

YORUBA NUMBERS

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To twentieth century urban man number is a tool, a scale for enumeration, a gage for measurement, a code for identification. It is a mathematical abstraction, an abstraction of order and quantity. It was not always so. To non-mathematical man number is no abstraction for he does not necessarily distinguish between number and that which is numbered. Number can be far more than a conventional symbol; it can be an entity with characteristics and properties of its own.¹ Basic to Pythagoras' (582-500 B.C.) philosophy is the idea that numbers can be isolated and endowed with both biological and moral properties.² For Pythagoras number was more than a symbol of quantity, more than a symbol of reality, it was reality. Just as other Greek philosophers had postulated fire, earth, and water as the elements of existence, Pythagoras identified numbers as the elements of reality. A less astonishing and more recent case for the non-mathematical significance of numbers was made by Carl Jung (1875-1961). This modern psychologist proposes that number is one of the fundamental categories of the human psyche, or — in his terminology — an archetype. Shortly before he died, he wrote,

The very numbers you use in counting are more than you take them to be. They are at the same time mythological elements (for Pythagoras, they were divine); but you are certainly unaware of this when you use numbers for a practical purpose.³

But are numbers, in fact, anything more than codes for the man who uses them in calculators and computers? A street number, a Social Security code, a driver's license are certainly in no way symbolic. The price on a pound of meat and the monthly telephone bill are codes, nothing more. Yet, many an urban American avoids the thirteenth floor of his apartment house. He attends church every seventh day and is recognized as an adult at twenty-one. Whether superstition, symbol, or simple convention, certain numbers do play a decidedly important role in his life. Perhaps Jung over-stated the case by giving numbers archetypal significance; nevertheless he did point out an important fact: numbers used non-mathematically do follow certain patterns of usage. Freud was correct when he asserted that man uses numbers in a way which has been strictly determined, more determined than might seem possible.⁴ Numbers are not used at random, but according to a consistent, ascertainable pattern.

When such a pattern appears among the Yoruba of southwestern Nigeria, it is not because the Yoruba are unacquainted with the mathematical uses of numbers. Unlike many other African peoples, the Yoruba have long been an urban, mercantile nation; the city and market are centuries old institutions in Yorubaland. The demands of trade and urban bureaucracy long ago made numbers familiar tools of calculation. It is an insult among the Yoruba of Abeokota to say, "O daju danu, o ko mo essan messan [You don't know 9×9]." ⁵ (Americans set their standards of ignorance much lower: "He can't put two and two together.") Most Yorubas would probably sneer at Pythagoras' notion that numbers are divine.

Of course the Yoruba use of numbers is not confined to the market and the afin. The same women who shrewdly bargain in the marketplace are part of the community

which tells and listens to traditional stories, poems, and songs. Number is an element, although not a predominant one, in this lore. The questions posed here are: How is number used in this tradition? Are specific numbers associated with particular genres or contexts? Do any numbers evince symbolic associations of any sort? And, perhaps most significantly, why are certain numbers used consistently in the folklore in preference to others?

To attempt to answer these questions working only with translated materials might seem somewhat specious. Numbers, however, pose far fewer problems of inaccurate or misleading translation than most other elements of language. The words used for numbers are most often unambiguous, single forms without synonyms or other linguistic associations. Although number-words probably owe their origin to some specific activity or object, these early associations nearly always drop away and numbers become isolated, easily identifiable forms.⁶ Furthermore, number is a concept common to nearly every culture and, as a result, parallel linguistic forms make number translation a relatively simple matter. Number, in short, is among the elements of language least likely to be distorted by translation.

Although individual Yoruba numbers have parallel forms in the European languages, the traditional number system of the Yoruba is in some ways quite different from the European decimal system. A survey of this traditional system is prerequisite to understanding the use of number in Yoruba society. It may well be that the structure of the number system affects, perhaps determines, the use of numbers in the lore.

It is difficult to dissociate the European number system from the written numerals which represent it. The Yoruba number system, on the other hand, possesses no commonly accepted written shorthand.⁷ Number is a verbal, not a written, form in West Africa. Merchandising, for example, is a verbal process, not a matter of ledgers and account books. This is an important point of difference between the European and Yoruba systems. The limits of mental calculation and verbal expression impose certain conventions on the Yoruba system, conventions which will be described below. Yet, the Yoruba system is by no means less complex than the decimal system. In fact, the Yoruba system is considerably more difficult to practically employ than the relatively simple European system.

Some anthropologists assume that the Yoruba number system, like nearly all known systems, began with digital counting⁸; man almost certainly began counting with his fingers and toes.⁹ In the Yoruba system the basic numbers correspond to the fingers, the numbers one through ten. (There is no mathematical concept of zero.¹⁰) These numerals -- simple, unambiguous, and uncompounded forms -- are ten of the fourteen root numbers, or radical forms, from which all other numbers are compounded. The number eleven, for example, is a compound form meaning one in addition to ten (1+10). The numbers eleven through fourteen are formed by adding the appropriate radical to ten. Fifteen through nineteen are formed not through addition, but subtraction. Fifteen, for example, is a compound meaning twenty minus five (20-5). Why the Yoruba employ both addition and subtraction in these elementary forms poses an interesting problem. The numbers one through twenty could have been counted simply enough on all the fingers and toes (as among the neighboring Vei). Why this more complex system? Robert Armstrong proposes an interesting hypothesis to answer this question: he suggests that by using both addition and subtraction a man is able to count ten and its multiples on the fingers of one hand.¹¹ The accompanying drawings show how such a counting convention might have worked.



Using the free hand to count off units of ten, a man might extend finger counting well beyond its apparent limits. Armstrong's proposal is, of course, only hypothetical for Yoruba mathematical skills long ago developed well beyond such basic counting.

Twenty, *ogun* (not to be confused with the orisha *Ogún*), is a most important root number, a radical basic to the form of most of the first 200 numerals. Even multiples of twenty are formed simply by multiplying *ogun* by another radical. Forty, for example, is 2×20 . Other multiples of ten, not exact multiples of twenty, are formed by multiplication and subtraction. Fifty, for example, is a compound meaning $(20 \times 3) - 10$. (The number thirty is an exception here; it is a radical form, although little used in compounds.) Intermediate forms not multiples of ten are compounded according to the pattern of addition and subtraction set by eleven through nineteen. This pattern of regular compounding is illustrated below.

| | | | | | | | |
|----|--------|----|--------|----|-------------------|----|------------------------|
| 11 | $10+1$ | 21 | $20+1$ | 31 | $30+1$ | 41 | $(2 \times 20)+1$ |
| 14 | $10+4$ | 24 | $20+4$ | 34 | $30+4$ | 44 | $(2 \times 20)+4$ |
| 15 | $20-5$ | 25 | $30-5$ | 35 | $(2 \times 20)-5$ | 45 | $([3 \times 20]-10)-5$ |
| 19 | $20-1$ | 29 | $30-1$ | 39 | $(2 \times 20)-1$ | 49 | $([3 \times 20]-10)-1$ |
| 20 | 20 | 30 | 30 | 40 | 2×20 | 50 | $(3 \times 20)-10$ |

Thus, in contrast to the European decimal system which forms compounds with addition and multiplication, the Yoruba system compounds with addition, multiplication, and subtraction. The result is complex numeral form.

Such a number system, although somewhat awkward with large numbers, would be more than satisfactory for a rural population with a barter economy. This system or one very similar to it probably sufficed the Yoruba during their early history; but once the Yoruba nation adopted a currency as the means of exchange, this system proved inadequate. Adopted by the Yoruba and some neighboring tribes, the cowry shell (*cypraea moneta*) was a true currency, portable, durable, and a universal medium of exchange among the Yoruba peoples. Like all money, shell money demands quantification; to be an effective money, the cowries had to be numbered, their value determined. The cowry count became so important that a special number form developed for just that purpose: *bkan* (1), for example, developed an alternate form, *ookan* (one cowry). *Okbwo* (*oko*[a string]*owo*[of cowries]), a number form representing twenty cowries seems to indicate that cowry shells were strung in groups of twenty. However, other sources (sources such as S. Johnson, the Yoruba historian) state that the shells were strung in groups of thirty-two, forty,¹² sixty-six, or even 100.¹³ The number of cowries in these initial groupings or strings seems, in short, to have been quite variable. Nonetheless, certain conventions of cowry usage did develop which suggested a way, using the basic logic of the lower numerals, to expand the basic number system.¹⁴ Unstrung cowries seem to have been counted out in small groups of twenty or forty; when enough cowries were thus counted, the small piles were pushed together into a heap of 200. From this convention a new root number was formed: *igba* (200) finds its origin in the word for "heap" or "pile." With the exception of 400 (the largest and last radical form), *igba* is the root form basic to most numerals larger than 200 (as twenty is the radical basic to most forms less than 200).

Just as *igba* (which, although not a compound, might mathematically be considered 10×20) became an important root in higher compounds, so too does 10×200 (2,000), *egbèwá*, become a base for compounds above 2,000. *Egbèwá*, however, is not a true radical; although a base for higher compounds, it is itself a compound. Continuing the pattern, $10 \times 2,000$ (20,000), becomes the base for even higher compounds. It was in this fashion that the basic counting system was expanded into a large, albeit complex, numerical system. This expansion was affected in no small way by the acceptance and use of cowry money. The basic units of the expanded number system correspond to the basic traditional units of cowry exchange: 200 cowries are a "heap," a "head" of cowries numbers 2,000, a "bag" of cowries consists of ten heads, 20,000 cowries.

It was an important principle of cowry exchange that prices asked and received be in conventional units or groups.¹⁵ Cowries were most conveniently exchanged in simple strings, heads, or bags. Of course, cowries were exchanged in intermediate units, but these too would be in common multiples and, therefore, easy to handle. 300 cowries, for example, might be an acceptable price; 562 cowries would not be a fair price. As great an improvement over barter as cowry currency was, it was nonetheless too bulky to be exchanged in other than conventional units.

It is difficult to estimate the value or buying power of the cowry in traditional society. Not until British colonization in the nineteenth century do we have any notion of the exchange value of cowries. In 1853 the exchange value (cowries to pounds) of one head of cowries was estimated at 4s.; ten years later foreign importation of cowries had lowered the value of one head to 1s. 5d.¹⁶ Only in the late nineteenth century was the exchange value of cowries stabilized, although at a greatly deflated value: one head was valued at 6d.¹⁷ (U.S. dollar equivalent, 1870-1900, 12¢.¹⁸) The convention that cowries be exchanged in traditional multiples or groups affected their value; for example, although 300 cowries had a value of 1d., 500 cowries -- not 450 -- had the exchange value of 1½d. (3¢). These figures decidedly point out the meager value of small numbers of cowries; other records from the late nineteenth century support this observation. In 1864 missionaries among the Yoruba negotiated an annual tuition of £2 (eight bags; 160,000 cowries) for each child in the mission school.¹⁹ An evangelist in Yorubaland of the 1800's was expected to support himself, his wife, and as many as five children on a salary of £36 (144 bags) per year.²⁰ It cost little to live in a Yoruba town, but any purchase would involve a considerable number of cowries; cowries were doubtless exchanged in very large numbers in the local market. A few strings were of little value; the wealthy man would possess many, many bags of cowries.

Early in the twentieth century British currency completely superseded cowry money.²¹ Ifa verses, however, still call for money sacrifice in quantities of cowries. Conversationally, money is often referred to in *oke* (bags), units of 5s.²²

The traditional number system of the Yoruba, in short, probably began with digital counting; the introduction of cowry money forced the basic digital system to expand in order to accommodate the mathematical demand of monetary exchange. Although this expansion followed the basic logic of the lower numerals, it was clearly affected by the conventions of cowry exchange. The fourteen radical forms (one through ten, twenty, thirty, 200, and 400) and the conjunctions of addition, subtraction, and multiplication are the basis of all other numerals. Traditionally, Yoruba numbers exist only in

verbal form; there is no written "shorthand" for Yoruba numbers. The number 330, for example, exists only as the verbal form brin din nirinwó ólé méwáá. Conventional groupings of cowries do, however, provide a kind of shorthand for standard units such as the head (2,000). Numbers other than these conventional units are complex and perhaps difficult to form and use. Where the European decimal system is based upon units of ten and the functions of addition and multiplication, the Yoruba system is based upon units of both ten and twenty, and the functions of addition, multiplication, and subtraction. The result is a number system far more complex than the decimal system. In one of the earliest studies of the Yoruba number system, Adolphus Mann drew an apt analogy descriptive of that system:

We light, as it were, on a building, which, when viewed from base to summit, is not behind our European systems in regularity and symmetry, while the system surpasses them in aptitude of interlinking the separate members; it stands to them in the same relation as the profusely ornamented Moorish style stands to the more sober Byzantine.²³

Only a few numbers, a small fraction of the entire number system, are used in Yoruba traditional lore and belief. Some few numbers appear again and again, in poetry, in prose, in proverb; others appear seldom, if ever. Numbers which appear no more than three times in the translated corpus used here are not included in the survey below. The numbers one and two have been excluded as well; both are basic, "natural" numbers essential to simple description and the most basic kind of quantification; their use as pattern numbers cannot validly be attributed to specific cultural values or patterns.

Carl Jung believed that four was another such "natural" number. Four, he points out, is one of man's ancient symbols, a symbol probably as old as the Old Stone Age;²⁴ it is a sacral number practically everywhere and in all ages.²⁵ It usually symbolizes the one-in-many, completeness, and harmony.²⁶ Westerners, for example, speak of four seasons and four evangelists. Peoples in many different parts of the world describe the earth as having four corners. The Yoruba say, "Igun mérin ni aiyé ní" (The world has four corners). From the four gates of the earth, tradition says, the gods and the spirits of good and evil approach man.²⁶ The four-headed god, Olórí Mérin, is the diety of the world's four corners; in olden times, four times a year a four-day-old child was sacrificed before his four-headed image.²⁷ Four major orisha, one for each part of the earth, are closely associated with the four parts of the world. One day of the traditional four-day-week is dedicated to each of these four orisha.²⁸

Although the traditional week consists of four days, the Yoruba traditionally count five days to the week. By counting inclusively, that is, by counting both the first and last day, the week is counted five days long. (This five-day week consisting of four days was no end of confusion to the authors of the first books on the Yoruba.) Rural and periodic markets traditionally met, and still meet (according to the Western way of counting the week) at intervals of four or multiples of four days. Although the seven-day week was introduced by Europeans in the late nineteenth century, a periodic market of today might well meet on Monday/Friday/Tuesday/Saturday/etc.²⁹

The traditional week is also a ritual period. Many dieties are worshiped ritually every four or eight days and have annual celebrations lasting for four or eight days.³⁰ For example, sacrifice is made to Oluweri, a minor deity, every eight days.³¹ Ijebe carvings are fed symbolically every four days.³² Four is closely associated with ritual sacrifice. Ifa not infrequently demands sacrifice in quantities of four or its multiples, for example: "Four rats, four fish, and four snails."³³ The afin at Owo has twelve courtyards set aside as shrines for ancestor Obas; specific numbers of kola nuts, all multiples of four, must be offered in these courtyards to commune with these ancestors.³⁴

Just as the world has four gates, so too does the traditional Yoruba town conceptually have gates numbering four or its multiples. Ibadan is reputed to have had sixteen gates; Abeokuta, tradition says, had twelve gates.³⁵ (By way of comparison, it is worth noting that imperial Rome was a city of four gates; sacred Jerusalem, a city of twelve gates.³⁶)

Ojo observes that four was "the sacred Yoruba figure."³⁷ Four is a number found in contexts which are nearly always religious; it is seldom found in folktales, proverbs, riddles, or other "secular" forms. Bascom, noting that the Odu of Ifa number the orisha at 400, observes that "this is a mystic number and can be taken only as meaning a great number."³⁸ 400, although not a definitive numbering of the orisha, is a number associated with divinity. The structure of the number system does not describe 400 as a multiple of four, but the linguistic similarity of four (èrin) and 400 (erino) is unmistakable.

Four fours, or sixteen, is another particularly important number. According to a creation story told at Ife, Olodumare sent Oduduwa and sixteen assistant chiefs to form the earth;³⁹ thus, tradition says, Ife had sixteen chiefs.⁴⁰ Local legends tell of sixteen chiefs in Ibadan and sixteen chiefs in Ilagbèlè.⁴¹ S. Johnson remarked that the Ekiti tribal country was ruled by sixteen chiefs.⁴²

Jung observed that "numbers not only serve our needs for everyday counting and measuring, but for centuries they have been our way of 'reading' many ancient forms of divination."⁴³ It is here that the number sixteen is most important: it is the key figure in forms of divination in Europe, Persia, India, Micronesia, and Africa.⁴⁴ It is the essential figure for the several forms of divination used by the Yoruba: Islamic sand-cutting, agbigba (using four strings of four markers each), owo merindilogun (using sixteen cowries), and Ifa.⁴⁵ Tradition says that Ifa (Orunmila) gathered sixteen palm nuts from a sixteen-branched palm tree on Ado rock.⁴⁶ As his gift to man, Ifa taught him how to divine with these sixteen nuts. Sixteen palm nuts are his symbol;⁴⁷ sixteen oil lamps burn during his festival.⁴⁸ In the Ifa system, the babalowa, using sixteen palm nuts (ikin) or eight half shells (opèlè), determines two columns of four markings each, columns which can be read as sixteen basic figures (Odu) and 256 (16 x 16) derivative figures. The figures of Ifa are thus based upon multiples of four and sixteen. Although perhaps oversimplifying the complex Ifa system, Peter Morton Williams points out that:

Ifa symbolism shows how the paired distinctions can be matched and balanced to form patterns based on the sign of completion and perfection, that is, the number four.⁴⁹

Sixteen is associated with divinity and the occult as well as divination. Ijala chanters tell of "Full sixteen gods [who] successively implored me to be their concubine."⁵⁰ Speaking of the head of the Egungun cult in Ogbin, the hunters chant, "Pits and small enclosures,/Sixteen there were in the backyard of Ogbin./In them all he engaged in occultist activities."⁵¹

It would be spurious to assume that every pattern number found in the traditional lore has symbolic associations. Some numbers may be no more than conventions of composition. Sixteen is part of what appears to be one of these purely conventional number patterns. The pattern, occasionally used, dividing sixteen objects into two parts of eight each is the essential element in these verses from two oriki.

We dance to the sixteen drums that sound jingin, jingin,
To eight of the drums we dance bending down,
To eight of the drums we dance erect.⁵²

Sixteen wooden posts
Their father Carved up and took to the Alaafin.
Eight of them were carved in the likeness of royal wives. 53
Eight of them were carved in the likeness of royal servants....

The number three is a primary symbol among initiates of the Ogboni cult. New initiates wear a string of three cowries around their wrist for three days.⁵⁴ The Ogboni greet one another by bringing clenched fists together three times.⁵⁵ When one of the Ogboni dies, he is buried to drums speaking in patterns of three.⁵⁶ The number three is the key to Ogboni symbolism; they have a saying, "Ogboni meji o di eta" (Two Ogboni, it becomes three).⁵⁷ About the use of the number three, Peter Morton Williams writes:

In the rest of Yoruba religion three is avoided; there is emphasis on dualism -- in, for example, the pairing of many of the gods -- and stress on the number four and its square, sixteen....To offer three objects to a god in ritual or to a guest on secular occasions, is insulting and invites reprisal.⁵⁸

Mr. Williams, unfortunately, oversimplifies the use of this number by the Yoruba. He contends that to offer three objects to a god is offensive; yet, Ifa often calls for sacrifice in quantities of three, for example: "Three pots, three hoes, and two pigeons."⁵⁹ Three appears in other religious contexts as well. At creation, one origin story says, Olodumare sent three sons -- Earth, Fire, and Forest -- into the world.⁶⁰ Traditional belief describes the three souls in man: emi (breath), ojiji (shadow), and olori (head).⁶¹ Thus, although four and sixteen are the numbers most frequently associated with religious concepts, three appears occasionally in myths and often in ritual sacrifice.

Yoruba folk tradition uses three most often, however, in *litan*, narratives. Common in the traditional tales are three sons, three brothers, three animals, or a period of three years. The rat, for example, is said to have had three sons -- elephant, buffalo, and ram -- each of whom fought the bird Irogun.⁶² In the tale of the hunter and the forest witch, the hunter is saved only because of the bravery of his three dogs.⁶³ Ijala chants tell of the three birds which excell in smartness,⁶⁴ and the three brothers who go to the king to settle their quarrel.⁶⁵ In the tale of *The Twins*, one of the twins slays a six-headed monster and peacefully rules the kingdom for three years.⁶⁶

European folklorists have observed that the folk narratives of the Aryan and many other world cultures are subject to the "Law of Three;" that is, pattern in these narratives is nearly always tied to the number three.⁶⁷ To place Yoruba *itan* completely within this "Law" would seem to be an unwarranted generalization; nevertheless, three is a number distinctly associated with Yoruba narrative.

On occasion three is associated with the number seven in Yoruba narrative tradition. For instance, the three quarreling brothers are told the king will look to their problem in seven days.⁶⁸ Seven is the number associated most often with things of consequence, of importance. The king will solve the problem in seven days. The tadpole king, an animal tale says, will be crowned in seven days.⁶⁹ The crossroad has always been an important place in Yoruba belief (supplicants are often directed to offer sacrifice at the crossroads); a proverb speaks of "The crossroad with seven ways which confuses the stranger."⁷⁰ The *Olufin* of Ife is said to have had seven children, seven grandchildren, and seven great-grandchildren.⁷¹ According to one creation story, *Oduduwa* begat seven grandchildren, each of whom became a leader of one of the seven principle tribes of the Yoruba.⁷² If the annual dry season was excessively long and drought threatened, professional rain-makers (often *Egungun*) were summoned and given seven days in which to make rain. If after seven days they had failed, a state of emergency was declared and the *Orb* cult called in.⁷³ The annual *Orb* festival, incidentally, lasted seven days.⁷⁴ According to one Yoruba tale, *Oduduwa* and *Orishala* agreed to stop the war between the gods on the condition that they should have human sacrifice every seven months.⁷⁵ Until recently, human sacrifice was offered under the seven-branched palm tree at *Aiyetoro-Ekiti*.⁷⁶ Seven is thus often associated with sacrifice and, to a lesser degree, with divinity. Yet, it is a number seldom found in *Ifa* verses.

In contrast, six is used again and again in *Ifa*; *Ifa* often demands sacrifice in quantities of six, for example:

Six of everything must be sacrificed: six bunches of dried rats, six bunches of dried fish, six cloths, six bags of money, six ewes -- six of everything -- and six drums.⁷⁷

In contexts other than *Ifa*, the number six is most often associated with domestic situations or the details of domestic life. *Olusegbe* was a great general, later king, with six wives.⁷⁸ *Olusegbede*'s father had six wives, all of whom became pregnant.⁷⁹ The faithful wife will make her husband six loaves of pounded yam, enough for the family and possible guests.⁸⁰ A proverb says, "What woman, if we gave her twelve (2 x 6) yams, would not pound a few yams for us?"⁸¹ Another proverb advises, "A man has been beaten six times and is advised to be patient. What else is there for him to do?"⁸² The traditional game called *Ayo* is a game for two played on a board with six cavities (and, incidentally, with four nuts in each cavity).⁸³

As noted earlier, in some parts of Yorubaland cowries were strung in groups of twenty. These strings of cowries are not infrequently part of a ritual sacrifice called for by *Ifa*; one such sacrifice calls for 400 plus twenty cowries, another for 600 plus twenty cowries.⁸⁴ *Bascom* points out that by calling for a sacrifice of twenty cowries (*okowo*) in a verse involving a farm (*oko*), *Ifa* invokes a pattern of word magic.⁸⁵

Twenty cowries, nonetheless, is a meager sum. The three following proverbs imply that okowo is but a pittance:

Perhaps we shall meet again, said he who sold his dog
for twenty cowries.

One who drinks to the value of forty cowries will speak
to the value of twenty cowries.

A reviler has no twenty cowries as his capital at home
beyond his mouth.

Only a fool thinks twenty cowries are of great value. A few cowries are of such little value that an Ifa verse says it is all too easy to forget about twenty, thirty, or even forty cowries.⁸⁷ A funeral song from Ede bemoans the poverty of the dead by saying that they have not even forty cowries with which to buy common salt.⁸⁸

Although twenty cowries is a small sum, twenty years, Yoruba tradition says, is a long time. "Lies travel for twenty years and never arrive," says one proverb.⁸⁹ Another says, "Twenty children will not play together for twenty years."⁹⁰

Excluding okowo, twenty is often associated with wealth and power. An Ijala chant in praise of the buffalo warns that "Even the man who owns twenty horses" dare not pursue the mighty buffalo.⁹¹ The phrase "Twenty slaves and thirty iwofa [indentured servants]" is a conventional phrase used to signify wealth and prosperity. This pattern is common to several genres of Yoruba folklore.

a) Oriki:

The owner of twenty slaves is sacrificing
So that Eshu may not confuse him.
The owner of thirty iwofa is sacrificing
So that Eshu may not confuse him.

Beautiful antelope with the slender neck.
Your thighs are worth twenty slaves.
Your arms are more precious than thirty servants.

b) Iwi:

We may have twenty slaves,
We may have thirty laborers,
Only a child brings us joy,
One's child is one's child.

c) Proverb:

If a man has twenty slaves, if a man has thirty iwofa, his
child is always his child.

d) Marriage Song:

I must go now.
Let the new house suit me.
Let me have twenty slaves,
Let me have thirty iwofa.⁹²

This number pattern is almost certainly not symbolic. It is, however, a pattern which the traditional number system, by its very construction, encourages. Between ten and 200, twenty and thirty are the sole radical forms; as such they stand distinctly apart from the great many compound numbers. The series twenty-thirty (ogun-ogbón) is also an alliterative one, easily used to advantage in poetry and song. These are probably the primary reasons this particular number pattern has become traditional.

Like the other radical forms, 200 is also a pattern number. Bascom quite accurately identifies it as "a ritual number signifying only a very large number."⁹³ For example, an oriki in praise of the Ogoga of Ikene says, "200 needles do not equal a hoe, and 200 stars do not make a man."⁹⁴ ("200 needles," incidentally, is itself a conventional expression.) A proverb warns, "He who throws stones at 200 hens will throw stones until darkness falls."⁹⁵ "Eyes" is the solution to the riddle, "Two tiny birds jump over 200 trees."⁹⁶ A man of great generosity is he who "lavishly gives away 200 yam tubers dug out from his farm."⁹⁷ The main courtyard or public meeting place of the afin of Ado-Ekiti is called Igbámptè ("a place where 200 people can spread out").⁹⁸ Yoruba hunters have given the much honored duiker the appellation Laagbe ("honor 200-fold").⁹⁹

As the number 200 indicates large quantity, multiples of 200 are used in the same way to indicate very large quantities. For instance, in a magic contest among three magicians (association of three with the occult) before the Alaafin of Oyo, the first magician causes 200 needles to magically appear, the second produces 200 baby animals, but the third is the undisputed master magician when he produces 800 children.¹⁰⁰ Tradition tells of a man who plans to keep death from his door by posting 800 strong men to guard the road.¹⁰¹

As noted earlier, the Ifa verses collected by Bascom number the orisha at 400. Other sources, however, count 201 or 401 gods.¹⁰² One origin story tells of the war between the gods, a war which lasted 201 years.¹⁰³ On the basis of the preceding observations, 201 and 401 would seem to be used as numbers indicating 'more than a great many.'

165 is a pattern number which can be accounted for by neither the structure of the number system nor ancient symbolic associations. Whatever its origin, Yoruba folklore traditionally numbers the varieties of things at 165. There are, tradition says, 165 kinds of trees, 165 kinds of animals, 165 kinds of leaves, 165 kinds of cloths.¹⁰⁴ While 200 indicates merely great number, 165 is used as the specific enumeration of certain classes of things. It is used far less frequently than 200 and is found most often in the Odu of Ifa.

Some of the observations above are supported by the traditional use of the pattern number 1400, a compound of the radicals 7 x 200. Seven is associated with matters of consequence and 200 with great number; their compound, 1400, indicates very great number. Ogun is said to have had 400 wives and 1400 children.¹⁰⁵ The oba of Ofa maintained, it is said, 1400 kósó drummers and 1400 bembé drummers.¹⁰⁶ "A path" is the answer to the riddle which asks, "Which is the long coffin that can accommodate 1400 corpses?"¹⁰⁷ According to a proverb, "Quantity has nothing to do with juju; battle kills the man with 1400 medicine calabashes."¹⁰⁸

Cowries, it is important to note, are not counted according to these pattern numbers. While twenty cowries are a pittance, twenty children are a great wealth; 200 cowries are a small sum, but 200 egungun is a multitude; a sacrifice of 1800 cowries is no greater than one of 200 needles. Cowries, in short, are counted by cash value, not traditional number associations. Because of the meager value of small numbers of cowries, they are nearly always counted in hundreds and thousands. Most numbers above 1400 in the tradition are cowry counts. These large numbers are, of course, consistent with the conventions of cowry exchange; they invariably are multiples of strings, heaps, heads, and bags.

The survey above does not include every number found in Yoruba tradition. One folktale, for instance, tells of a great hunter who killed an animal with 152 tails. However, there are but a few of these 'irregular' numbers and they appear seldom in the tradition. Every number, with the exception of one and two, which appeared more than three times in the translated corpus used here, is surveyed above. These pattern numbers are used again and again in the tradition, and, more importantly, have specific connotations and associations.

- A. The number four has ancient symbolic associations: in ancient times it was closely associated with divinity and the idea of completeness and perfection. The Yoruba of today probably do not use four symbolically, but its association with divinity is firmly established in the tradition.
- B. Four, its square, sixteen, and the square of sixteen, 256, are key numbers in the Ifa system of divination. The associations here are an extension of the ancient symbolism of four. Thus sixteen is most often associated with divination and the occult. Sixteen and 256, it is worth noting, are two of the very few pattern numbers which are not radical forms.
- C. The number three has some ritual associations. It is a key symbol in the Ogboni cult. Ifa often calls for sacrifice in quantities of three. Three appears most often, however, in narrative: the narratives tell of heroes with three tasks, hunters with three dogs, farmers with three sons.
- D. Three is the initial part of a three-seven sequence which appears intermittently in folk narrative. In both narrative and poetry, the use of seven indicates that matters of importance, of consequence, are at hand. Seven is also associated with sacrifice.
- E. Like seven, six is a number of ritual sacrifice. Just as Ifa often calls for sacrifice in threes, it also calls for sacrifice in a pair of threes, six. In non-ritual contexts six is most often associated with domestic situations.
- F. Twenty and the higher numerals are essentially numbers of quantity in the traditional lore. A long period of time is indicated by twenty years. Wealth is indicated by ownership of valuables in quantities of twenty. "Twenty slaves and thirty iwofa" is a pattern found frequently in the lore indicating prosperity and wealth.

- G. The radical 200 indicates great number, a multitude. 800, four 200's, is often used to indicate very great number. These associations do not, of course, apply when counting cowries.
- H. Tradition has it that there are 165 varieties of certain things, 165 kinds of trees, for example.
- I. A royal multitude is indicated by the number 1400. There are no other true pattern numbers in the higher numerals. Any higher numbers found in Yoruba tradition are consistent with the conventions of cowry exchange.

There are exceptions to even these broad generalizations; but, as a general rule, these patterns and associations are an accurate reflection of the use of numbers in Yoruba tradition.

These numbers have become pattern numbers for a variety of reasons. Numbers such as four and sixteen originally had symbolic associations. Other numerals such as twenty and 200 were conventional cowry units and, more importantly, radical forms. A radical form is, quite simply, much easier to use than a complex compound one. Yet, a compound such as 165 has become a pattern number; why this particular compound has become a pattern number remains a mystery.

Whatever their origin, these numbers are used consistently in Yoruba tradition. This tradition, it is important to note, places no greater emphasis on numbers than any other. In fact, numbers appear in only a small fraction of the collected Yoruba lore. In Delano's published collection of 504 proverbs, for example, only nineteen, or fewer than four per cent, include numbers. This figure seems to be a fairly accurate indication of the use of numbers in Yoruba folklore. Nonetheless, when numbers are used, they are not selected at random. There is a pattern in both their usage and the contexts in which specific numbers appear. These numbers may have no symbolic meaning for the modern Yoruba, but they are part of a traditional pattern which is still quite vibrant.

NOTES

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