A 'common-sense' approach to literature might suggest that fictional or poetic texts are like a distorting mirror, giving back twisted reflections of what is already more directly available through 'ordinary' discourse. Recent discussions of oral texts have shown, however, that genres recognized as literary or poetic are often a privileged discourse which can say things that other discourses would not be permitted to.

Landeg White and Leroy Vail, in their studies of Southern and Central African oral poetry, have found it useful to revive the old idea of 'poetic licence'. As White puts it, 'oral poetry is permitted a freedom of expression which violates normal conventions... Chiefs and headmen may be criticized by their subjects, husbands by their wives, fathers by their children, employers or overseers by their workers, and political rulers by their subjects in ways that the prevailing social codes would not normally permit so long as it is done through poetry'. ¹ The things that can only be said in poetry are not confined to criticism of the powerful by the powerless. In one of the most subtle and illuminating studies of oral art yet to appear, Lila Abu-Lughod² discusses the role of songs among the Awlad 'Ali Bedouin, whose code of honour and modesty puts strict limits on the expression of emotion or weakness in 'ordinary' discourse. Only in ghinnawa songs, sung in intimate circumstances, is it permissible and even laudable to reveal dependency rather than self-sufficiency, sorrow rather than anger, affection rather than indifference. The analysis shows that this discourse is not to be seen as a spontaneous, 'natural' outbreak of feeling in a repressive society, for the expression of sentiment in songs is as formal, traditional and rule-bound as the expression of the dominant ethic of honour and modesty. Rather, there are two contrasting and alternative perspectives on experience, each acceptable in its own context and each governed by its own rules.

Though one is dominant, neither is more 'true' than the other, and neither encompasses the whole of experience.

There are two aspects of this valuable and pioneering work which I want to take up and extend here. The first is the important point, which emerges from both White's and Abu-Lughod's analyses, that there is something about the way poetic texts are constituted that gives them this privileged capacity to express the otherwise not-to-be-expressed. That is, they are recognized as having special textual properties, and it is these properties which grant them 'licence'. In Landeg White's words, it is the poem and not the poet that is privileged. Abu-Lughod shows how ghimmāwa poems are privileged not only because of the social context of their performance, between intimates and confidantes, but also because they are valued in themselves, for their association with the past, 'which most look back on as a golden age', and, significantly, for their 'special qualities of poetic language and form'. If the textual constitution of these discourses, their 'literariness', is what enables them to articulate the otherwise unsayable, then it is surely important to examine the conventions of each genre not as mere 'stylistic features' (so often listed in the introductory chapters to collections of African oral poetry) but as the very means by which certain utterances are made possible. Literary conventions, from this perspective, are not something which 'distorts' an ideational map which is more directly represented in non-literary language. They are precisely what enables aspects of people's experience and thought to be given expression, the means of bringing certain thoughts into being. It is therefore important to look more closely at how any given textual form is constituted, in terms of its linguistic, structural and imaginative properties, and how this enables the articulation of a certain perspective on the world.

The second point to be extended here is the notion that different genres may represent different, parallel discourses within a single culture, and that these discourses may offer alternative perspectives on experience or articulate different aspects of it. The distinction between 'poetic discourse' and 'ordinary discourse', although useful in the cases described by White and Abu-Lughod, is too limiting as a general model, as well as having overtones of a Russian Formalist position which has been convincingly dismantled by recent criticism. Not all cultures recognize a binary distinction between 'poetic' (or literary)

3 Ibid., 240.
4 Ibid., 233.
5 See, for example, Marie Louise Pratt, Toward a speech act theory of literary discourse (Bloomington and London: Indiana University Press, 1977), who demonstrates that all the characteristics held up as typical of 'poetic language' can also be found in registers of 'ordinary speech', and vice versa. See also Tony Bennett's criticism of the poetic language/ordinary language distinction, in Formalism and Marxism (London: Methuen, 1979), and Roger Fowler's argument that 'ordinary language' is in fact divided into numerous distinct registers each governed by its own conventions, in Essays on style and language, ed. Roger Fowler (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1966).
and other discourses; and whether they do or not, they may also have further generic distinctions, making possible the articulation of several alternative, complementary or conflicting perspectives on experience. The idea of ‘poetic licence’ can likewise be extended and diversified. Different genres may be granted different kinds of privilege, different ranges of scope and authority. There is a sense in which all metaphorical and allusive discourse enjoys ‘licence’ – for all such discourse invites interpretation, and interpretation always multiplies and goes beyond the text itself.

In this paper I look at three Yorùbá oral literary discourses. They are genres which are explicitly distinguished by name in Yorùbá culture and which have key features by which they are immediately recognizable. Each represents a different vantage point on experience. Their discourses are contiguous, sometimes overlapping, sometimes incompatible. Áló (‘folktales’), eşè Ifá (Ifá divination verses) and oriki (praise poetry or appellations) draw on the same thematic and linguistic materials: indeed, it could be said that they draw to a considerable extent on each other, for Yorùbá oral genres tend to be highly incorporative and porous. But the ‘same’ material, depending on the genre within which it is utilized, is recruited to present markedly different philosophical perspectives.

Each of these perspectives is one thread leading us into the arena of discourses which make up the repertoire of ideas available to Yorùbá people. Genre is a formalized manifestation of a shifting of perspective which, of course, goes on continually and less conspicuously in all registers of discourse. In some cases these perspectives may represent different aspects of a unitary experience. People will endorse the domestic, neighbourly values expressed in āló and also, in different contexts, the competitive, ruthless aspirations often evoked in oriki. As in Abu-Lughod’s study, each of these perspectives is the counterpart of the other, and they are held alternately and perhaps even simultaneously by the same people. But there are also enduring and distinctive modes of interpretation, representing the entrenched interests of particular segments of society. Ifá poetry is the patrimony of a specialized, highly-trained professional body of divination priests. The conventions of the genre permit the generation of a perspective which, among other things, upholds the authority and legitimacy of their organization.

Not only are there multiple, overlapping, partly incompatible discourses. In the Yorùbá case, I would go further and suggest that the proliferation of alternative perspectives, the holding open of possibilities, the deferral of final ideological resolution, is itself a dominant value.

In Adeboye Babalola’s collection of Tortoise stories, there is one about how Tortoise, the trickster, stole the Leopard’s drum. The narration begins with an explanation of the circumstances.
Long long ago, they used to hold a festival every year in Tortoise’s town; all the natives of the town at home and in the farm would attend it because it was a very important ceremony there. They would hold all kinds of festivities during this celebration; there would be a lot of competitions among the citizens; sometimes wrestling matches, sometimes races, sometimes singing or dancing or *ijálpá*-chanting competitions. In the year that this story happened, the competition was for making drums.⁶

It goes on to describe how the Lion, the king of the town, summoned all the animals to participate in the competition; how Leopard, the scion of a drumming lineage and the late oba’s personal musician, was expected to win; how Tortoise, being lazy but greedy and envious, decided to appropriate the prize; how he befriended Leopard by tricking smaller animals into going there to be eaten, how he became a frequent and accepted visitor at Leopard’s house; how, the day before the competition, he took advantage of this to enter Leopard’s house while he was out and steal the drum which Leopard was drying in the sun ready for the competition. It then explains that while Leopard was a creature of the day, Tortoise walked both by day and night. He had friends among the night animals unknown to Leopard. He approached one of them, Giant Rat, and told him that though he wanted to take part in the competition he would unfortunately be away that evening, and wondered if Giant Rat would be kind enough to take his drum to the palace for him, in exchange for a share of the prize if he won. Giant Rat agreed. When Leopard realized that his drum had gone, he calmly set out to lie in wait for all who passed by on the road to the palace. As each animal, carrying its drum, went past, Leopard challenged it in a song, and each played its drum to prove that it was not Leopard’s. When Giant Rat, thinking it was Tortoise’s drum he was carrying, played for Leopard, Leopard leapt on him and chased him as far as his burrow, where Giant Rat, praying and begging in terror, narrowly escaped with his life, but not before Leopard’s claws had stripped the skin off his tail. In this way Leopard got his drum back, went to the palace and won the prize. This story tells us why rats hold up their hands and rub them together, and why they have a bald patch on their rumps.

This narrative is clearly signalled as an *álo* by its opening formula:

*Apáló:*  
*Awọn Jāmójọ:*  
*Teller:*  
*Audience:*  
My tale falls *gbà-á*, it falls *gbò-ó*, it falls on the head of Tortoise and Leopard.

and the closing formula:

Ídí áló mi rèé gbángbaláká
ándí áló mi rèé gbángbaláká
 Bí n bá puró, kágogo enu mi má róó
Bí n ó bá puró, kágogo enu mi ró lèémétà –
Ô di . . .pó . . .pó . . .pó!

This is the end of my tale gbángbaláká
This is the end of my tale gbángbaláká
If I was lying, may the bell of my mouth not sound
If I was not lying, may the bell of my mouth sound three times
It goes pó . . .pó . . .pó!

The utterance is thus clearly framed and demarcated from other discourse, as a fictional sequence jokingly asserted to be 'true', that is true at a metaphorical and not a literal level. Like most other áló, this one is set squarely in an analogue of the diurnal human world. The characters live in the familiar setting of a town where much of the population is away on their farms, returning for important events such as the annual festival. They are ruled over by one of themselves, the Lion, who although mightier than they, is of the same kind. The narrator (possibly with some help from Babalọla) is lavish with the circumstantial detail of daily life and with careful documentation of the characters' motivation so that their actions seem credible within the parameters of normal daily human interaction.

Most important for the purposes of this argument is that the chain of events is unleashed by the characters' own actions, which themselves are engendered by their intrinsic moral natures. Tortoise's disposition to greed and cunning is acted out, in tale after tale, in outrageous actions which in turn set off a chain of consequences. In this particular tale – as in a number of others – the trickster gets away with it and the one to suffer the consequences is one of his victims. In most tales, whether about Tortoise or other characters, malefactors are brought to book. In all cases, however, the sequence of action is a direct result of the characters' moral dispositions. In the Tortoise tales, the plot mechanism varies: sometimes the victim of Tortoise's stratagem retaliates; sometimes the town as a whole combines to catch him and have him punished; and sometimes his bad action leads directly to retribution, without the intervention of any other agency – as in the story where he goes to fetch a special stew made for his wife to cure her barrenness, but prompted by his habitual greed, he eats it all himself, causing his stomach to swell up in a fake pregnancy until he bursts and dies. There is sometimes a supernatural element in the

7 See Deirdre La Pin, 'Story, medium and masque: the idea and art of Yorùbá story-telling' (University of Wisconsin Ph.D. thesis, 1977) for an illuminating discussion of the way people describe the fictionality of áló.
stories – the presence of Òsanyin, of various kinds of spirits and of objects with magical properties – but the characters' fates nonetheless depend squarely on their own natures. One of the clearest illustrations of this is the story, existing in many variants, in which a kind-hearted and innocent wife becomes involved in a journey where she meets a series of people who demand her help. She gives all of them what they ask and the sequence leads her to a gourd or other container enclosing a great fortune. On seeing this, her wicked co-wife determines to follow the same course of action: but this time the journey is made in a spirit of greed and calculation. The same sequence of encounters and requests unfolds, but at each stage the co-wife refuses to help. Finally she too receives a container, but on opening it finds it to be full of vipers and scorpions which bite her to death. In some cases the same journey is undertaken twice by the same character, the first time in innocence and goodwill, the second time deliberately for gain. The same distribution of reward and punishment holds. The moral disposition which gives rise to behaviour, then, is both the source of narrative action and the subject of the narrative.

Àlò are the most communal, domestic and democratic of Yorùbá verbal art forms. They used to be told within the compound in the evenings after work, with all the household present. All were entitled to tell a tale if they wished, even the youngest, and all were expected to support the others' performances by supplying a chorus to the songs. The moral values which are the issue in these stories are, correspondingly, those which make for harmonious communal living. Good neighbours, loyal friends, and faithful wives are contrasted with tricksters, betrayers, and deceivers. The important point is not so much that the àlò are didactic, imparting values to the young – indeed, whether Tortoise triumphs or is punished, he is always surrounded by a kind of subversive glee that seems to undermine the ostensible moral 'message' – but that the ground and framework of every story is the values of the everyday, ordinary, human world. What is being tested, experimented with and sometimes imaginatively abolished is the morality of communal living, based on common decency, humanity and generosity. This is the scope and the field of the discourse of àlò. It is secular in the sense that characters take the blame and suffer (or escape) the consequences produced by their own moral actions. Tortoise's behaviour in the story quoted above causes a gasp of pleasurable horror because he violates the rules of fair play (he wants to win a prize he doesn't deserve), common decency (he tricks small animals into Leopard's clutches merely in order to ingratiate himself), and friendship (he fakes friendship with Leopard and exploits his putative friendship with Giant Rat). In other stories he steals from his neighbours, cheats his in-laws and murders his bosom friends. What happens to the protagonists of àlò is their own fault. Òrí ('Destiny') and Òrìṣà (gods) are scarcely mentioned, and Ifá only appears occasionally as an incidental element of a story.
Many àló, however, are incorporated into the ‘Ifá literary corpus’, the vast, highly structured repertoire of divination verses learnt by a professional, specialist cadre of divination priests and used by them in the course of Ifá consultations performed for clients. In the process of incorporation, the tales are given the characteristic stamp of eṣe Ifá: that is, they are made to conform to the conventions of this genre. When the story of Tortoise stealing Leopard’s drum appears as a verse in the odu Ìrètè Òkànàn, its narrative centre of gravity has been significantly shifted:

‘Leaf sprouts’, the diviner of the top of Eggplant was the one who cast Ifá for the 165 kinds of animals on the day that Tortoise was going to steal Leopard’s drum. They said that the 165 animals should sacrifice one stick of rats each and 0.78 pence [260 cowries] because of a troublemaker, so that they might not see a troublemaker during that year. All the animals sacrificed.

Soon afterward the King of the Sky sent word to the 165 kinds of animals that they should come for a dance, and that they should bring their drums with them. All the animals put new heads on their drums; and when they were going, Tortoise, who did not find leather with which to cover his drum, found Leopard’s drum on the road where he had left it when he went to wash. Tortoise stole this drum and took it to the home of the King of the Sky. This drum was very fine and it sounded better than all the other drums. When Tortoise was beating this drum for the King of the Sky, the other animals gaped in amazement, wondering where Tortoise had found such a drum.

The story continues with an account of how Leopard, after searching in vain for his drum, lay in wait on the road for the animals returning from the palace. As in the àló, he sang a song demanding that each should play its drum for him, and let each pass until Tortoise arrived. As soon as Leopard saw the drum round Tortoise’s neck, he fell on him and scratched him until Tortoise managed to slip from his grasp and escape into the forest. The claw marks are to be seen to this day on Tortoise’s shell.

Like all Ifá verses, this one begins with the nickname or mystic name of a mythological diviner whose divination session, the outcome of which is then recounted in the narrative, serves as a model and precedent for the current divination. This verse follows the strict pattern, variously analysed by scholars as consisting of 5, 6 or 8 parts, which follow each other in regular and unvarying sequence, making each eṣe Ifá a template for all the others. According to Abimbola, the most influential of Ifá scholars, the sections of each eṣe Ifá are as follows: (i) the name of the diviner/s; (ii) the client for whom they performed divination; (iii) the problem or other cause of the consultation; (iv) the prescribed sacrifice; (v) whether or not the client carried out the prescribed sacrifice; (vi) the consequence of fulfilment.

or non-fulfilment of the prescription; (vii) the client’s reaction; and
(viii) a summary, moral, or recapitulation. This story follows this
sequence as far as step (vi), where it stops. However, this is far enough
to reveal the fundamental difference in point and scope of ěṣe Ịfá and
àló, even when, as in this case, they are the ‘same’ story.

Although the sequence of events is much the same as in Baba-
lo’s àló, and even the song – the hallmark of àló – is incorporated
whole, the range of this story is quite different. Here the subversive
delight in Tortoise’s wrong-doing is much less prominent. No mention
is made of his dishonourable wish to win a competition he is not
qualified for; there is no hint of his false friendship with Leopard, and
the other friend, the Giant Rat, does not enter the story at all. Tortoise
merely takes the drum because he ‘did not find leather with which to
cover’ his own. The fulcrum of the narrative lies elsewhere. The point
of this version of the story is that the 165 kinds of animals did
divination and made the prescribed sacrifice. Having done so, they
were saved from the trouble stirred up by Tortoise: Tortoise was
captured by Leopard while they themselves were unharmed. The
pivot of the plot is the performance of divination and the offering of
sacrifice. It is from this that the rest of the action flows. And this is
categorically true of every Ịfá verse. Whatever the origin of the
materials Ịfá incorporates, it makes them its own by the installation of
this simple but decisive narrative mechanism. The only moral choice
normally made in these stories is between performing and not
performing the recommended sacrifice; and the reasons the characters
may have for this decision are rarely elaborated upon. What is
significant is that if people do what Ịfá says, they prosper; and if they
do not, they endure misfortune.

The perspective of this story is wider than in the àló. Although,
compared with Babalọla’s version of the folktale, it is bald and bare,
lacking in the details of daily life, the psychological motivations and
the commentary on the characters’ dispositions, it still takes a larger
view. The king who summons the animals is not the Lion, but the
‘King of the Sky’, ọba ọran, otherwise known as God. As in other Ịfá
narratives, the causes and key points of action are located outside the
purely human sphere. The individual protagonist is represented as
being caught up in webs of action whose sources and spurs are outside
human control. Actors of all kinds, ranging from personified objects,
qualities and animals to historical personages, gods, or mythological
heroes, consult Ịfá. All of creation is subject to the influence of
spiritual forces, and all can hope to realign these forces favourably
through consultation of Ịfá followed by the appropriate sacrifice or
other prescribed action. Whether or not the protagonist is innocent,
neighbourly, and trustworthy is rarely the point. Although the verses
endorse the same communal virtues as àló, these virtues are not what
the verses are about. The individual’s fate is determined within a
much larger context of spiritual forces, mostly hidden from him or her
and of which partial and intermittent knowledge can be gained only through consulting Ifá. The mysterious and unpredictable nature of these forces is often represented in the figure of Ešù, the trickster deity, who intervenes apparently at random to raise people up or cast them down, regardless of their personal merits. In one story, for instance, a woman goes every day to the market to sell her blacksmith husband's hoes, but without success. She consults Ifá and is told that at the next market, a man will come to her stall and that she must sell to him at whatever price he suggests. The 'man' is Ešù. The woman does as she is told and Ešù takes over her stall, selling her wares at great profit and then instructing her step by step how to capture Ajé (Wealth) who has a stall at the same market. The woman becomes immensely rich as a result.9 Ese Ifá tell us that our lives are in the hands of spiritual forces and that our role is to keep in touch with these forces and solicit their good will by divination and sacrifice.

The vast, ordered corpus of Ifá verses takes many years to master and is treated as a sacred, semi-secret, quasi-scriptural body of knowledge, given in primordial times by the god Ifá himself, and transmitted with scrupulous exactitude ever since. Each verse, as we have seen, recounts a precedent to the consultation during which it is recited, and serves as a model for future action. Each precedent affirms the same truth and recommends the same future course: 'Consult Ifá and follow its prescriptions and all will be well; fail to do so, and disaster will ensue'. By the installation of the divination as narrative fulcrum, Ifá can convert any material into further validation of the importance and truth of Ifá. And Ifá has clearly been a persistently incorporative mode. Not only ăló, but historical narratives, riddles, oríkì and proverbs have been absorbed into its system. The interests that shape this genre, at least in its most obvious aspects, are clear enough. It is the Ifá cult's project to absorb textual materials from other domains, put on them the stamp of the ese Ifá, and thus orient them towards the further validation of the Ifá divination system. The universalizing and hegemonic ambition of Ifá is inscribed in the heart of every text.

Like Ifá, oríkì – the 'praise poetry', appellations or attributions which every entity in the Yorùbá world possesses – are highly incorporative, ingesting elements from riddles, arój (chain-sequence narratives), proverbs and Ifá itself. However, although they may incorporate parts of narratives, they are not themselves a narrative form. They are, rather, composed out of a concatenation of autonomous, often cryptic fragments, each of which points away from the text to its own explanatory hinterland: which may be a full-blown narrative, but which may equally be an etymological gloss or some

other kind of decoding. A performance of oríki, although it alludes to many narratives, is essentially a discontinuous form. Nonetheless, it shares many of its textual resources with ìfá verses and àló. In oríki orílè especially – the oríki that unite large groups of people claiming a common origin in a named, ancient town – quite extensive passages may be found that also occur in ìfá. The conventions of oríki, however, ensure that they are used to different effect, and to establish a different perspective. Oríki are composed to enhance the reputation of their subject. There is an ìfá verse which includes the following lines:

À sé bá ó rí günugún
A ki yóó lè sebo;
 Bá ó rákálá
A ó soro;
Sálágérẹjẹ wáá jẹbo.
Igún wáá jẹbo
Kẹbo ó lè báa fin
If we can’t find a vulture
We will not be able to perform sacrifice
If we can’t find a hornbill
We will not do the ritual;
Sálágérẹjẹ [vulture’s diviner] come and eat the sacrifice
Vulture, come and eat the sacrifice
So that the sacrifice may be accepted. . .10

The formulation beginning ‘If we can’t find a vulture’ up to ‘We will not do the ritual’ is a familiar one, even existing as a proverb, although here the message has the opposite implication (‘If you can’t get a vulture, then use a hornbill’, i.e. if you can’t get what you want, then make do with something else). In the ìfá verse it is included because of the ritual and symbolic value of vulture and hornbill – especially vulture, several of whose praise-names are quoted in the verse, for it is he who carried sacrifices up to heaven.11 Vulture is a highly significant figure in ìfá, which is so much concerned with the prescription of sacrifices to be made by clients.

In a performance of the oríki orílè of ilé Èlémọsọ in Òkukú,12 a singer began:

Ilé bàbáá mi –
Bi mèé rígun
Mèé sebo
Bi n ó rákálá

10 Wande Abimbola, Ijínle Òhún Enu Ìfá, Apá Kiini (Glasgow: Collins, 1968), 143–4 – my translation.
11 See Wande Abimbola, Sixteen great poems of ìfá (UNESCO, 1975), 73–104 for the myth.
12 Òkukú is a small town in the Odó-Otin District of the Òyó State of Nigeria, where I conducted the research on which parts of this paper are based. For a full discussion of oríki in Òkukú, see Karin Barber, I could speak until tomorrow: oríki, women and the past in a Òygá town (Edinburgh: University Press for the I.A.I., 1991).
Here the same four lines take on an entirely different function. *Oriki orílé* are performed to amplify the reputation, self-esteem and public recognition of the groups who own them. They also have an emblematic function. By presenting distinctive and immediately recognizable emblems of membership, they enable people to identify themselves and each other as members of the constituent lineages which make up a Yorùbá town. In *oriki orílé*, elaborate textual structures may be prepared in which to present one of these emblems, long decorative passages devised for the purpose of displaying what may be no more than a single word or phrase: the name of a river, a ceremony, or a trade pertaining to that group. In the passage just quoted, the references to the vulture and hornbill are arranged so as to present the notion of the ‘ritual at Ikólé’: Ikólé is the town of origin being celebrated, and the ritual is one of their distinguishing practices. Typically, the singer takes the opportunity to amplify the town’s reputation by suggesting that the ritual is celebrated so lavishly that all the vultures – probably intended here (as in the proverb) as victims rather than carriers of sacrifice – are thrown into a panic and ‘fly about in consternation’. This leads smoothly into the praise ‘My Géé-òré’ [indicating that the singer belongs to the group], ‘served by all at Òmù’.

*Oriki*, then, direct the listener’s attention to a focal subject in order to amplify this subject’s aura. The subject him- or herself is the centre of the text, attracting centripetally the fragmented and discontinuous epithets which make up a ‘corpus’ of *oriki*. In the personal *oriki* of individuals, this process of social and political aggrandizement is especially clear, and is indeed a crucial aspect of the making of big men in this society. The more powerful and important the person, the more *oriki* he or she will possess, and the more often they will be performed. Nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Yorùbá society – the seed-bed of most of the *oriki* known today – allowed the individual a number of different routes to power and prestige. The hierarchical
framework of *ọba* and grades of ranked chiefs accommodated a large number of self-made men, people who by recruiting supporters in one way or another created their own position for themselves. These ‘big men’ would often have their self-made power ratified afterwards by the award of a chieftaincy title or other formal position, but not always. There was scope for any number of ambitious people to increase their following. Some did it through leadership in war; some through their knowledge of medicine; others through trade or farming. In all cases, reputation was an essential ingredient in the recruitment of supporters, and *oriki* a vital instrument in the creation and confirmation of reputation. Personal *oriki* commend the qualities that contributed to these men’s rise.

Whatever route they took, certain characteristics appear to have been indispensable to, or at least permanently associated with, the success of the big man. Listening to personal *oriki*, we find ourselves in a moral universe significantly different from, and sometimes even almost antithetical to, the one established in either *àlà or itàn Ifá*.

The ethic of *oriki* is essentially competitive, individualist, and aggressive. To succeed, the big man has to be able to assert his will over others and withstand the attacks of his rivals. Violence and excess are signs of power and are hailed with an admiration which, although often tinged with irony, is nonetheless a commendation. A big man of Okukù in the 1920s was given these *oriki*:

*Oriki* elevate the subject of the salutation at the expense of everyone else, and proclaim the importance of self-reliance, distrust of others, and the ability to keep one’s own counsel:

*Akàndè* baba ní níkan ọjìbo
Ó lé e wá n boFá
Bèè le n bọsun
Ọrán won o i kan tôisà
Èniyàn tó wáá bọ inú è ló gbón
Èké è kuni
Ìkà won o ku ómọ èniyàn
Ìkà o fè kà rerù á so
Ayọdélé Sàngódeyi Kásúmù bábáá mi
Ó ló dijó tí ọrì ení bá sóni

*Akàndè* the father has something to rise and worship
He said you worship Ifá
And you also worship Ọṣun
DISCOURSES IN YORŪBĀ

But other people’s (malevolent) plans have nothing to do with the ọrisà
People who worship their own counsel are the wise ones
There is no-one who is not a deceiver
Not a single person who is not cruel
The cruel person doesn’t want us to lay down our burdens
Ayòdélé Sàngódeyì Kásúmù my father
He said we have to wait until our Ọrì lifts it down for us

Gbọtífáyò, the subject of this oriki, is commended for having announced to the world that he relied on no-one except his own self. Gbọtífáyò’s recommendation that one should wait for one’s own Ọrì to lift down one’s burdens suggests an interpretation of this key concept which is different from what is evoked when it appears in Ifá. Ọrì, literally ‘head’, has variously been translated as luck, chance, fate and destiny. In the Ifá corpus – though this corpus itself is internally varied and inconsistent, a field of alternative possibilities rather than an overarching cosmological scheme – there are stories representing Ọrì as something like a life-course, a dominant pattern which the individual finds him- or herself acting out throughout life, and which he or she may partly ameliorate, through divination and sacrifice, but cannot repudiate. In some stories it may even appear almost as an incubus, something you are saddled with and must make the best of; in others as a tutelary deity more reliable and more intimate than any other spiritual being. In Gbọtífáyò’s oriki, however, Ọrì sounds more like a principle of inner personal identity, success and self-determination, like the notion that seems to be evoked in Parolles’s words in All’s well that ends well: ‘Simply the thing I am shall make me live’. The difference of emphasis goes with the difference in overall orientation. Ifá is concerned, above all, with the place of individuals within a larger pattern of spiritual forces. The big man is alone in the centre of the world evoked by oriki, surrounded by enemies, known and suspected, with only his own personal obduracy and magnetism to rely on in the last resort.

The really interesting point here is that Gbọtífáyò was in fact a noted Ifá divination priest, with a great reputation and many apprentices. Nonetheless, in oriki he is a big man first and a babaláwo second, and his pronouncements (‘You worship Ifá/You worship Osun/... but other people’s (malevolent) plans have nothing to do with the ọrisà/People who worship their own counsel are the wise ones’) sounds almost atheistical. Self-reliance takes precedence, in this ethos, over the alignment of spiritual forces which is the subject of Ifá practice and poetry.

13 William Shakespeare, All’s well that ends well, IV.iii. The immediate sense of Parolles’ words must be that from now on he resolves to live on his own resources and without further pretence. However, the phrase seems to me to have a resonance which goes beyond the literal interpretation.
The performers of these genres, then, share many of the same textual resources. But each genre, through its own specific literary conventions, permits these verbal materials to take on different ranges of meaning. Divergent if not necessarily incompatible interpretations of experience are articulated within these generic frames. It is inappropriate to ask what Yorùbá ‘really believe’ about Òrì, for example, or to try to establish a single authoritative definition of this crucial concept. Different genres, and different uses of the same genre, produce different interpretations. Inhabiting a common ideational universe, people nevertheless take up different positions within it, according to their situation, their interests, and the immediate frame of reference. Some positions are kept separate. It is significant that Ifá priests are forbidden to tell àló. Perhaps because the Ifá corpus has absorbed so many àló, the boundary between them and Ifá stories is carefully guarded, so that common knowledge does not seem to invade the sphere of sacred knowledge. Most often, however, actors in the social scene can move freely between genres. A family man telling àló or a successful babaláwo may both be big men too, and in the contexts in which their role as big men is to the fore, they will be saluted with oríki whose values are at odds with and may even deny those brought into play when they are bringing up their children or practising their mystery.

These oral genres are a set of discursive frames, among many others, which together and individually constitute an arena in which ideas emerge and are given form. There is overlap, contradiction, dissonance and inconsistency in this. But that is exactly what Yorùbá culture continually promotes, with its preference for proliferation and difference. The ‘search for order’, often urged as the motivating impulse behind traditional (and other) ideological operations, is perhaps overshadowed, in the Yorùbá case, by the impulse to profusion and the multiplication of alternatives. Generic conventions are better seen as enabling factors in this process than as the external shell of literary form.