ORÍKÌ ÒRÍṢÀ: THE YORUBA PRAYER OF PRAISE

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A recent article on prayer in the traditional religion of the Yoruba people of West Africa quotes with approval the complaint made by Shorter in 1975 that insufficient attention has been given to the prayers of African traditional religion generally. The writer goes on to treat of Yoruba petitionary prayer which he describes as "the totality of Yoruba traditional prayer par excellence".1 Prayer, of course, can be understood in the narrow sense of requesting favours from beings belonging to the suprasensible world. In its wider sense, however, it includes such sentiments as praise and thanksgiving. The purpose of the present paper is to make a further contribution to the study of Yoruba traditional prayer by considering in particular the Yoruba prayer of praise.

Yoruba praise-prayer is found at its most elaborate in the communal worship of the Òrîṣà. The Òrîṣà are deified remote ancestors and/or natural forces.2 These divinities have inspired lengthy hymns of praise which are among the finest religious and literary products of Yoruba culture. The scale of this form of prayer can be judged from the description of a ceremony for Sàngò, the god of thunder, in Oyo Town, Nigeria. For the whole duration of a procession in his honour a priestess chants his praises and continues to do so for some twenty minutes after it reaches the palace of the king.3

In this essay, the basic concept, form and content of Yoruba praise hymns are first examined, then some attributes in the hymns which are shared by many Òrîṣà are identified and, finally, the complete text of one praise hymn is presented by way of illustration.

**Concept, Form, Content**

The Yoruba word for praise is iyin or iyin lógo. For a hymn of praise, however, the word used is oríki, understood in a plural
sense. ‘Oriki’ has been variously translated as ‘praises’, ‘praise poem’, ‘praise names’, ‘attributive names’, ‘verbal salutes’, ‘titles’, etc. The Yoruba concept of religious praise can only be understood in the light of their custom of honouring people by reciting their oriki. As used in Yoruba social life, oriki have all got the same basic literary form and style. However, on the basis of the object praised there are three main categories: oriki ilu, for towns and townspeople, oriki orile, for lineages, and oriki inagije for prominent individuals whether living or dead. This last type, especially when the recipient of praise is a living ruler or public figure, is the one that most closely resembles oriki orisâ, with which we are here concerned.

As in other African societies, official singers and drummers were retained by Yoruba kings and nobles. Their chief function was to laud their master on specified occasions. Their tributes consisted principally of a proclamation of the names, deeds and character of the recipient and of some of his famous ancestors. A corresponding service for each orisâ, regarded by the devotees as a king or queen having a noble past and still gloriously reigning, was carried out by his or her cult group. The present article is based on oriki of some of the more widely worshipped orisâ, which have been recorded in different locations in S.W. Nigeria and the Republic of Bénin.

In oriki orisâ, the names and deeds, status and power, points of character and appearance, likes and dislikes of the particular orisâ are proclaimed in pithy statements. This is done without too much regard for logical or chronological sequence. Sometimes one can recognise units within the whole which have been formed by association of ideas or built around a particular image. However, the entire poem is best conceived as a loose collection of individual praises or oriki. An individual oriki can vary in length from a personal name to a few sentences. Most of the praise is expressed in the third person. In other words, the orisâ is referred to rather than addressed. The recital is enhanced by metaphor, allusion, analogue and other poetic devices.

The oriki of a particular orisâ are a set of individual oriki or praises loosely arranged like beads on a string. Individual oriki can be detached and used in isolation or as part of other forms of prayer such as petition or invocation. When they are recited together, however, they constitute the Yoruba prayer of praise at its best. In view of the loose unity of the hymn it would not be imperative that