SONGS OF PRAISE AND INVOCATION:
The Orisha Sacred Songs of Trinidad

I received an advanced study grant and traveled to Benin West Africa in the summer of 2005 to conduct field research into the Yoruba origins of the Orisha chants of Trinidad. I conducted the first segment of my research in Ketu, an historic Yoruba district located in the eastern part of Benin, 86 miles from Cotonou and 67 miles from Porto Novo, the two main cities in the Benin Republic. Ketu has a population of approximately 100,000 inhabitants, 77 percent of whom constitute the Yoruba people, crowded into two of the six communities, namely Ketu (the city) and Idigny/Idahin (a rural town). It was in Idigny that I met with King Oba Thomas Atanda Idowu Arolagbade II and interviewed the chief priests and Orisha devotees.

In Trinidad, the Orisha movement, better known as the Shango religion, which venerates the forces of nature, the Orisha, is the cultural link between Afro-Trinidadians and the Yoruba peoples of West Africa. Streams of Yoruba culture have flowed from the rivers of Africa and into the seas of the Americas. In Trinidad, the essence of Yoruba culture still exists, and Yoruba language has survived in song, primarily because of the vitality of the Shango religion. This collection of Orisha chants translated demonstrates the life experiences of African-Trinidadians, from the African continent, to the Middle Passage, the oppressive slave plantation, and finally the present communities of Trinidad. Unfortunately, most Trinidadians still have a colonized mentality and continue to devalue, ridicule, and demonize the Orisha religious movement. Their contempt for African-based religions does not diminish the joy and fulfillment Orisha devotees gain from their faith.

Over the course of my research experience in the Benin Republic, I was privy to Orisha religious celebrations and observed that the Orisha sacred songs of Trinidadians are reflections of the rhythms and expressions of Yoruba culture. The invigorating drums, the heartbeat of the tradition, and their pulsating rhythms have the power to awaken anyone in their vicinity. The beauty of the Orisha drums is that they elevate our being to higher states of consciousness where, through joy in trance, we dance the dance of our ancestors. With the exception of some of the sacred songs/chants that I sang, the collection of chants translated in this research included those recorded and sung by Ella Andall, a prominent Trinidadian Orisha devotee, in her most recent CD, Shango Babawa. The translations are not literal per se, but they do convey the ideological, sociological, and contextual meanings. Sung to praise and honor some of the most revered Orisha, in the Orisha spiritual religious traditions, the Oriki praise songs enabled diasporic Africans to reaffirm their Yoruba identity. Their unquestioned trust in their Orisha spiritual traditions enabled diasporic Africans to remember and mentally transport their Orisha to the Americas. Shango, who is the spirit of lightning and thunder, the Orisha of justice of righteousness, the protector of children and the innocent, became the patriarchal head, the bearer and the representation of the Orisha spiritual tradition in Trinidad. Shango, in addition to several Orisha, is the cultural remnant that enslaved Africans brought to the Americas, including the Caribbean island of Trinidad.

Orisha devotees remember the horrors of slavery through the chant of Ara romi o, but they regain hope and assurance in songs like Babawa ye rona ye rona and Shango mu ase fun wa. These lamentations of hope not only reveal their dependency on Shango, but they also show the power and heightened self-esteem they have gained.
ARA ROMI O
Ara romi o
My body is in pain
Ara romi Shango
SHANGO my body is in pain
Ara romi emitibini
SHANGO: I do not want my body to pain
Ara romi Shango
SHANGO: my body is in pain
Ojo romi e e
The rain is falling on me [I am experiencing hard times]
Ojo romi Shango
The rain is falling on me [I am experiencing hard times]

BABA YE RONA YE RONA
Babawa ye rona ye rona
Our father has found a way to be with us
Shango rona
SHANGO has found a way to be with us
Babawa ye rona ye rona
Our father has found a way to be with us
Shango rona
SHANGO has found a way to be with us

SHANGO MU ASE FUN WA
Shango mu ase fun wa
SHANGO: give us the power
Orriwo
You have the power
Shango fun wa
SHANGO: has given us the power
Orriwo
You have the power
Mu ase fun wa
Give us the power
Orriwo
You have the power
Babawa fun wa
Our father has given us the power

In times of hardships, many questioned their faith and subjected themselves to despair as seen in Ka rele. However, some of the devotees’ unquestionable trust in their religion corrects those doubts when they reminded others of Shango’s vitality, as observed in Emi ni ape Shango l’ojo.

KA RELE
Ka rele
Let us go home
Ka rele o
Let us go home!
Ka rele ojo moni owo
Let us go home, the rain has no regards for anyone
Ojo baa de
Let the rain come!
Onian wa, bi ojo baa de onian wa
People come, even if there is rain, people come

EMI NI APE SHANGO L’OJO
Emi ni ape Shango l’ojo
I say that they [devotees] call SHANGO during the rain [hard times]
Shango de omi lala l’ojo
SHANGO has come [even if] there is plenty water [hard times]
Omi lala l’ojo
There is plenty water [hard times]

Orisha devotees have no qualms about portraying or about celebrating Shango’s aggressiveness, his omnipotence and his unscathed vengeance as the fierce protector in songs like Shango olo.

SHANGO OLORO
Shango olo
SHANGO is deadly
Shango olo olo
SHANGO owns snake venom [SHANGO is lethal]
Shango o
Hail SHANGO!
Shango olo
SHANGO is deadly
Shango Babawa is a typical song of invocation and Fere ku fero yero and Emi l'awa ko pem le fise emi l'awa are traditional praise songs.

**SHANGO BABAWA**
Shango Babawa
Our father Shango
Shango Alado karele
Shango, the wearer of powerful amulets, let us go home and pay homage
Shango Babawa Olododo
Our father Shango, the most powerful
Kabiese O!
[Prostrating gesture/greeting of respect]

**FERE KU FERE YERO**
Fere ku fero yero
You [Shango] are worthy to be praised gracefully
La finsi Babawa
Our dear father
Fere ku fere Shango
Shango is worthy to be praised gracefully
La finsi Babawa
Our dear father

**EMI L'AWA KO PEMI LA FISE EMI L'AWA**
Emi l'awa ko pem le fise emi l'awa
Whenever you [Shango] call me, I will come and serve you
Shango ko pem le fise
Shango I will come and serve you
Emi l'awa ko pem le fise emi l'awa
Whenever you [Shango] call me, I will come and serve you
Shango ko pem le fise
Shango I will come and serve you

Most Shango ceremonies dismiss Shango and bring closure with Tete ma lo Shango and/or Eru dele O.

**TETE MA LO SHANGO**
Tete ma lo Shango
Depart quickly Shango
Tete ma lo
Depart quickly
Shango o! Tete ma lo
Hail Shango! [Now] depart quickly
Tete ma lo Baba
Depart quickly father
Tete ma lo
Depart quickly
Shango o! Tete ma lo
Hail Shango! (Now) depart quickly

**ERU DELE**
Eru dele O
Your servant has come to your shrine
Eru de
Your devotee has arrived
Mo juba
I pay homage
Mo lo
I leave
Eru de
Your devotee has come
Mo juba
I pay homage
Mo lo o!
[And] I leave

"Emi l'awa ko pem le fise emi l'awa
Whenever you [Shango] call me, I will come and serve you"