

**Oyinbo Omo Aşogun Dere:
An Analysis of Racial Injustice, Gun Violence, and Sexual Assault
in America through a Traditional Yoruba Religious Perspective**

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With all of the violence and death that occurred in America in the summer of 2016, it seems that the discussion of the issues surrounding these and similar events has failed to lead us out of the current predicament. By analyzing the myths, rituals, and traditions of the Yoruba deity Ogun, this paper seeks to provide an indigenous Yoruba perspective on the current issues of violence, death, social isolation, social inequality, and sexual assault and harassment in American society and institutions of higher learning. With American society's emphasis on progress, hard work, technology, and force in the form of guns and military might, it argues that we are living in an "Age of Ogun," but will need to learn to interact with him properly in order to resolve these terrifying and related issues.

Keywords: Ogun, Yoruba, guns, violence, sexual assault, injustice, United States, universities

Ojo Ogun,
Si lo, si lo, silo, ni ma se aiye.
Dugbe dugbe a gba ode oorun keke.
Ipe npe ju a si kun fe kun.
Otopako a si kun fe je.
Parangada ni a da fomodo
Abiri, abihun a simu orişa.
Mo ri faaji re.

*On days when Ogun is angered,
There is always disaster in the world
The World is full of dead people going to heaven
The eyelashes are full of water
Tears stream down the face
A bludgeoning by Ogun causes man's downfall
I see and hear, I fear and respect my orişa
I have seen your (bloody) merriment.¹*

The summer of 2016 was quite difficult for me as it was for many Americans following the series of seemingly senseless killings and shootings including those of Alton Sterling, Philando Castille, and Charles Kinsey at the hands of the police and the mass murder that took place at Pulse in Orlando and Club Blu in Fort Meyers. What made that summer particularly difficult to bear was not just the feeling of helplessness in the face of such violence, the injustice of it all, or the fact that it followed on a long series of prejudice-related and other killings. Rather, as one of my close friends put it just after Philando Castille was killed, it was because "people don't even know what to say, much less do." I admit that at times I have even felt too tired to continue speaking about these events, particularly when black people, gay people, schoolchildren, and

¹ John Pemberton III, "The Dreadful God and the Divine King," in *Africa's Ogun: Old World and New* (2nd ed.), ed. Sandra T. Barnes (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997), 129.

others have been killed with such astonishing frequency, and all efforts at addressing racial prejudice and gun control seem to get us nowhere.² After I expressed this same emotion several years ago, a kind friend encouraged me not to stop talking or the situation would never improve. I have, unfortunately, been reminded of that moment time and time again, but like many others, after more than a year has gone by I have felt like everything has been said, still nothing has been done, and that at this point I too no longer know “what to say, much less do.” However, conducting research with worshippers of the Yoruba deity Ogun in Ede, Nigeria, I found another way of approaching this situation through the rituals, myths, and philosophy associated with this tradition.

Can We Talk about Ogun? A Different Perspective

After the Orlando shooting, an *Atlantic* article opened with the sentence, “Can we talk about men?” and launched a thought-provoking investigation of the role of masculinity—rather than religion, race, mental illness, or any other issue—as the common denominator underlying virtually every mass murder that has taken place in the US in recent times.³ I found this discussion of what has been termed “toxic masculinity”—or a specific model of masculinity characterized by a desire for control and a violent and furious response when that desire is not met—to be very compelling and similar to a presentation I gave at the American Academy of Religion about six months prior. The paper addressed multiple different models of masculinity present in traditional Yoruba culture and what American society could learn from embracing and balancing a more pluralistic sense of masculinity. While I addressed three different models in that paper, I have chosen to focus singularly on the tradition of the Yoruba orisha (or divinity) Ogun in this article because I believe these lessons to be particularly pertinent to several current issues including racial injustice, violence, and sexual assault. While I am personally a Christian and not involved in Ogun’s traditions—although I am a descendant of Ogun priests—and despite the fact that his is not one of the most widely practiced in American society, I have found that thinking about and through Ogun has helped me to find a productive way to talk about these issues when all other methods seem to have failed. This is in part because for devotees of Ogun and many others besides, Ogun is simply a cosmic reality such as gravity or anger, and as a result is not restricted by geographical or religious boundaries, existing in all societies across space and time. As Adeboye Babalola has stated, there is a cosmic “‘space’ over which Ogun ‘presides.’ When human events or circumstances fall into this space, Ogun serves as a metaphor for the experience being related,” hence what is important is whether or not the events fall within

² I have found this particularly disheartening given the fact that acts officially categorized as religious terrorism have claimed far fewer lives, but we have witnessed a rise in Islamophobic discourse since the run-up to the 2016 election, and no one needs to be reminded of the sweeping and controversial legislation that has been instituted since the terrible events of 9/11 to address these acts of senseless violence. Reporting in 2015, CNN noted that “for every life terrorism claimed on American soil (and where Americans abroad were killed by terrorists), more than 1,000 died from firearms inside the US,” and this includes events such as 9/11 as well as others that mostly had nothing to do with Islam like the anthrax mailings in 2011, Julia Jones and Eve Bower, “American Deaths in Terrorism vs. Gun Violence,” CNN, December 30, 2015, <http://www.cnn.com/2015/10/02/us/oregon-shooting-terrorism-gun-violence/index.html>.

³ James Hamblin, “Toxic Masculinity and Murder,” *The Atlantic*, June 16, 2016, <http://www.theatlantic.com/health/archive/2016/06/toxic-masculinity-and-mass-murder/486983/>.

Ogun’s purview not whether or not the people involved worship him or are even familiar with his tradition.⁴

At the beginning of one my first classes in graduate school on African religion, Prof. Jacob K. Olupona informed us that anthropology and the study of religion and society have traditionally consisted of scholars taking theories from the intellectual traditions of the West and applying them to other parts of the world. He, however, was waiting for the day when theories and models from African intellectual traditions would be used to conduct analyses of Western societies, and I became very curious as to what such a study would look like. This is precisely what I intend to do here, specifically through Olupona’s method of indigenous hermeneutics. By indigenous hermeneutics, Olupona suggests, “a new and responsible hermeneutics that focuses on a culture’s orientation to the transcendent . . . [implying] the development of logical ways to account for events that may nevertheless be perceived by ‘outside’ observers as illogical.”⁵ This means finding frameworks and theories embedded in indigenous traditions themselves to draw out their meaning, much like using Shakespeare to interpret Shakespeare. However, in this instance I plan to employ theories taken from the tradition of Ogun to come to grips not with Yoruba society, but with a series of issues facing American society to see if, as the divine trailblazer, Ogun might clear a path out of our current predicaments. Just as shifting the discourse to men and masculinity may be helpful at this juncture, my hope is that this novel indigenous Yoruba perspective may be productive where current popular discourse has largely been ineffective.

During my time in graduate school, one of my greatest pleasures has been serving as a resident advisor (RA) in an undergraduate dorm for the past five years. While we have fortunately been spared the horror of gun violence, I will also draw from my experience working very closely with students in an environment that has recently sought to address issues of race, sexual assault, mental health, and others that I believe are all linked to and can be addressed by the idioms of the Yoruba deity Ogun.

The Age of Ogun

Ogun is one of the most fascinating deities in traditional Yoruba religion; he enjoys a privileged place as one of a select few deities who is worshipped in all parts of Yorubaland in Southwestern Nigeria and can also be found all along the Atlantic coast from Ghana to the eastern part of Nigeria, albeit in slightly different forms and variations in name and ritual practice.⁶ As the orisha or deity of war, the hunt, farming, blacksmithing, technology, and all human activity that involves iron, it is easy to understand why Ogun enjoys such a privileged position both in West Africa and in African diaspora religions such as Haitian Vodun, Cuban Santería, Brazilian Candomblé and Umbanda, and many others. It is important to point out that for his devotees (as is the case with all orisha), Ogun is not simply an abstract spiritual entity, idea, or principle; he also *is* iron itself and as such, his rituals are often carried out on or to pieces of iron. Thus, Ogun is a concrete reality and not only a metaphysical principle manifest in physical

⁴ Adeboye Babalola, “A Portrait of Ògún as Reflected in Ìjálá Chants,” in Barnes, *Africa’s Ogun: Old World and New*, 147–72.

⁵ Jacob K. Olupona, *City of 201 Gods: Ilé-ifè in Time, Space, and the Imagination* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011), 3.

⁶ See Sandra T. Barnes, “The Many Faces of Ogun,” in Barnes, *Africa’s Ogun: Old World and New*, 1–26.

form or symbolically represented in tangible material. However, Ogun's usefulness as a cultural and religious symbol also affords him great utility as an archetype for understanding broader events and dynamics of human life.

In describing the great rise in importance of warfare and mobility alongside a decrease in the importance of marital and kinship relations following the fall of the famous West African Oyo Empire around 1830 CE, Matory describes the epoch as an "Age of Ogun" in which his domains, traditions, and idioms ruled the day.⁷ Matory notes that as "god of iron, one of the major imports of the transatlantic trade, . . . [Ogun] is closely associated with guns, warfare, and mobility, all of which were central features of life in this region during the nineteenth century."⁸ Indeed Ogun was the most important deity of the all-important new class of warlords during the period, and the city of Ibadan—the prevailing political and military power of the time—had Ogun and war at the heart of its foundation, rise to power, and domination of the region. Matory is not alone in identifying the rise in relevance of Ogun in the period as two Yoruba babalawo (traditional diviners) are recorded as describing the times in which they lived in similar terms. According to one, Ogun was the source of punishment for men's disobedience to God's will as well as the supply of European guns and gunpowder.⁹ The other had a vision in which he saw Ogun "armed with 400 short swords . . . [going] out daily on the earth to slay, for his meat is to drink the blood of the slain."¹⁰ Clearly the increased importance of the domains in which Ogun reigned supreme made him emblematic of the period, and although the internecine wars of nineteenth-century Yorubaland are quite different from modern life in the United States, I believe Ogun plays a prominent—if not preeminent—role in both societies.

While many traditional African religions no longer enjoy the privileged position or number of adherents they did in the past, Barnes estimates that "more than 70 million African and New World peoples participate in, or are closely familiar with, religious systems that include Ogun, and the number is increasing rather than declining."¹¹ Ogun has enjoyed so much popularity in modern times that Barnes has described him elsewhere as "an old god for a new age."¹² The famous Nobel Laureate and Ogun devotee Wole Soyinka has also extolled the timeless virtues and relevance of Ogun,¹³ and in many Yoruba cities where other orisha traditions have died out, Ogun's remains one of the most common and popular. Clearly something about Ogun's nature makes his tradition particularly well-suited for the modern world, and I have identified several features of American society in particular over which he reigns supreme.

⁷ James Lorand Matory, *Sex and the Empire That Is No More: Gender and the Politics of Metaphor in Oyo Yoruba Religion* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994), 13–25.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 15–16.

⁹ J. D. Y. Peel, *Religious Encounter and the Making of the Yoruba* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000), 50; and J. D. Y. Peel, "A Comparative Analysis of Ogun in Precolonial Yorubaland," in Barnes, *Africa's Ogun: Old World and New*, 263–89.

¹⁰ Peel, *Religious Encounter and the Making of the Yoruba*, 94; and Peel, "A Comparative Analysis," 278.

¹¹ Barnes, "The Many Faces of Ogun," 1.

¹² Sandra T. Barnes, *Ogun: An Old God for a New Age* (Philadelphia: Institute for the Study of Human Issues, 1980).

¹³ Wole Soyinka, "Tolerant Gods," in *Òrìsà Devotion as World Religion: The Globalization of Yorùbá Religious Culture*, eds. Jacob K. Olupona and Terry Rey (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2008), 42–44; and Wole Soyinka, *Myth, Literature, and the African World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976).

Oyinbo Omo Şogun Dere: The Present Age of Ogun

First and foremost, I believe Ogun’s increased relevance in our world today to be linked to his nature as an embodiment of progress and forward motion. Even in our use of the word “progress” or the way societies are often described—such as advanced or developing/developed—a high premium is placed on breaking new ground, innovation, and forward movement and advancement. J. D. Y. Peel has also noted this convergence with ideas brought by the European Enlightenment,¹⁴ and I have chosen my words carefully as breaking new ground and innovation carry connotations of both farming and technology, which are also common domains of Ogun. There is a natural link between technology and iron/blacksmithing, and modern science and technology have surely become some of the most powerful forces of the contemporary era. This is particularly evident to those in the world of education where a very strong emphasis is placed on STEM (science, technology, engineering, and math). Apart from having recently received the university’s largest ever donation of \$400 million for a new School of Engineering and Applied Sciences,¹⁵ students at Harvard rarely go anywhere without carrying Ogun with them in the form of their laptop computers or phones. Although farming may no longer be the quintessential American occupation,¹⁶ Ogun’s association with fertility evinces his nature as sexually virile and potent,¹⁷ which correlates with the pervasiveness of sex in popular culture, particularly as transmitted through modern media technology such as radios, televisions, movie theaters, and/or computers. As a solitary hunter and trailblazer in an otherwise community-oriented society, Ogun is also a forceful archetype of independence and a “self-made man” who has a strong—and at times obsessive—work ethic, perhaps even reminiscent of Weber’s *Protestant Ethic* and American capitalism.

While most of these characteristics have been presented in a generally positive light, they certainly have a darker side to them as well. For example, while a strong work ethic is an admirable quality, Americans work more hours than the populations of most other industrialized countries,¹⁸ and one of the perennial issues we face in advising at Harvard College is students taking on far too much work in terms of courseload, extracurriculars, and employment. Such an overemphasis on work often leaves some students isolated and lonely, characteristics of Ogun that I believe have contributed to a general, growing concern for student mental health.¹⁹ Those who work on college campuses will surely be familiar with the trope of the isolated student who

¹⁴ Peel, “A Comparative Analysis of Ogun,” 281.

¹⁵ “Harvard Receives Its Largest Gift,” *Harvard Gazette*, June 3, 2015, <http://news.harvard.edu/gazette/story/2015/06/harvard-receives-its-largest-gift/>.

¹⁶ Harvardians will be able to relate to this as the academic calendar was only recently changed from a previous model that allowed students to stay home long enough to harvest the fall crops!

¹⁷ It is also worth noting that his iron tools are used in the rituals of circumcision of sexual organs.

¹⁸ A recent study even suggests that Americans may work more than Europeans because they are happier to work longer hours and place a higher premium on work than leisure activities. Adam Okulicz-Kozaryn, “Europeans Work to Live and Americans Live to Work (Who is Happy to Work More: Americans or Europeans?)” *Journal of Happiness Studies* 12, no. 2 (April 11, 2011): 229; and Benjamin Snyder and Stacy Jones, “Americans Work Hard, But People In These 15 Countries Work Longer Hours,” *Fortune*, Nov. 11, 2015, <http://fortune.com/2015/11/11/chart-work-week-oecd/>.

¹⁹ In fact, mental health and sexual assault were two of the central issues discussed during a recent Harvard student government election and received a great deal of coverage in our newspaper, *The Crimson*. Aafreen Amzi and Jesper Ke, “Greenlaw and Morris Focus on Mental Health and Social Life,” *Harvard Crimson*, Sept. 10, 2016, <http://www.thecrimson.com/article/2015/11/16/greenlaw-morris-uc-profile/>.

lives on the computer and the internet and has limited personal and social interactions, making integration into broader social life both difficult and anxiety-inducing.

Next, while Ogun is sexually virile, his interactions with women are practically always fraught, and divorce and sexual assault are not uncommon themes in his mythology. Again, recent concern over the prevalence of sexual assault and gender-based prejudice—overwhelmingly against women—drove nine universities including my own to take part in the Association of American Universities’ (AAU) Survey on Sexual Assault and Sexual Misconduct, whose results were very sobering and disturbing.²⁰ When the effect of alcohol on this harrowing state of affairs is paired with Ogun’s tendency toward intoxication through his favorite drink of palm wine, the connection becomes even clearer. Finally, to bring up the issues raised at the beginning of this article, Ogun’s myths are rife with accounts of multiple deaths at his hand, many of which seem completely senseless and unjust.

With the increasing demands that jobs and careers make on our time, our obsession with technology and industrialization, the emphasis on individuality, our constant movement like the hunters of ancient Yorubaland, the prevalence of sex and sexuality in so many aspects of life, and the ubiquitous nature of metal and guns, from a traditional Yoruba point of view, the modern world has put Ogun on a pedestal. Even those who react *against* the modern world (such as ISIS, Al-Qaeda, and Boko Haram in Nigeria) have adopted his technology, isolationist lifestyle, violence, and strict and harsh perspective on retributive justice. It appears that even the most seemingly contradictory modern philosophies must still express themselves through the idioms of Ogun.²¹

I initially began to think of applying Yoruba indigenous hermeneutics to conceptualize contemporary American society as an Age of Ogun when translating a verse from the vast oral corpus called Ifa that is chanted by *babalawo* (Yoruba diviners and priests of the orisha Ọrunmila) in the process of divination. In one verse of Eji Ogbe, the most senior and prominent section of this oral corpus, Oyinbo (or white people/foreigners) are described as “*ọmọ aṣogun dere*” or *children of those who made Ogun into an idol*.²² This is significant for many reasons. Dating using Ifa narratives is very tricky,²³ and although we cannot know exactly when this verse came into being, it is clear that at some point after Ifa practitioners came into contact with Western Europeans, they looked for a suitable way to describe this foreign culture and identity using Yoruba idioms. The cult of Ogun, characterized by high mobility, advanced technology, industriousness, metal, and displays of force seemed like the best framework through which to understand and depict these strange people. After all, they traveled a long distance in impressive ships with advanced military technology that they were not afraid to use both in the service of and against their Yoruba interlocutors. From a traditional Yoruba perspective, as Ogun simply *is* all of these things

²⁰ “AAU Climate Survey on Sexual Assault and Sexual Misconduct,” Association of American Universities, accessed August 31, 2016, <https://www.aau.edu/Climate-Survey.aspx?id=16525>.

²¹ Interestingly enough, Plato depicts Socrates as predicting that the last political order of society will be characterized by “children of iron,” who are preoccupied with physical force and acquiring wealth. Plato and C. D. C. Reeve, *Republic*, 242 (Indianapolis: Hackett Pub., 2004).

²² A recitation by a Yoruba diviner, a transcription and translation of this verse, and a fascinating story can be found here: <http://ask-dl.fas.harvard.edu/content/10-eji-ogbe-oyinbo>.

²³ See Wande Abimbola, “The Literature of the Ifa Cult,” in *Sources of Yoruba History*, ed. S. O. Biobaku (Ibadan, Nigeria: Oxford University Press, 1973), 41–62.

(weapons, mobility, technology, displays of force, etc.), the Oyinbo were serving and revering him/his spirit whether they knew it or not.

Still, Ifa does not describe Oyinbo as children of Ogun (ọmọ Ogun), as his devotees would usually be called, or even as the ones who made Ogun into an orisha or deity, which might also be reasonably expected. Rather, Ifa says Oyinbo are the descendants of those who “made Ogun into an idol/statue,” indicating that something was out of place. Not only was Ogun not quite treated as the orisha that he is, making him into an idol runs against tradition as in Yorubaland Ogun is *never* depicted as a statue or idol, as are some orisha. Instead his sacrifices are offered to objects like metal weapons, tools, a blacksmith’s anvil, and so on.²⁴ Hence, from Ifa’s perspective, Oyinbo had been closely linked and involved with Ogun and had been for a long time since they are the *descendants* of those who made Ogun into an idol, but they clearly did not understand how to function as his “children” and interact with him properly, which, as we shall see presently, can have disastrous effects.

Keeping A Respectful Distance

Despite the fact that Ogun is one of the most popular traditional Yoruba deities and can be found over such a vast geographical area, the Yoruba fear him as much as they love and respect him. As his myths and praise songs indicate, while Ogun is a strong protector and deity of justice, his impressive power can at times wreak havoc on even those who serve him.²⁵ Hence, although being essential to the functioning of society, he—like the hunters who follow his traditions—is usually a marginal figure who spends most of his time outside of the city fighting wars, hunting, and collecting materials for powerful magic charms. In fact, while almost every orisha or orisha shrine is kept inside the devotee’s house (and usually next to each other when there are multiple orisha present), Ogun is one of the few that is kept *outside* of the house. Eṣu, another orisha who is usually kept outside the house, is kept there because he is a protector and also because his domain is chaos, which is something better kept at a distance as well. For reasons addressed below, although these two popular orisha are both kept outside at a safe distance, they cannot be too close to each other, further emphasizing the ambiguous need to keep Ogun close, but not too close.

Ogun is understood to be a bit volatile, dangerous, and “hot,” much like the weapons made from his iron. His cutlass is both a literal and figurative double-edged sword that can clear a path, plant crops, execute justice, and defend human life, but at the same time (and sometimes to the same ends) it can also destroy human life, as we will soon see. One common ritual in the worship of Ogun and the various forms he takes in societies other than the Yoruba is a rite of purification in which his hot influence and nature must be “washed” from the face or body of a person who has taken life.²⁶ This is because the power of Ogun that gives him its great utility must be controlled and applied properly or chaos and destruction will surely ensue. Those familiar with the Bible will likely be reminded of the similar rituals ancient Hebrew warriors had to perform before they could become reintegrated into society,²⁷ and I can not help but wonder if

²⁴ This is most likely because as iron itself, there is simply no need to re-present him. A depiction of his qualities will always be inferior to his qualities and nature themselves. Peel, “A Comparative Analysis of Ogun,” 268.

²⁵ Adeboye Babalola, “A Portrait of Ọgún as Reflected in Ijala Chants,” in *Africa’s Ogun: Old World and New*, 147–72.

²⁶ Robert G. Armstrong, “The Etymology of the Word ‘Ogun,’” in *Africa’s Ogun: Old World and New*, 29–38.

²⁷ Numbers 31:19–24.

American soldiers who suffer from PTSD after experiencing the awesome and awful power of Ogun might also benefit from such ritual processes as well.

However, one might still ask the question that if Ogun is a deity of justice and a protector, why is he implicated in instances of senseless killing and injustice as I have suggested here? The fact of the matter is that as a whole domain of life and philosophy of human nature, Ogun cannot be fully expressed in only positive or only negative terms. As Barnes rightly observes:

In West Africa, positive and negative power is not separate. Power is singular, and therefore what we in the West see as dual and capable of being divided into two mystical notions cannot be divided in African thought. For the latter, power exists in a single supernatural representation.²⁸

Hence, just like great Greek heroes such as Hercules, Ogun's faults are as supernatural as his virtues, and he encompasses an entire domain or sphere of life. If Ogun is justice, serving him well will ensure that you receive the justice you deserve. If however, you do not serve him well, justice will remain elusive, and his fury may be visited upon both guilty and innocent alike. This is why it is so important to respect Ogun but not to turn him into an idol or interact with him inappropriately; finding yourself on the wrong side of his powerful machete has devastating implications as we will now see.

Lessons from Ogun's Mythology

As perhaps the best way to understand Ogun's character and nature (apart from being engaged in his tradition itself) is through the myths and narratives that depict his actions, I will now analyze Ogun's mythology to draw out some of the most powerful and pertinent lessons about what commonly occurs when the power of Ogun is not understood and addressed appropriately. Because these myths are told frequently and often adapted to new contexts, there is considerable variation within some accounts, so I will present the most essential and common features as the dynamics displayed rarely change along with the specific details. These myths are told and retold because they are timeless representations of metaphysical archetypes that occur over and over again, so after a brief recounting of the myths, I will expound on how I have come to understand them playing out in the United States today.

Senseless Killing

Senseless, unjust frenzied killing is frequently found in Ogun's praise poetry, and is the theme of perhaps the most well-known myth about him. Ogun once returned from war tired and thirsty, and found the people of his town celebrating a festival. He asked them to give him his favorite drink of palm wine to quench his thirst, and when he received none (either because there was a taboo on drinking palm wine at that particular festival or because they had simply consumed all of it), Ogun flew into a rage and slaughtered countless people around him. When his anger subsided, Ogun realized what he had done, and filled with remorse, he either committed ritual suicide or removed himself for his people's own good by descending into the ground or retreating to a hill outside of town. In another similar and commonly told myth, Ogun

²⁸ Barnes, "The Many Faces of Ogun," 19.

has in fact entered the ground and left an iron staff or chain where he did so, instructing his people that if they ever need his assistance in war, they need only call his name and pull on the chain or staff. One day, many years later, some people got drunk and decided to call Ogun and pull on the chain. Ogun then burst out of the ground and flew into action as he promised he would. Only after he had killed everyone in sight did he realize that they were the ones he had in fact sworn to protect, and grief-stricken, he retreated again into the earth, promising never to come back lest this catastrophe repeat itself.²⁹

Given the events that have happened over the past few years, particularly seeing the harrowing video of Philando Castille’s murder, to me this myth speaks volumes about what we have observed in America since the killing of Trayvon Martin in 2012, but has surely been occurring before this particular instance brought the issue to the fore. In both instances and numerous others, Ogun has attempted to perform his role as protector of his people, but instead he ends up slaying those he has sworn to protect (and serve?) in terrifying numbers. Particularly in the second myth, he was in fact called to the scene, feared for those he was to protect, and believed he was going about his duty as best as he could. However, in each instance, when the dust settled, he was overcome with grief, regretted the carnage he had created, and took immediate action to ensure that these events would never occur again.³⁰ Not only have we seen a horrifying number of deaths at the hand of Ogun through guns and police officers as his representatives in recent times, we have also heard many people crying out for him in the form of justice,³¹ and many others describing racial tensions in particular as a kind of “race war.” After these battle lines were seemingly drawn at Charlottesville protests, Ogun was again enlisted to take the life of Heather Heyer,³² and it seems like practically every national tragedy in recent history is related to the traditions of Ogun in one way or another.

Unfortunately, calling on Ogun without simultaneously addressing the issues of injustice at hand has only led to more polarization and more killing, as the equally heartbreaking case of the five dead police officers in Dallas, Texas demonstrates. I do not mean to criticize those who call for justice or the manner in which they do so, but rather note that Ogun’s justice is swift, terrible, and destructive when society *as a whole* does not take measures to ensure that just behavior is upheld. Furthermore, just as police officers time and again have claimed that they used Ogun’s deadly force only because they were afraid—much as Ogun was—I am inclined to believe them. However, as the deity of justice, Ogun immediately mourned his actions, recognized that even righteous fear was not a moral excuse, claimed responsibility for the tragic events, and took swift action—at great cost to himself I should add—to ensure that the safety of his people would not be compromised again. After all, this is what he and/as our police force

²⁹ This myth is also often told with many other powerful warrior and cultural heroes as the protagonist such as Oramiyan in Ile-Ife where his “staff” can still be seen today.

³⁰ It is also worth noting here that the potential guilt of the people who pulled on Ogun’s chain or staff was not brought into question because their execution was surely not merited and Ogun simply assumed responsibility. However, the criminality (perceived or real) of victims of police violence is constantly invoked when this myth is reenacted in American society.

³¹ Here I am specifically thinking of movements such as Black Lives Matter and also “I Too Am Harvard” from our own campus that inspired several other similar movements at institutions of higher learning in the US and the UK. See “I, Too, Am Harvard,” accessed March 5, 2018, [itooamharvard.tumblr](https://itooamharvard.tumblr.com/); and Bethonie Butler, “‘I, Too, Am Harvard’: Black Students Show They Belong,” *Washington Post*, March 5, 2014, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/she-the-people/wp/2014/03/05/i-too-am-harvard-black-students-show-they-belong/>.

³² This time it was in the form of a car, not a gun.

exists to accomplish. Unfortunately, this has not been the case with most such instances in the United States as the now almost inevitable acquittal of police officers after racially inflected shootings demonstrates, as do statements such as there being “very fine people on both sides” after the violence that erupted at the Unite the Right rally in Charlottesville, Virginia. The failure to recognize, repent, and atone for such injustice will only stoke the flames of Ogun’s forge and lead to even more death, destruction, and devastation.

Ogun and Eṣu: Violence and Chaos

In another powerful myth about Ogun that can also be compared to those of Hercules, Ogun once became too confident in his power and declared that he had absolute authority because he could not be defeated in combat by anyone. Eṣu, as a trickster deity who loves to put people in their place, gladly accepted the challenge and stepped up to face Ogun. Ogun pulled out his mighty machete and to his surprise, Eṣu did nothing. He simply let himself get split in two! However, Eṣu is also a powerful magician, and instead of dying, there were two identical Eṣus standing on either side of Ogun’s machete. In his characteristic rage, Ogun began hacking at the two new Eṣus, but only succeeded in creating four, then eight, then sixteen. Eventually there were so many Eṣus that they easily overpowered even the mighty Ogun, and it took the ashamed deity of iron a long time to heal and recover.

This myth beautifully depicts the way violence, when combined with fury (embodied in Ogun), usually only leads to a vicious cycle of chaos (embodied by the multiplying Eṣus). Furthermore, this myth makes it clear that simply applying more and more of Ogun’s admittedly supreme strength will never solve our problems, but usually makes them worse and turns them into a poly-headed hydra. Again, this myth makes me reflect on how the militarized nature of the Unite the Right protest solved (and could only solve) nothing but creating more chaos and death or how the use of Ogun’s deadly force created a breakdown in (or violation of) law and order in places like Ferguson and Baltimore, creating a military-police state that only exacerbated racial tensions. Particularly in a country such as the United States that emerged from a similar resistance to violence and oppression, this should not be a difficult narrative to recognize and apply.

In addition, when guns are used to restore order and protect life but only end up causing death and more chaos, increasing their number will only multiply the number of Eṣus present, and statistics have shown time and again that this is precisely what happens.³³ This is a good place to recall that while the shrines of Eṣu and Ogun are both kept outside the household, they are never too close to each other because the combination of violent power and chaos is always dangerous. Rather, a better way to approach the situation is to appease Ogun, calm him down, and seek alternative means to ensure that justice can be met. This of course is not easy, but another Ogun myth provides a sense of how it can be done.

³³ This is particularly the case with homicide and suicide. It appears that in instances of relative decline in gun ownership, homicide rates dropped significantly also. See Mark Duggan, “More Guns, More Crime,” *Journal of Political Economy* 109, no. 5 (Oct. 2001): 1086–1114; Michael Siegel, Craig S. Ross, and Charles King III, “The Relationship Between Gun Ownership and Firearm Homicide Rates in the United States, 1981–2010,” *Am J Public Health* 103, no. 11 (Nov. 2013): 2098–2105; and Michael C. Monuteaux, Lois K. Lee, David Hemenway, Rebekah Mannix, and Eric W. Fleegler, “Firearm Ownership and Violent Crime in the U.S.,” *American Journal of Preventative Medicine* 49, no. 2 (June 16, 2015): 207–14.

Ogun and Oşun: Balancing Male/Female, Work/Play, and Violence/Love

As stated earlier Ogun often leaves the city to go live in the woods, but once when he left the primordial city of Ile-Ife—the origin of the world in Yoruba mythology and the city where all of the deities lived—life became difficult without him. Without his tools, building and farming became impossible, nobody else could bring back as much game from the forest as he previously did, they were vulnerable to attack, and society generally began to fall apart. Several of the most important male orişa went into the forest and found Ogun there smelting iron. When they asked him to come back to Ile-Ife, he refused and said that he was too focused on the work at hand. After these orişa came back emptyhanded, they held a large meeting and ultimately decided that Oşun (the female deity of love, beauty, fresh water, and the arts) might succeed where they had failed. Pretending not to know where Ogun was, she went into the forest, and started bathing and singing in a nearby pool. Her beautiful singing attracted Ogun, who put down his tools and followed her enchanting voice. When he saw her bathing, his nature as a virile deity also associated with fertility was aroused, and Oşun had him right where she wanted him. It did not take long for her to persuade him to come back with her at least for some time, and Ogun, calmed and tamed by Oşun’s influence, returned to Ile-Ife to set everything right again.

This is one of my favorite myths about Ogun because it involves so much of his ambiguous nature. He is supposed to be kept at a distance and *should* leave the city, but he must not be kept too far away or removed entirely. As a hunter he must spend significant time alone and isolated as well, but a complete withdrawal from society causes problems also. His work ethic is one of his greatest qualities, but it can be taken too far and must be checked. Ogun is perhaps the quintessential male deity, but he must be balanced by Oşun, the quintessential female deity. Finally, his often hyper-active sex drive can cause problems, but if approached correctly it can be a blessing for all.

Although a significant part of Ogun’s strength comes from his independence, no man is an island as the Iremoje chants sung at his hunters’ funerals demonstrate.³⁴ Hunters need their towns just as the towns need the hunters, and their exploits should always be performed for the good of others. When people, particularly Ogun’s people, become too isolated as they are wont to do, all of society begins to fall apart and Ogun becomes imbalanced. As an RA I have observed many students become isolated and feel lonely and depressed often because they work too hard and feel like they have too much pressure on them, much like iron subjected to too much heat and too many hammer strokes. This frequently coincides with a further and often crippling retreat into the world of technology, and I believe this lack of human interaction only makes the issue more difficult to address. I have similarly noticed friends who have fallen victim to overly demanding work schedules feel as if they have become removed from the other aspects of their lives, and one even told me that he was concerned his career had been turned into a kind of false idol!³⁵ Perhaps our obsession with productivity and work (while far from negative characteristics in and of themselves) has been taken a bit too far, and our culture of individualism, independence, and the trope of the “self-made man” have started to cause more problems than they solve.

³⁴ 'Bade Ajuwon, “Ogun’s Iremoje: A Philosophy of Living and Dying,” in *Africa’s Ogun: Old World and New*, 173–98.

³⁵ Precisely as the Ifa verse stated Oyinbo people had done.

To return to the horrifying events of mass shootings that have become all too common, this myth also calls to mind the recurring theme of the “lone wolf” who perpetrates such atrocities. One need only think of events in South Carolina, Denver, Santa Barbara, and more recently Las Vegas, or men like the Unabomber among others, to recall that those who are or who feel isolated for too long can be driven to commit horrific acts of violence and destruction. Clearly social isolation and toxic masculinity are common factors in too many of these tragedies, and although identifying those who commit such acts as “lone wolves” is often an attempt to situate the tragedy outside of the context of certain groups or social issues such as racism, it does appear that America has fallen prey to a surprisingly active group of lone wolves who are not afraid to devour its citizens for any number of ideological reasons or lack thereof. I do not believe it is a coincidence that isolation, confusion, and senseless death are all linked and contained within the nature of Ogun.

The nature of this isolation is not purely social either. The United States has witnessed increasing political and racial isolation and segregation in recent years as well.³⁶ The killings in South Carolina represented a desire to preserve a certain racial identity in America by eliminating another, and the stabbing on the Portland train and killing of Indian engineers in Kansas demonstrated a desire to isolate and separate America from those perceived to be Muslim. Even the Pizzagate shooting, inspired by out-of-touch fake news spread through Ogun’s medium of technology, demonstrates a certain type of political isolation and lack of effective communication that inevitably resulted in senseless violence as well. Similarly, the racially charged desire to build a wall along the southern border of the US can only serve to further isolate America, driving it further away from any mutually beneficial interactions.

Fortunately, Oṣun is there to help. By effectively balancing Ogun’s hypermasculinity and sex-drive with her own cooler femininity, Oṣun was able to restore balance and enlist Ogun’s positive qualities to work for everyone’s benefit. To me, this common trope in Oṣun’s tradition implies that in order to balance and complement (but not necessarily combat) Ogun’s nature, we must support and pay close attention to the qualities associated with Oṣun. While discussing her term paper, a brilliant female student in one of my classes and a leader in the Women in Business club on campus informed me that some of our most celebrated corporations had effectively begun paying women not to have children so they could focus on their careers instead.³⁷ I was shocked and learned a great deal from our discussion about how this emphasis on a particular way of working in essence pressured some women to be more like men who take no maternity/paternity leave. Interestingly enough, Matory also describes the most powerful and celebrated Yoruba women during his Age of Ogun as “unwifely” and “antiproductive” but able to advance themselves through the exploitation of labor and trade, which makes me think that

³⁶ Alvin Chang, “White America is Quietly Self-Segregating,” *Vox*, Jan. 18, 2017, <https://www.vox.com/2017/1/18/14296126/white-segregated-suburb-neighborhood-cartoon>.

³⁷ Sabrina Parsons, herself a CEO, makes some very compelling arguments about how the corporate world need not encourage women to make drastic changes to their lifestyles and how such policies make implicit statements about how women fit into the workplace. She suggests that companies could adapt themselves to be more accommodating to women rather than forcing women to adapt their lifestyles to be more accommodating to a patriarchal corporate system. Sabrina Parsons, “Female Tech CEO: Egg-Freezing ‘Benefit’ Sends The Wrong Message To Women,” *Business Insider*, Oct. 20, 2014, <http://www.businessinsider.com/apple-facebook-egg-freezing-benefit-is-bad-for-women-2014-10>.

these Yoruba women may have been “leaning in” long before Sheryl Sandberg ever did.³⁸ I do not mean to criticise these women;³⁹ quite the contrary as their ability to succeed against the odds in an overtly male-oriented society is to be admired.⁴⁰ Instead I would suggest that we should also recognize, encourage, and be open to additional ways in which women can succeed and be understood as successful as well. After all, Oşun is also a goddess of wealth, and Yoruba women are traditionally famous for their business acumen.

Furthermore, as matron of the arts, Oşun represents the importance of the aesthetic side of life. Ogun usually lives a very spartan lifestyle when in the forest (which should not be a surprise given Spartan traditions), but Oşun perhaps can help us to understand that our obsession with science, technology, engineering, and work and productivity should also be balanced with play, joy, and beauty. Although many of our students at Harvard are classic workaholics, the best—and sometimes only—ways they can be lured away from their homework and extracurriculars is through movies in our dining hall, playing games, listening to music, enjoying (usually sweet) food we make for them, and other activities that Oşun surely loves as well.⁴¹ Time and time again, I have observed fun, beauty, and social integration help struggling students and seem to salvage situations that would likely have fallen apart if each issue were to be addressed in isolation. Additionally, when Daryl Davis was frustrated by the hatred of the KKK, his response was not to organize an armed racial rally, but rather to sit down and calmly listen to, and befriend, Klan members. Music was what first brought him together with one of them who had never had a drink with a black man before, and after Davis established relationships with many Klan members in spite of their differences, 200 of them decided to leave the Klan and be open to associating with other races.⁴²

By embracing Oşun’s domain through the arts, beauty, calm reconciliation, and empowering women, Ogun need not be challenged or combatted, but can rather flourish more than he could in isolation.⁴³ However, caution must be taken again, as Ogun’s powerful emphasis on a particular type of masculinity can be “toxic,” as James Hamblin from *The Atlantic* observes and as these next Ogun myths remind us.

³⁸ Matory, *Sex and the Empire That Is No More*, 19.

³⁹ Although I certainly do not approve of the way some of these Yoruba women advanced themselves through the dominant economic activity of the time, namely the slave trade.

⁴⁰ Additionally, it is worth noting again that in this case Ogun’s nature and male gendered characteristics are manifested in women, demonstrating how the amplification of his sphere of life can engage and affect all members of society, not just men.

⁴¹ It is also not lost on me that performing practically all of these activities involves combining Ogun’s technology with Oşun’s playfulness.

⁴² Dwane Brown, “How One Man Convinced 200 Ku Klux Klan Members to Give Up Their Robes,” NPR, Aug. 20, 2017, <https://www.npr.org/2017/08/20/544861933/how-one-man-convinced-200-ku-klux-klan-members-to-give-up-their-robos>.

⁴³ To return to Plato’s *Republic*, Socrates also provides a beautiful account of how iron can be softened and made more useful by the arts: “So when someone gives himself over to musical training and lets the flute pour into his soul through his ears, as through a funnel, those sweet, soft, and plaintive harmonies we mentioned; and when he spends his whole life humming, entranced by song, the first result is that whatever spirit he had, he softens the way he would iron and makes useful, rather than useless and brittle.” *Republic*, 95.

Ogun and “Toxic Masculinity”

“Because Ogun fails to recognize the complementary distinctiveness of the wifely role,” Matory notes that “[his] relations with wives are clumsy.”⁴⁴ I would add that the combination of his impressive force, short temper, and active sex-drive create the potential for his interactions with the opposite sex to transcend mere clumsiness and become violent, dangerous, abusive, and toxic. Just as Ogun—as the forces of iron, technology, mobility, etc.—is not limited to any specific society, his shortcomings in this area are not limited to only one gender or biological sex. However, Ogun is more closely associated with masculinity in the traditional Yoruba context, and in this respect, Ogun’s shortcomings in romantic life have close parallels with a certain type of masculinity in contemporary American society as well. Matory also cites a myth in which Ogun fell in love with another prominent female deity named Yẹmoja and married her. Ogun grabbed Yẹmoja and reassured her that although everyone fears him and he has a terrifying appearance, he would never hurt her. Later, wanting to please his wife, Ogun tried to cook for her, but only succeeded in breaking a pot and making a mess. Yẹmoja was understandably upset, insulted Ogun in a way she promised never to do, and the enraged Ogun struck her! Again feeling remorse for his act of violence, Ogun tried to make amends by stroking her breast—an action Yẹmoja made him promise never to do. At this point Yẹmoja turned into water and slipped through his fingers.⁴⁵

Ogun’s failed relationships with women are not limited to Yẹmoja, however, and his mythological interactions with two other women, the orisha Ọya and Adi (or a kind of oil in the Yoruba language), have also been disastrous. In a popular myth that revolves around Şango (the royal orisha of thunder and lightning), Ogun lost the affection of his wife Ọya (orisha of tornados, storms, and buffaloes) to Şango. Defeated and ashamed, he ran into his beloved forest, while Şango and Ọya went on to become the most famous couple in Yoruba mythology. In another myth taken from the oral Ifa corpus, Ogun married a woman named Epo, but later overpowered and forced himself on her younger sister Adi after taking her to work with him on his farm. He ordered Adi not to tell anyone, and the girl became depressed and reclusive. However, when it became clear that Adi was pregnant, Ogun was brought before the king and submitted himself to judgment.⁴⁶

These three myths display three of Ogun’s issues with women that I have noticed time and again both in American society at large and on college campuses in particular. First, Ogun quite sincerely wishes to be a loving husband, but is so unprepared to deal with women and the feminine side of life—represented by cooking and breaking the pot—that Ogun ends up literally destroying whatever he touches, much as he has in previous myths as well. Second, the fact that some men are polite and well-intentioned does not mean that they are incapable of, or not responsible for, acts of sexual abuse and assault. Ogun had only the best of intentions toward Yẹmoja, but as a result of his inability to interact appropriately with women he was directly responsible for uninvited violent and sexual contact. Clearly good, honest intentions are not an

⁴⁴ Matory, *Sex and the Empire*, 18.

⁴⁵ Ulli Beier, *Yoruba Myths*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980), 45–46; and Matory, *Sex and the Empire*, 17–18.

⁴⁶ Epo and Adi are both names for kinds of oil taken from palm kernels, and this myth explains why adi is now a taboo for some orisha. “Ogunda-Di,” African Language Program at Harvard University, accessed March 5, 2018, <http://ask-dl.fas.harvard.edu/content/94-ogunda-di-odi>.

excuse or sufficient cause for trust as the second myth illustrates. This may be, in part, why Şango was able to win Oya’s affection so easily, leaving Ogun feeling humiliated and frustrated as he lost a relationship that he believed should have been assured to him. Finally, Ogun’s desire for sex coupled with his great strength make it possible for him to *choose* to take advantage of a young woman whom he knew quite well and who was subsequently traumatized by the ordeal she survived and was ordered not to speak about it.

For all adolescents learning to manage romantic relationships can be confusing, frustrating, and difficult, but as an RA, many young men in particular have come to me to ask how they should approach and interact with young women. However, I have heard from even more young women—but also young men as well—about how they are disappointed in the way their male significant others have behaved, and I know I am likely to have been the subject of that discussion also. Although I have also encountered women who struggle to manage their romantic relationships appropriately, it seems to me that perhaps more so than our young women, many of our young men are often not properly prepared to interact with their romantic interests appropriately.

While this can take the form of simple funny stories of awkward interactions (of which I have heard many!), particularly—but not exclusively—when men are the perpetrators, it can also result in emotional, physical, and sexual abuse as represented in Ogun’s mythology. All of the RAs in our dorm recently went through training on how to help students have discussions about what is acceptable and consensual behavior in sexual settings as our college has recently made this issue a priority. It became clear to us that a lack of understanding and communication (recall that Ogun and Yemoja have a breakdown in communication) is one of the central issues that must be addressed as students are likely not to be fully prepared in this regard. Of course not all instances of abuse and assault are accidental or unintentional as Ogun’s interactions with Yemoja and Adi illustrate; I simply mean to draw attention to the fact that when it comes to issues of consent, a lack of proper and effective communication and interaction often has truly devastating results.

Furthermore, Ogun’s loss of his relationship with Oya and the way he must have seen Şango and Oya’s relationship flourish surely left him feeling sexually frustrated considering that all of his dealings with women seem to end in disaster. Moreover, Ogun again retreats into his beloved forest and isolates himself from society. Yet again, these issues of isolation and sexuality and their prevalence in our society seem to be a toxic mixture. One need only recall that the isolated and frustrated Santa Barbara killer confessed that he felt “forced to endure an existence of loneliness and insignificance, all because the females of the human species were incapable of seeing the value in [him],” and that the tragedy in Orlando was similarly linked to issues of sexuality, frustration, and also inebriation—another trait associated with Ogun.⁴⁷ When one

⁴⁷ The shooter at Pulse had a long history related to law enforcement and violent outbursts, and the Santa Barbara shooter’s extensive manifesto expresses how he felt isolated and frustrated by the lack of attention he received from women when compared to other men. This of course does not place responsibility at the feet of women but rather illustrates the skewed perspective that may emerge from such conditions of isolation and frustration. Gal Tziperman Lotan, Paul Brinkmann, and Rene Stutzman, “Witness: Omar Mateen Had Been at Orlando Gay Nightclub Many Times,” *Orlando Sentinel*, June 13, 2016, <http://www.orlandosentinel.com/news/pulse-orlando-nightclub-shooting/os-orlando-nightclub-omar-mateen-profile-20160613-story.html>; and “Inside Santa Barbara

takes the tradition of Ogun as a comprehensive whole, these struggles with isolation, violence, sexuality, substance abuse, and most importantly, masculinity are inherently linked and particularly present on college campuses.

Perhaps most tragically, the third myth about Ogun seems to sum up what many on college campuses have come to know about sexual assault. It is usually perpetrated by men,⁴⁸ the survivors are usually female,⁴⁹ the perpetrators are most often known by the survivors,⁵⁰ and one of the most difficult challenges after the horribly traumatic experience is finding a way to talk about it. The last time I remember crying is when I learned that a young woman I know, love, and had hoped to care for as an RA had been raped while a student in our dorm.⁵¹ Not only did she survive this experience, just like Adi in the myth, she knew the perpetrator, had to live in close proximity to him, and also was limited in what she could and wanted to discuss with others. In addition to going through an excruciating disciplinary procedure, she cited the experience of marginalization and lack of support as even more horrifying.

Her experience has stressed to me that retribution is not necessarily what is needed most, but just as the only instance of Ogun's pacification came through the power of Oṣun, it is only through the empowerment of and attention to the place of women (but also all survivors) in our society that we can properly address these issues. One of the greatest challenges in being able to respond on an institutional level is simply knowing when sexual assault has taken place as so many survivors are rightfully afraid of what will happen to them if they speak, find it too difficult to describe and relive the experience, and are unsure if they will find any justice even if they do.⁵² This is particularly the case when survivors are forced to live near those who assaulted them, as too often occurs.

Killer's Manifesto," ABC News, May 25, 2014, <http://abcnews.go.com/US/inside-santa-barbara-killers-manifesto/story?id=23860511>.

⁴⁸ Sofi Sinozich and Lynn Langton, *Rape and Sexual Assault Victimization Among College-Age Females, 1995–2013*, (United States Bureau of Justice Statistics, Office of Justice Programs, Dec. 2014), 8.

⁴⁹ Ninety percent of adult survivors are female, and one in every six women in America has survived attempted or completed rape at least once in her lifetime. This, however, should not detract from the fact that one in every ten survivors is male, or that TGQN (Transgender, Genderqueer, Questioning, Nonconforming) students and adults are particularly vulnerable. "Victims of Sexual Violence: Statistics," RAINN, accessed Aug. 31, 2016, <https://www.rainn.org/statistics/victims-sexual-violence>.

⁵⁰ Some estimate that in as many as 80% of sexual assault and rape cases the assailant is known to the survivor, and the rate can be as high as 93% with teenagers and juveniles. "Rape and Sexual Assault Victimization" and "Perpetrators of Sexual Violence: Statistics," accessed Aug. 31, 2016, <https://www.rainn.org/statistics/perpetrators-sexual-violence>.

⁵¹ She has bravely spoken out about her experience, and has published a petition with Rise Up to lobby the government to approve a Bill of Rights for survivors of sexual assault. The petition may be found here: <https://www.change.org/p/richard-neal-secure-basic-civil-rights-for-sexual-assault-survivors>. In October 2016, the "Survivors' Bill of Rights Act of 2016" was passed by the US Congress and signed by President Obama, and similar legislation was enacted on the state level in Massachusetts. Lauren Libby, "Secure Basic Civil Rights for Sexual Assault Survivors," Change.org., accessed August 31, 2016.

⁵² It is estimated that a full 4/5 of female survivors on college and university campuses never report their assault, and the number is only slightly higher for the general public. "Campus Sexual Violence: Statistics," RAINN, accessed Aug. 31, 2016, <https://www.rainn.org/statistics/campus-sexual-violence>; and "Rape and Sexual Assault Victimization," 9. Written before the AAU survey and university response, a similar experience of living near an assailant is described here by one anonymous student. Anonymous, "Dear Harvard: You Win," *Harvard Crimson*, March 31, 2014, <http://www.thecrimson.com/article/2014/3/31/Harvard-sexual-assault/>.

In another enlightening—if distressing—discussion I had with a different young woman in our dorm, I learned about how masculinity has become perceived by many as almost synonymous with aggressive sexuality. She informed me that one of her friends has learned to emphasize his identity as a gay male so that women could feel comfortable and safe around him. She thought it was a shame that a singular default identity of “male” often elicits fear of assault and that her friend would deliberately have to perform a specific identity in order to put women at ease. These fears seem justified as the recent AAU survey results revealed that about 25% of all women at our college (compared to 23% nationwide) reported being sexually abused or harassed at some point, again usually at the hands of males with whom they were familiar.⁵³ To move beyond college campuses, the *#metoo* campaign and the recent string of male celebrities accused of sexual assault demonstrate that this has been a serious issue for quite a while, but it seems like the floodgates are just now opening and bringing it to light for all of society. Although the effectiveness with which this issue is being tackled at colleges across the country is and should be debated, the fact is that it can no longer be denied that this is one of the most serious problems at American institutions of higher learning and beyond and is inextricably tied up in issues of masculinity and substance abuse.⁵⁴

The theme of injustice and silencing unfortunately runs through other areas as well, as the Take A Knee protests launched by Colin Kaepernick demonstrate. It is fascinating that in the face of the violence and injustice faced by black people in the United States, Kaepernick opted for a *silent* form of protest, and even so many of differing political leanings still sought to have him and all subsequent players silenced and censored. Even the president called for these players to be silenced or fired and for spectators to isolate them further, and many believe that Kaepernick is currently out of contract as a direct result of his protests.⁵⁵ As football is quite possibly the most Ogun-like sport, Kaepernick and others have engaged in muted protests in the face of injustice, and those who are implicit in the injustice they resist seek to silence and isolate them further, an important lesson can be learned from all of these myths about Ogun. A failure to recognize and account for unjust killings and oppression is likely only to anger Ogun and result in more conflict. When such arrogance and displays of strength are calmly and quietly challenged, rash and forceful reactions only multiply the problems, as when Ogun attacked Esu, and the other football players—both black and white—who have subsequently joined in the Take A Knee campaign reveal. The tendency to seek further isolation and a retreat into comfortable and familiar surroundings only causes a societal breakdown, and a failure to communicate properly and effectively only exacerbates issues. All of these factors can further contribute to issues of sexual- and gender-based harassment and discrimination, and despite efforts to sweep these issues under

⁵³ Although the total percentage is surely higher as is the percentage of women who report having faced some form of gender-based discrimination. David Cantor, Bonnie Fisher, Susan Chibnall, Carol Bruce, Reanne Townsend, Gail Thomas, and Hyunshik Lee, *Report on the AAU Campus Climate Survey on Sexual Assault and Sexual Misconduct* (Rockville, MD: Westat, 2015), 14; and “Fact Sheet: AAU Climate Survey on Sexual Assault and Sexual Misconduct,” Association of American Universities, accessed March 5, 2018, https://www.aau.edu/sites/default/files/%40%20Files/Climate%20Survey/Fact%20Sheet%20for%20AAU%20Climate%20Survey%209-21-15_0.pdf, 1.

⁵⁴ Although I have opted not to explore the related issue of substance abuse fully here, it is one that was singled out by the AAU in its survey report, is another common feature of Ogun’s tradition, and one I have unfortunately witnessed first-hand many times as an RA. “Fact Sheet,” 3; and “Rape and Sexual Assault Victimization,” 8.

⁵⁵ Tom Porter, “Trump Wants ‘Son of A Bitch’ NFL Players Fired but Colin Kaepernick—and His Mom—Are Fighting Back,” *Newsweek*, Sept. 23, 2017, <http://www.newsweek.com/trump-wants-nfl-police-brutality-protesters-colin-kaepernick-sacked-heres-670001>.

the rug and silence those oppressed, the truth ultimately comes out with severe consequences for those implicated. Ultimately this situation leaves neither the oppressed nor the oppressor better off, and with respect to all of the current issues related to racial injustice, gun violence, and sexual assault, that certainly seems to be the current state of affairs.

Justice and Resolution

Just as the student I know who survived sexual assault—and the countless others of whom I am unaware—has not received the justice she rightfully sought, and just as the families of Philando Castille, Trayvon Martin, Tamir Rice, Eric Garner, Sandra Bland, and countless others have not received the justice that they sought, it appears that Ogun, the supposed deity of justice, has failed us and is in fact the source of the problem itself. In speaking with the Oluṣe or high priest of Ogun in Èdè, I learned that he (and I as the descendant of an Ogun priest myself) would certainly agree with this assessment. In fact, when I described some of these events to the Oluṣe, he shook his head and exclaimed, “*ibinu Ogun ni!*” This is the wrath of Ogun! However, as noted above, all Yoruba deities encompass the positive and negative aspects of their domains, and when one *oriṣa* causes serious issues in society, (s)he is also understood to be simultaneously the source of and solution to the problem. In this way, the existence of the problem is merely a sign of the deity’s righteous displeasure and not his inherent malevolence. For example, when 35 people died within just a few days in Èdè as a result of car accidents, the people finally heeded the advice of the Oluṣe, went to the traditional king and performed an elaborate set of rituals to appease Ogun. When the accidents and deaths stopped abruptly, many naturally attributed this to the town having set matters right with Ogun.

The issue is not that American society (or *Oyinbo* as *Ifa* called Westerners) has put Ogun on a pedestal. The issue is that he has been turned into an idol, which he was never meant to be. If Ogun is served properly and his idioms and traditions are observed appropriately and put in their proper context, all of life is more orderly and benefits from his influence. However, if these interactions with Ogun and his power are not properly ordered, we will only feel the negative aspects of his nature, and feel them forcefully as the people of Èdè did. A good friend of mine who is a devotee of Ogun once neglected to perform his customary rituals for a brief period of time, and when this friend set glasses down on a metal counter (read Ogun), they broke, almost inexplicably. Although my friend, through this system of indigenous hermeneutics, recognized Ogun as the source of the recurring problem, properly (re)organizing interactions with him was also the solution. After Ogun’s rituals were performed, the problem ceased, and my friend again experienced his benevolence.

I have argued that perhaps more than through any other *oriṣa*, the modern era and American society can be effectively understood through the idioms and characteristics of Ogun. Our obsession with work and productivity, dedication to progress, the emphasis placed on independence and individuality, and the ubiquitous nature of technology that has infiltrated every part of our lives has led me to believe that Ogun reigns supreme in contemporary America. Perhaps this is not without good reason as he has so much to offer in these areas. However, making Ogun so powerful and prevalent is not without its dangers. Over the past few years I have felt as if America has collectively summoned and angered Ogun who is consequently slaughtering those who revere him, just as the Yoruba *babalawo* 150 years ago described Ogun

coming to the earth with his 400 short swords to shed blood,⁵⁶ or as Ogun’s drunk devotees did when they inappropriately pulled on his chain. Furthermore, particularly with respect to the related issues of gun violence and mass shootings, and racial injustice, it feels as if we are getting nowhere while the problem gets worse, and some are even suggesting that the best way forward is to get more cutlasses so we can create even more chaos and violence and cut Eṣu in half yet again. Almost daily, our government sends out Ogun in the form of completely mechanized planes that drop death on others, and I have seen firsthand how our young people have been subjected to the horrors of social isolation and sexual assault. I feel as if I am living in the “day of Ogun’s anger” referenced at the opening of this article when the dead are going to heaven and eyelashes (including my own) are full of water.

On different occasions, when I have seen a dead chicken and goat that were killed by cars on the road, those with me exclaimed, “Ah, Ogun ti pa a!”—*Ah! Ogun has killed them*, because as mentioned before, Ogun is the metal technology that caused their death. In a similar way, to employ indigenous Yoruba heurmenetics, Ogun is also the police, the weapons, and even the automobiles that have claimed the lives of our brothers and sisters of different colors, orientations, and sexes. But this also means that within Ogun there is also the power to resolve these issues. In Ogun’s praise poetry, he is also the one called upon to stay senseless violence,⁵⁷ and he is as much a protector and creator as he is a destroyer. In response to the shooting at Sandy Hook, the Oluṣe stated that such a thing could never happen in Ede for two reasons. First, every year the king performs Ogun’s rituals on behalf of the whole town and has his devotees pray for his benevolence and then follow his commandments. This ritual action effectively prevents the misuse of Ogun and ensures that his tools are only employed for social benefit. Second, in addition to having secured Ogun’s favor, they allow only hunters and soldiers to carry guns because his destructive power in the form of guns does not belong in ordinary civil situations.⁵⁸ I believe America may need to appeal to Ogun’s creative, nurturing, and protective nature just as enthusiastically as we have embraced his destructive nature through our obsession with firearms, unparalleled military force, independence, pride, almost militarized partisanship, and refusal to acknowledge and address injustice.

In our call for justice we must also make sure that we first please Ogun before we can expect it to be heard. In other myths Ogun brings his swift wrath to bear on entire towns when stealing goes unpunished, and to this day even Yoruba Christians and Muslims are afraid to take oaths on pieces of iron because of the belief that if they themselves are not blameless, they only invite the terrible wrath of Ogun. Babalola notes that “Ogun is quick to protect the honest, the innocent poor, [and] the victims of military attack,”⁵⁹ and that he is a “crusader against injustice.”⁶⁰ He is praised as “the divinity who takes from the rich and gives to the poor . . . [to] guard the dwelling place of each one of us,”⁶¹ and he seems to be particularly concerned with economic justice and equality. Consequently, a response must address all of these issues (such as killing innocent people through drone strikes, severe and growing economic disparity, gender discrimination, racial inequality, and social isolation and frustration) before we can expect Ogun

⁵⁶ Peel, *Religious Encounter and the Making of the Yoruba*, 94.

⁵⁷ Babalola, “A Portrait of Ògún as Reflected in Ìjálá Chants,” 161–62.

⁵⁸ Ileadì Atoyebi Ogundìgi, interview with author, Ede, Nigeria, September 2, 2016.

⁵⁹ Babalola, “A Portrait of Ògún as Reflected in Ìjálá Chants,” 156.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 155.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 152.

to smile on us.⁶² After all, if he protects the victims of military attack, this implies that those who do not refrain from attacking the innocent (domestically or abroad) are likely to find themselves on the wrong side of his machete. If our society continues to prey on the vulnerable and marginalized we cannot expect him to guard us, no matter how many guns we have. If we do not first and foremost address these issues of injustice, increasing Ogun's power would be tantamount to taking a false oath on an even bigger piece of iron or the people of Èdè putting more cars on the road after a series of deadly accidents.

The fact that Ogun's rituals are carried out at a respectful distance must not be overlooked either, and perhaps our lives would be a bit better if we restrained our obsession with technology, guns, productivity, and violence and learned to revere them without making them so central to our lives and identities. We must also not forget that while applying more of Ogun in the same way will only make matters worse, the other male orisha were not able to bring him into the fold either. In the only myth analyzed here that has a happy ending, this was accomplished through Oṣun's role in cooling and pacifying Ogun. Just as a blacksmith working with iron must quickly cool it in water so that it does not become deformed or burn those who come into contact with it, the hot and aggressive energies of Ogun must always be tempered by the coolness and soothing nature of Oṣun. This again underlines the importance—and absence in American society—of rituals of cleansing and cooling for those who participate in Ogun's ambiguously destructive and creative violence that can be used either to protect and mold or to kill and destroy. If we can learn to embrace Ogun and Oṣun simultaneously by empowering and respecting women, learning to understand and value the arts, and placing a higher premium on social justice, integration, and interaction than we do on individuality and force, then perhaps we can transcend the identity of those who made Ogun into a sacreligious idol beset by his wrath and become true children of Ogun whom he blesses and protects from all of the horrors that have made the past few years so difficult for us all.

⁶² Again, Socrates supposedly also predicts that this Age of Iron will be characterized by those who “engender lack of likeness and unharmonious inequality, and these always breed war and hostility.” *Republic*, 242.

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