⁶ God had sent Ogun and Sopona (the god of smallpox) into the world to "render unto everyone according to his deeds." As he went on, "Ogun is armed with four thousand short swords, and he goes out daily on the earth to slay, for his meat is to drink the blood of the slain." The

babalawo ended by referring to Sango, “a very mighty god, and when he is about to go [into] the world, he is always cautioned by Ifa and Orisanla to deal gently with their own special worshippers.” So both Ogun and Sango, like Esu and Sopona, are here seen as destructive deities, in contrast to the saving deities Ifa and Orisanla (Obatala). But the overall message is less that Yoruba considered this as *uniquely* Ogun’s age than that they recognized Ogun as one of the major forces shaping it.

For as far as levels of individual devotion go, there is no evidence that Sango was displaced by Ogun. On the contrary, by the CMS evidence, Sango appears alongside Ifa as the most popular deity of late nineteenth-century Yorubaland, though less pan-Yoruba in the spread of his appeal than Ifa. Accounting for as many as 38 percent of all *oriṣa* referred to in Other Oyo towns (see table 3.1) and 27 percent in Ibadan—a difference explicable by Ibadan’s significant population of non-Oyo origin—Sango attains 16 percent at Abeokuta, and still reaches 8 percent, equal to Osun, in the East, right outside his home territory. References to Ogun run at much lower levels, except for the East (where Ogun stands at 14 percent). Though these two sets of figures for Ogun and Sango are misleading as direct measures of their relative importance, they do shed valuable light on the social character of the two cults. For I suggest that the number of reports of Sango expresses not merely his popularity but also the sometimes spectacular appearance of his cult and the zeal with which he was promoted, both of which gave it a very high profile in nineteenth-century Yoruba towns. Sango’s cult survived the collapse of the old imperial capital where it had been based, and it thrived vigorously in the new world of the warlords. It made its way through the belief of its devotees in its protecting power, through the way that it both frightened people and offered them relief from their fears, and through sheer predation, in the form of the purification fines or fees, backed by the threat of violence, that it levied after a house had been struck by lightning.⁶⁷ While priests of Ogun are never mentioned in the CMS reports⁶⁸ (except to the extent that a blacksmith might implicitly serve as one), priests of Sango are the next most frequently mentioned religious specialists after *babalawo* and Muslim *alfa*. The senior Sango priests at Ibadan were clearly formidable figures who had to be treated with circumspection by the ruling war chiefs of the town,⁶⁹ whereas the cult of Ogun does not appear as a distinct force in the politics of the town at all.

The adaptability of the Sango cult shows up equally at whichever end of its range we view it. As an instrument of rule, its potency was most evident at Ijaye, which until 1862 was Ibadan’s only rival as the military successor state to Oyo. Ijaye’s ruler Kurunmi—functionally a man of Ogun, if ever there was one—took the headship of the Sango cult himself and made it a mainstay of his regime. But Ijaye was an Oyo town, whose people already held Sango in awe. More impressive in its way was the extent to which Sango started to make inroads into Ogun’s heartland of the East, regions that war and trade had opened to Oyo influence as never before. At Ilesha by the late 1880s, the Sango cultists were wielding a new influence over the

king,⁷⁰ and their confident public praises of their god excited some popular resentment.⁷¹ The reasons for these developments at Ilesha are obscure, but for Ondo we have a much better picture. In the late 1870s Ondo was afflicted by a run of small-pox epidemics. Though Sango was said in 1877 to be “worshipped here by only a few . . . [and] looked upon with some degree of contempt by the mass of the people,” two years later he had “many worshippers,” who conducted an impressive festival.⁷² In 1879 and 1880 the chiefs gave large amounts to some newly arrived Sango cultists for sacrifices to expel the disease. The sheerchutzpah of the Sango people in promoting their god as the solution to the epidemic—something for which he was not previously known—can only be wondered at, especially when they called at the CMS compound afterward to mock the Ondos for their gullibility.⁷³

Ogun’s relevance to the public sphere was realized differently from Sango’s. In all areas of Yorubaland, the nexus of killing, pollution, purification, and retributory justice was cardinal to it. Kurunmi, who avoided close contact with his mother’s cult of Ogun as snake, is reported to have turned to Ogun on two occasions, which both involved the claim to righteous vengeance. An adulterous wife of his was killed, and her organs were torn out “in the front of his house before his Ogu, his god of iron”; and an old woman was killed for an unspecified offense at his Ifa festival, again before his Ogun, who this time received his usual sacrifice of a dog.⁷⁴ At Ota the place for executing criminals was a little grove of trees near one of the town gates, known as Ojugun (The Face of Ogun).⁷⁵ Ogun’s role as the sanction of justice, which was most usually expressed in the practice of swearing on iron, is closely linked to his role in purifying the just shedder of blood. Here every blacksmith’s shop was potentially a shrine: after the *egungun* at Ibadan had executed the adulterous wife of a chief, the actual killer had to sleep in a blacksmith’s shop for several nights, to be released from blood guilt.⁷⁶ Both sides at the Kiriji battlefield had shrines of Ogun whither heads of the slain were taken,⁷⁷ which sound similar in their general form to the hunters’ shrines of Ogun marked out by the cheekbones of elephants.⁷⁸ That of the Ekitiparapo was a grove in the middle of the camp where sacrifices were made, and there was also a smithy that could serve as a sanctuary, like other blacksmiths’ shops.⁷⁹ Ogun, even in relation to the butchery of war, was far from being gratuitously bloodthirsty. He was not even always the deity who received human sacrifices: when the war staff (*opagun*) was propitiated at the beginning of Ibadan’s campaigns, it was Oranyan, not Ogun, for whom a man was killed.⁸⁰ Unlike Sango’s, the cult of Ogun was not predatory.

OGUNDIPE AS MAN OF OGUN

Yoruba religion is distinguished equally by the variety of its *oriṣa* and the reality of personal cultic choice. It has long been suggested that as a result there might be a close match between the personality of the devotee and the character of his god. This

idea is strikingly confirmed in the case of that individual worshipper of Ogun about whom the CMS missionaries tell us the most, the Egba chief Ogundipe. A revealing incident is told by the English missionary J. B. Wood, who reckoned him a friend and had many dealings with him.⁸¹ Ogundipe trained as a blacksmith, and even into his old age—he was now around seventy—continued to work at his forge. Wood once called to see him and knew he was at work from the smoke curling up in the evening air from the back of the house. Since no member of Ogundipe's household dared to interrupt him in his smithy, Wood had to wait and finally had to leave after more than an hour without seeing him. The story discloses not only Ogundipe's commitment to his "mystery" but the awe, even fear, in which his people held him. Like other great warlords, he maintained a large, polygynous household, which he ruled as its absolute master. If a wife or a slave absconded, he would pursue his rights with ferocious persistence, and on at least two occasions he killed adulterous wives.⁸² His end was tragic. In failing health and fearing plots against him, he kept revolvers and a rifle always at his side, and he shot one of his wives, whom he suspected of poisoning his sleeping mat.⁸³ His death a few days later was suspected to be by his own hand—or perhaps someone in his household could stand his rage no longer.

If all this recalls the myths of Ogun's propensity for violence and his own fraught marriage, other sides of Ogundipe's life fit more positive aspects of the mythical template. The Methodist missionary J. F. T. Halligey called him "not only a brave warrior, but a very skillful mechanic—quite an artist in metal work": he made his own staff of brass, ornamented "with curious figures."⁸⁴ Ogundipe's artistic interests extended to music as well as to metalwork: he composed songs, which he set to his own music and had sung by a choir of his wives. Halligey actually met him "engaged in one of those interesting rehearsals," conducting some twenty-five women who accompanied their singing with a gentle rhythmical swaying and clapping. The words of the song, alluding to recent conflict in the town, were as follows:

They who destroy other men's houses really destroy their own;
The war chiefs sent their men to pull down the houses of the white men.
The houses of the war chiefs must now come down.
Cowards and thieves these war chiefs are.
Strangers who visit us in peace they plunder.
Ah! When the Dahomians come, these chiefs will flee.

We seem here to have a synthesis between the topical chants associated with the Oro cult (performed by men),⁸⁵ the Christian practice of conducted choral singing, and perhaps an element of praise poetry (*oriki*, performed by women). The expressed sentiment of retributive violence, of course, is most thoroughly Ogun's.⁸⁶ And even as they sang their husband's praises, the women could not have forgotten that like Ogun he was capable of doing terrible things in his anger.

Yet despite Ogundipe's capacity for violence, J. B. Wood insisted that in the public life of Abeokuta "he was admired, feared and *respected*. As a judge he was well-liked, since his judgments were regarded as fair, whilst his charges were moderate."⁸⁷ The Egba attributed the failure of the second rains of 1887, shortly after his death, to the passing of a great man.⁸⁸ He had first come to attention in the 1850s as the lieutenant of the enlightened chief Ogunbona, on whose death he became in turn the chief patron of the missionaries. He staunchly supported them during the crisis of 1867, when the Europeans were expelled from Abeokuta in response to the policies of the British governor of Lagos. Ogundipe's policy was always to keep trade routes to Lagos open and to encourage cultural innovation. When he argued, against those who wanted to maintain the blockade of the river linking Abeokuta and the lagoon, that "the river was made by God and is for him, and that whatever is made by God is made for the Common use of all his creatures,"⁸⁹ the Ogun theme of open roads converges with ideas of Christian enlightenment.⁹⁰ Ogundipe was widely known by the sobriquet *Alatiṣe*,⁹¹ a name that alludes to a proverb promoting the ideal of active responsibility: its meaning comes close to "a man's got to do what a man's got to do."⁹² Toward the end of his life he modified it to the title *Alatunṣe* (The One Who Restores Things).⁹³ Though this seems to allude directly to his role in the installation of an *Alake* (the Egba paramount) in 1884, it also clearly echoes a recurrent missionary theme: that their preaching was about *atunṣe aiye*, "the restoration of the world" from its present state of confusion.⁹⁴

OGUN IN HISTORY

Of the two main ways in which anthropology can be historical—in dealing with the past as other and in addressing the problem of change—this chapter has concentrated on the former, attempting to give an account of the cult of Ogun as it was in the second half of the nineteenth century. The variations that have concerned us have chiefly been variations across space, not across time, and particularly as they link with variations in levels of missionary reportage of different *oriṣa*. The problem of Ogun's greater prominence in the Yoruba East proved less intractable than that of the apparently low level of his reportage in the Center/West when compared with that of some other *oriṣa*, notably Sango. To some extent, functions ascribed to Ogun in the East are taken up by other *oriṣa* in the Center/West, such as the agricultural deity Orisa Oko. The case of Sango, however, was quite otherwise: it was a matter less of competition for the same functional niche than of a general challenge posed by a cult that was distinctly organized, aggressively promoted, and endowed with formidable sanctions. Ogun, by contrast, was a cult much more implicitly grounded in a range of mundane activities that were vital to the welfare of the community, all arising from the perceived importance of iron. These respective characteristics ensured that Sango

would get the maximum publicity in missionary reports whereas Ogun would tend to be underreported.

When the otherness of past practice is clearly shown—as here, most strikingly, with the largely female cult of Ogun as snake—the problem of change soon demands attention too. The conundrum here is that, although it is the differences between present and past that pose the problem, the past has to be seen as providing essential conditions for the present. The great fact about Ogun's recent history is his singular relative success, over a period in which *oriša* cults in general have been in marked decline, in adapting to the circumstances of modernity. Whereas Orisa Oko has declined with the marginalization of subsistence agriculture and the Sango cult has lost its most potent sanctions, Ogun never depended on such sanctions and still possesses a large field in which he is the implicit controlling force. Though some of his areas of functional relevance have shrunk in importance—subsistence farming, hunting, local warfare, and mining/smelting operations—there has been a vast expansion in others, such as the use and repair of iron implements. If we see Ogun qua iron in the center of the picture, then it is a shift away from the producer to the user end of iron technology. I suggest that the demise of Ogun's snake cult was an aspect of this shift. Most notable of all, perhaps, have been the uses of iron in relation to modern travel, where Ogun's traditional connection with the open road has been reaffirmed. The nexus of mechanics, drivers, motor-park touts (*agbero*), party thugs, and so on—the milieu memorably depicted in Wole Soyinka's play *The Road*—extends back to some of the values of the nineteenth-century war boys.

How far the modern manifestation of Ogun has been affected by his perception as a culture hero or as the archetype of the artist, as Soyinka has expressed it,⁹⁵ is hard to say. Suffice it to note that, whatever his personal religious beliefs, Soyinka stands directly in a tradition that runs back to the central figures of late nineteenth-century Egba Christianity. His great-grandfather, the Rev. J. J. Ransome-Kuti, was doubtless among the clergy and elders whom the Rev. Tom Harding assembled at Ake church in 1888, the year after Ogundipe's death, to provide collective answers to a questionnaire about Egba religion and who gave it as their view that Ogun was "the chief of all the many gods of the Yoruba people; . . . when other gods are consulted, their reply is 'worship Ogun.'"⁹⁶ The aggregate evidence of the CMS archive is hardly compatible with quite such a sweeping view. But perhaps we may interpret the opinion as a sign for the future as well as a statement about the past, as showing that a body of leading Yoruba Christians was already prepared to regard Ogun as an acceptable symbol of some widely shared values of their culture.