

OLÓKUN MYTHOLOGY AND SOCIO-AESTHETICISM OF ORÍ-OLÓKUN

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Abstract

Orí-Olókun, a brass sculpture, excavated from Olókun grove in Ile-Ife in 1910 by Leo Frobenius and his team, is a well-known antiquity. This precious work of art represents the totality of Olókun, the Yorùba goddess of the sea. Olókun is also referred to as the deity of health, wealth and prosperity. Orí-Olókun figure is not the only symbol of Olókun cult and worship, but a proper understanding of the socio-aesthetic values of Orí-Olókun figure speaks volumes about the mythology of Olókun and its importance to creativity in Yorùba art. Therefore, this paper seeks to provide an etymology of Olókun in relation to the Orí-Olókun aesthetic using historical and formal analysis with a view to throwing light on the relationship between Yorùba art and religion, and the influence of Olókun beyond art for art's sake.

Keywords: Olókun, Olókun myths, Orí-Olókun figure, socio-aestheticism, Yorùba art

Introduction

The Orí-Olókun figure is one of the most symbolic and popular of the classical brass masterpieces of Ife art and Yorùba sculpture. The circumstances that led to this popularity are obvious- Leo Frobenius and his team in 1910, excavated for a period of three weeks, some Ife masterpieces, which included Orí-Olókun figure which was from the Olókun grove in Ile-Ife and he published in 1913 his discoveries in *Voice of Africa* (Volume 1), which attracted archaeologists, ethnologists and socio-cultural anthropologists.

Willet (1960) corroborated this by asserting that the most famous of the finds was the brass head known as Olókun in the Olókun Grove. He affirms further that Frobenius bought it for six pounds and a bottle of whisky with an agreement that he will keep the copy and return the original, though, Underwood and Fagg (1950) claim that the Ori-Olókun which was later displayed in the Ife Museum was not the original one. Though Willet insists (1960) that there was no evidence that Frobenius perpetrated the substitution but he concludes that the original of the Olókun head has never been found.

The figure, which is a naturalistic representation, has facial characteristics that are very realistic with eyes, nose, and lips in life-like proportions to each other. According to Bachmann (2024) the figure depicts the head (ori) of the deity Olókun or an Ọ̀nì, king of Ife. However, in this paper the head will be regarded as belonging to Olókun the Yorùba goddess of the sea.

Olókun is described in the Ifá divination corpus, Ọ̀túá Méjì as:

Olókun sẹ̀nì adé / Olókun the royal being

A-gbódò-jòba./ The one who reigns supreme in the waters.

(Abimbola, 1977:73)

The statement above, points to Olókun as a deity who inhabits the depth of the sea. The deity is associated with health, wealth and prosperity. Olókun embodies motherhood, and the waves and tides of the sea fall under her realm (originalbotanca.com). She is rich in majesty and sovereignty, a symbol of immense wisdom, strength and perseverance. These and other transcendent attributes of Olókun are why contemporary artists in Nigeria and diaspora, whose focus is Yorùba artistry, have been depicting the water goddess along various socio-religious themes (See Plate 1).

Since we cannot isolate the Orí-Olókun figure from the Olókun goddess, an etymology of the Olókun mythology will provide the evidence of oral literature for proper evaluation of the socio-aestheticism of the Orí-Olókun figure, through its beauty, visual and creative symbolism.



Plate. 1: *Olókun* (Yoruba Sea Goddess). Size 10 x12 cm. Mixed media, 2014 by Kehinde Adepegba. The artwork depicts Olókun and her affluence and influence. Source: Imago Mundi Collection

Olókun Mythology and Etymology

Olókun is one of the scores of gods and goddesses in the Yorùba pantheon. The exact number of Yorùba deities has not been ascertained. Some of the Orìṣà once lived as humans before they were deified. Corroborating this, Brain (1980:197) says there are hundreds of Yorùba gods, or Orìṣà and they form a complex pantheon, which comes under a Supreme Being and includes the souls of those dead persons who are supposed to have had supernatural powers during their lifetime. Olókun is one of those. She shares similarities with Ọṣun, Ọṣà, Ọbà and Ọya who were great women who once lived as human beings and later became deified as water goddesses. They are still being worshipped in different parts of Yorubaland and in the Diaspora till today.

According to the popular song below, Olókun is superior to these other water divinities both in influence and affluence.

Olókun làgbà omi, / Olókun is the greatest of all waters,
Omi gbogbo, ẹ fìbà f'Olókun / All waters must pay homage to Olókun
Olókun làgbà omi. / Olókun is the greatest of all waters

Same attributes are underlined in Otua Meji, as recorded by Abimbola (1977:73):

Àtomi, àtàgbàrá / Waters, mild and turbulent
Ẹ wá f'Orí balẹ f'Olókun, / Pay homage to Olókun,
Òkun layaba omi. / Òkun is the queen of all waters.

Òkun (sea) is perceived as both the water as well as the Olókun (deity). The movements of the body of òkun are both the physical and spiritual manifestation of the spirit of Olókun dwelling in it. Olókun is the owner of the sea as her name implies. However, some references in oral literature posit that Olókun is a male god. For instance, Elebuibon (2004) in a story of “Odebiyi, the Olókun’s Hunter”, describes Olókun as a male. Olókun is also a name given to any child born with a birth net wrapped around his hand from elbow to the arm (Adeoye, 1971:41). Despite these references, Olókun is largely recognised as a female personage. Idowu (1996:14) also affirms that Olókun, “the goddess of the sea”, (a female Neptune) is one of the divinities of Yorùbaland. However, Olókun is considered as androgynous, both masculine and feminine in nature (Oshaeifa.com)

The mythology of Olókun’s deification is embedded in Ile-Ife history. There are various examples of such oral stories. One of them is recorded by Ifá Temple Newsletter (2001:2): Olókun a beautiful damsel married Odùduwà, the progenitor of the Yorùba race. They were fond of each other and lived happily until Odùduwà took a second wife. As a result, the relationship went sour. Olókun, in anger and frustration, having been humiliated and embarrassed by Odùduwà’s second wife, went away taking all she could carry. Since she was unhappy and bitter, living became unbearable for her and as a result transformed into the water now called òkun (sea).

This transformation did not bring her life to an end; rather as a water deity, she became richer and more powerful. Many worshippers who desired to be rich sought her favours. However, Olókun in her state as a water goddess longed for the beauty of Ile-Ife. Therefore, she sent a messenger to Òrúnmìlà, the Yorùba god of divination, to come and keep her company. Òrúnmìlà, who honoured her invitation, was overwhelmed by her great wealth and the comfort given him during his stay with her. The comfort and hospitality of Olókun made Òrúnmìlà forget his primary responsibilities and he could not return to Ile-Ife for twenty years.

A profound relationship developed between the two of them. And as man and wife they were bestowing blessings of prosperity on those who showed purity of heart and humility of spirit. Ọrúnmìlà was the diviner for Olókun and this made her bestow great wealth and other social advantages on all men and women who sought her. Olókun did not prosper any seeker of blessing until confirmed by Ifá. Ifá is the repository of wisdom who sheds light on hidden issues. Ifá, as described by Elebuibon (2004: vii) as:

Akéré finú sọgbón /The tiny embodiment of wisdom
Akó ẹran tí sòkú alé ànà dààyè / The one who resuscitates yesterday's corpse
Ẹlà Ìsòdè / Ẹlà of Ìsòdè
Tí kọmọ lóràn bí iyèkan ẹni. / The one who illuminates with wisdom like the
 siblings of one's mother.

Since Ifá was very close to Olókun, Olókun now signified profound wisdom accentuated by Ọrúnmìlà the father of Ifá. The union of Ifá and Olókun was not merely a convergence of two deities; it was a profound fusion of wisdom and mystery (Olaiya, 2024). This existing relationship is why Ifá is often referred to as: Ifá Olókun, a sọrò dayọ (Ifá, Olókun's ally, the bringer of joy).

Olókun, now a principal divinity, still does those things she did in the past. Even as a spirit being, she is embodied today in many human virtues such as wisdom, patience, endurance and discipline. She also governs material wealth, psychic abilities, dreams, mental health and water-based healing. This good character (ìwà) is believed by the Yorùbá to be reflected in beauty (ẹwà) hence they say ìwàlẹwà (character is beauty). Olókun is beautiful in all aspects. Thus Olókun, according to Ben-Amos (1995:68), manifest beauty in all its forms: graceful movement in dance, 'sweet' songs, elaborate shrine decoration and rich fabric. Particularly, beautiful women adorned with precious beads worship her. Little wonders that women, who are a symbol of beauty and fertility in African societies, are the ones who worship Olókun.

The second myth is that of Olókun and a poor Ọḍẹ Afàwònyànyàn, ọḍẹ ẹbá òkun (the hunter who stretches his net to catch his prey (fishes) along the banks of the sea). One of the Ifá verses further emphasises the wisdom, wealth and protection offered by Olókun. Ọḍẹ Afàwònyànyàn planned to catch Olókun's children (fishes) having found their abode on one of his expeditions. Olókun who was aware of the hunter's plans as revealed and advised by her diviners placed a great quantity of money, some beautiful maidens, children and assorted clothing at different spots on the way to her abode. On the d-day, the hunter, who was confronted by these beautiful things that were displayed to tempt him, brushed them aside and continued on his mission to catch the shoal of fishes from Olókun. Olókun was surprised by the stubborn determination of the poor hunter not to be diverted by these riches and she submerged him in the waters. In this story, Olókun teaches the virtues of

contentment and we see her as a wealthy goddess who will give everything to protect her children (Okedokun, 2010).

Her majesty is emphasised in oral literature. Òtúá Méjì as recorded by Abimbola (1977:73) says:

*Ojú òkun ò ní burú, / No matter how settled the surface of òkun,
Kó ma lee fẹ́ ilẹ́lẹ́ ilẹ́lẹ́ lábénú; / Movement goes on underneath the surface
Awàlâwúlú ojú ọrun kò hu koóko; / The surface of the sky does not grow weed;
Ọnà ẹgbàlẹ̀ ọ yá kù wìrì wọ / The way to the shrine is difficult to tread
Fún àwọn ọmọ ẹlẹgbẹ̀rì; / For the non-initiates
A díá fun Olókun sẹ̀nì adé, / Divined for Olókun the royal being
A-gbódò-jọba. / The one who reigns supreme in the waters*

These lines simply reveal the ebullient nature of Olókun the royal being who reigns in the depths of the waters and reigns supreme over all other water goddesses. It is believed that her splendour is inscrutable hence also this Yorùba aphorism:

*Ẹ̀nikan kìí rídíí òkun, / No one gets to the bottom of sea
Ẹ̀nikan kìí rídíí ọ̀sà / No one gets to the bottom of lagoon
Ọmọ́nigèlègélẹ́ fídí ẹ̀ pamọ. / Cassytha filiformi plant hides its roots*

Another popular proverb: Ayé lòkun, èniyàn lẹ̀sà (The earth is as vast as the sea, humans are as bounteous as the lagoon) shows the massive nature of òkun compared with humans as abundant as they are. Olókun's majesty, splendour, influence and affluence as the owner of òkun are undeniable.

Nevertheless, the supremacy of Olódùmarè (the Supreme Being) as the head of the Yorùba pantheon of countless gods remains. Every being must have recourse to Olódùmarè as the final arbiter because the gods (orisa) only serve as intermediaries between Olódùmarè and men. This song corroborates Olódùmarè's supremacy:

*Mo fòkun weri / I wash my head with sea water
Mo fòsà wẹ̀sẹ̀ / I wash my legs with lagoon water
Ẹ̀ni Olódùmarè wẹ̀ ló mọ́ roro / The one that is clean is the one washed by
Olódùmarè.*

Olókun's majesty draws people to Olódùmarè, the Supreme Being. Her followers pay obeisance to Olódùmarè through the goddess.

Olókun and Socio-aestheticism of Orí-Olókun Figure

It is evident from the above that the Orí-Olókun figure ‘discovered’ by the German explorer, Leo Frobenius in 1910 is an important example of Yorùba sculpture. The discovery of this and other artefacts serves as evidence of Olókun worship among the Yorùba especially in Ile-Ife, where the Olókun story did begin.

Today, Olókun veneration and her shrines are not limited to Ile-Ife, but are also found in different places of Yorubaland and particularly in places near the sea where her worshippers are concentrated. According to Awolalu (1979) Olókun or Malòkun³- the lord of the see or divinity that is in the sea- is given prominent worship in Ugbi and Igo-Egunrin in Okitipupa Division, in Itebu-Manuwa (an Ilaje town in Ijebu Province) and in some parts of Lagos State and Ile-Ife. Awolalu affirms that water shrines, which are common in riverine areas, are erected on the banks of rivers, lakes or lagoons to worship water spirits like Òsun, Yemoja, Ọ́lòsà and Olókun.

Olókun is venerated among the Benin in the present Edo State, which shares historical affinity with the Yorùba, and in Togo and the Republic of Benin². Olókun is also worshipped by the Yorùba in diasporas in the Caribbean countries like Cuba, Trinidad and Tobago, etc. Rosen (1989:44) emphasises that the Edo people of Nigeria believe that Olókun (god of the sea), is a powerful and benevolent deity who can bring children, health, riches, and other blessings to those who worship her. The Orí-Olókun figure is a visual representation of Olókun (see Plate. 2). Lawal (1987) noted that in most traditional African sculptures, the head is the most prominent because in real life, it is the most vital part of the human body. Hence the proportional ratio of head to body in human figure depictions by Yorùba artists is usually 1:3 or 1:4 as against the 1:7 or 1:8 usual human proportions. Lawal states further that the human head is worshipped as the seat of a man’s personality and destiny. This belief is so strong among the Yoruba that an altar or shrine called *ilé orí* (see Plate. 3) for the veneration of a person’s inner head is created by individual as a physical representation and embodiment of the spirit of his or her destiny.

Woman has always been an important subject in Yorùba art (Adepegba, 2009:6). According to Brain (1980:240), the ideals of female beauty are embodied in Yorùba art. The Orí-Olókun, rendered in the celebrated naturalism that characterises other Ife brass and terracotta works, is both an object of worship, and an image of Olókun’s beauty.

¹ Malòkun is the Ìlajẹ dialect meaning Olókun. Ìlajẹ is one of Yorùba sub-groups like Ègbá, Ìjẹbú, Àwòrì, etc.

² The Yorubaland before it was balkanised by the British and French government, spread to parts of Togo and Republic of Benin in West Africa.



Plate 2: Image of Orí-Olókun brass head.
Source: *Revising History Through the Arts*,
P 38



Plate 3: Ilé orí (altar for the inner head). Source:
Tim Hamill, 2024

Olókun's Beauty and Her Worship

As an object of worship, the figure reveals Olókun as a graceful divinity. One can feel her eminence from the robust rendition. The Orí-Olókun figure was a means of venerating the charitable goddess. In many African traditional cultures art is the principal means of the expression of religious ideas (Smith, 1980). The crown-like headdress with a plume, similar to some other Ife heads, emphasises the royal status and esteemed individuality of Olókun both as a human and a goddess. It probably served as an altar image in the Olókun shrine. The sophistication and technology of this artwork like other Ife heads establish the genius of the Yorùba artist. Aesthetic principles such as balance, rhythm and emphasis are observed in the rendition of Orí-Olókun. The piece of evidence that Olókun was a beautiful woman was visually re-enacted in the beautiful creation of Orí-Olókun brass head.

Visual and Creative Symbolism

The choice of Orí-Olókun as the name for the experimental visual art workshop in Ile-Ife in 1968, which was masterminded by Michael Crowder and led by Solomon Wangboje, was apposite and made the figure more popular in post-independence Nigeria. It is not a mere coincidence that this experiment took place in Ile-Ife. Ile-Ife has remained the soul of Yorùba artistic heritage and has had a major influence on the art of other Yorùba city-states. In addition Orí-Olókun is a symbol of man's interaction with nature and his environment. The social-aesthetic importance of the Orí-Olókun figure is the core of the Orí-Olókun experimental workshop³ where many indigenous artists were developed, among whom are Wale Olajide, Rufus Orísayomi, Peter Badejo, Adeniji Adeyemi and Ademola Williams. Adepegba (1995:96) reveals that Orí-Olókun artists have followers and apprentices who in turn have been influencing many young artists. This is one examples of how Orí-Olókun excels as a significant figure in Yorùba art.

The social-aestheticism of the Orí-Olókun concept is revealed in multidimensional and creative uses of the figure vis-à-vis religion and worship, education, art and architecture, and communication of values. University of Ife now Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife blazed the trail by using Orí-Olókun as the university logo in simplified two-dimensional format (see Plate 4). This figure is symmetrically emblazoned in the centre of an open book hallowed by rays of knowledge, reflecting 'learning and culture' which is the motto of the university. Here Orí-Olókun represents education and knowledge. A Yorùba language periodical titled "Olókun" (now defunct) in 1981 employed the Orí-Olókun figure for the design of its masthead (see Plate 5). It was a magazine rich in Yorùba language, and literary ideas, symbolised by the depth and wealth of Olókun. Orí-Olókun also served as the logo of the Second All Africa Games held in Nigeria in 1973 emphasising the relationship between art and sports.

According to Archibong (2008), Orí-Olókun is presently the insignia of the Nigerian Institute of Architects (NIA). This projects creatively beauty and stability. A postage stamp (Plate 6) by the colonial government pays homage to the quality of Ife art through the Orí-Olókun. The stamp was used for overseas air letters and cards since the late 50s and early 60s. This reflects the communication potentials of Orí-Olókun. It has been variously used as the logo of art or culture related organisations, the title of a journal among others. Even beyond the shores of Nigeria, many young artists have been fascinated by the Orí-Olókun figure such that they continue to imitate the naturalistic work in their artworks.

³ Orí-Olókun experimental workshop included visual artists, dramatists and writers



Plate 4: Black and white logo of Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife

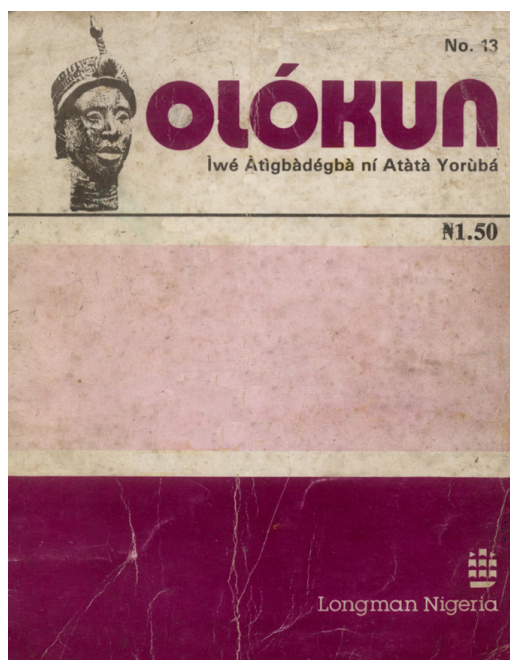


Plate 5: A Yorùba language periodical titled *Olókun*. Source: Longman Nigeria Plc 2009.



Plate 6: Orí-Olókun reproduced on Nigeria postage stamp.
Source: *Tradition and Creativity in Tribal Art*, 1969

Image in Plate 7 is a good example of Orí-Olókun figure imitation by a male Cameroun brass-caster. This work is a sharp contrast to the naturalistic canon of Ife art. It reveals the inability of the artist to capture the naturalism of the original. Though, the work appears like the Ife art but it is more of a contemporary caricature of the original, which is a form of art now common in Africa.



Plate 7: A copy of Orí-Olókun reproduced by a Cameroun brass-caster.
Source: *Tradition and Creativity in Tribal Art*, 1969

Cultural Rejuvenation and Restitution

The Orí-Olókun concept has led to a number of cultural experiments. This cultural resurgence in the name of Orí-Olókun has led to calls for the restitution of stolen Nigerian artefacts. In 1978, Wole Soyinka and Olabiyi Yai, both of the University of Ife, travelled to Brazil to retrieve the stolen Orí-Olókun from the house of an architect and collector where it was purportedly located. Finding their way into the house of the architect for a lunch, the said original Orí-Olókun was successfully 're-stolen', only to be discovered that it was one of the souvenirs from the British Museum. It was made of clay and covered with a coating to look like copper (Steinglass, 2006). In the same vein, as reported by Okpanku (2004), Atiwuron Cultural Group produced Orí-Olókun, a multi- naira film specially written to call for the restitution of Nigerian artefacts. The producer of the film believed nothing was too much to spend towards the restitution of the stolen works. Orí-Olókun, therefore, has inspired a series of attempts by African states to recover treasures held by European museums. Orí-Olókun has been a powerful tool of communication in cultural rejuvenation and dialogue.

Conclusion

The Orí-Olókun figure is an image of the fundamental nature of the Olókun goddess and her worship. Olókun is only one of the numerous divinities in Yorùba religion. One of the common factors in Yorùba religion is the use of sculpture in the service of the gods. Every god has its peculiar artistic symbols whether assembled or created.

The Orí-Olókun and other beautiful objects discovered in the Olókun grove in 1910 are peculiar to the goddess. Orí-Olókun is the ultimate image of Olókun's beauty and majesty. Having looked at the mystery and mythology of Olókun, the prime deity of the sea, one can now understand the socio-aestheticism of this magnificent figure vis-à-vis its beauty, visual and creative symbolism, a tool for cultural rejuvenating dialogue and communication of values

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