

OUR MYSTERIOUS MOTHERS:
THE PRIMORDIAL FEMININE POWER OF ÀJÉ IN THE COSMOLOGY,
MYTHOLOGY, AND HISTORICAL REALITY OF THE WEST AFRICAN YORUBA

by

Annette Lyn Williams

A Dissertation Submitted to the Faculty
of the California Institute of Integral Studies
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of
Doctor of Philosophy in Philosophy and Religion
with a concentration in Women's Spirituality

California Institute of Integral Studies

San Francisco, CA

2014

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OUR MYSTERIOUS MOTHERS:
THE PRIMORDIAL FEMININE POWER OF ÀJÉ IN THE COSMOLOGY,
MYTHOLOGY, AND HISTORICAL REALITY OF THE WEST AFRICAN YORUBA

ABSTRACT

Among the Yoruba *àjé* is the primordial force of causation and creation. *Àjé* is the power of the feminine, of female divinity and women, and *àjé* is the women themselves who wield this power. Unfortunately, *àjé* has been translated witch/witchcraft with attendant malevolent connotations. Though the fearsome nature of *àjé* cannot be denied, *àjé* is a richly nuanced term. Examination of Yoruba sacred text, *Odu Ifa*, reveals *àjé* to be an endowment gifted to female divinity from the Source of Creation. Female divinity empowered their mortal daughters with *àjé*—spiritual and temporal power exercised in religious, judicial, political, and economic domains throughout Yoruba history. However, in contemporary times *àjé* have been negatively branded as witches and attacked.

The dissertation investigates factors contributing to the duality in attitude towards *àjé* and factors that contributed to the intensified representation of their fearsome aspects to the virtual disavowal of their positive dimensions. Employing transdisciplinary methodology and using multiple lenses, including hermeneutics, historiography and critical theory, the place of *àjé* within Yoruba cosmology and historical reality is presented to broaden understanding and appreciation of the power and role of *àjé* as well as to elucidate challenges to *àjé*. Personal

experiences of *àjé* are spoken to within the qualitative interviews. Individuals with knowledge of *àjé* were interviewed in Yorubaland and within the United States.

Culture is not static. A critical reading of *Odu Ifa* reveals the infiltration of patriarchal influence. The research uncovered that patriarchal evolution within Yoruba society buttressed and augmented by the patriarchy of British imperialism as well as the economic and social transformations wrought by colonialism coalesced to undermine *àjé* power and function.

In our out-of-balance world, there might be wisdom to be gleaned from beings that were given the charge of maintaining cosmic balance. Giving proper respect and honor to “our mothers” (*awon iya wa*) who own and control *àjé*, individuals are called to exercise their *àjé* in the world in the cause of social justice, to be the guardians of a just society.

Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to my lineage of mothers who walked the earth and whose spirits walk beside me: Dolores Miller Williams Hodge, Roslyn Louise Miller Bradshaw, Margaret McKenzie Dwyer Miller, Mariah McKenzie, and Doris Henrietta Usher Williams Lincoln. It is also dedicated to my recently departed big brother, Caswell Fitzarthur Smith, who grokked his quirky little sister.

“Mother! Powerful! Old!”¹

¹ Invocation to the earth deity, Onile. Witte, *Symboliek*, 226.

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Dissertation writing, with all that it entails and all that life presents along the way, enlists a village of supportive friends, family, and faculty to ensure its successful completion. To mangle musical metaphors, the process has been a long strange trip down a long and winding road. Therefore, it is with profound gratitude that I offer thanks.

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Early in the writing process, I was conferred the vibrant and evocative “dissertation writing goddess.” The spirits of the women whose work this goddess has blessed live within her. I am honored and grateful to add my energy and filled with gratitude to the women who preceded me: Elizabeth Shillington, Mari Pat Ziolkowski, and Martha Brumbaugh, who bestowed me with the goddess.

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Note on Orthography

While the foundation of a standard Yoruba orthography was established by Samuel Ajayi Crowther and the Church Missionary Society in the early middle years of the nineteenth century and is based on the Oyo dialect,² it has evolved and undergone numerous modifications. As such, it appears that a singular standard of Yoruba orthography is not uniformly employed. One finds great variation and inconsistency in orthography, specifically in the use of diacritical marks.

For instance, the festival that honors iyàmi àjẹ is written alternately as Gèlèdè, Gẹ̀lẹ̀dẹ̀, Gẹ̀lẹ̀dẹ̀ or simply Gelede. Similarly ashe, the power within all beings, has been written àṣe, aṣẹ, àṣẹ or even àse. The latter example is surprising because it is missing the diacritical mark under the “s” that renders its pronunciation “sh.”

Spelling variations are also common, especially with respect to the name of deities and ancient ancestors. A few examples: The name of the Yoruba progenitor has been written as Odua, Oduduwa, Odudua, or Oodua. The founder of Oyo is identified as Oranyan, Oranmiyan, Awranyan. Also for consideration is the multiple names of deities. For example, Olorun = Olodumare; Oriṣa'nla = Obatala. Names are spelled without diacritical marks or with an alternating variety of diacritical marks.

Authors employ a variety of conventions in the use of diacritical marks. For instance, Samuel Johnson does not use the dot under the “s” while employing

² Biobaku, *Origin of the Yorubas*.

diacritical marks elsewhere. In the work of Ulli Beier, it appears that virtually no diacritical marks are used. Henry Drewal appears to be fastidious in his attention to diacritical markings. Surprisingly, no accents are employed in an article by Taiwo Makinde of Obafemi Awolowo University in Ile-Ife, not even in quotations. The inconsistency in the usage of diacritical marks is disconcerting given that they have an importance equivalent to that of vowels in determining the meaning of the word.³

Throughout the dissertation, diacritical marks and all conventions used by the respective authors will be maintained within quotations. However, with the exception of chapter titles, key terms and to distinguish meaning, diacritical marks will not be used in the general text of the dissertation. As noted, there is precedent for this in the work of distinguished authors on Yoruba culture such as Ulli Beier.⁴ As well, Yoruba words and phrases are italicized; proper names are not given italics.

The following aid to pronunciation of Yoruba terms is taken from Verger.⁵ The consonants have the same pronunciation as English with the exceptions below:

- G Is always hard, like **goat**
- H Is always soft
- J Is pronounced like **dj** as in **adjective**

³ Verger, “Ìyàmi Òṣòròngà.”

⁴ For example: Beier, “Historical...Myths.”

⁵ Verger, “Ìyàmi Òṣòròngà,” 74.

- P Is pronounced **kp**
- S Is pronounced **source**
- Ş Is pronounced **sh** like **shovel**
- E Is always hard, like the a in **bay**
- Ē Is open like the e in **bed**
- O Is always hard, like the o in **hoe**
- Ō Is always open, like the au in **caught**
- U Is like the oo in **cool**

Preface

“Porcupine...remind me of innocence again, with every man a brother each woman a friend.”⁶

Let me begin at the beginning of my journey. The sweet and shyly smiling face of a little girl filled a page that caught my eye, and I found myself returning her smile. From the article’s title on the facing page, came the shocking assertion that this child is labeled a witch. Reading the article informed me that she was just one of an astonishing number of children in the Congo branded as witches and abandoned by families who believe their misfortunes caused by the child witch.

These children are blamed for all manner of misfortune such as illness, crop failure, loss of jobs, and death. Many children are killed outright either for resisting forced removal from their homes or by angry mobs bent on revenge. The article⁷ told of children as young as two being labeled witch.

It was heartbreaking to read how these children come to believe that they are witches responsible for adversities and deserving of the treatment they receive at the hands of self-proclaimed exorcists. The children are repeatedly told that they are evil. “They are beaten with chains or scalded with boiling water and hot irons.”⁸ The little girl in the photo had hot chili put in her eyes, was given enemas, forced to eat dirt mixed with a yellow powder, and was punched in the

⁶ Sams and Carson, *Medicine Cards*, 84.

⁷ Goodwin, “Does This Little Girl.”

⁸ *Ibid.*, 168.

stomach so violently that she vomited. “Such institutionalized psychological and physical torture—in the guise of ‘exorcism’—has become epidemic in Congo.”⁹

The tortures inflicted on these children in the name of curing them come at the hands of exorcists, most of whom are the self-proclaimed pastors of independent churches, individuals having no theological training. One of these is Pastor Joseph Ifumpua, founder of the Christian Assembly of Jesus the Victor where he houses and supposedly cures child witches. The children live in deplorable conditions and go hungry, most suffering from malnutrition. According to the article, the children are made to believe that disobedience to the pastor will result in their deaths.

In the meantime the pastors, male and female, grow rich by telling the accused witches’ families that their belongings are cursed. These charlatan pastors collect the property with assurances to the families that God will bless them tenfold.¹⁰ Property ranges from jewelry and home electronics to homes and land. Children are stripped of their innocence, an innocence violated to line the pockets of morally insipid men and women. Innocence and joy—already difficult to hold onto for children born into situations of poverty and social distress—despoiled for profit.

Notwithstanding the rationalizations and reasons given in the article for this phenomenon in the Congo—namely, the displacements caused by war—reading the article wide-eyed and mouth agape led to the question: What

⁹ Ibid., 166.

¹⁰ Ibid.

madness is this in the twenty first century? Pursuant to the teachings of Lucia Chiavola Birnbaum, advisor and mentor, inquiry begins with a “burning question.” What subject or issue inflames the mind and heart demanding inspection? Yes, the heart is also touched, for the area arouses passion. In the case of this dissertation, the aroused passion was anger stemming from the reprehensible torture of children in the name of “de-witching.”

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

“Myth legitimates social institutions and practices by their references to ancient precedence.”¹¹

Gaining insight with respect to the phenomenon of witchcraft accusations in Africa was the impetus for this dissertation. As a student of Yoruba traditional religion, or *Ifa*, I was particularly interested in exploring the question of witches and witchcraft among the Yoruba. Within the literature of *Ifa*, there are references to beings called *àjé*. The word *àjé* “has been translated in the literature as ‘witchcraft’ or ‘witch.’”¹²

However, as will become apparent, *àjé* is a nuanced term. *Àjé* is polyvalent and complex. *Àjé* are considered the esteemed “guardians of society.”¹³ Nonetheless, *àjé* are feared witches. Or, at least, the term *witch* is considered the closest equivalent English word.¹⁴

Nigeria has over 250 ethnic groups.¹⁵ The Yoruba constitute 21% of Nigeria’s population, making them the single largest ethnic group with a 2012 estimate of approximately 33.9 million people. A map of Yorubaland is shown in Figure 1. The Yoruba cities of Lagos and Ibadan are by far Nigeria’s largest,

¹¹ Olajubu, *Women in the Yoruba Religious Sphere*, 26.

¹² M. T. Drewal, *Yoruba Ritual*, 177.

¹³ H. J. Drewal and Drewal, *Gẹ̀lẹ̀dẹ̀*, 9.

¹⁴ Elebuibon, *Invisible Powers*.

¹⁵ Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), “The World Factbook: Nigeria—People and Society,” par. 2.

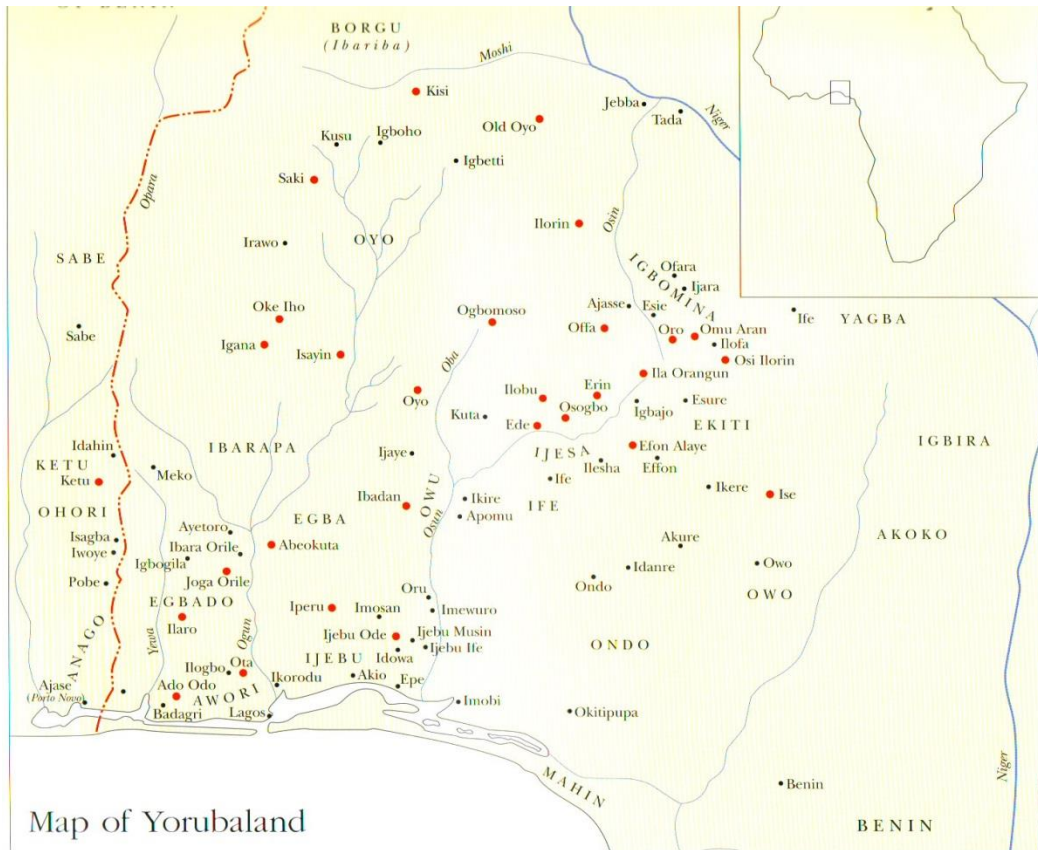


Figure 1. Map of Yorubaland.¹⁶ Reproduced with permission from the Museum for African Art, New York. The boundaries of the Oyo Empire as stated by Samuel Johnson are as follows: “Ifes in the east, the Niger on the north, the Baribas on the west as well as the Dahomians, and the Egbados on the south.”¹⁷

having approximately 10.4 million and 5.5 million inhabitants, respectively.¹⁸

Within Nigeria the Yoruba are situated in the southwest and inhabit the states of

¹⁶ Source: H. J. Drewal et al. *Yoruba: Nine Centuries of African Art*, 12.

¹⁷ S. Johnson, *History of the Yorubas*, 16.

¹⁸ Country Watch, “Country Profile—Nigeria: Ethnic Divisions” and “Country Profile—Nigeria: Major Cities.”

Kwara and Kogi in the north, which are also occupied by Nupe.¹⁹ Ondo on the eastern edge of Yorubaland is also occupied by Edo. Other Yoruba states include Oyo, Oşun, Ekiti, Ogun, and Lagos.²⁰

However, the Yoruba themselves are not a uniform band of settlers but are a multiplicity of culturally and linguistically related groups, each having individual cultural features and distinct dialects. Historically these were more or less independent kingdoms though paying tribute to the central authority of Ile-Ife or Oyo. For example, nineteenth century Ekiti had 16 kings, one for each of its districts.²¹

The Yoruba can be described as a loose confederacy of city-states often given to serious internal conflict. First published in 1969, *The Yoruba of Southwestern Nigeria* gives the accounting of Yoruba subgroups listed below; notice that the Yoruba extend well outside of Nigeria.

Starting in the west, the subgroups include the Ana (Ifẹ) and Isha (including the Manigri) astride the Togo-Dahomey boundary; the Idasha (Dassa), an enclave of Dahomey; the Shabẹ (Ishabẹ, Shavẹ), Ketu (Iketu), and Ifonyin (Ọhọri, Aho, Holli, Nago, Anago, Dje) astride the Dahomey-Nigeria boundary; the Awori, Egbado, and Egba of Abẹokuta Province and the Federal District; the Ijẹbu (Jẹbu) of Ijẹbu Province and the Federal District; the Ọyọ of Ọyọ, Ilorin, and Ibadan Provinces; the Ifẹ and Ijẹsha (Jẹsha) of Ọyọ Province; the Ondo, Ọwọ, Ilajẹ, and Ekiti of Ondo Province; the Igbomina of Ilorin Province; the Yagba, Bunu, and Aworo (Kakanda) of Kabba Province...The Ekiti were composed of a number of autonomous kingdoms...such as Efon, Ara, Ido, and Ado.²²

¹⁹ Yahaya, "The Nupe People of Nigeria."

²⁰ Eades, *The Yoruba Today*.

²¹ S. Johnson, *History of the Yorubas*.

²² Bascom, *Yoruba of Southwestern Nigeria*, 5.

Acknowledging this multiplicity and following the example of writers such as Ulli Beier, it is probably more correct to employ the plural, Yorubas. However, the convention is employment of the term Yoruba.

Description of the Problem

Though, as noted in the preface, my entry to this subject was through the aberration of Congolese children persecuted as witches, it seemed a general investigation of witchcraft, with emphasis on witchcraft in Africa, would shed light on the child witchcraft phenomenon. Shortly after reading the *Marie Claire* article on child witch persecutions in the Congo, I became increasingly aware of witchcraft accusations and persecution against women as a global problem.

Astonishingly, current-day accusations of witchcraft and subsequent persecution are rampant. Women accused of witchcraft and their treatment have garnered world press. As examples, reports have come to the fore from Saudi Arabia, where a woman accused of causing impotency was sentenced to beheading;²³ Papua New Guinea, where women are accused of using witchcraft to cause AIDS;²⁴ India, where a neighbor's death by natural cause led a woman to be accused of witchcraft and beaten;²⁵ and Africa where the president of Gambia ordered that villagers be rounded up and witches rooted from their midst.²⁶

²³ Saleh, "Condemned Saudi 'Witch'."

²⁴ *BBC News*, "P. N. G. Aids AIDS Victims."

²⁵ Eastment, "Indian 'Witch' Tied."

²⁶ Nossiter, "Witch Hunts."

The judgments have been severe—exile, torture, or in many cases, execution. The tongue of a woman in India was chopped off as punishment for assumed witchcraft after she was accused of causing the death of a young family member.²⁷ In another incident in Papua New Guinea, a young woman accused of being a witch was burned at the stake.²⁸ She was bound, gagged, and tied to a stake set amidst tires that were set ablaze.

In a 2009 meeting of United Nations officials, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and other groups working on this issue, it was revealed that the incidence of women and children being accused as witches and killed is on the increase worldwide. The killings are “becoming common events in countries ranging from South Africa to India.”²⁹ Between 2001 and 2006 about 300 individuals were killed as witches in the northeastern Indian state of Assam.³⁰

Witch hunting has become common practice in Nepal and Papua New Guinea. In Africa children accused as witches who would formerly have been banished from their homes are now being killed by their families because the families fear that officials will force them to take the children back. Most cases of witch accusation and persecution are not reported.

U.N. officials tracking the problem said deaths ran into at least tens of thousands, and beatings, deprivation of property and banishment and

²⁷ Singh, “Branded Witch.”

²⁸ Malkin, “Woman Burned at Stake.”

²⁹ Evans, “Killing of Women,” par. 4.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, photo caption.

isolation from community life meant victims of "witch frenzy" ran into millions.³¹

Appendix A highlights the long-existent reality of witch camps in northern Ghana as revealed through two documentaries.

It is most alarming to read occurrences of witchcraft superstition and the persecution of witches sanctioned, explicitly or tacitly, by elected officials. The above cited case of Gambia's president, Al-Haji Yahya Jammeh, is one example. "The Child's Right and Rehabilitation organization of Nigeria has documented that more than 15,000 children have been victims of witch-hunts."³²

In the southeastern Nigeria state of Akwa Ibom, 820 instances of children being branded as witches were documented between 2004 and 2007.³³ The governor of Akwa Ibom State, Godswill Akpabio, responded to a 2010 CNN broadcast by stating that well documented reports of child witchcraft persecution in Akwa Ibom are gross exaggerations.³⁴

Nigerian child witch-hunting pastor, Helen Ukpabio, has gone as far as suing an ardent critic, Leo Igwe, "charging him with religious discrimination." Ukpabio and her Liberty Gospel Church have tortured children suspected as

³¹ Ibid., "Homeless Children," par. 4.

³² Olomo, "Iyami Osorongu," 284.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ CNN Wire Staff, "Nigerian Governor."

witches including “the burning of three children, ages three through six, with fire and hot water.”³⁵

The belief in witches and their curses is not limited to “southern” countries. Though people are not persecuted for witchcraft, there is fear of witches in Romania, where proposed legislation to tax witches and seers fell through because of legislators’ fears of being cursed.³⁶

Sarah Palin’s association with the witch hunting minister, Thomas Muthee of Kenya, brought her derision and embarrassment as she became the butt of many jokes during the 2008 presidential race.³⁷ However, Thomas Muthee is serious in his mission to identify witches by means of “spiritual mapping” and to subsequently drive them out of their communities by “spiritual warfare.”³⁸ Alarming, this dual strategy for cleansing an area of “demonic influence” has adherents in the United States among evangelical Christians.³⁹

It was against this backdrop that I started to ponder the history of witchcraft in Africa and, more specifically, among the Yoruba of southwestern Nigeria. What makes one a witch? What are a witch’s characteristics and behaviors? From where does the witch spring? Was there precedent for the current witch persecutions?

³⁵ Bupp, “Witch Hunter Sues Humanist,” 13.

³⁶ Hein-Hudson, “Romania Will Not Tax Witches.”

³⁷ Goodstein, “Youtube Videos Draw Attention.”

³⁸ Lampman, “Targeting Cities,” par. 8.

³⁹ Ibid.

As seen, the belief in witches and witchcraft is a worldwide phenomenon. It is a past and current widespread belief in Africa. So much so that colonial legislation was enacted against its use and accusations of its use.⁴⁰ So much so that Zimbabwe repealed this legislation in 2006.⁴¹

A *New York Times* article banner from 1928 proclaims witchcraft the religion of Africa.⁴² In another brief and disparaging assessment of the African's relationship to the witch doctor that touts the superiority of the "White man," it is stated that Africans "consider their native witch doctor as more important than the ruling foreign government or the chief of their own tribe."⁴³

The witch doctor's primary function is to expose the—presumably female—witch and to render punishment. While looking through early twentieth-century archived newspaper articles on the subject, it became evident that the male witch doctor was held with ambivalence. The witch doctor was sometimes spoken of in positive terms, and some early twentieth-century adventurers even attested to the efficacy of the craft as a healing modality.⁴⁴ However, witchcraft was commonly cast in a negative light and as the domain of women.

Based on global media reports, it is apparent that in today's world the overwhelming majority of individuals accused of and persecuted for witchcraft are

⁴⁰ Roberts, "Witchcraft and Colonial Legislation."

⁴¹ *BBC News*, "Do You Believe?"

⁴² *New York Times*, "Zulu Witch Doctor."

⁴³ *New York Times*, "African Witch Doctor," par. 1.

⁴⁴ *New York Times*, "His Money Had Legs."

women. Most of these women are elderly, single, and poor. In addition, once the accusation of witchcraft has been leveled a woman is dispossessed of whatever property or land she owns.⁴⁵

With the current witch-craze and witchcraft persecutions being what they are—millions of women being accused and stigmatized, beaten, driven from their communities, exiled and made to live in deplorable conditions, deprived of property, tortured, mutilated, lynched, and burned to death—an examination of this phenomenon and the factors that fuel it is relevant. This dissertation addresses a small portion of the task by focusing a lens on the Yoruba *àjé* within Yoruba traditional religion as explicated in its sacred text, *Odu Ifa*, and within Yoruba society.

Qualitative interviews were conducted with scholars of Yoruba culture and religion, academics teaching in universities in the United States or in Yorubaland. The hope was that by so doing a fuller understanding of the Yoruba concept of witch, *àjé*, would be gained. As well, qualitative interviews were conducted with priests and practitioners of Yoruba traditional religion to learn their views of and relationship to *àjé*. Practitioners of Yoruba traditional religion participate in rituals and celebrations pertaining to the honoring and propitiation of deity. Propitiation of deity is primarily undertaken to ensure the flow of the good things in in one's life or to reestablish life's balance.

It was a great privilege to conduct research in Nigeria during the early autumn of 2009. This research enabled me to speak with Nigerian scholars and

⁴⁵ Evans, "Killing of Women."

indigenous priests and practitioners of *Ifa*, in addition to scholars, priests, and *Ifa* practitioners in the United States.

Background

Though there exists encyclopedic volumes of writing on witchcraft in Africa, relatively little has been written on the Yoruba *àjé*. Much of what exists is distributed within writings on Yoruba traditional religion and philosophy, and women in Yoruba society.⁴⁶ The first writing on *àjé* is attributed to Pierre Verger (1965) followed by the 1976 works of Wande Abimbola and Rowland Abiodun.⁴⁷ These works convey the *àjé* within the context of Yoruba cosmology as presented through Yoruba mythology.

In line with the literature, throughout the dissertation, *iyami*, *àjé* and, the compound, *iyami àjé* are often used interchangeably. However, some scholars do offer a distinction between *àjé* and *iyami*, which will be visited. Additionally, an argument can be made for the relative neutrality of and even positive association for the term *iyami* (my mother), whereas *àjé* is charged by its direct translation to “witch.” Kola Abimbola states, however, that *àjé* is “translated inadequately into English as witches.”⁴⁸

Conversely, an argument can be made that it is not the translation that is incorrect. Rather, what is at fault is a misevolved conception of the word *witch*

⁴⁶ For example, K. Abimbola, *Yorùbá Culture*; Abiodun, “Woman in Yoruba Religious Images”; McIntosh, *Yoruba Women*.

⁴⁷ H. J. Drewal and Drewal, *Gẹ̀lẹ̀dẹ̀*, 275 n. 1.

⁴⁸ K. Abimbola, *Yorùbá Culture*, 52.

and an unenlightened image of the women cloaked by the term. The word *witch* is related to *knowledge*; its etymology thought to stem from the “Proto Indo-European *weid*” through the Germanic *wissen*.⁴⁹ It is a neutral term.

The word *witch* apparently came to be associated not only with the knowledge itself but also the possessors of that knowledge. From my acquaintance with this history, it appears that these were primarily women knowledgeable in the power of plants and the natural world. As with the etymology described above, *àjé* is a term associated with power and the knowledge from which that power is derived. *Àjé* is used to denote the power itself and the women who are its carriers. Therefore, in the etymological sense and earliest use of the term, *àjé* is witch.

The historical negative moral associations with the term are distinct from its etymology. One factor in the fear-based or negative portrayals of the witch is the isolated or forest settings in which these women lived—away from “civilization.” The Yoruba would say that such women live in the bush, in a place feared for its mystery and power.⁵⁰

Likewise, historical shifts of politics and religion, as well as economics have contributed to rendering *àjé* a negative moral construct.⁵¹ Thus, a popular view of *àjé* predominates based on stereotypes upheld by Christian denigration of

⁴⁹ T. Johnson, “Words Wicca and Witch,” Choice #3.

⁵⁰ Apter, *Black Critics and Kings*.

⁵¹ Ajayi, “A New Christian Politics”; S. Johnson, *History of the Yorubas*; McIntosh, *Yoruba Women*; M. Oduyoye, *Christianity in Yorubaland*; Olomo, “Iyami Osorongu.”

Yoruba traditional religion and notions of women as bringers of original sin that caused the downfall of humankind.

The abundance of literature written on the subject of witchcraft in Africa has primarily been within the field of anthropology. Often noted is the seminal 1937 work of Evans-Pritchard on the Azande of Central Africa. Parrinder's 1958 comparison of Western and African witchcraft is an early work of its kind as is Mair's more general 1969 cross-cultural study.

However, writing on witchcraft in South Africa dating back to the last quarter of the nineteenth century was found.⁵² In addition to the references to Yoruba witch beliefs found in Talbott (1921), the University of Chicago thesis by Susan Messinger (1953) is an early undertaking on witchcraft among the Yoruba.

It is argued that Western anthropologists bring their cultural associations to the term witch.

This means that their purportedly objective analyses are guided *from the outset* by a Western model, which cannot help but shape, influence and, we would suggest, distort their analyses and interpretations.⁵³

Early African writers on the subject received their primary education at missionary schools thereby imbibing the Christian attitude towards witchcraft.

Conversions to foreign religions and misinterpreted observations concerning the ancient roles of Yoruba women and men have caused a social response of fear at the mere mention of the word *Iyami*. This fear of female power continues to be supported by Yoruba adoption of foreign

⁵² Callaway, *Religious System of the Amazulu*.

⁵³ Hallen and Sodipo, "Comparison of the Western 'Witch,'" 2.

religious beliefs, as well as cultural indoctrination, and is maintained by religious persecution.⁵⁴

Àjé have been subject to colonial distortion by translation of the term as *witch*. The first Yoruba/English translations were undertaken by British clergy. The Yoruba orthography was established as part of a wider effort by the Church Missionary Society of the Church of England to establish “a complete form of alphabetic system to which all hitherto unwritten languages could be adapted.”⁵⁵

Adopted in 1856, this supplanted the system in use since the 1840s that was initiated by Church Missionary Society missionaries to Yorubaland from Sierra Leone. This group included, Reverend Samuel Ajayi Crowther, who later became the first African Anglican Bishop in Nigeria. He is credited with creating the first book of Yoruba grammar, published in 1843 and is also credited with translating the Anglican prayer book and bible to Yoruba.⁵⁶

In speaking of Yoruba translation, Johnson describes it as “English ideas in Yorùbá words: the result is often obscurity and confusion of thought.”⁵⁷ He goes on to state:

The rock of stumbling is the desire of translators to reproduce every word and particle of the English in its exact equivalent in Yorùbá, regardless of idiom, and thereby obscuring the sense of the latter.⁵⁸

⁵⁴ Olomo, “Iyami Osorongá,” 284–85.

⁵⁵ S. Johnson, *History of the Yorubas*, xxiii.

⁵⁶ M. Oduyoye, *Christianity in Yorubaland*.

⁵⁷ S. Johnson, *History of the Yorubas*, xxxiii.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

Further, translation is undertaken without explicit acknowledgement of the translators' cultural filters or even conscious recognition that they imbue their translations with the biases of their culture. In the case of Church Missionary Society translators and the *zeitgeist* of the era, these biases include a sense of cultural and racial superiority as well as abhorrence of native traditions and religion.

Exposure to my father's by-the-book Christian faith made it clear that there is no nuance in the Christian conception of the witch or her power. In Christianity it would appear that the person and the power are patently evil. To have the power of witchcraft it seems is to be in league with the devil.⁵⁹ I have come to view the Christian world as one asphyxiated by the inexorable dualistic concept of good versus evil. Their witch is evil.⁶⁰ The witch of the West is invariably wicked. The formula mandates that witch = *àjé* = evil.

The same formula holds for Eṣu, the Yoruba deity who is "divine messenger," divine trickster, and "divine enforcer."⁶¹ Eṣu has been conflated with the devil⁶² and is, therefore, seen in Christian eyes as unnuanced evil. Eṣu's multiple and paradoxical roles, as reflected in myth, are confusing to the mind steeped in dualistic constructs. Within Yoruba traditional religion:

⁵⁹ Ginzburg, *Ecstasies*.

⁶⁰ With the popular exception of Glinda the fictional "good witch" from *The Wizard of Oz*. And even here, each witch is an embodiment of *either* good or evil.

⁶¹ Bascom, *Ifa Divination*, 105.

⁶² S. Johnson, *History of the Yorubas*.

Dark and light forces are not seen as forces of “good” or “evil.” Instead, they are seen as the essential polarity that generates life. It is the imbalance in either direction that causes the conflicts that are sometimes referred to as “evil.”⁶³

Aṣe is the creative principle with which all of nature is imbued. Eṣu “is the keeper of *aṣe*, mediating its positive and negative powers.”⁶⁴ Eṣu’s mediation on behalf of humans and *oriṣa* has the function of maintaining balance and harmony in the universe.

Eṣu is also regarded as an “agent provocateur,” who instigates problems between humans, between humans and deities, and between deities. This instigating of problems he does out of sheer mischief or where sacrifice is required to restore cosmic balance, to get his due portion. “These negative aspects of Èṣù prompted Islamic and Christian missionaries to identify him with the devil of the Koran and the Bible, which he is not.”⁶⁵

Translation of *àjé* as “witch” is likewise a conflation and inaccurate rendering of the concept. When *àjé* is spoken of within the context of Western religion, it is without nuance, without positive regard for the spiritual power and protective attributes of *àjé*. *Àjé* is a nuanced concept. The *àjé* are enforcers of divine justice; they are capable of retribution; they are holders of social order, and they contain unsurpassed power of manifestation. And the power that is *àjé* can be used in corrupt and self-serving contexts.

⁶³ Fatunmbi, *Iwa-pele*, 36.

⁶⁴ Lawal, “Ejiwapo,” 26.

⁶⁵ Lawal, *Gèlèdè Spectacle*, 23.

There are several questions that can be posed regarding *àjé* as beings. What and/or who are the *àjé*? Are they supernatural beings; are they human; are they only women, only post-menopausal women, or can both sexes be *àjé*? In typical Yoruba fashion, *àjé* are all of the above.

The Yoruba are frustratingly comfortable with a world where the answer is both/and. The raging debate on post-modern relativism would probably seem foolish to the average Yoruba individual comfortable with multivalent reality. The Yoruba could teach lessons on contextual relativism, as well, for they know that one story is not truth for different groups.

Research Objectives

This dissertation was undertaken as a fact-finding mission. I entered it wanting to find answers as to why women (and currently children) are accused as witches and egregiously harmed. As a student of Yoruba traditional religion, the focus was narrowed to Yorubaland and *àjé*.

My interest was in learning the basis of the commonly held fear of *àjé*—why is the spiritual or social power they wield perceived as threatening, particularly by men within the culture. Aina Olomo states simply: “It is woman’s power of the unknown that is frightening to man.”⁶⁶ Yet, there is much more to the story. Who are the *àjé* and what role do they play in the history and lore of the Yoruba?

A primary task undertaken in this dissertation is to learn about the *àjé* and the perception of *àjé* within Yoruba culture, among the Yoruba, and among

⁶⁶ Olomo, *Core of Fire*, 127.

practitioners of Yoruba traditional religion. The former is undertaken in large measure by a reading of *Odu Ifa*, the religious text and cultural history of the Yoruba. The latter is carried out by a series of qualitative interviews conducted with individuals who are themselves Yoruba and/or practitioners of Yoruba traditional religion. Here is had an ostensibly early and contemporary reading of the *àjé*.

To aid in reaching a more robust understanding of the Yoruba relationship to the *àjé* and the role they play in Yoruba history and lore, a secondary objective is elucidating the place and power of women within Yoruba society. Historical shifts in the roles and perception of women and their power is an important component here. Accordingly, a third objective is bearing light on the historical dynamics within Yoruba society that impacted both the perception and reality of women's power and attendant consequences.

This dissertation is considered Phase 1 of a larger project. It lays the groundwork upon which future research can be constructed. The dissertation's broad scope introduces and gives an overview of the varied and intersecting domains—historical, political, economic, and religious—that impact perception and treatment of *àjé*. It answers a need to see the big picture, to scrutinize the forest before chronicling the trees.

Phase 2, a future endeavor, is envisioned to include deeper exploration of the lives of women and men with respect to the primordial feminine power that is *àjé*. Phase 2 also includes the ambition of exploring possible means of redressing the impacts of the fear of women's spiritual power, of redressing the scapegoating of women and children as witches to be blamed for problems associated with broad issues of economic instability and social disruption.

Research Strategy

In Greek myth, mother-right (mother justice) was rescinded at the trial of Orestes by the deciding vote of Athena, who disclaimed the power of the womb because she was birthed from her father's brow.⁶⁷ With the installation of this misogynistic brand of patriarchy, mother justice went underground and was defamed.

Images of those who wielded the power of mother justice became distorted, and they became misrepresented as embodiments of evil—hags, crones, witches, *àjé* and her sisters. In addition to examining components of Yoruba historiography, and Yoruba cosmology and ontology as found in *Odu Ifa*, the dissertation takes a close look at the areas of patriarchal influence and colonialism on the Yoruba relationship to *àjé*.

The thesis statement holds that patriarchal structures within and influences upon Yoruba society served as catalysts to the vilification of *àjé*, the latter most notably in the form of religious influences and colonialism. Because the dissertation is essentially being written for individuals having little or no knowledge of the Yoruba, it makes sense that a broad view is given. This broad view reflects the course of my research, which aims to situate the phenomenon of *àjé* within its cultural context through the use of archival research material and qualitative interviews. After discussion of methodology, an historical overview of the Yoruba is presented.

⁶⁷ Graves, *The Greek Myths*.

Methodology and historical overview are followed by examination of Yoruba cosmology and ontological orientation. *Àjé* is the focus of the next section, including consideration of a ritual designed to honor *iyami àjé* and a mid-twentieth century witch-hunting cult. The twenty first-century experience of individuals with respect to *àjé* completes the journey.

The introduction and methodology set the stage, so to speak, providing the background and methodological underpinning of the endeavor. Reflecting the multivalent nature of the research subject, transdisciplinary methodology was chosen for its ability to weave together disparate threads forming a richly textured synthesis.

Chapters 3 and 4 contain an historical overview. Here is investigated the important role of oral tradition in constructing the Yoruba historical narrative. As well, the caveats to oral tradition as history are entertained. Yoruba mythology and the process of myth creation is a discursive interaction with history. It is a dialectic where multiple oppositional truths are integrated or held simultaneously.

Culture can be described as the body of beliefs and codes of conduct that underpin social functioning. The historical overview seeks to situate the people, to identify cultural markers, to ascertain the place and status of women, and to situate *àjé* within a historical context vis-à-vis women and power. Examples of women in myth, legend, and history are offered. The exploration of outside influences on Yoruba society is introduced and carried forward throughout the work.

Myth and ritual are ontological vehicles carrying a people's worldview and orientation towards their world. Chapter 5 delves into the realm of Yoruba cosmology primarily through the medium of Yoruba traditional religion and the

Yoruba sacred text, *Odu Ifa*. *Odu Ifa* has been described as a literary corpus, a system of morals and values, and a treatise on how to live one's life so as to reap the blessings (*ire*) of longevity and abundance.⁶⁸

Chapters 6, 7, and 8 are a more thorough exploration of *àjé*, beginning with a comparison of the Yoruba conception of the witch as contrasted with the concept of *àjé*. From here attention turns to how *àjé* is denoted within Yoruba cosmology and *Odu Ifa*, including their relationship with the Yoruba deities and with humanity. *Àjé*'s roles and functions within Yoruba society as well as *àjé*'s iconic representations are examined in Chapter 8.

The following chapter turns to Gelede, a ritual that honors *iyami àjé* in their "capacity as guardians of society."⁶⁹ A detailed description of this ritual includes the myths surrounding the origin of Gelede and its social role as well as the underlying unity of the tradition across regions. But most importantly, Gelede is looked at for its representations of *iyami àjé* and for its power to reinforce societal norms and expectations.

Leaving from the honoring of *àjé*, attention turns to treating the imposition of sanctions against *àjé*. The main focus of Chapter 10 is the Atinga witch-finding movement of the mid-twentieth century. Among other things, in the Atinga movement is represented a new dimension of the economic jealousy often accompanying witch accusations. Atinga, with its melding of indigenous and Christian (and Islamic) elements, was a precursor to the current crop of African

⁶⁸ W. Abimbola, *Ifá Literary Corpus*.

⁶⁹ H. J. Drewal and Drewal, *Gelede*, 9.

evangelical witch hunters as epitomized by Helen Ukpabio and the Liberty Gospel Church in southeastern Nigeria.

Chapter 11 contains anecdotal components of the qualitative interviews that speak to how individuals experience *àjé* in the present day. These accounts illuminate the textual material, adding insight and depth. Anecdotes shared speak to an individual's lived reality with respect to the mysterious powers that are and mysterious being who are *àjé*.

Relevance

Although I am geographically located in the West, African ancestry and experience of colonialism calls me to reclaim the disparaged energies of my African primordial mothers. A nuanced view of the witch is generally lost in the West. While being reclaimed by some—considered on the margins—the witch is conventionally considered patently evil.

A contribution of the dissertation lies in its exploring the multivalent nature of the power associated with the witch, but that goes far beyond the negative stereotypical Western conventions of the witch. It is exploring power as it is reflected within the Yoruba cultural concept of *àjé*.

Àjé traditionally carries nuanced signification among the Yoruba. However, that has been threatened by colonial implantation of Western religion and Western cultural values. Spiritual activism encompasses reclaiming spiritual heritage and using it to make positive contributions to the world (e.g., to one's community, and the environment). The gift of *àjé* to women is one to be used for empowerment.

As stated, a purpose of the research is to impart knowledge and understanding by shedding light on the obscure and negatively shrouded area of

àjé. Olufemi Taiwo states: “Taking Africa seriously means...that research will be adapted to the real need to promote knowledge.”⁷⁰ Knowing that one is endowed by *àjé* with their power and choosing to hide that light under a barrel is an affront to our mothers. One does not insult *iyami àjé* without consequence.

There are multiple references to *àjé* in works across several disciplines. However, the literature review revealed few books focused on *àjé*. Teresa Washington expounds upon *àjé* and looks at the power of *àjé* as encapsulated within strong female characters of African-American literature. Yemi Elebuibon, *babalawo* and titled spokesperson for the Ifá priests of Oṣogbo, gives the reader a “peep into the world of witches,” the subtitle of his book on Yoruba *àjé*. Fagbemileke Fatunmise shares mysteries of *iyami àjé* as well as referencing some of *àjé*'s cross-cultural sisters. Pierre Verger was an ethnographer and *babalawo* whose extensive article on *àjé*, “Iyami Osorongá,” is of considerable depth and comprehensiveness. Two small books out of the Brazilian Candomblé tradition focus on working with the energies of *àjé*.

Confessions of witches have been recorded among the Yoruba that primarily coincide with witch-finding activities. An individual who claims to have extricated herself from the witchcraft cult gives an account of her life as a witch.⁷¹ However, my investigation uncovered few research examples of individuals speaking first-hand about their personal perceptions or experiences of *àjé* and none outside of Yorubaland.

⁷⁰ Taiwo, “Feminism and Africa,” 62.

⁷¹ Abali, *Rescued by Christ*.

Because my research has not uncovered literature that speaks to the relationship of individuals to *àjé* in its complexity or in diaspora, another contribution of this research is in the qualitative interviews conducted with individuals to learn about their experiences of and attitudes towards *àjé*. I conducted interviews in Nigeria and in the United States with a diverse cross-section of scholars and practitioners of Yoruba traditional religion, having in common knowledge of *àjé*.

In this dissertation I offer as scholarly contribution the unique perspective of investigating the converging impact of several streams on the perception and treatment of *àjé* within Yoruba society. Yoruba cosmological placement of *àjé* through to historical, political, religious, and economic variables are distilled in the explicative analysis, including consideration of colonialism's impact. No similar investigation has been uncovered in the literature.

It is more than conceivable that complex issues underlie the global occurrence of present-day witch scares. Investigation of causative mechanisms for the phenomenon can benefit by looking at multiple and intersecting variables. These include those factors that are indigenous and culture specific, as well as exogenous stressors.

Owing to its breadth this work has the potential to make a contribution to the disciplines of African studies, religious studies, women's studies, and women's spirituality. The most evident contribution would be to the field of African studies given that the dissertation addresses an African cultural expression of primordial feminine power, drawing primarily on material from an African sacred text.

Religious studies, specifically women and theology, is addressed as women's sacred power is examined within the Yoruba sacred text, *Odu Ifa*. Contribution is made to women's studies by the dissertation's investigation of the role and power of women in different epochs of Yoruba history. This contribution continues with the dissertation's exploration of the impact of colonialism on the lives of Yoruba women, specifically as it impacted women being viewed negatively as *àjé*.

The discipline of women's spirituality is served by the dissertation's general examination of women's spiritual power and agency. Indigenous spirituality and patriarchal impact upon and impediment to women's expression of sacred power are also areas explored that find home within women's spirituality.

Limitations and Delimitations

Though the impetus for the dissertation was the current global witch-scare phenomena, the dissertation's exploration is geographically limited to Yorubaland. Nonetheless, it is believed that the conceptual framework of the dynamic intersection of multiple socio-cultural elements used with regard to investigating treatment of *àjé* is transferable to other cultural contexts.

Utilization of Yoruba language research material was fettered by my lack of Yoruba language proficiency. Fortunately, copious research has been conducted on the society and culture of the Yoruba in a variety of languages. It is stated that "the Yoruba are arguably the most researched ethnic group in Africa."⁷²

⁷² Olademo, *Gender in Yoruba Oral Traditions*, 16.

Yorubaland boasts noted universities in Ile-Ife, Lagos, Ibadan, and Ilorin from which much English-language research is derived. This resource coupled with the works of prominent Yoruba scholars who teach and write in the United States such as historian Toyin Falola (University of Texas at Austin), gender issues scholar Oyeronke Oyewumi (State University of New York at Stonybrook), and art historian Rowland Abiodun (Amherst College) provided a wealth of accessible research material.

With respect to the qualitative interviews, these interviews are not a study of the lives of the individuals with whom I spoke. The words of the interviewees are presented in their integrity, without penetrating analysis. The anecdotal elements of the interviews are presented in Chapter 11 as an example and small sampling of how *àjé* is experienced in the twenty first century. Areas of convergence between the themes found in the literature with regard to *àjé* and the experiences of interviewees are brought into relief.

Interview texts were not analyzed in relation to the interviewees' subjective relationship with *àjé*. No analysis was undertaken to uncover the meaning of their experiences of *àjé* within their lives, neither was analysis conducted of how their experience of *àjé* defines their lives or identities. The words of the interviewees are presented without analysis of the subjective significance of the experiences to the interviewees and without analysis of any intersubjective significance between the interviewees and researcher. These rich veins of investigation are areas to be mined in future research.

The dissertation does not argue the "reality" of witchcraft and whether witchcraft is subjective (fantasized by the mentally ill) or objective (social deviants wreaking non-supernatural havoc) or supernatural (spiritual forces affecting

material outcomes). Assessment of witchcraft's reality often becomes joined with explanations for the belief in witchcraft. Below is a brief example of the psychologizing often employed in grappling with the mystery of witchcraft beliefs as well as a highlighting of socio-cultural explanations.

Several authors psychologize witchcraft in an attempt to find a "rational" explanation for the prevalence of the belief. Morton-Williams is representative of these authors when he states that "witchcraft is entirely imaginary." He continues: "Since witchcraft is impossible, the fear of witchcraft and activities to counter witchcraft must be symbolic; cultural expressions of hidden anxieties, of psychic stress."⁷³

Working among the Yoruba, psychiatrist Raymond Prince found that "patients suffering psychic disturbances frequently consider their symptoms to be the result of witchcraft."⁷⁴ There is cultural precedence for this within a verse of *Odu Ifa* Ogundalwori as recorded by Epega and Neimark. "Odù Ògúndá'wòrì speaks of emotional and mental illness caused by evil spirits."⁷⁵ Prince goes on to speculate that within a society that reveres motherhood, the witch collectively represents the ultimate bad mother and that the Yoruba as a culture have not integrated the infantile splitting of the mother into good and bad entities.⁷⁶

⁷³ Morton-Williams, "The Atinga Cult," 327.

⁷⁴ Prince, "Yoruba Image of the Witch," 802.

⁷⁵ Epega and Neimark, *Sacred Ifa Oracle*, 210.

⁷⁶ Prince, "Yoruba Image of the Witch."

Integration or resolution of this split manifests itself in what is termed the “depressive position.” As partial justification for this line of thought, Prince reasons: “It may also be noted that depressions are rare among the Yoruba...Could this mean that the Yoruba as a culture has not reached the ‘depressive position’?”⁷⁷ Overlooking the evident condescension, Prince’s reasoning is fallacious as his argument is based on a false perception of *àjé*, one that is grounded in the idea of the Yoruba witch as uniquely evil.

The prevalence of witchcraft, with its focus against women, has been attributed to several socio-cultural factors reviewed by Hallen and Sodipo. Primary among them is sexual antagonism with the threat of accusation serving “as an effective measure to keep women subservient in African society.”⁷⁸

A second point of stress is found within the patrilineal, polygamous marital structure where the easing of a wife’s precarious position is highly dependent upon producing male offspring and can engender mistrust and suspicion among co-wives. In a society with high infant mortality, infant deaths lead to accusations of witchcraft against co-wives, particularly the childless and women no longer able to bear children.⁷⁹

A contemporary stress attendant with witchcraft accusation is associated with the rapid and disruptive social transformations brought about by modernity

⁷⁷ Ibid., 803, 804.

⁷⁸ Hallen and Sodipo, *Knowledge, Belief, and Witchcraft*, 95.

⁷⁹ Rea, “A Prevalence of Witches.”

and development. On an individual level these “rapid changes increase personal anxieties; increased anxieties promote accident, failure, and ill health.”⁸⁰

Witchcraft is used as rationalization for social and personal misfortune; the witch serves as scapegoat. “On a conceptual level witchcraft provides an explanation for personal misfortune....On a social level witchcraft is best regarded as an index of certain social stress points.”⁸¹

Examples of the above explanations for witchcraft’s presence in Africa are encountered throughout the dissertation. However, they are not the focus of the work and are not developed beyond this brief discussion. Though witchcraft serves as explanation for a variety of events and circumstances, Bourdillon makes the following thought-provoking observation:

People brought up in a different way of thinking may talk about chance or the will of God; for people brought up to think in terms of witches, the question of why is answered in terms of witchcraft.⁸²

Personal Connection

Inclusion of this component that speaks to my personal relationship to the subject honors the principles of several methodologies that ask the self to be consciously and transparently present in the research—transdisciplinarity, feminist standpoint, and indigenous methods. Very similar to the researcher mindfulness called for by the aforementioned methodologies is the self-reflexivity

⁸⁰ Hallen and Sodipo, *Knowledge, Belief, and Witchcraft*, 95.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 96.

⁸² Bourdillon, “Witchcraft and Society,” 180.

called for generally in qualitative research, where the interviewer is asked to be epistemically self-aware.

Another term for reflexivity is “epistemological awareness,” cognizance of those factors that have shaped how one sees the world and cognizance of how that in turn impacts one’s research. The need for reflexivity is, of course, particularly cogent when the ontology in which the research subject is grounded is foreign to one’s own and involves “confronting deep seated personal epistemological assumptions.”⁸³

Several methods that fall under the heading of scaffolding are used to heighten researcher reflexivity particularly for those unfamiliar or uncomfortable with the idea of researcher subjectivity. These include “a reflective journal, member checks, peer debriefing, and triangulation.”⁸⁴ However, the training in feminist standpoint epistemology received as part of the women’s spirituality curriculum has served to concretize the need for reflexivity as an automatic and assumed aspect of research.

Part of the principle of indigenous methodology is honoring indigenous techniques and methods.⁸⁵ Maintaining an altar to my *oriṣa* (deities), honoring my ancestors, and monthly propitiation of *àjé* were in keeping with this principle as well as being in tandem with a personal commitment to spiritual process. With the

⁸³ Gerstl-Pepin and Patrizio, “Reflexivity in Qualitative Research,” 300, 306.

⁸⁴ Ibid., 301.

⁸⁵ Wilson, *Research Is Ceremony*.

honoring of *àjé* on the new moon, I asked that their energy guide the dissertation process.

My experience as a novice initiate into the priesthood of traditional Yoruba religion has had unforeseen and far-reaching impacts contributing to accelerated personal evolution. The consequences (after-shocks) of this path have provided new opportunities for growth and churned up material that has been the fodder of self-transformation. Briefly stated, the after-shocks included a difficult period of heightened sensitivity and protracted presentience followed by the sequential deaths of several loved ones and friends.

The dissertation writing process has been one in which textual research and data collection interweave with the personal and numinous. Though speaking specifically with respect to heuristic research, the words of Clark Moustakas are apt: “The self of the researcher is present throughout the process and, while understanding the phenomenon with increasing depth, the researcher also experiences growing self-awareness and self-knowledge.”⁸⁶

Investigating the demise in status of *àjé* within their culture answers a personal need to understand minimization of the feminine within our time. My initiatory journey is seen as acknowledgement or reclamation of the gifts of recent and ancient ancestors—a grandfather in Cuba who was a *babalawo*, a priest of Orunmila the Yoruba deity of wisdom associated with the *Ifa* divination system, and a Jamaican great-grandmother who was the local community’s herb woman

⁸⁶ Moustakas, *Heuristic Research*, 9.

and who read people using her gift of prophecy. From the description given of this great-grandmother, she could undoubtedly be considered *àjé*.

A hybrid, insider/outsider perspective has advantages as well as disadvantages. As an initiate of Yoruba traditional religion I bring a budding emic perspective to the research, having some knowledge of and sensitivity to the intricacies of the Yoruba pantheon. Also, interviewee knowledge of my status as an initiate undoubtedly facilitated exchange.

As a Westerner, however, my mindset is decidedly non-Yoruban. The matter of paradox is one example. Paradox is a conundrum to be unraveled; paradoxes are exceptional occurrences. This view is in contrast to the Yoruba orientation of apparent comfort with paradox, acceptance of paradox, and seeing paradox as ordinary or even normal. The Yoruba deity Eṣu is an embodiment of that paradox wherein he is said to be too large to inhabit a house yet fits comfortably in a nut shell.

With regard to my personal unfolding, I stand in two worlds. Or more accurately, I walk a tightrope between the numinous and what I cling to as objective reality when the numinous comes unbidden and feels overwhelming. At other times I dance between the worlds, in those moments when I elicit the numinous through meditation or other spiritual practice.

The ideal is formation of a conscious bridge between these domains. Those who are *àjé* can bring spirit to bear in the material world. My great-grandmother's gifts of knowledge, intuition, and spirit combined for the benefit of her community and those who sought her aid.

Writing this dissertation assists in the process of bridge formation between numinous and temporal realities. In its pages the negative shroud within which

àjé is popularly cloaked is rent. Though the ineffable power of *àjé* must always be approached with reverence and humility, with the stripping away of negative stereotypes it is hoped that this energy will enjoy greater open and conscious expression.

Along the lengthy road that has been the dissertation process I have been transformed—forged by fire—in many respects. Along the way I have gained insight into the powers and gifts of *àjé* and gained greater clarity concerning the forces that undermine the power of the feminine. This process has assisted me in coming to a greater understanding of “women’s power.”

It has assisted me in coming to terms with my own power. It has helped me “own” my power and see more clearly the uses of that power in the world. It has helped me appreciate the true value of women’s power in the world and the importance of our position as women. *Àjé* has shared this knowledge with me—
Modupe O! Modupe O! Modupe O!

This coming to terms with what it means to be a woman in the world and the deep meaning and significance of women’s power has been for me a burning issue. Moustakas states that “the question is one that has been a personal challenge and puzzlement in the search to understand one’s self and the world in which one lives.” He goes on to say that “with virtually every question that matters personally there is also a social—and perhaps universal—significance.”⁸⁷

As a child I exasperated adults with my need to understand, my constant asking of why. By way of explaining the need for God in one’s life, my father

⁸⁷ Ibid., 15.

would point to the atrocities that we as humans perpetrated upon each other—the Vietnam War and the Biafran Civil War with their televised images of carnage and the distended stomachs of starving toddlers. Images of suffering and death clung to me as did images of attack dogs let loose on civil rights protesters. This dissertation sits squarely within my need to understand the whys of “man’s inhumanity to man” or more specifically in this case, man’s inhumanity to woman.

CHAPTER 2: METHODOLOGY

“Theories are regulative principles which encourage us to seek explanations for social phenomena in one direction while turning us away from some others.”⁸⁸

“Because cosmological myths function as models for human activity, roles played in them by males and females have great import for gender construction and relations in a given culture.”⁸⁹

While the introduction is a roadmap that delineates the road to be traveled, the methodology specifies the eyes used to see the road and lays out the logic of the route. The methodological grounding of this work is transdisciplinarity. Transdisciplinary inquiry acknowledges the contributions that can be brought to an area of investigation using an integrated or holistic approach to scholarship and is applied to areas as diverse as the hard sciences and creative arts.

There is acknowledgment that “the debate on transdisciplinary is fairly young and that the process of transdisciplinary research is still being developed.”⁹⁰ Also, there is acknowledgment that “internationally the term ‘transdisciplinary research’ is defined in different ways, ranging from a diffuse conceptual term located above individual disciplines, to any research that involves stakeholders.”⁹¹

The Swiss Academy of Sciences has published the *Handbook of Transdisciplinary Research* that foregrounds the hard sciences and cross-

⁸⁸ Taiwo, “Feminism and Africa,” 57.

⁸⁹ Olajubu, *Women in the Yoruba Religious Sphere*, 67.

⁹⁰ Weismann et al., “Enhancing Transdisciplinary Research,” 434.

⁹¹ Jager, “Forward,” *Handbook of Transdisciplinary Research*, vii.

disciplinary collaboration in transdisciplinary research. Transdisciplinary research crosses the boundaries between the sciences; it bridges the hard sciences with social science, bridges academic disciplines, and bridges divergent cultural paradigms and perspectives.⁹² How transdisciplinary research is enacted depends in large measure upon the domains in which it is brought to bear. Ideally it builds “connections across disciplines, paradigms, cultures, and worldviews.”⁹³

Klein delineates and distinguishes the typology of the multiple approaches to transdisciplinary, stating that “there is no universal theory or methodology of Transdisciplinarity.” She identifies clusters of key words that designate components of transdisciplinary. “Interdisciplinarity” is the first. This cluster of words:

highlights some of the major traits associated with ID, key among them integration, synthesis of knowledge, interaction of disciplines, and holistic thinking. These traits counter segmentation and fragmentation of knowledge resulting from specialization and internalist approaches to theory and practice.⁹⁴

“Complexity” speaks to the heterogeneity and diversity of perspectives brought to an issue as well as to the area of holistic perspectives. Transdisciplinary or “TD movements have aimed to transcend the narrow scope of disciplinary worldviews by reorganizing the structure of knowledge.”⁹⁵ “Participation and collaboration” exemplify the next grouping.

⁹² Raman, “Varieties of Boundary Crossings.”

⁹³ Molz and Edwards, “Research Across Boundaries,” 2.

⁹⁴ Klein, “Transdisciplinary Moment(um),” 189 , 190.

⁹⁵ Ibid., 192.

The underlying premise of Cluster 3 is that societal problems need to frame research questions and practices now, not academic disciplines...Prioritizing of socially relevant issues and participation is particularly strong in German-speaking countries of Europe, in North-South partnerships, and in northern countries such as the Netherlands, Denmark and Sweden.⁹⁶

“Forms of knowledge” are expansive and allow for “integration of local, indigenous, people’s and traditional forms of knowledge.” The fifth component refers to transdisciplinarity’s “transgressive imperative” that “interrogates the protocols and truth claims of disciplinary conventions, expertise, and control.”⁹⁷

The process of honoring multiple perspectives, particularly those of differing cultures, has the great potential to diminish one-sided biases that invariably result in cultural misinterpretations and misunderstandings. According to Raman, “it is difficult for one who is not an active participant in a culture to be empathetic to all that it entails, especially its experiential dimensions.”⁹⁸

Within transdisciplinarity multiple paradigms and often conflicting viewpoints are brought together to form new insights.

The existence of a multiplicity of perspectives, at times mutually opposed, can...be transformed into an opportunity for creativity, *if* we accept the possibility of multiple ways of knowing, that there is more than one perspective that has something to offer, and no one perspective has the monopoly, *and* recognize the possibility that the perspectives can co-exist and also be brought together to develop...creative integrations.⁹⁹

⁹⁶ Ibid., 193-194.

⁹⁷ Ibid., 196.

⁹⁸ Raman, “Varieties of Boundary Crossings,” 33.

⁹⁹ Montuori, “Promise of Transdisciplinarity,” 155.

A synthesis of multiple methodologies lends a broadened perspective and enriches the research. Transdisciplinary inquiry is truly a synthesis as contrasted with the multidisciplinary approach in which each discipline employed in the research stands apart in its contribution. Also, within transdisciplinary research, all facets of the researcher are explicitly invited to take part in the inquiry—rational and non-rational faculties that inform one’s identity.

While working on the dissertation, I continued my initiatory journey along the path of Yoruba traditional religion. The synchronous and significant nature of these events cannot be discounted. The process of initiation has both direct and subtle impacts on my work. A significant example is the wisdom of elders, enriching to both personal journey and research. As well, during the writing of the dissertation, I did a monthly New Moon ritual in nature as propitiation of *àjé*. It was a way of honoring the primordial energy of *àjé*. It was gesture of gratitude and supplication for blessings.

Why Use Transdisciplinary Methodology?

Wande Abimbola asserts that Yoruba men have an “ambivalent” attitude towards Yoruba women and women’s power, “a love-hate attitude [that] probably arose from the supernatural and financial/economic powers that women wield.”¹⁰⁰ *Àjé* as women who wield incredible power were, therefore, as much feared as revered. If this dual attitude is indeed the case, then the question becomes: What moves apprehension to antagonism and allows for the unclenching of hostility upon women who wield *àjé*?

¹⁰⁰ W. Abimbola, “Images of Women,” 411.

To answer this question, a close consideration of the Yoruba relationship to *àjé* is requisite, including the source of *àjé*'s power and *àjé*'s societal role. Were there factors—and if so, what were the factors—that resulted in shifts to how *àjé* was perceived that incited violent reaction toward them? If the Yoruba hold *àjé* with ambivalence, then a tipping point to wide-scale maltreatment is not difficult to envisage.

The hypothesis considers patriarchal structures within and influences upon Yoruba society as crucial areas for consideration, the latter most notably in the form of outside religious influences. Coupled with these influences are the structural changes—economic and social—occasioned by colonialism.

The notion of ambiguity in the relationship of Yoruba men to Yoruba women calls forth complexity, and the relationship of the Yoruba to *àjé* as portrayed in the literature is paradoxical. “Multiparadigm approaches aid exploration of particularly complex and paradoxical phenomena by helping theorists employ disparate theoretical perspectives.”¹⁰¹ Also, the literature review revealed a relative paucity of research specific to *àjé*. As a relatively unexplored area of study, “it is important to study it in many different ways in order to gain a broader understanding.”¹⁰²

There are a multitude of factors that come into play when assessing the Yoruba relationship to *àjé*. Understanding will hopefully be achieved by situating *àjé* within these multiple contexts grounded by the Yoruba cosmological and

¹⁰¹ Lewis and Grimes, “Metatriangulation,” 672.

¹⁰² Urick, “Exploring Generational Identity,” 103.

philosophical orientation to *àjé*. Also significant are the place and power of women in Yoruba society, as well as historical changes in their place and power. Internal and external factors impacting societal structures also come into play. Transdisciplinarity holds and makes sense of this complexity.

Multiparadigm inquiry broadens conventional definitions of theory to denote a coherent understanding capable of accommodating diverse representations. Theorists seek a metaparadigm perspective from which they may recognize the interplay of conflicting yet interdependent paradigm insights.¹⁰³

Once an exploration of the relationship of the Yoruba to *àjé* is completed an attempt is made to formulate a theory to aid in the understanding and articulation of the relationship. Using multiple perspectives gives a more nuanced understanding of the factors that shape reactions to *àjé*. As the subject of *àjé* is complex, individual relationships to *àjé* are equally complex. Therefore, using multiple paradigms to formulate theory respects this diversity of perspectives, assisting to understand the varied viewpoints and factors that contribute to formulation of one's relationship to *àjé*. This theoretical hypothesis can serve as a frame for future research.

On a personal note, I adhere to Professor Montuori's lived-assertion that one's life interests and studies are not necessarily contained within or limited to a single paradigm. Of his areas of interest and affiliation, he states: "I felt they could not be contained by a particular discipline, even as those individual disciplines and sub-disciplines shed light on my subject in different ways."¹⁰⁴

¹⁰³ Lewis and Grimes, "Metatriangulation," 684.

¹⁰⁴ Montuori, "Promise of Transdisciplinarity," 148.

Similarly, I have studied, worked in, or have degrees in business management, economic development, translation, archetypal psychology, religion, and women's spirituality. Much of this background informs the present work making it untenable to limit the mode of inquiry to a single methodology.

How Is the Methodology Transdisciplinary?

Coming to an integral understanding of the Yoruba socio-cultural perspective towards *àjé* is to create a transdisciplinary amalgam or a patchwork quilt that is more than a mere collection of squares of cloth but is a melding and synthesis of materials that form a new whole. As such, several methodological approaches are bracketed within the dissertation.

Montuori outlines a practical framework for transdisciplinary research, what he calls "a heuristic for transdisciplinary work."¹⁰⁵ The process involves consideration of five elements or the answering of five questions concerning the research. Each is addressed in turn with respect to this dissertation.

First, the research should be "inquiry-based" and an argument made for "why it cannot be contained within the boundaries of only one discipline."¹⁰⁶ The rationale for using a transdisciplinary methodology was explained above. The complexity of the phenomenon that is *àjé* demands an approach that reaches across multiple paradigms.

The second consideration calls for an awareness of the perspectives already used to study the phenomenon in question, "even if there is no research

¹⁰⁵ Montuori, "Five Dimensions of Applied Transdisciplinarity," par. 2.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, par. 4.

specifically on our topic.”¹⁰⁷ There is a decided scarcity of research specific to the totality of *àjé*. Two detailed texts on *àjé* were uncovered. One is by Washington (2005), professor of Africana Literature, who discusses the multifaceted nature of *àjé* then looks at representations of *àjé* in African-American literature.

Elebuibon is a *babalawo* and the *awise* or spokesperson for the Ifá priests of Oṣogbo. His 2008 book, *Invisible Powers of the Metaphysical World*, elaborates the powers of *àjé* as witches and the motivations for their actions, among other areas. Several verses of the Yoruba sacred text, *Odu Ifa*, are included that recount tales of *àjé* interaction with humans and deity.

Three additional books on *àjé* were also discovered. Fagbemileke Fatumise considers *àjé* in light of women’s divine power while introducing the mystery and symbolic representations of *àjé*. Montenegro’s two small compositions are devoted to working with the energies of *àjé*.

In addition two texts detail *Gelede*, the festival held to appease and honor *àjé*. H. J. Drewal and Drewal (1983) is the first. Both authors are scholars of Yoruba culture. Henry Drewal is an art historian and Margaret Drewal is professor of performance studies. The second book on *Gelede* was authored by Babatunde Lawal (1996), art historian and Yoruba scholar.

Pierre Verger was an ethnographer and *babalawo* whose research and documentation of material on *àjé* have been invaluable. While not a book, his substantial article, *Iyami Osorongo*, is a concentrated compilation of several *odu* and numerous verses of text collected in Oṣogbo devoted uniquely to *àjé*.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., par. 5.

This being as it may, the topic of *àjé* is broached across numerous fields. *Àjé* is found in discussions of Yoruba cosmology and philosophy;¹⁰⁸ in discussions of the role of women in Yoruba religion;¹⁰⁹ in discussions of women's changing social roles;¹¹⁰ and in discussions by anthropologists,¹¹¹ philosophers,¹¹² and art historians.¹¹³ Most discuss *àjé* within the context of witchcraft.

The third element of Montuori's framework asks individuals to monitor their mode of thought. "Complex thought...offers a way of thinking that accounts for context, interconnection, interdependence, change, and uncertainty."¹¹⁴ This research situates *àjé* within Yoruba ontological and cultural perspectives that are examined in Chapter 5, as well as looking at historical forces that undoubtedly impacted *àjé*. The idea is not to decontextualize *àjé* and view it as an abstract phenomenon. *Àjé* is deeply interwoven into the fabric of the culture. However, *àjé* was not impervious to the social and structural shocks attendant by war and colonialism.

¹⁰⁸ K. Abimbola, *Yorùbá Culture*.

¹⁰⁹ Olajubu, *Women in the Yoruba Religious Sphere*.

¹¹⁰ McIntosh, *Yoruba Women*.

¹¹¹ Apter, *Black Critics and Kings*.

¹¹² Hallen and Sodipo, *Knowledge, Belief, and Witchcraft*.

¹¹³ H. J. Drewal and Drewal, *Gẹlẹdẹ*.

¹¹⁴ Montuori, "Five Dimensions," par. 6.

The fourth consideration asks the inquirer to articulate the place of the self in the research. It calls for transparency and recognition that the worldview and perspectives of the researcher impact the research. This fourth element I find similar to the feminist standpoint model that is elaborated below. In addition, this fourth element asks for assessment of the motivations behind undertaking the research. “Transdisciplinarity views inquiry as an opportunity for self-inquiry.”¹¹⁵ As outlined in the dissertation’s introduction, there were several motivating factors that prompted undertaking of this research. Primary among them was appraisal of the negatively skewed picture that has been painted of *àjé*.

Five, transdisciplinary calls for creative inquiry. It is a “creative process”¹¹⁶ wherein knowledge is created based on interaction with the research and from the perspectives of an individual’s multiple socio-cultural referential frames. The assessments made and conclusions reached grow out of the researcher. The data does not “stand on its own”—a popular attribution from the positivist paradigm—but is imbued with the blood and spirit of the researcher.

This blood and spirit are those of my mother-line with which I feel profound connection. It is the hereditary blood that I share with my Jamaican great-grandmother seer and Cuban *babalawo* grandfather. It is my spirit that demands I delve into the numinous, explore my cultural heritage and that prompted my initiation to the Yoruba deity Oṣun, “leader of the *àjé*.”¹¹⁷ It is my spirit that seeks

¹¹⁵ Ibid., par. 7.

¹¹⁶ Ibid., par. 8.

¹¹⁷ Badejo, *Oṣun Şègègèsí*, 77.

insight on *àjé* and that demands to understand why the power of the primordial feminine has been disparaged.

Research on the Yoruba *àjé* is a dialectical process with contradictory and conflicting views existing within the Yoruba's comfort with ambiguity. It is dialogue between this often confounding tension of opposites and the inner world of the researcher. The perspectives of the individuals interviewed must also be factored in. What is birthed is a creative amalgam; the product is "creativity that emerges out of the interaction of multiple perspectives."¹¹⁸

A technique for bringing the multiple paradigms employed into relief is bracketing. "Bracketing entails making the assumptions and selective focus of each perspective explicit, then categorizing extant literature *within* paradigms."¹¹⁹ What follows is a discussion of the methodologies and attendant paradigms employed in the research. Citations employed give an indication of the principal authors within each area.

Multi-perspectival Research

Several methodological components contribute to this endeavor. Included are hermeneutics, historiography, critical theory (feminist theory and women's spirituality, postcolonial and indigenous perspectives, spiritual activism), and qualitative interviews.

¹¹⁸ Montuori, "Promise of Transdisciplinarity," 155.

¹¹⁹ Lewis and Grimes, "Metatriangulation," 678.

Hermeneutics

Hermeneutics plays a role because of the textual analysis that the dissertation entails. Additionally, if one defines a culture's rituals as "living text,"¹²⁰ then hermeneutics is applicable for the dissertation presents the *Gelede* ritual held in propitiation of the *iyami*, as well as looking at the role and power of the priestess in ritual.

Among the Yoruba, two types of oral tradition concerned the source or origin (*ipilẹṣẹ*) of any phenomenon: the mystical, which attributes the creation of all things to divine beings; and the historical, which attempts to locate origins in time and space.¹²¹

The earliest history of the Yoruba was preserved within its oral tradition. *Odu Ifa*, Yoruba sacred text, is the verbal repository of the people's history and sacred traditions only recently put into print. In it are the myths, legends, praise poetry, songs, and religion of the Yoruba. Interpretive reading of the *Ifa* literary corpus is, therefore, a fundamental aspect of the dissertation. Within its pages are stories that speak to *àjẹ* and their interactions with *oriṣa* (deities) and humans. Appendix B is a glossary that contains many praise names for *iyami àjẹ* as well as the identities of several Yoruba deities.

While keeping in mind the pervasive racial bias of the epoch, early scholarship on Yoruba culture has been sought out in the hope of obtaining reports and recordings of Yoruba tradition that predate Western acculturation. For example, Bascom claims that the Yoruba beliefs discussed in his book *Ifa*

Divination.

¹²⁰ Morris, *Religion and Anthropology*, 5.

¹²¹ Lawal, *Gẹlẹdẹ Spectacle*, 37.

are probably as close to those of the pre-contact period as can be hoped for at this date, since they were mainly recorded in 1937–38 from babalawo who had remained apart from both Islam and Christianity. Moreover, their interpretations were drawn from verses they had memorized in their youth. (103)

A paradoxical element is that although the Yoruba creator, Olodumare, gifted *àjé* with their power and gave them the task of overseeing the world, they are often perceived as destructive, anti-social beings. “Paradoxes denote social constructions, formed as actors polarize interrelated phenomena to comprehend uncertainty and complexity.”¹²² Analysis of such writings for authorship and motivation is a consideration within hermeneutics.

Yoruba written grammar was developed in the mid-nineteenth century under the aegis of Christian missionaries.¹²³ From this, we receive translation of the Yoruba term *àjé* as witch, with attendant Christian judgment.

Much of what we accept as authoritative definitions of Yoruba spirituality comes from academics and priests with dual religions... Theological premises of other religions have crept into our spiritual processes by being hidden in the language of the translations and the sentiments of their devotees and writers.¹²⁴

While the *odu* have been subsequently transcribed and translated by many individuals sensitive to Yoruba traditional religion,¹²⁵ as noted many of these individuals have been influenced by Christianity, and for many writers the

¹²² Lewis and Grimes, “Metatriangulation,” 684.

¹²³ Olademo, *Gender in Yoruba Oral Traditions*.

¹²⁴ Olomo, *Core of Fire*, 111-112.

¹²⁵ The University of Ibadan has undertaken the monumental task of recording thousands of *Ifa* verses before they are lost.

Yoruba culture is an adopted one. Also, the major works have all been by men.¹²⁶

Therefore, selective inclusion favoring male perspectives and potential distortions might occur. Oyeronke Olajubu maintains that:

The prevailing cosmology myths among the Yoruba reflect a latent patriarchal coloring that does not tally with the historic Yoruba cosmic experience, which makes room for male and female principles.... This is usually for subjective reasons that serve sectarian interest and that inadvertently seek to hide the fact that woman played positive and important roles in these accounts.¹²⁷

Consequently, in reading the *odu* and seeking an understanding of *àjé*, I employ the feminist hermeneutics of Rosemary Radford-Reuther and Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza whose theological analyses, among other matters, uncover Biblical patriarchal bias.¹²⁸ African scholar, Jacob Olupona, speaks of a “new hermeneutics” in the works of women scholars of Yoruba traditional religion that privilege female representations. “Feminist interpretations present powerful images and symbols of deities.... We are indeed experiencing the Yorùbá concept: the transcendent and the sacred in a radically different and fresh context.”¹²⁹

Paul Ricoeur’s hermeneutics of suspicion as to the conscious and unconscious intentions of the transcribers is critical and is called for by Olajuba in the reading of Yoruba sacred text. Ricoeur states: “The contrary of suspicion, I

¹²⁶ Olajubu, *Women in the Yoruba Religious Sphere*.

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*, 75.

¹²⁸ Radford-Reuther, *Sexism and God-talk*; Schussler Fiorenza, *Wisdom Ways*.

¹²⁹ Olupona, “Òrìṣà Ọṣun,” 50-51.

will say bluntly is faith.”¹³⁰ One cannot take on face value the words on the page. The motivation of the writer is important, the message or “truth” that the author desires to transmit. A biased view can result in a skewed picture being drawn of the subject.

A critical reading is, therefore, necessary. “This hermeneutics is not an explication of the object, but a tearing off of masks, an interpretation that reduces disguises.”¹³¹ In applying this critical eye to the reading, in seeing beyond the words, I must also be critically suspicious of my own potential imposition of meaning arising from my ontological base and epistemology used in ascribing meaning—Black, female, Afro-Caribbean-American, college educated, initiate to Yoruba traditional religion, family heritage of earth-based religious practice, father who was a Jehovah’s Witness. This implies a meta-consciousness, if you will, an observer who is observing the observer in the act of observation.

Using the hermeneutics of suspicion one uncovers the political motivations behind the text by questioning whose interests are served by the rendering offered. In looking at myth as history, this tack is followed by several authors with interesting results.¹³² Fortunately, for many myths there are counter-myths that challenge dominant claims and ritual re-enactments that belie conventional truth.

The “deeper,” paradoxical interpretations of Yoruba ritual revise and subvert official ideologies not through faulty logic or a perverse sense of

¹³⁰ Ricoeur, *Freud and Philosophy*, 28.

¹³¹ *Ibid.*, 30.

¹³² For example, Apter, “Historiography of Yoruba Myth”; Beier, “Historical and Psychological Significance.”

play, but because they grasp power *ultra vires*, opposed to authority, traducing its structures and rules.¹³³

Textual scrutiny also requires a hermeneutics of humility. With humility one approaches a text with openness, allowing the meaning or multiple meanings of the text to reveal themselves. This humility is contrasted with assuming or ascribing meaning. A hermeneutics of humility also implies that as new data reveals itself, one must be open to this additional knowledge and to the altered perspectives that this new knowledge might occasion.

More importantly for this work, a hermeneutics of humility entails being careful not to judge oral text through a Western value lens.

There must be a 'letting go' of knowledge, belief, and practices that dishonor the indigenous spiritual understandings...given our preparation and training in predominately Western, male, patriarchal, capitalist knowledge spaces.¹³⁴

With every day of writing I am challenged to keep "letting go" of—or at least bracket—my ontological assumptions.

Historiography: Cultural History and Oral Tradition

The dissertation is broad in scope. This breadth reflects a need to see the big picture, to understand context. Therefore, Yoruba history is examined in an attempt to understand past and contemporary dynamics within the society and potential impact on *àjé*. The precolonial-era Yoruba left no written texts. An interdisciplinary approach to the study of African history in general has been advocated because most pre-colonial African societies did not write their

¹³³ Apter, *Black Critics and Kings*, 116.

¹³⁴ Dillard, "When the Ground Is Black," 286.

histories.¹³⁵ The present discussion of historiographical perspectives examines the arguments, pro and con, regarding the use of oral text as history.

This section is inspired by the methodology of feminist cultural historian Lucia Chiavola Birnbaum whose perspective looks at historical events using the lens of feminist theory and indigenous perspectives. The ways of knowing and being of “subordinate” cultures are held with esteem while feminist values such as gender parity are honored.

For Dr. Birnbaum, subjugated and subversive voices reveal dormant truths. These truths are often embedded in the folklore, myths, rituals, songs, and proverbs of a people.

The lowly person, the old lady...frequently convey or enact the deepest wisdom. In folk tales, those disinherited by custodians of dominant society are often the carriers of the deepest and perennial human beliefs.¹³⁶

Birnbaum communicates the view of Emmanuel Anati—paleo-ethnologist specializing in the art and religion of prehistory—regarding the significance of story. Anati’s is the “Jungian belief that mythology is a mirror of our collective memory.”¹³⁷

The writings of Lucia Birnbaum with respect to Sicily and Italy show that folklore and ritual are crucial components of cultural history, particularly the suppressed history of a people.¹³⁸ Her several works provide numerous

¹³⁵ Abasiattai, *Expanding Frontiers of African History*.

¹³⁶ Birnbaum, *Future Has An Ancient Heart*, 79.

¹³⁷ Birnbaum, *Dark Mother*, xli.

¹³⁸ Birnbaum, *Black Madonnas*.

examples that demonstrate “how subordinated peoples keep their own history in tales that differ from official history.”¹³⁹ This differential historical recounting is true in the myths and rituals of many Yoruba sub-groups; ritual re-enactments often directly challenge hegemonic claims.

Speaking of the power of orally transmitted knowledge, Susanne Wenger, Iya Adunni among the Yoruba of Oşogbo where she lived for over 50 years, states the following:

The sacred potency of the unwritten language...is much more intense than anything that the written word—tamed in letters and trained and drilled with grammatical rules of the bureaucratized etymon—could ever achieve.¹⁴⁰

Historiography, the way in which history is told, is by its very nature an interdisciplinary field. Written text is considered the most reliable source of a people’s history, though this rule is open for debate when considering that the stories are generally told of and by the dominant members within a society. However, other means are employed to substantiate the written text or where written text does not exist, to paint a people’s story.

Cultural history looks at those elements within a society that link the society to its past, “indigenous forms of historical consciousness.”¹⁴¹ Oral text, ritual, symbolism, art, archaeology and material culture are among the elements used to reconstruct a people’s past. Oral text includes folklore, myths and legends, sacred or praise poetry, historical and lineage recitations, for instance.

¹³⁹ Birnbaum, *Dark Mother*, 103.

¹⁴⁰ Wenger and Chesi, *A Life with the Gods*, 46.

¹⁴¹ Medick, “‘Missionaries in the Rowboat’?” 42.

In the African context these rituals and myths, time and again, proved to be dramatizations of real events in history, such as cultural contact, invasion, conquest, migration and other significant social events and social movements.¹⁴²

Though the Berlin Conference and the Scramble for Africa took place in the last 16 years of the nineteenth century, European involvement in the region dates to at least the early fifteenth century. By and far this early contact was with the peoples of coastal Africa.¹⁴³ Successful European incursion into the interior of Yorubaland did not occur until the early nineteenth century with the innovation of quinine in the treatment of malaria.¹⁴⁴

A sustained presence came even later. Anglican missionaries established a presence in the interior beginning in 1842 at Abeokuta. However, many of the missionaries were returned Africans, Yoruba natives who were rescued en route to New World enslavement and taken to Sierra Leone where they received missionary education. Even with the use of quinine, Europeans did not last long in the interior, succumbing to fevers or other illness within two or three years of their arrival.¹⁴⁵

Early writings on Yoruba history and culture have been sought out that give a glimpse of Yoruba life before the full spread of colonialism took place.

¹⁴² Amadiume, *Re-inventing Africa*, 46.

¹⁴³ Falola and Heaton, *A History of Nigeria*.

¹⁴⁴ Eades, *The Yoruba Today*.

¹⁴⁵ M. Oduyoye, *Christianity in Yorubaland*.

Some are invaluable eye-witness accounts. William Bascom states: "In 1937–1938 my informants remembered some details going back to about 1850."¹⁴⁶

Samuel Johnson was present in Ibadan in 1874 to witness events surrounding the politically motivated murder of influential *Iyalode* Efunsetan,¹⁴⁷ and in 1893, John Payne compiled and published his work: *Table of Principal Events in Yoruba History*. Both men were native Yoruba. Albert Ellis wrote what was at the time a comprehensive book on Yoruba culture and society in 1894.¹⁴⁸

The methodology of the cultural historian involves looking at living culture as a mirror on the historical past. In this vein looking at Gelede, the Yoruba festival in honor of the *iyami*, provides exposure to a repository of historical knowledge on the role and power of *àjé*, their functioning, and their ritual relationship to the community.

Yoruba myths deal primarily with the origin of the world (cosmogony) and the origin of social and ritual categories (cosmology)...The presentation of gender and power relations in these myths, for example, propounds great influence on the images and roles of women in the sociocultural setting. They reflect change and continuity and thus serve as normative expressions of the Yoruba existential conditions.¹⁴⁹

In personal conversation with Iyanifa Chief Fa'jembola Fatumise,¹⁵⁰ initiated elder within Yoruba traditional religion, she has characterized Gelede as

¹⁴⁶ Bascom, *Yoruba of Southwestern Nigeria*, viii.

¹⁴⁷ S. Johnson, *History of the Yorubas*.

¹⁴⁸ Ellis, *Yoruba-Speaking Peoples*.

¹⁴⁹ Olajubu, *Women in the Yoruba Religious Sphere*, 26.

¹⁵⁰ Fa'jembola Fatumise, in conversation with the author, August 4, 2008, Oakland, California.

an apology from men to women for patriarchal takeover. She states that Gelede is performed to appease the anger of women so they use their awesome power for good because when the mothers are angry, the primal elements of the society are disordered—fertility is diminished in plants, animals, and humans.

There is debate as to what defines history and the place and validity of myth.¹⁵¹ This debate is pertinent to the dissertation because the precolonial history of the Yoruba is largely contained in the oral text *Odu Ifa* or simply *Ifa*. Within *Odu Ifa*, the repository of Yoruba cultural history that was transmitted for centuries, are *odu* (sacred texts), *itan* (mythic stories / historical accounts), *oriki* (praise poetry), folktales, songs, and proverbs. “In Yoruba, myth-legends (*itan*)...are accepted as ‘history’ that is believed to have happened.”¹⁵²

Where communities might have differing recollections of historical events, oral tradition has been successfully used to situate the historical event or to deny the accuracy of a claim.¹⁵³

Oriki is the most popular of the Yoruba poetic genres....An analysis of the thematic content of a town’s oriki tends to reveal the genesis of a town, the origin of its people, its taboos, ethos, and mores.¹⁵⁴

When coupled with additional techniques in African historiography, oral tradition is a powerful tool in the recollection of a people’s historical past.

¹⁵¹ Afigbo, “Fact and Myth”; Apter, “Yoruba Myth and Ritual”; Miller, “Listening for the African Past”; Shokpeka, “Myth in the Context”; Vansina, *Oral Tradition*.

¹⁵² Bascom, *Ifa Divination*, 130.

¹⁵³ Sheba, “Migration Theories and Insignia.”

¹⁵⁴ Ogen, “The Akoko-Ikale,” 257.

Reliance on oral tradition for historical veracity is not without strong caveats, however. In addition to the vagaries of memory, as is true of written history, oral history is told by the victor. To legitimize conquest and solidify changes in rulership:

The succeeding dynasty discredits its predecessors completely and establishes its own legends and myths or it claims to be a direct descendant of its predecessor and incorporates its own myths into the existing ones.¹⁵⁵

As well, formalized ritual enactment of myth is double-edged. Its ability to faithfully convey a history over generations can serve to perpetuate the hegemonic claim of a usurping group as opposed to telling the history of the people indigenous to an area.¹⁵⁶

That being as it may, oral tradition can be used to assist the process of constructing a people's history. Of particular helpfulness are oral traditions that pass down information content in a relatively stable manner. The *Odu* corpus is said to comprise the "religious philosophy of the Yoruba," and is said to "belong to the most fixed and reliable section of the oral tradition."¹⁵⁷

As already noted, the reliability of oral literature in the reconstruction of history is much debated. Ritualized retelling and ritual reenactments are considered more reliable because of their formalized and cyclical nature.¹⁵⁸

¹⁵⁵ Ibid., 264.

¹⁵⁶ Apter, *Black Critics and Kings*.

¹⁵⁷ Idowu, *Olódùmarè*, 7.

¹⁵⁸ Vansina, *Oral Tradition*.

These forms are a “cyclical return to the original historical event.”¹⁵⁹ A time-honored structure is followed generation after generation with little tolerance for deviation from the established protocol and central elements or themes.

Looking at the importance of *Odu Ifa* within the culture and the references to *àjé* within this sacred oral literature sheds light on the place of *àjé* within the culture. The components of Yoruba oral tradition:

enable us to study the indigenous belief of the Yoruba ‘from the inside’ to know what they *actually* think and believe, not what we think that they should think and believe, in due deference to some pet theories.¹⁶⁰

The sacred and political have been intertwined throughout Yoruba history, with the priestess playing key roles. Rituals of re-enactment are performed during important festivals as embodied history. They are, however, often a channel for the expression of subversive claims in which priestesses play a central part. An example is the Yemoja festival in the eastern Yoruba town of Ayede where subversive claims are aired even as the king is being reinvested.¹⁶¹

Odu Ifa and Gelede place *àjé* on mythic footing. However, attitudes towards the *àjé* as powerful women become clarified through looking at the role of *àjé* in society. The place of women within the society throughout history is a telling indicator of how women are viewed. Women holding positions of power and authority speak to their contributions being valued. Shifts over time in this barometer can speak to changed perceptions of women.

¹⁵⁹ Teish, *Carnival of the Spirit*, 187.

¹⁶⁰ Idowu, *Olódùmarè*, 10.

¹⁶¹ Apter, *Black Critics and Kings*.

Socio-historical impact on current realities is also relevant in terms of the perceptions of *àjé*. Here, the social and cultural impacts of Christianity and colonialism are discussed. For instance, the power imbalance engendered by forms of colonial administration upset the system of checks and balances within traditional rulership structures. This destabilization, in turn, impacted traditional roles played by *àjé*.¹⁶² Additionally, a contention under deliberation is that Christianity and colonialism impacted women in a way that contributed to exacerbation of witchcraft accusations.

Historiography is employed to situate *àjé* and women's power in Yoruba historical and cultural context. Through oral history the values and beliefs of a people are transmitted from generation to generation. Therefore, examining the importance of myth and legends in Yoruba oral histories and looking at the prominent place of women in traditional/precolonial society gives a greater understanding of *àjé*.

Critical Theory

If there is an overarching methodological theme present, it would be characterized as critical theory because of its basic questioning and analysis of hegemonic claims, as well as pointed examination of socio-cultural assumptions that govern our lives. "The term *critical* implies a commitment to interrogating the historical specificity of our current material and political conditions."¹⁶³ Critical

¹⁶² Matory, *Sex and the Empire*.

¹⁶³ Parameswaran, "Reading the Visual," 410.

theory engages with political reality, challenges injustice, ideally awakens consciousness, and fosters change.

Critical theory asks individuals to look at the contradictions in social reality.¹⁶⁴ In the case of *àjé*, it is such contradiction that was a spark for my inquiry. The Yoruba overarching creator deity, Olodumare, gave *àjé* their power and assigned them the function of overseeing the world. However, women believed to be *àjé* are accused of witchcraft, maligned, and mistreated. Why this duality?

Context is emphasized within critical theory. Therefore, situating *àjé* within the contexts of Yoruba traditional religion, as well as Yoruba ontological and epistemological orientations is important. As discussed above, placing the Yoruba relationship to *àjé* within the context of Yoruba history is also a central element of this dissertation.

Critical theory calls for critical thinking that leads to change. It entails production of knowledge significant to “counter-hegemonic struggles.” This:

critical-emancipatory knowledge is viewed as having decisive significance for fundamental social change because it involves the fundamental transformation of individual and collective identities through liberation from previous constraints on communication and self-understanding.¹⁶⁵

The change desired by individuals who question dominant socio-religious paradigms involves reclaiming the value of traditional religion’s empowering spiritual technologies and beneficial ancestral beliefs relevant to today’s socio-cultural contexts. It involves at least questioning the hegemonic claims and

¹⁶⁴ Freire, *Politics of Education*.

¹⁶⁵ Marrow, *Critical Theory and Methodology*, 305, 310.

agenda of Christians and Pentecostals that instigate and promulgate witch hysteria with resulting physical and mental injury to women and children. Though the dissertation is specific to West Africa, witch hysteria is a current world-wide phenomenon.

Among other avenues of inquiry, as stated above, investigating the role of imperialist Christianity and colonialism in exacerbating witchcraft accusations and mistreatment is pursued in questioning the popular one-sided view currently promulgated, particularly among Christian Yoruba, of *àjé* as destructive beings.

The nature of the inquiry, the fact that *àjé* is visibly female, and Wande Abimbola's claim of Yoruba men's ambivalence towards Yoruba women and their power¹⁶⁶ leads to an exploration of power dynamics. Such an exploration lends itself to critical theory. Several methodologies find a home within critical theory. Having many of the same concerns as, and indeed coming under the umbrella of, critical theory can be found the following approaches of relevance to this research—feminist theory and women's spirituality, postcolonial and indigenous perspectives, and spiritual activism. Each is part of the amalgam constituting the theoretical base of this work.

Feminist Theory and Women's Spirituality

In its original variants feminist theory critiqued male dominance within Western society and the subjugated role of women. However, according to feminist theorists, it was the very placement of women that gave them the vantage point to see the truth of patriarchal dominance. Sandra Harding states: "Men's

¹⁶⁶ W. Abimbola, "Images of Women."

dominating position in social life results in partial and perverse understandings, whereas women's subjugated position provides the possibility of more complete and less perverse understandings."¹⁶⁷

Current perspectives of feminist theory critically examine mechanisms of domination and subjugation within a society and the individuals most impacted. The analysis has extended beyond gender to include multiple perspectives such as race, class, age, and sexuality.¹⁶⁸ Feminist epistemology privileges women's ways of looking at the world or "women's knowledge."¹⁶⁹

However, epistemology itself is not context free. Epistemologies are "culturally specific modes of constructing and exploiting cultural meanings in support of...knowledge claims." If that epistemology is couched within a dominant paradigm of oppression, it contributes to women knowing themselves through the lens of the oppressor—a lens that justifies women's oppression.¹⁷⁰

False witchcraft confessions by women accused of being *àjé* might be viewed in this light. Critical thinking that recognizes this trap is of course necessary. However, also necessary are the means to effect change. The latter is more politically difficult when the reins of power are in the hands of those who benefit from the dominant paradigm.

¹⁶⁷ Harding, *Science Question in Feminism*, 26.

¹⁶⁸ Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*.

¹⁶⁹ Alcoff and Potter, "When Feminisms Intersect Epistemology."

¹⁷⁰ Harding, *Science Question in Feminism*, 141.

Women's spirituality is at home in transdisciplinarity. Within women's spirituality, feminist and indigenous perspectives find a place of meeting. Feminist theory examines issues of domination and subordination based on gender, race, class, age, sexuality, and ability—"mutually constructing systems of oppression." It examines the major structures within which this paradigm operates—government, private enterprise, religion, education—as well as the policies and practices that keep domination/subordination relationships in place.¹⁷¹

This approach is similar to the radical structuralist paradigm that "focuses on power differences that arise from the structures inherent in organizations."¹⁷² Stretching this paradigm to look at the Yoruba compound structure, a theme in the literature is that polygamy and the compound structure can be a source of women's insecurity. Therefore, witch accusations occur as a way of assigning blame for misfortune.¹⁷³ Ifi Amadiume describes feminism as "political consciousness by women, which leads to a strong sense of self-awareness, self-esteem, female solidarity and, consequently, the questioning and challenging of gender inequalities in social systems and institutions."¹⁷⁴

Feminist theory privileges women's epistemic reality. Women's spirituality honors women's ways of knowing and also honors knowledge that comes from multiple domains. It recognizes the importance of oral tradition, for example.

¹⁷¹ Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*, 227.

¹⁷² Urick, "Exploring Generational Identity," 107.

¹⁷³ Bourdillon, "Witchcraft and Society."

¹⁷⁴ Amadiume, *Male Daughters, Female Husbands*, 10.

Lucia Birnbaum states that in “teaching women’s spirituality classes...I insist on oral as well as written sources because sole reliance on written sources leaves out the spiritual traditions of submerged cultures.”¹⁷⁵

We have learned to study women’s spirituality, not with universal abstractions, but with attention to class, age, and beliefs, as well as variables of race, gender, and culture, coming to a deeper understanding of race as one human race, while keeping in mind the enormous importance of difference in “racial” experience, gender as largely socially constructed, and culture as many-layered, requiring the study of subaltern as well as dominant cultures.¹⁷⁶

Women’s spirituality privileges suppressed voices, indigenous knowledge, and the emic worldview of culture holders while insisting on the transparency of etic outsiders and acknowledging their contributions. “Outsiders can show us glimpses of the central beliefs of a culture, beliefs often held so deeply that people inside the culture assume them unconsciously.”¹⁷⁷ Given the twenty first century reality of individuals holding multiple identities, it is anticipated that in the future there will be “more hybrid identities and border-crossers performing research in ways that resist ‘insider-outsider’ dichotomies while continuing to authentically foreground indigenous issues and work—though not without complications and contestations.”¹⁷⁸

Women’s spirituality bridges third-wave feminism’s multivocality with respect for the rich variety and depth of spiritual experience. It acknowledges

¹⁷⁵ Birnbaum, *Future Has an Ancient Heart*, 78.

¹⁷⁶ Birnbaum, *Dark Mother*, xxxiii.

¹⁷⁷ Birnbaum, *Future Has an Ancient Heart*, 75.

¹⁷⁸ Swadener and Mutua, “Decolonizing Performances,” 41.

“many ways of knowing” as well as the primacy of lived temporal reality and spiritual reality of the individual. The landscape of the numinous realm is not divorced from intellect, but embraced as a source of knowledge. This respect for the spiritual planes of existence it shares with the perspectives of indigenous research. Cynthia Dillard speaks of “an African and African feminist epistemological space that places spirituality at the center of thought and discourse.”¹⁷⁹

The foregoing being as it may, African women scholars have leveled cogent critiques of many Western feminist assertions and intrusions. Mainstream Western feminists are accused of treating “gender as essentialized ontology,”¹⁸⁰ universalizing their concepts of gender and exporting these concepts to other cultures. With history and cultural traditions as diverse as one finds in Africa, it is lamented that “a disinclination to generalize on the basis of limited evidence and respect for diversity of African phenomena are rare in feminist theory as applied to Africa.”¹⁸¹

Criticizing the essentializing of patriarchy and gender relations by many mainstream Western feminists Oyewumi reminds the reader that “gender relations are social relations and therefore historically grounded and culturally bound.”¹⁸² Though Yoruba culture is patrilineal and patriarchal, women have traditionally

¹⁷⁹ Dillard, “When the Ground Is Black,” 278.

¹⁸⁰ Oyewumi, “Feminism, Sisterhood,” 3.

¹⁸¹ Taiwo, “Feminism and Africa,” 48.

¹⁸² Oyewumi, “White Woman’s Burden,” 40.

enjoyed roles of power and authority in numerous domains, particularly prior to colonialism. Great exception is taken to the “misrepresentation of African women’s realities by these latter-day civilizers in feminist garb.”

There is no doubt that at the worst of times, feminism is an aspect of the imperialism of culture. In exactly the same way as Christian missionaries defined our foreparents as pagans before forcing them to become children of God, feminists desire to demonize African men in the name of saving African women.¹⁸³

There is no universalizing truth about patriarchy with which it would be prudent to encounter the world of *àjé*. Filomina Chioma Steady maintains that generally in Africa women “experienced a more limited, rather than absolute, form of patriarchy.”¹⁸⁴ For example, though there was gendered division of labor, both were equally valued and non-hierarchical. Therefore, the priority of Western feminists to “politicize sexuality” has been described as “totally removed from, and alien to the concerns of the mass of African women.”¹⁸⁵

African feminism combines racial, sexual, class, and cultural dimensions of oppression to produce a more inclusive brand of feminism through which women are viewed first and foremost as human, rather than sexual, beings...African feminism is, in short, humanistic feminism.¹⁸⁶

Nah Dove generously includes diaspora Blacks in her delineation of Africans stating that “we, despite our different experiences, are linked to our

¹⁸³ Taiwo, “Feminism and Africa,” 55, 53.

¹⁸⁴ Steady, “African Feminism,” 6.

¹⁸⁵ Amadiume, *Male Daughters, Female Husbands*, 9.

¹⁸⁶ Steady, “African Feminism,” 4.

African cultural memory and spirituality.”¹⁸⁷ However, these different experiences color my epistemological vision¹⁸⁸ that is impacted by my geographic and psychological location—Western educated, living in the West, enjoying a relatively privileged life experience while living within a patriarchal system particularly known for its racial oppression, a categorization not inherent in Nigeria.

It is not the differentials in concepts of patriarchy that are examined, rather the reality of patriarchy as it exists within the *àjé* context is reviewed for its effects on the lives of these women. In this way I hope not to impose—or at least to bracket the imposition of—my own biases with respect to patriarchal reality as I have experienced it.

Elderly women are the majority of those among the Yoruba who have customarily been accused of and punished for being *àjé*. In his brief mention of witches and witchcraft among the Yoruba, Ellis disparagingly remarks that “here, as elsewhere in the world, it is the oldest and most hideous of their sex who are accused of the crime.”¹⁸⁹ To use Collins’ term, the “intersecting oppressions”¹⁹⁰ of gender and age are relevant to *àjé*.

However, African scholars take exception to the portrayal of African women, particularly in the development literature, as uniform victims—“oppressed, downtrodden, and immiserated...viewed as objects of history rather

¹⁸⁷ Dove, “African Womanism, 516.”

¹⁸⁸ Kwok, *Postcolonial Imagination and Feminist Theology*.

¹⁸⁹ Ellis, *Yoruba-Speaking Peoples*, 117.

¹⁹⁰ Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*, 228.

than as active agents.” Exception is also taken to feminine gender in Africa being conceived of “as a disability across the board.”¹⁹¹

Yoruba women, for example, have considerable agency and power especially with respect to their commercial activities and in their role as mother. *Ajé* is the personification of agency, authority, and power. What is also true, however, is that if perceived as eclipsing male prerogative, secular assertions of female power have generally been checked.

Okome concedes that “of course there is considerable inequality between men and women, this is incontrovertible.” However, she cautions that one must take into account the “relational principles which affect the conceptualization of power in society and the capacity to exercise power.” *All* men are not in a privileged position to *all* women regardless of class, educational status, and so on.¹⁹²

This relative privilege, of course, also holds true in the Western world. However, this dynamic is contrasted with race relations in the United States during the first half of the twentieth century where within the dominant paradigm a well-educated, professional Black man was considered inferior to any slovenly, uneducated redneck.

As already commented upon, the impact of imperialism upon the lives of women is critical to consider. However, imperialism also left its mark upon African state formation in ways that bolster gender disparity. The European model of

¹⁹¹ Okome, “What Woman, Whose Development,” 74.

¹⁹² *Ibid.*, 79.

statehood privileging male power was imposed upon Africa. In the case of Yorubaland, this meant that female checks on male power were virtually eliminated.

In both its colonial and post-colonial forms, the African state has discriminated consistently against women. The post-colonial African state, continuing the colonial assault, has done a lot of violence to women's struggle for equality, equity, and justice.¹⁹³

Though outside the scope of the present dissertation, the lingering effects of formal colonialism as well as internal economic and political state policies have also impacted assumptions about and realities of *àjé*. Nigerian state policies, particularly with regard to petroleum, have contributed to regional witch-hunts, for example.¹⁹⁴

Theoretically, many of the criticisms brought to bear by African scholars¹⁹⁵ are seemingly addressed within feminist standpoint epistemology that endeavors "to epistemically valorize some of the most discredited perspectives of knowledge"¹⁹⁶ with the aim of dismantling "perspectival hierarchies."¹⁹⁷ The critique of Western feminism by African women scholars¹⁹⁸ is similar to the

¹⁹³ Ibid., 82.

¹⁹⁴ Osukwu, "Child-Witch Branding."

¹⁹⁵ Amadiume, *Male Daughters, Female Husbands*; Dove, "African Womanism"; Okome, "What Woman, Whose Development"; Taiwo, "Feminism and Africa."

¹⁹⁶ Alcoff and Potter, "When Feminisms Intersect Epistemology," 5.

¹⁹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁹⁸ Amadiume, *Male Daughters, Female Husbands*; Dove, "African Womanism"; Okome, "What Woman, Whose Development"; Taiwo, "Feminism and Africa."

critique that feminist standpoint epistemology has of knowledge produced by dominant groups.

Knowledge claims are always socially situated, and the failure by dominant groups critically and systematically to interrogate their advantaged social situation and the effect of such advantages on their beliefs leave their social situation a scientifically and epistemologically disadvantaged one for generating knowledge.¹⁹⁹

Women's spirituality advocates writing from a feminist standpoint perspective. Feminist standpoint methodology calls for situating the self within one's work, as is true for transdisciplinarity. My standpoint was revealed in the introduction and infuses the work. Feminist standpoint epistemology asks one to speak from the ground of one's biological, cultural, social, and experiential reality. It is at odds with a "falsely universalizing perspective"²⁰⁰ and acknowledges that the varied backgrounds of women globally are such that "their angle of vision on domination will vary greatly."²⁰¹

Of course, theory and practice do not always perfectly coincide. According to Collins the disparity owes much to the inequality in power between subaltern women and dominant groups. Although not done with conscious intent, "this inequality can foster a pseudo-maternalism among White women reminiscent of how US [United States] middle-class social workers approached working-class, immigrant women in prior eras."²⁰² Such patronizing can undoubtedly be

¹⁹⁹ Harding, "Rethinking Standpoint Epistemology," 54.

²⁰⁰ Harding, *Science Question in Feminism*, 126.

²⁰¹ Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*, 232.

²⁰² *Ibid.*, 234.

received as condescension leading to resentment, confrontation, breakdown in relationships, and the thwarting of much needed open dialogue.

Postcolonial and Indigenous Perspectives

Many of the concerns of African women scholars are also addressed by postcolonial feminist theorists such as Anne McClintock and Gayatri Spivak,²⁰³ who are among “those feminists who have reacted against...universalizing tendencies within Western feminist thought.”²⁰⁴ It is indeed this essentializing that indigenous and postcolonial perspectives challenge and negate. In line with these perspectives is the following admonition and reminder: “Feminists must...recognize the legitimacy and expertise of African women’s voices.”²⁰⁵

The postcolonial lens examines structures of dominance and subordination based on culture and hegemony, looking at issues of justice. A postcolonial perspective takes a critical eye to the lasting impacts of colonialism though it is because of the legacies of colonialism that exception is taken by many to the use of the prefix “post.” Aborigine activist Bobbi Sykes stated the case trenchantly and succinctly “at an academic conference on post-colonialism, ‘What? Post-colonialism? Have they left?’”²⁰⁶

A fundamental tenet of postcolonial methodology is placement of taken-for-granted assumptions about oneself and one’s reality within the context of

²⁰³ McClintock, *Imperial Leather*, Spivak, “A Critique of Imperialism.”

²⁰⁴ Mills, “Post-colonial Feminist Theory,” 98.

²⁰⁵ Okome, “What Women, Whose Development?,” 62.

²⁰⁶ As quoted in L. T. Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies*, 24.

history and its impacts—“to historicize the normative.” Therefore, placing *àjé* in historical context is central to the dissertation. The periods of precolonial and early colonial Yorubaland in particular are examined. Postcolonial feminist methodology builds on the work of Black feminists in bringing to the fore an:

intersectional and multiplicative model of oppression (race and class matter as much as gender)...Postcolonial feminists have argued that the geometries of global and national power slide between and among the vectors of gender *and* sexuality, nation, religion, class, caste, and ethnicity.²⁰⁷

Grewal and Kaplan add to this: “scattered hegemonies such as global economic structures, patriarchal nationalisms, ‘authentic’ forms of tradition, local structures of domination, and legal-judicial oppression on multiple levels.”²⁰⁸

The dissertation, therefore, takes a postcolonial perspective in its discussion of the impact of Christianity and colonialism on perceptions of *àjé* as well as the impact of Christianity and colonial policy on the lived reality of Yoruba women. Christianity, the imperialist arm of colonialism, is also assessed critically for its influence on attitudes towards indigenous religion and women. As made clear by Matory, “colonial records document considerable antagonism between Christians and *orisa*-worshippers.”²⁰⁹

Maori scholar Linda Tuhiwai Smith states that postcolonial discourse “has involved a ‘knowingness of the colonizer’ and a recovery of ourselves, an analysis

²⁰⁷ Parameswaran, “Reading the Visual,” 409.

²⁰⁸ Grewal and Kaplan, “Transnational Feminist Practices,” 17.

²⁰⁹ Matory, *Sex and the Empire*, 91.

of colonialism, and a struggle for self-determination.”²¹⁰ Closely linked to postcolonial discourse is the decolonization of research that entails “valuing, reclaiming, and foregrounding indigenous voices and epistemologies.”²¹¹

Indigenous methodologies respect varied ways of conceptualizing and knowing the world, honoring indigenous ontologies and epistemologies. Putting research in an indigenous frame, indigenous scholar, Shawn Wilson states that:

When ceremonies take place, everyone who is participating needs to be ready to step beyond the everyday and to accept a raised state of consciousness....It is fitting that we view research in the same way—as a means of raising our consciousness.²¹²

The subject of this dissertation, *àjé*, is situated within the framework of an indigenous culture. It is an exploration of an indigenous spiritual and cosmological perspective. As such the parameters of indigenous research come to bear. Respectful inquiry, bracketing the self, and according knowledge primacy to members of the indigenous culture are examples of these parameters.

Undertaking this research demanded that I bracket my customary cognitive orientation. For although the occurrence of witchcraft and the accusation of witchcraft in Africa are steeped in social and political realities, the belief in the witch and her powers stem from an ontological prism that views spiritual entities and the divine realm as real, as having agency. Thus, the Yoruba experience of *àjé* demands a bracketing of my oft-time skeptical relationship to spirit and the adoption of an “empathic approach,” which requires the perspective

²¹⁰ L. T. Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies*, 7.

²¹¹ Swadener and Mutua, “Decolonizing Performances,” 31.

²¹² Wilson, *Research Is Ceremony*, 69.

of “looking at religious phenomena from the viewpoint of the peoples themselves.”²¹³

In this regard I endeavor to speak phenomenologically,²¹⁴ which entails bracketing personal opinions and judgments of approval or disapproval while recognizing the possibility of intersubjectivity. Though adopting an empathic approach and speaking phenomenologically might appear mutually exclusive as one involves connecting with and the other involves standing back from, both ask that the viewpoint of the peoples themselves be honored. It is delicate juggling trying to see with the eyes of another culture and maintaining awareness of my own biases. But both are necessary.

Writings on the relationship between self and other influenced and gave grounding to my own thoughts and misgivings about broaching the complex world of *àjé*.²¹⁵ The concept and reality of *àjé* exist within a cultural context foreign to my own. Undertaking the study of *àjé* meant being confronted with the challenge of wrapping my mind around cultural paradigms that differ from the ones in which I am enveloped. A few of these paradigmatic differences include a differing conception of patriarchy, the differing relationship to spirit, and a non-dual/non-oppositional understanding of good and evil. These are just a very few examples.

²¹³ Morris, *Religion and Anthropology*, 6.

²¹⁴ This, along the lines of Husserl’s bracketing of individual consciousness in his transcendental phenomenology (D. W. Smith and McIntyre, *Husserl and Intentionality*). Also, empathic resonance could be seen as an expression of intersubjectivity.

²¹⁵ For example, Kwok, *Postcolonial Imagination and Feminist Theology*, Okome, “What Woman, Whose Development?”; L. T. Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies*.”

As I explored worlds, cosmologies, and religious concepts foreign to me, authors on decolonizing research²¹⁶ led me to the question of my ethical stance in relation to the culture and individuals whose landscape I sought to explore for the purpose of gaining increased understanding of their world. Exploring attitudes and behaviors towards *àjé* among the Yoruba as influenced by socio-cultural changes was to undertake an exploration of the Yoruba interior landscape.

Any attempt to explore the interior landscape of another is fraught with dangers. Among these, projecting one's own psychic reality onto others is the most evident. Personal experiences, predispositions, and expectations invariably influence anticipated outcomes. The Yoruba experience reality based on their cultural and social experiences as well as their ontological orientation. While I experience reality based on the same broad concepts, there is literally a world of difference between the specific content of each element.

Cultural sensitivity was, therefore, required to avoid the pitfall of universalizing response to experience—a decidedly Western presumption spoken of earlier. While I might feel appropriate responses to perceived *àjé* demonization and mistreatment would be anger-sadness-fear, women as *àjé* might have quite different responses.

The appeal to universal human experience and the inability to respect diverse cultures are expressions of a colonizing motive: the incorporation of the Other into one's own culture or perspective.²¹⁷

²¹⁶ For example, Grewal and Kaplan, "Transnational Feminist Practices"; Parameswaran, "Reading the Visual"; Swadener and Mutua, "Decolonizing Performances."

²¹⁷ Kwok, *Postcolonial Imagination and Feminist Theology*, 56.

Although a student of Yoruba traditional religion and philosophy, I in no way claim to be the “non-indigenous expert” of *àjé* experience, to paraphrase Linda Tuhiwai Smith.²¹⁸ Nor do I claim any expert knowledge of *àjé* as a concept of power. I sat at the feet of my knowledge elders, especially those who are Yoruba, and I listened and learned from the individuals with an emic perspective. That is why the qualitative interview component of this dissertation is crucial. Habitually, “indigenous voices have been silenced or ‘Othered’ in the [research] process.”²¹⁹ Through the qualitative interviews, individuals who walk with the epistemic realities of Yoruba culture speak in their own, individual voices.

The decolonizing methodological imperatives help guide and steady the journey along its slippery slope and assist in avoiding the pitfall of being a pernicious cultural voyeur, simply looking for what I could get out of the exploration. Instead the vantage point of indigenous scholars moved me to careful consideration of one’s ethical responsibility in the encounter with an unfamiliar culture. The writing of Leela Fernandes on spiritual activism, discussed in the next section, is also brought to bear.

Although I cannot reduce the reality of Yoruba women to my own, their ontological or epistemological orientation to my own, their understanding of, experience of, or confrontation with patriarchy to my own, there is an important point of convergence. Reading the realities of women cross-culturally led Collins to remark:

²¹⁸ L. T. Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies*.

²¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 139.

Regardless of how any given matrix is actually organized either across time or from society to society, the concept of matrix of domination encapsulates the universality of intersecting oppressions as organized through diverse local realities.²²⁰

In line with critical theory's objective of knowledge to effect change, the hope is that broadening the understanding of *àjé* leads to a diminished reactionary stance to the word itself, to the power, and to the women who are imbued with this power. Although I agree with the constructivist paradigm that reality is "specific to the people and locations that hold them,"²²¹ I believe women within all cultures are gifted with at least a latent form of this primordial power. I hope that sensitivity engendered toward *àjé* translates cross-culturally.

Spiritual Activism

Within the paradigms of women's spirituality and indigenous perspectives, the spiritual and political meet. Birnbaum reminds us that "women's power in traditional societies is not *power over*, but spiritual power,"²²² and spiritual activist, Aina Olomo, defines an activist as "a healer of society's illness...[who] points out its dysfunctions."²²³

Dillard speaks of an "activist praxis" that she sees as an integral component of an African epistemological view in which research is "in service to

²²⁰ Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*, 228.

²²¹ Wilson, *Research Is Ceremony*, 37.

²²² Birnbaum, *Future Has an Ancient Heart*, 78.

²²³ Olomo, "Our Esteemed Elders," par. 19.

community.”²²⁴ Charlene Spretnak is another author on the joining of spirituality and political activism in her 1982 collection, *The Politics of Women’s Spirituality*.

Feminism’s fourth wave is characterized by “a new kind of political activism that’s guided and sustained by spirituality...a fusion of spirituality and social justice.” Spiritual activism calls for awareness of one’s divinity, interconnection, interdependence and responsibility to each other and the planet.

Fourth wave feminism is:

exploring a new feminine paradigm of power that’s based on tolerance, mutuality, and reverence for nature...[and has] stressed the role of compassion and tolerance in addressing political, economic, and religious differences.²²⁵

These attributes are among those brought forward by the primordial African mothers, according to Lucia Birnbaum, and taken with them along the original migrations paths out of Africa after 60,000 BCE to infuse the consciousness of all the world’s peoples—justice with compassion, equality, non-violent transformation,²²⁶ and “values of caring, sharing, healing, and vision.”²²⁷

The transformative effects of spiritual practices and beliefs on the individual are brought into a wider social context. Spiritual and personal transformation is not only deeply felt and personal but is also at the service of

²²⁴ Dillard, “When the Ground Is Black,” 279.

²²⁵ Peay, “Feminism’s Fourth Wave,” par. 2, par. 3, and par. 6.

²²⁶ Birnbaum, *Liberazione della Donna*.

²²⁷ Birnbaum, *Future Has an Ancient Heart*, 66.

social transformation, of justice.²²⁸ While honoring, respecting and learning from our differences and unique perspectives, we also seek places of connection. With regard to Black women globally Collins states:

One task, then, lies in stimulating dialogue across the very real limitations of national boundaries, to develop new ways of relating to one another, in order to unpack the interconnectedness of Black women's experiences.²²⁹

Leela Fernandes speaks of the "disidentified self," the self that is aware of the agency of spirit and aspiring to live from the place of our shared spiritual essence. This perspective is not a universalizing paradigm, however. "The idea of a spiritual essence is the very antithesis of such an essentialism of identity, since spirit can never be contained within the limits of identity." Fernandes refers to the "unboundedness of the disidentified self" and states that from this perspective, "there is no possible separation between spirituality and social justice."²³⁰

As the antithesis of the researcher as voyeur, conceptualization of the researcher as witness speaks to the realization and acknowledgment of interconnection as well as calling forth "acceptance of a deeper sense of social and spiritual responsibility." In this way the act of witnessing can be transformative, not only to self but "in a practical sense."²³¹

²²⁸ Fernandes, *Transforming Feminist Practices*.

²²⁹ Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*, 232.

²³⁰ Fernandes, *Transforming Feminist Practice*, 36, 38.

²³¹ *Ibid.*, 92.

My exploration of *àjé* stemmed from a need, or a sense of responsibility, to move beyond the popular negative portrayal of *àjé* to a more nuanced understanding. My felt responsibility is to present women's spiritual power in its complexity and richness beyond fearsome stereotypes and dualistic either/or constructs.

Though this might be less direct than the tangible impacts spoken of by Fernandes, my own increased willingness to act in the world is more in line with one aspect of her thoughts. She goes on to state that "teaching, writing or other forms of social activism...involve a kind of giving away or giving back of the immense learning which the witness has received."²³²

The dissertation's primary intention is to highlight the power and agency of *àjé* as well as to highlight *àjé*'s polyvalence. Arguably, the aspect of *àjé* most publicized is the phenomenon of witchcraft and women accused of being witches, and attendant consequences. The dissertation endeavors to understand the complex and multi-textured, dynamic nature of the Yoruba relationship to the polyvalence of *àjé*.

Qualitative Interviews

Qualitative research is far-reaching. Methodologies that utilize qualitative methods are numerous and varied including phenomenology, grounded theory, narrative inquiry, and ethnography to name only four. Types of qualitative

²³² Ibid., 93.

interviews also vary considerably. A small named sampling includes oral history, in-depth, narrative, naturalistic, and ethnographic.²³³

The format of qualitative research with individuals ranges from one-on-one interviews to group contexts such as focus groups. The level of interaction that the researcher has with participants also varies from close personal encounters to the researcher as participant observer.²³⁴

Within the dissertation, use of qualitative interviews is limited to single-interview encounters with 15 individuals. The focus of the qualitative interviews was an exploration of individuals' relationship with the Yoruba *àjé*. *Àjé* is concurrently concept, energy, and entities. Within the Yoruba sacred text, *àjé* is perceived as both positive and negative, both beneficial and destructive. Generally in Yoruba society, however, *àjé* is perceived in a negative light.²³⁵

The word witch, with its negative Judeo-Christian overlay, is commonly used in association with *àjé*. Therefore, I wanted to ascertain how individuals perceived *àjé* for themselves, how this contradictory dialectic is reconciled (or not) in the thoughts and lives of the individuals interviewed.

The qualitative interview design used might best be characterized as a semi-structured interview format with a narrative twist. Semi-structured interviews are "suitable where one is particularly interested in complexity." As noted above *àjé* is a complex concept, and this interview format allowed that complexity to be

²³³ Gubrium, et al., *Sage Handbook of Interview Research*.

²³⁴ Ibid.

²³⁵ Rea, "A Prevalence of Witches."

reflected in the responses of interviewees. “In general, researchers used semi-structured interviews in order to gain a detailed picture of a respondent’s beliefs about, or perceptions or accounts of, a particular topic.”²³⁶

Considerable time was spent before the interview process began thinking about the general topic of *àjé* and the desired themes for exploration such as *àjé*’s dual nature, general fear of *àjé*, the secrecy around *àjé*, male versus female attitudes towards *àjé*, and precolonial versus postcolonial attitudes towards *àjé*. Though interviews were minimally structured, follow-up questions were based on these pre-identified areas of interest that could be flexibly explored based on the direction of the interview.

However, because I wanted the individuals interviewed to have maximum range and flexibility of expression, each interview was begun with an open-ended invitation: Tell me your experience of *àjé*. While this approach echoes that of narrative inquiry and much of the material shared came out of interviewees’ “subjectivity—their rootedness in time, place, and personal experience,”²³⁷ this was not a narrative undertaking.

It is stated that “narratives provide us with access to people’s identity and personality.”²³⁸ Nonetheless, the motivation behind the narrative-like invitation was not discovery of how the identities of these individuals are shaped by their experience of *àjé* or definition of the subjective meaning of *àjé* in the lives of these

²³⁶ J. A. Smith, “Semi-Structured Interviewing,” 10, 9.

²³⁷ Riessman, *Narrative Analysis*, 5.

²³⁸ Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach, and Zilber, *Narrative Research*, 7.

individuals. Nor was the motivation revelation of themes in the lives of the individuals with regard to their experience.

Rather, the opening qualitative interview question was framed as an invitation because it afforded the interviewees *carte blanche* to share their perceptions, knowledge, and personal experiences of *àjé*. Olupona cautions that “traditionally, students of religion in Nigeria consider these areas very difficult and, indeed, too sensitive to investigate. These are areas of field research where even the initiated fear to tread.”²³⁹ This caution is owing to the awesome power of *àjé*, their reputation as fearsome beings, and the immense secrecy that surrounds *iyami àjé*.

Therefore, it is with much humility and supplication that one approaches their realm. It is important to state clearly that my intention was neither to investigate the *iyami* nor attempt to gain access to information to which I am neither privileged nor entitled. In this regard the format of an open invitation seemed fitting, allowing the interviewee to lead the interview and to share that which was most comfortable and appropriate.

Ideally I would have liked to interview women among the Yoruba who are initiated to *àjé* to hear their stories, impressions and assessment of their treatment within contemporary society. With the exception of one individual, whose identity is not revealed, the women with whom I spoke did not self-identify as having been initiated into the *àjé* secret society. This reticence is understandable because individuals are loath to admit that they are *àjé*. The persecution of women as

²³⁹ Olupona, “Yoruba Religious Tradition,” 255.

witches has been such that women exercising the power of *àjé*, and the *iyami* in particular, fear having their identities known.

A literature review that is enhanced by being “supplemented with verbal oral narrations is a significant contribution to our field.”²⁴⁰ Though Olupona is speaking to art historians, his assertion can be extended to numerous fields. The reason for the qualitative interview component in the dissertation is to ascertain how a variety of individuals relate to or view *àjé*. It is to hear their assessments of and opinions on *àjé*.

It has been stated that it is important to understand “the qualitative interview as a collaborative enterprise, as an *exchange* between two parties.”²⁴¹ Individuals interviewed are in actuality my coresearchers in the revelatory process of understanding the multiple levels of social reality reflected by *àjé*. “Knowledge is constructed...by individuals in interaction with one another in ways that modify their observations, theories, hypotheses, and patterns of reasoning.”²⁴² This co-construction of knowledge is especially true if the individuals in question share dissimilar cultural experiences. This collaborative element is an aspect of transdisciplinarity.

One might consider the stories told by the interviewees as contemporary *itàn* recounting current historical reality. In reviewing these accounts, areas of

²⁴⁰ Olupona, “Yoruba Religious Tradition,” 255.

²⁴¹ Pezalla, Pettigrew, and Miller-Day, “Researching the Researcher-as-instrument,” 166.

²⁴² Longino, “Subjects, Power, and Knowledge,” 111.

convergence and shared experience are gleaned as well as areas in which *àjé* experience is individualized or divergent. Each account adds to our understanding of how *àjé* is perceived and experienced.

The individual anecdotes enrich the corpus of stories about women's spiritual power and its perception. This enrichment is significant. As stated in Braud and Anderson:

Within the feminist, organic, and narrative approaches to research is a common emphasis on hearing and honoring the voices of the other person, particularly the previously unempowered person or member of a previously unempowered group.²⁴³

Among other things, the stories of *àjé* add to those which draw attention to reactionary responses to women of power, particularly women who wield spiritual power.

Constructivism maintains that the understanding of the world we construct is based on our experiences.²⁴⁴ Therefore, an individual's attitude towards *àjé* is based on their experience of *àjé*. The invitation "Tell me your experience of *àjé*" is left open-ended. Experience is defined by the individual interviewed. It is left purposely vague to privilege the interviewee's voice, the interviewee's interpretation, opinion, judgment, and so forth.

²⁴³ Braud and Anderson, *Transpersonal Research Methods*, 47.

²⁴⁴ Wilson, *Research Is Ceremony*.

Interviewees

“The prior relationship or lack of it between the interviewer and respondent is one of the myriad contexts that precede and shape the interview encounter.”²⁴⁵

Without exception all individuals interviewed were either recent acquaintances or unknown to me before the time of the interview. Therefore, establishment of comfort and ease of communication was necessary to create a relaxed conversational space. Having a friendly, warm, and engaging manner facilitated this process as did showing attentive interest throughout the interview exchange.

Most interviews were planned a considerable time in advance. However, fortuitous serendipity also played a role. Individuals interviewed seem to have been chosen for me as much as by me. All individuals chosen for interview had knowledge of Yoruba traditional religion and *àjé*.

Requests for interviews with academics were generally made by formal application. For example, letters were written and emailed to four faculty members at Obafemi Awolowo University because of my planned 2009 visit to Ile-Ife. These were individuals with whose work I was familiar or the department with which they were affiliated bore relevance to the research topic.

One response was received and an interview request granted. I was informed that due to a strike at the university, most professors were not on hand and did not readily access their emails. It was basically a stroke of luck that the professor who granted me an interview came into his office and checked his email.

²⁴⁵ Warren, “Interview as Social Interaction,” 132.

On two occasions in the United States serendipity intervened to place me at cultural events attended by scholars kind enough to consent to spontaneous interviews. One person I had attempted to contact at the university where she taught and was told that she was out of the country.

Interviews conducted in Nigeria were preplanned or facilitated by introduction once I had arrived. Two priests (*babalawo*) with whom I was in contact before going to Nigeria, one in Lagos and the other in Ile-Ife, were interviewed. In addition, they facilitated interviews with three Yoruba women, one in Lagos and two in Ile-Ife.

While in Nigeria, I was introduced to an internationally known senior priestess of Oṣun whom I very much wanted to interview. She was agreeable to the interview; however, time and logistics conspired against us. Serendipity again intervened. In March 2010 I learned that she would be in Miami officiating at an initiation. I seized the opportunity.

Arriving at her location I was honored and humbled to be asked to take part in the initiation as a priestess of Oṣun.²⁴⁶ Exhausted and elated after the rituals, we were finally able to conduct the interview. While in Miami, I was also introduced to and able to interview a priest of Ṣango.

A breakdown of the individuals interviewed is outlined in Figure 2. Gender distribution was balanced—eight women and seven men. The majority of those interviewed were native Yoruba (9) and priests/priestesses (11). This skewing

²⁴⁶ I do not call myself a priestess. Rather, I state that I am an initiate of Oṣun. There is much knowledge and experience that I would need to acquire before being comfortable with the title of priestess. However, in this context and under the guidance of a senior priestess of Oṣun, I performed duties of a priestess.

was intentional because of the cultural knowledge and expertise of these two groups in relation to the dissertation topic.

| | Female | | Male | |
|--------------|----------|--------|--------------|--|
| Yoruba | 4 | | 5 | |
| Non-Yoruba | 4 | | 2 | |
| | Academic | Priest | Practitioner | |
| Academic | 1 | 3 | 2 | |
| Priest | – | 8 | – | |
| Practitioner | – | – | 1 | |
| | Academic | Priest | Practitioner | |
| Yoruba | 2 | 6 | 2 | |
| Non-Yoruba | 4 | 5 | 1 | |

Figure 2. Interview demographics, sorted by gender, role, and ethnic origin.
Note. Author’s figure.

Academics, priests and priestesses of Yoruba traditional religion, and practitioners were interviewed. Therefore, all had “insider” or emic cultural knowledge. Roles often overlapped, as with interviewees who were both academics and practitioners or priests/priestesses of Yoruba traditional religion or its diaspora variants.

This cross-section of 15 individuals conversant with Yoruba cultural experience included those born in Yorubaland and those not born to the culture. Yoruba individuals could speak from their lived cultural and historic reality. Others spoke as adepts of Yoruba traditional religion as well as from personal encounters with the energy of *iyami àjé*.

A finer delineation than outlined in Figure 2 can be made to show the richness of perspectives obtained. For example, the academic disciplines represented included history, public policy, West African cultural studies, art history, organizational development, and Black studies. There was variation in marital status, race, occupation, and whether or not the interviewee had children.

More detailed delineations can be made. Suffice it to say the group was not mono-paradigmatic.

Each interview was begun in the same manner. Whether the individual seated with me was a non-academic or an academic, the interview began with the same invitation to share experience of *àjé*. Interviews with academics were among the most detailed. They had a wealth of knowledge and insights to share on the subject of *àjé* and women's power within Yoruba society.

Between academic treatise and historical facts are the stories in which one hears a personal cord being plucked and feels the emotional resonance that the speaker has with the subject. The information and perceptions received from the interviewees are interspersed throughout the dissertation. The anecdotal material is included in Chapter 11.

Interviews

Numerous elements combine to form the qualitative interview. For the interviewer these include interest in and knowledge of the topic as well as that individual's training and facility with the interview process. "For the respondents, they include the biographical and current features of their lives."²⁴⁷ Location and other logistical factors are also important and ethical considerations play a key role.

Over 500 minutes of interviews were conducted with 15 individuals in Nigeria and on the East and West Coasts of the United States. The majority of interviews were audiotaped and transcribed by me; hand-taken notes were used

²⁴⁷ Warren, "Interview as Social Interaction," 131.

in two cases. I entered the qualitative interview with open anticipation to whatever the individual wanted to share on the subject after the initial invitation was made: Tell me your experience of *âĳĕ*. Interviews vary considerably in time and depth. Some individuals shared extensively, others very briefly.

Some interviews were little more than brief conversations; four were 10 minutes or less. Other interviews were in-depth exchanges; four were one hour or longer. However, length of interview did not necessarily determine cogency of content. Shorter interviews often directly got to the heart of the topic and to an individual's experience of *âĳĕ*, whereas longer interviews often ranged into a variety of interesting but off-topic areas.

Interview location is subject to many considerations such as topic sensitivity, environmental distractions, the needs of the interviewer and interviewee, as well as the subjective meaning attributed to a location.²⁴⁸ The choice of location is a component of the "interview as a socially constructed, negotiated event."²⁴⁹

Because interviews were conducted in a variety of cities, I traveled to meet the interviewee and prioritized interviewee convenience. Interviews were also conducted in a variety of settings, generally in known and comfortable environments for interviewees such as their homes, the home of an acquaintance, or compound. Owing to logistical and time constraints, however, interviews were

²⁴⁸ Herzog, "Interview Location."

²⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 210.

also conducted in less than ideal settings such as a small, busy hotel lobby and a moving vehicle.

On the matter of ethics, before interviews could be conducted, a research review process was undergone and written approval obtained (Appendix C). Both written and oral consent forms were used with participants (Appendix D). “The notion of informed consent is grounded primarily on the principle of individual autonomy and secondarily on that of beneficence.”²⁵⁰ Transparency and accountability are also functions of informed consent, which can be a tool for establishing trust. Marzano points out that informed consent carries varied significance across cultures.

Most interviewees were not impressed by this aspect of the interview process. This lack of concern with signed consent was particularly evident in non-academic settings and underscored that “understanding the qualitative interview as social interaction is important.”²⁵¹ Trust was obtained not by requesting informed consent but because introductions were made by an individual trusted by the interviewee or I had an opportunity to informally interact with the interviewee, often in ritual space, for several hours before the interview.

The consent form specified that the name and personal information of the interviewee would be used as agreed upon. Because of the public nature of their work, the names of academic scholars interviewed and quoted are used throughout the dissertation. Though no one requested anonymity, I chose to

²⁵⁰ Marzano, “Informed Consent,” 443.

²⁵¹ Pezalla, Pettigrew, and Miller-Day, “Researching the Researcher-as-Instrument,” 166.

withhold all interviewee names in Chapter 11 where material of a more personal nature is shared. Additionally, two interviewees shared details and anecdotes with me that they asked be kept out of print. Of course, their wishes have been respected.

The end of the interview is generally signaled by the cessation of tape-recording or note taking. However, many interesting interactions can occur at this juncture.²⁵² Post-recording on two separate occasions, Nigerian male interviewees said to me that I was *àjé*. Neither asked if I thought or realized I was *àjé*; both told me that I was *àjé*. They said it casually, almost jokingly, but were sincere. The first time this occurred I was a little taken aback. However, I filed the comment in the context of our discussion as an accentuation of *àjé* as an innate faculty of women.

The second time the comment was made, several months later, gave me something to think about on my long drive home from the interview. I had almost forgotten about the first time the comment was made. As I drove I mentally reviewed both interviews. Both were with male Yoruba academics, the second of whom practiced Yoruba traditional religion and was clearly positive and passionate about the topic. He was bestowing a great compliment by calling me *àjé*, and I felt suitably honored.

As to what prompted them to say that they saw me as *àjé*, this I attributed to the quality of our interviews. Both interviews were characterized by an enjoyable, open, and extensive exchange. I got the impression (intuited) they

²⁵² Warren, "Interview as Social Interaction."

meant that they had happily extended the interview longer than was their initial intention and were attributing that fact to my *àjé*—women’s “spiritual leverage” according to the first interviewee, “a power that you cannot explain, and yet you defer to it.”

At this juncture, with time, distance, and this round of research completed, the comments resonate with the myriad ways *àjé* manifests in the world. “Research is all about unanswered questions, but it also reveals our unquestioned answers.”²⁵³ I entered the research knowing that the *àjé* were great, powerful, awesome beings. This is true. However, there is a wider truth that *àjé* is the power of the primordial feminine that touches us all but which is deeply seeded within women.

A woman does not have to be an *iyami àjé*, initiated to the secret society of *àjé*, or exhibit extraordinary or supernatural power to be considered *àjé*. As the interviews and research revealed, a woman’s *àjé* manifests both in small, personal ways, and in wider contexts such as women who are priestesses or who wield political, economic, and spiritual power and whose actions are socially impactful.

Note on Scholarly Interviews

As stated I spoke with academic scholars of Yoruba history and philosophy and extended to them the same invitation: Tell me your experience of *àjé*. This approach was taken for two reasons. First, several of the scholars are native Yoruba and/or practitioners of Yoruba traditional religion. Second, I did not

²⁵³ Wilson, *Research Is Ceremony*, 6.

want to dichotomize the realms of scholarship and personal encounter. This dichotomy would be artificial. Just as the “personal is political,”²⁵⁴ the personal is also pedagogical.

Research and scholarship are personal (subjective) encounters with the apparent “object” of study. In referring to the relationship between text and individual, Paulo Freire states:

We must equally avoid other fears that *scientism* has instilled in us. For example, there is the fear that our emotions, our desires, may ruin our objectivity. Whatever I know I know with my entire self: with my critical mind but also with my feelings, with my intuitions, with my emotions.²⁵⁵

That being said, though given the same opening invitation, scholars did have a general tendency to provide information on Yoruba socio-cultural history. However, woven within this information were rich veins of personal observation, critique, and experience. Academic segments of these qualitative interviews are quoted in the dissertation as appropriate.

Summary

The methodological framework of the dissertation is transdisciplinarity. Subsumed within this framework are several methodological approaches, the synthesis of which leads to broadened perspectives and an enriched understanding of one’s subject. Because of the multidimensionality of *àjé* and its complex web of relationships in Yoruba culture, several approaches are employed within the dissertation. These include hermeneutics, historiography, critical theory

²⁵⁴ There is some controversy about the origin of this phrase. Shapiro’s *The Yale Book of Quotations* attributes the phrase to Carol Hanisch.

²⁵⁵ Freire, *Teachers as Cultural Workers*, 29-30.

(feminist theory and women's spirituality, postcolonial and indigenous perspectives, spiritual activism), and qualitative interviews. With synthesis the whole becomes greater than the sum of its parts.

Patricia Hills Collins draws on several perspectives in speaking to the complex interconnections of race, class, and gender in the lives of Black women. She lists "Afrocentric philosophy, feminist theory, Marxist social thought, the sociology of knowledge, critical theory, and post-modernism."²⁵⁶ With regard to the transdisciplinary nature of her work she states: "The standard vocabulary of these traditions...and these terms themselves rarely appear in the text."²⁵⁷

Likewise, rarely in the following chapters of the dissertation is specific reference made to the perspectives employed. I wholeheartedly agree with Patricia Hill Collins when she states: "To me the ideas themselves are important, not the labels we attach to them."²⁵⁸

Though the research material is interpreted and the dissertation written using my lens and particular viewpoints, readers also bring their frames of reference to a work. Therefore, each reader extracts meaning in keeping with his or her own reality. Readers in this sense rework the text. Riessman states that "collaboration is inevitable because the reader is an agent of the text."²⁵⁹

²⁵⁶ Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*, vii.

²⁵⁷ Ibid.

²⁵⁸ Ibid.

²⁵⁹ Riessman, *Narrative Analysis*, 14.

Therefore, it is suggested that the reader make this work the launching point for deeper understanding of *àjé*, “our mothers.” Find and critique the sins of omission, then fill the lacunae with research and personal knowledge. It must be kept in mind that the conclusions drawn in research:

can only ever be held tentatively since, in contrast to dogma, they must be held open to revision as a result of further observations or shifts in the conceptual framework in which they are located.²⁶⁰

Àjé calls on each of us to bring our talents and abilities into the world.

²⁶⁰ Harding, “Evaluation of Scientific Work,” 521.

CHAPTER 3: HISTORIOGRAPHY I

YORUBA ORIGINS AND ILE-IFE

“The Yoruba are not ruled by timeless traditions, but—like any people—have, make, and write their own history in different idioms and registers and from multiple perspectives.”²⁶¹

Historiography includes the myriad ways in which history is told. Jacob Olupona uses the expression mythistory,²⁶² an evident contraction of mythology and history, to denote their often unclear distinction. Furthermore, “these terms are also relative, for what one ideology defines as myth another will term history.”²⁶³ Among subaltern peoples much of their unofficial history is transmitted through folktales, songs, myth, ceremony, and ritual. This type of historical transmittal is paralleled among the Yoruba.

Lacking written records, there are sources from which a people’s history can be gleaned. Archaeological evidence and oral traditions are two such avenues of information. Both have yielded rich veins of research and findings on Yoruba history and culture and are examined in turn. However, before proceeding, the complex area of oral tradition needs some expansion.

Yoruba historian S. O. Biobaku delineates the aspects of oral tradition helpful in fostering an understanding of the Yoruba past. These include ritual, historical reenactment, place names, oriki (praise names/sacred poetry), myths and legends. He stresses the importance of the meticulously trained “professional

²⁶¹ Apter, *Black Critics and Kings*, 1.

²⁶² Olupona, “Òrìṣà Òṣun,” 48.

²⁶³ Washington, *Our Mothers*, 288 n. 7.

oral historians” found at palace courts. It is the duty of those in this primarily hereditary position to “Chant praise-poems and recite dynastic lists with consummate skill.”²⁶⁴

The reliability of oral literature in the reconstruction of history is much debated. Ritualized retelling and ritual reenactments are considered more reliable because of their formalized and cyclical nature.²⁶⁵ These forms are a “cyclical return to the original historical event.”²⁶⁶ A time-honored structure is followed generation after generation with little tolerance for deviation from the established protocol and central elements or themes. This reenactment occurs on a regular basis, usually at annual festivals.

Two caveats are offered by Biobaku on the use of oral tradition. Affixing of dates to events and reigns is of extreme difficulty, if not impossibility. If a time reference is given at all, it is usually the frustratingly vague “long ago.”²⁶⁷ Jan Vansina asserts that “the lack of reliable chronology...in oral traditions remains one of its most severe limitations.”²⁶⁸

In addition to the difficulty of ascribing time to the events in a myth, it is a challenge to ascertain when and under what circumstances a myth came into being. The second, and more critical, caveat is that “memory inevitably selects,

²⁶⁴ Biobaku, “Use and Interpretation of Myths,” 13.

²⁶⁵ Vansina, *Oral Tradition: A Study*.

²⁶⁶ Teish, *Carnival of the Spirit*, 187.

²⁶⁷ Biobaku, “Use and Interpretation of Myths,” 16.

²⁶⁸ Vansina, *Oral Tradition as History*, 185.

and sometimes falsifies, the past in order to serve personal ambition or political ends.”²⁶⁹

First to be introduced are the archaeological findings regarding establishment of Yoruba settlements and dispersion of the culture as well as some generally accepted historical facts. After this Yoruba myths of origin are presented. Within these the truth of Biobaku’s second caveat becomes evident.

As Ulli Beier states:

Tour de force historical interpretations of Yoruba oral traditions are very common among Yoruba people, who exploit mythology and other forms of oral tradition to authenticate a de facto political situation.²⁷⁰

Deconstructions of these myths of origin have been undertaken by several scholars, some of which are reviewed. Of particular relevance to the present work, is the place of women and their power within Yoruba myths and legends.

Archaeological and Historical Findings

Archeological finds in Yorubaland attest to its habitation during the Upper Paleolithic period. Objects found at the rock shelter, Iwo Eleru, located 15 miles northwest of Akure, the capital of Ondo state, have been radiocarbon-dated to as far back as 11,000 BCE.²⁷¹ Excavation at Ile-Ife has unearthed objects dating to 560 CE²⁷² attesting to early habitation. The same source dates Ife’s rise to power from 900 CE.

²⁶⁹ Ibid., 16.

²⁷⁰ Beier, *Yoruba Myths*, 81.

²⁷¹ Shaw and Jameson, *Dictionary of Archaeology*, 314.

²⁷² Ibid., 296.

The year of Yoruba migration into Ile-Ife is unclear. However, what is clear is that by the twelfth century Ife had long been a centralized state and had become a regional power “holding regional dominance between the twelfth and fifteenth centuries,”²⁷³ after which it was eclipsed politically and economically by the Oyo empire.

While Ile-Ife was the first centralized state in the region, the ruler (*oni*) did not exert direct political influence outside of Ile-Ife. “Rather, the *ooni* served as a spiritual leader for other communities, a reference point for religious and ritual matters.”²⁷⁴ The legitimacy of the monarchs (*obas*) who wielded political authority within their respective communities was dependent upon their lineal connection to Ife. The spiritual authority of Ife was such that it had no need of an army. Even when Oyo became politically dominant, its rulers continued “to offer tribute to Ife in recognition of the divine authority that the city and its leaders possessed.”²⁷⁵

African historian and Yoruba scholar Robin Law sees the oft-touted relationship between Ife and Oyo in a critical light.

The common theory that the Oyo and Ife claims to paramountcy [sic] were complimentary, the *Oni* being the religious and the *Alafin* the political head of Yorubaland, is a modern fiction, the result of an attempt to harmonize contradictory evidence attributing the same sort of authority to two different rulers.²⁷⁶

²⁷³ Falola and Heaton, *A History of Nigeria*, 24.

²⁷⁴ Ibid.

²⁷⁵ Ibid.

²⁷⁶ Law, “The Oyo Empire,” 123.

The famed “naturalistic” bronze heads and terracotta sculptures of Ife were first unearthed from the Olokun grove by Leo Frobenius in 1910–1911 with subsequent finds throughout Ife. They date from 1190–1470 CE along with the tubular blue glass beads or *segi*, manufactured uniquely in Ife, and that form an important component of the monarch’s beaded crown.²⁷⁷ There is also evidence of terracotta and stone artwork predating the twelfth century.²⁷⁸

Regional Autochthones

That Yoruba influence was felt by many indigenous peoples of the region is evidenced. “In Ilesa, Ekiti and Ondo there are numerous myths and rites referring to the autochones.”²⁷⁹ Unfortunately, there is some indication that the original inhabitants were treated as slaves or worse by their conquerors. As recorded by Johnson, the Ife used the people of Ilesa for human sacrifices, treating them akin to livestock. Their name, Ijesa, is taken to be a contraction of *Ije oriṣa*, meaning “food of the gods.”²⁸⁰

Ijero is one of the oldest towns in Ekiti and its monarchy (Ajero) acknowledged as one of the most ancient. The Oloku is a priest living in a forest a few miles away from the town, who maintains that he was once the king of a town destroyed by the Ajero. Tradition has it that the Ajero must never meet with the Oloku.

²⁷⁷ Shaw and Jameson, *Dictionary of Archaeology*.

²⁷⁸ Obayemi, “Ancient Ile-Ife.”

²⁷⁹ Beier, “Before Oduduwa,” 152

²⁸⁰ S. Johnson, *History of the Yorubas*, 21.

Both the antiquity of the crown of the Ajero and the fact that Oloku does not know anything about Oduduwa [the Yoruba progenitor] indicate that the Oloku is very likely the descendant of aborigines.²⁸¹

One of several examples given for Ondo speaks of the small town of Oba situated four miles outside of Akure. When asked, the Oloba or king said that the Oba had always lived on that land. There is no migration myth associated with them, and the Oloba claims no lineage through Ife. According to the Oloba, *oriṣa* (Yoruba deities) are not worshipped by the people of Oba. Only the earth is worshipped. "The culture of Oba is unique, for this is the only Yorùbá town which officially worships the earth."²⁸²

Cults such as Ogboni recognize the power of the earth, and oaths made upon the earth carry the promise of death if broken or if the oath taker is untruthful. However, the earth or earth deity, Ile, is not generally worshipped as are *oriṣa*. Nonetheless, according to Beier, in the 1950s there were a few shrines in western Yorubaland where Oduduwa, perceived as a female divinity, was worshipped as earth.²⁸³ Intriguingly, "the Earth spirit is said to be as old as *Olorun* (another name for Olódùmaré), and not one of his subjects."²⁸⁴

Ile-Ife Regional Influence

The Edo encountered on the east by the Yoruba comprise the Kingdom of Benin. Well known for the Benin Bronzes, the Kingdom of Benin is believed to

²⁸¹ Beier, "Before Oduduwa," 153.

²⁸² Ibid., 154.

²⁸³ Beier, "Historical and Psychological Significance," 27

²⁸⁴ Cortez, *The Osha*, 89.

have risen to prominence in the tenth century, predating the rise of Ile-Ife. However, Benin's monarchical dynasty was overthrown in approximately 1300 CE due to misrule.²⁸⁵

Artistic motifs found in the excavations at Ile-Ife link it with Benin. Though unconfirmed by archeological evidence, local tradition holds "that as late as AD 1888 the heads of the Obas of Benin were brought for burial at Orun Oba Ado, in recognition of the fact that the dynasty sprang from there."²⁸⁶

According to popular stories, the last king of the mystical dynasty of the Ogiso reigning in Benin before the arrival of the Yoruba was dethroned following a revolt. He was replaced by a prince of Ife, named Oranmiyan... From that time, custom required that the oba of Benin be decapitated after his death, that his skull be sent to Ife for burial in the sacred enclosure (Orun Oba Ado) and that, in return, a brass commemorative head be sent to Benin, to be placed on the altar of the royal ancestors. At the end of the fourteenth century, the sixth oba, Oguola, is said to have suggested that a metal-caster from Ife come to Benin to teach his art.²⁸⁷

Yoruba and Edo myth indicate that the Edo had an early Yoruba ruler. At the behest of the people of Benin, the *oni* of Ife sent a king to rule. This monarch, Oduduwa, "had a son by an indigenous woman. The son, Eweka by name, became the first *oba* in the second Benin dynasty—the dynasty that continues to exist to the present day."²⁸⁸ This widely accepted version of Benin history is not undisputed, however.

²⁸⁵ Falola and Heaton, *A History of Nigeria*.

²⁸⁶ Shaw and Jameson, *Dictionary of Archaeology*, 297.

²⁸⁷ Ogot, *Africa*, 441.

²⁸⁸ Falola and Heaton, *A History of Nigeria*, 25.

At the 1984 University of Ibadan Conference, "The Evolution of Traditional Rulership in Nigeria," Benin Oba Erediauwa stated the claim for the Benin origin of Oduduwa, father of Oranmiyan. "The Benin say it was none other than the royal heir, Prince Ekaladerhan, who had become Oduduwa."²⁸⁹ If this statement is true, then the ancestral ruler of Ife and Oyo and the ruler from whom Yoruba kings claim their legitimacy is not a Yoruba. Writing in 1955, renowned Yoruba scholar and practitioner Ulli Beier states:

In fact, up to this day only the leading families in Benin villages derive themselves from 'Uhe' (Ife) while the broad mass of the population seems to make no such claim.²⁹⁰

Whether by early migration or military expansion, there is evidence of a Yoruba presence far west of Yorubaland. Though the Fon of Dahomey were overtaken and made a vassal of the Oyo Empire, there is some suggestion that "the Fon may themselves constitute an early wave of Yorùbá or kindred migration."²⁹¹ Additionally, there is "the tradition that the Yorùbá sway once extended as far as Ashanti and included the Gās of Accra, for the Gās say that their ancestors came from Ile-Ife," and the Gā language has more resonance with Yoruba than the local Fanti tongue.²⁹²

²⁸⁹ Kaplan, "Twice-Told Tales," 130.

²⁹⁰ Beier, "Before Oduduwa," 151.

²⁹¹ Ibid.

²⁹² S. Johnson, *History of the Yorubas*. 15.

Yoruba Unconnected to Ile-Ife

Though most Yoruba trace their mythic origin to Ile-Ife, “a large group of Yorubas in Dahomey...claim to have no connection with Ife.”²⁹³ It is theorized that during migration this group split off before the main body of Yoruba crossed the Niger. They, therefore, do not claim Oduduwa as progenitor. Even within Yorubaland one finds this sentiment.

The people of Idanre in Ondo province claim that on their move south, they left Oduduwa behind to found Ife, while Aremitan, the ancestor of the Idanre people, Airo, the founder of Ondo, and the king of Benin moved on.²⁹⁴

Myths of Origin

Myths of origin are a fundamental element in most cultures. “Yoruba traditions of genesis fall into two basic types: creation myths and myths of migration.”²⁹⁵ Transmitted orally over centuries, *Ifa* is the repository of Yoruba origin tales as well as Yoruba creation myths, praise-poetry, and parables.

Whether by migration or creation, the city of Ile-Ife is central to Yoruba origin tales. “Ile-Ifé: the first of creation here below; the original home of all things; the place from which the day dawns; the enchanted, holy city; the home of

²⁹³ Beier, “Before Oduduwa,” 150.

²⁹⁴ Ibid.

²⁹⁵ Apter, *Black Critics and Kings*, 15.

divinities and mysterious spirits!”²⁹⁶ To this day, Ile-Ife is considered the center of religious power in Yorubaland.²⁹⁷

Numerous mythistorical tales (*itan*) are contained in *Ifa*. “According to the Yorùbá, the *Ifá* corpus is the most comprehensive and authoritative body of knowledge about their people, genealogy, history, belief systems, and philosophy.”²⁹⁸ Within Yoruba mythology one often finds conflicting myths. Though frustrating if looking for the one definitive version or true rendering of events, the contradiction reflects what is not only a near inevitability within oral tradition, but also the Yoruba comfort with ambiguity and ambivalence.

According to Ulli Beier, owing to “their all-embracing, all-encompassing view of life, they [the Yoruba] can accept apparently contradictory interpretations of life and history as ‘parallel truths,’ each retaining its own validity in different contexts,” each validating a particular perspective or political claim. Thus, it is seen that the Yoruba progenitor Oduduwa has contradictory manifestations—one related to the migration myth and another to the myth of creation. These manifestations are in addition to Oduduwa’s appearance as a female divinity worshipped as earth in some parts of western Yorubaland.²⁹⁹

Near the palace in Ile-Ife are closely situated shrines of Obatala and Oduduwa. In conversation with Yoruba spiritualist Samuel Opeola, he states that

²⁹⁶ Idowu, *Olódùmarè*, 11.

²⁹⁷ Lawson, *Religions in Africa*.

²⁹⁸ Badejo, *Ọ̀sun Şẹ̀ẹ̀gẹ̀sì*, 2.

²⁹⁹ Beier, “Historical and Psychological Significance,” 27.

if a person goes to the Oduduwa shrine “and you talk of Obatala as a man, they will think you are mad...On the right there is the Obatala shrine...And you get there and you say Oduduwa is a man, they will almost behead one.”³⁰⁰

Tales of Migration

The term Yoruba came into common use during the nineteenth century and is said to be borrowed from the Hausa term, *Yarriba*, used to describe their southern neighbors as “cunning.”³⁰¹ Until that time, “Yoruba or Yoba was a name reserved to the Oyo peoples.”³⁰² It is claimed that the Church Missionary Society instituted use of the term Yoruba to describe the region because it wanted one name under which to group all the tribes of the area and that many tribes objected to the being called Yoruba.³⁰³

One interesting, but unsubstantiated, claim is that the Yoruba had migrated to and settled in “Arabia” but were driven out by religious intolerance for their lapse into paganism. They then migrated into Africa and established themselves at “Yarba, their first permanent settlement in Africa. Yarba is the same as the Hausa term *Yarriba* for Yorùbá.”³⁰⁴

³⁰⁰ Samuel Modupeola Opeola, interview with the author, September 27, 2009, Ile-Ife, Nigeria.

³⁰¹ Bascom, *Yoruba of Southwestern Nigeria*, 5.

³⁰² Biobaku, *Origin of the Yorubas*, 9.

³⁰³ M. Oduyoye, *Christianity in Yorubaland*.

³⁰⁴ S. Johnson, *History of the Yorubas*, 6.

There is no doubt that the Yoruba are not the original inhabitants of the land they occupy. However, it is difficult to ascertain the exact origins of the Yoruba. Migration is said to have occurred from the east. Whether this “east” is Mecca, Egypt, the Sudan or all three is open to debate. There is even speculation concerning Yoruba links to the ancient Phoenicians and Etruscans, much of this based on the engravings and art found at Ile-Ife.³⁰⁵ The staff of Oranmiyan, which he is purported to have carried to war³⁰⁶ and which is said to mark the grave of this son or grandson of Oduduwa and Yoruba ruler of the Edo in Benin, is one such artifact.³⁰⁷

Whatever the case may be, the people today regarded as the Yoruba are understood to be the descendants of groups that migrated into the region over a protracted period. Migration has been speculated to as far back as 2000 BCE.³⁰⁸ Nonetheless, the first major migratory wave is thought to be associated with the seventh century Kisra Migration across and out of the Sudan. It is important to keep in mind that the Sudan of the seventh century was a broad expanse of African savanna, not the geopolitically defined country of today. After arriving in

³⁰⁵ Ibid.

³⁰⁶ Bascom, *Yoruba of Southwestern Nigeria*.

³⁰⁷ S. Johnson, *History of the Yorubas*.

³⁰⁸ Talbot, *Peoples of Southern Nigeria*.

northeastern Nigeria and traveling along the Benue River, one migratory branch went south while a second branch continued westward to Borgu.³⁰⁹

What is believed to be the consequential Yoruba migration is dated three centuries later. There is historical evidence that the influx of Arab tribes into the Sudan and the imposition of Islam as a conquering faith forced non-adherents to flee. "It is more than probable that the major Yoruba migration which might be styled the Oduduwa migration took place at this time, i.e., towards the end of the tenth century A.D."³¹⁰ This version of events would seem to corroborate the migration tale wherein Oduduwa's father, King Lamurudu, was killed in a war of religion. His forces were vanquished. Prince Oduduwa and the followers of idolatry were obliged to flee.³¹¹

An interesting side note is that the ruling families among the Borgu, Nupe, and Yoruba are attributed to in-migration with much conjecture about a Meroic and Egyptian connection. One wonders at the similarities between Egyptian and Yoruba culture that would lead to speculation of a direct lineal connection.³¹² This form of speculation is not without its detractors, however. Idowu bemoans that researchers found such linkage "so attractive that it has become impossible for

³⁰⁹ Biobaku, *Origin of the Yorubas*.

³¹⁰ Ibid., 24-25.

³¹¹ S. Johnson, *History of the Yorubas*.

³¹² For example: Lucas, *Religion of the Yorubas*; Talbot, *Peoples of Southern Nigeria*.

them to think even of the breath of our nostrils without going all the way to Egypt for its source!”³¹³

Though a widespread cross-cultural occurrence, Yoruba and Egyptian rulers trace their lineage and legitimacy to deity. Pharaohs were seen as the embodiment of Ra “the ruler of the heavens, the celestial counterpart of Pharaoh, who lived upon Truth and judged the dead.”³¹⁴ They are also considered blood descendants of the god. Yoruba rulers who trace their lineage from Oduduwa and Oranmiyan make similar claim. Arguably, sacred kingship was most visibly embodied in the Oyo *alafin* who “also claimed descent from Sango...the god of thunder, further mystifying the office of *alafin* and connecting it to the realm of the gods.”³¹⁵

Ra judged the dead, and the Yoruba paramount ruler holds the power of life and death. The monarch’s investiture is not complete until he receives the sacred sword from Ife. “The sword symbolizes the right to execute criminals and thus the right to rule as king.”³¹⁶ Yoruba rulers entitled to wear the beaded, fringed crown are also seen as embodiments of deity. “Their rites of installation elevate them to a sacred status.”³¹⁷ Robert Farris Thompson states:

³¹³ Idowu, *Olódùmarè*, 3.

³¹⁴ H. W. Smith, *Man and His Gods*, chap. 1, sec. 5, par. 2.

³¹⁵ Falola and Heaton, *A History of Nigeria*, 49.

³¹⁶ Bascom, *Yoruba of Southwestern Nigeria*, 83-84.

³¹⁷ M. T. Drewal, *Yoruba Ritual*, 45.

Yorùbá kings provide the highest link between the people, the ancestors, and the gods. Their relation to the Creator is given in the praise poem *Oba alashe ekeji orisha*, "The king, as master of *àshe*, becomes the second of the gods."³¹⁸

The fringed crown covers their faces because it is considered dangerous to look upon the face of the divine. In addition, Yoruba kings' claim to legitimacy is through tracing their ancestry to Oduduwa, the mythic founder of Ife or the creator of the world.³¹⁹

The Egyptian king was considered the chief priest of all cults, though he distributed his authority and responsibilities among court priests. The Yoruba ruler is also a priest-king, who presides over major shrines, sacred objects, rites and key festivals that ensure the well-being of his people, particularly the land's fertility and the people's abundance.³²⁰

It is striking to find that a similar form of burial to that employed in Old Kingdom Egypt (3400–2474 BCE) for the Pharaohs was employed for the *alafin*, king of the Oyo Empire during its two century dominance of Yoruba territory. Archeological finds from Egypt's Old Kingdom indicate that immolation was practiced. Pharaohs were entombed in a necropolis along with wives, officials and servants who were to accompany them into the afterlife, thus, according replication and continuation of their earthly existence.³²¹

³¹⁸ Thompson, *Flash of the Spirit*, 7.

³¹⁹ S. Johnson, *History of the Yorubas*.

³²⁰ Matory, *Sex and the Empire*.

³²¹ H. W. Smith, *Man and His Gods*.

At the burial of the Oyo Yoruba *alafin*, the monarch is entombed in the royal mausoleum or *barà*. "Four women each at the head and at the feet, two boys on the right and on the left, were usually buried in the same grave with the dead monarch to be his attendants in the other world."³²² While archeological evidence indicates that the practice of immolation died out during Egypt's Middle Kingdom, among the Yoruba, immolation was practiced up to the latter part of the nineteenth century.³²³ Under the terms of various agreements and treaties with the British, human sacrifice was officially abolished in 1893.³²⁴

Tradition states that Oduduwa entered Ife from the east and there established his kingdom. His sons and grandsons set off in all directions from Ife to found their own dynasties giving rise to the kingdoms of Yorubaland. Oduduwa's 16 sons and grandsons and their respective kingdoms are the lineage through which subsequent kings claim the right to wear the beaded crown, the foremost symbol of kingship. For someone not of this lineage to wear a beaded crown was seen as a grave offense.³²⁵

A rather elaborate migration tale situates the Yoruba as descendants of Canaanites. Hugh Clapperton, part of the 1822 expedition of the first Europeans to see Lake Chad and an early explorer of western and northern Nigeria, was told and/or transcribed a tale of Yoruba descent from the tribe of Nimrod by Fulani

³²² S. Johnson, *History of the Yorubas*, 55.

³²³ Peel, *Religious Encounter*.

³²⁴ S. Johnson, *History of the Yorubas*.

³²⁵ *Ibid.*

Sultan Muhammed Bello of Sokoto, the son of Usman dan Fodio, founder of the Sokoto Caliphate.³²⁶ This group was ejected from their home territory and migrated to their present location in West Africa, leaving their people and culture at numerous sites along the way, notably in the Sudan.³²⁷

What seems clear from scant records is that there were a series of migration waves into what is now Yorubaland. The Yoruba of Ile-Ife, in particular, are considered late arrivals.

The Yoruba and similar migrations usually represented the latest arrivals and penetrated the areas quickly. In doing this they either pushed their predecessors farther and farther into one corner or, as was more usual, absorbed them into their new communities.³²⁸

Leaving the possible migratory paths of the Yoruba, attention now turns to Yoruba tales of creation. Several variants of the myth exist. Variations often offer historical rationales to explain divergences as shall be seen. Within a broader context one might say this variance is no different than the arguments between scientists and religionists over the most widely referenced western creation myth. Indeed, "no religion in the world has a single theological interpretation of essential beliefs which is accepted by all of its members."³²⁹

³²⁶ Bascom, *Yoruba of Southwestern Nigeria*; Biobaku, *Origin of the Yorubas*, S. Johnson, *History of the Yorubas*.

³²⁷ S. Johnson, *History of the Yorubas*.

³²⁸ Biobaku, *Origin of the Yorubas*, 25.

³²⁹ Fatunmbi, *Ifá Proverbs*, 203.

Tales of Creation

There are several renderings of the Yoruba story of creation. Although details vary in each, the fundamental elements are consistent. Olodumare, for whom another familiar name is Olorun, is commonly considered the Yoruba overarching deity, considered an eternal being. “Olódùmaré is the origin and ground of all that is”³³⁰ responsible for the creation of the *oriṣa*. It is this Supreme Being who authorized creation of land upon the watery expanse of Earth.

The main tools provided for this task were a portion of soil, a bird, and a chain for descent from heaven. While suspended from the chain, the soil is spilled upon the water. The bird is then placed on top of the soil; as it begins to scratch and spread the soil, solid land is formed.³³¹

Depending on the telling, the soil is stored in a snail shell, a piece of cloth, or wrapped in leaf. The bird is a five-toed hen, a pigeon, or a rooster. Some tales make mention of the bag in which the tools are stored. In one tale, a secreted helper inside the bag assists with creation. Ogun, the deity associated with iron and ironsmiths, is generally identified as the chain’s forger. Often a chameleon is used to test the solidity of the land’s surface. The initial work of creation was undertaken at Ile-Ife.³³²

³³⁰ Idowu, *Olódùmarè*, 18.

³³¹ For example: Bascom, *Yoruba of Southwestern Nigeria*; Beier, *Yoruba Myths*; Biobaku, *Origin of the Yorubas*; Idowu, *Olódùmarè*; *Odu Ifa* Okanran-Eguntan (186) as found in Epega and Neimark, *Sacred Ifa Oracle*.

³³² Ibid.

There are tales attributing creation of solid earth to Oriṣa'nla, Oduduwa, Oranmiyan, or Orunmila. An intriguing synthesis of migration and creation tales is found in Albert Ellis' 1894 work on Yoruba culture.³³³ Under primary consideration in this chapter are tales pertaining to Oriṣa'nla and Oduduwa. Versions of the tale of creation are found in numerous sources.³³⁴ First to be encountered is Oriṣa'nla as creator.

Oriṣa'nla

Oriṣa'nla is the Yoruba deity to whom the attributes of clarity, coolness and “the idea of ritual and ethical purity”³³⁵ are ascribed. These attributes are attested to by another name associated with this deity—Obatala, which has for its interpretation “Lord of the White Cloth”³³⁶ or “King in white clothing.”³³⁷ Another indication of his stature is that the creation of human form is attributed to Oriṣa'nla, who was given the commission by Olodumare, generally considered the overarching Yoruba deity.³³⁸

However, before this (or after, depending on the reading), Oriṣa'nla is said to have created the land and founded Ile-Ife. Idowu recounts the tale as follows:

³³³ Ellis, *Yoruba-Speaking Peoples*, 89-92.

³³⁴ For example: Bascom, *Yoruba of Southwestern Nigeria*; Beier, *Yoruba Myths*; Biobaku, *Origin of the Yorubas*; Idowu, *Olódùmarè*; Odu Ifa Okanran-Eguntan (186) as found in Epega and Neimark, *Sacred Ifa Oracle*.

³³⁵ Idowu, *Olódùmarè*, 73.

³³⁶ Ellis, *Yoruba-Speaking Peoples*, 38.

³³⁷ Idowu, *Olódùmarè*, 71.

³³⁸ *Ibid.*

What moved Olódùmaré to think of creating the solid earth, no one knows...He summoned Oriṣà-nlá...He gave him a leaf packet of loose earth (some say that the loose earth was in a snail's shell), and for tools a five-toed hen and a pigeon. When Oriṣà-nlá arrived, he threw the loose earth on a suitable spot on the watery waste. Then he let loose the hen and the pigeon; and these immediately began the work of scattering and spreading the loose earth. This they did until a great portion of the waste was covered... Oriṣà-nlá went back and reported to Olódùmaré that the work had been accomplished. Whereupon, Olódùmaré dispatched the chameleon to go down and inspect what had been done...The sacred spot where the work began was named Ifẹ.³³⁹

When Obatala was coming to Earth to perform the work of creation, Olodumare bestowed a portion of his attributes upon Obatala. "What he gave him is called *Odù*. In this case it means an endowed attribute of supreme authority to speak and act and be implicitly obeyed."³⁴⁰

Oduduwa

Samuel Johnson's early and sweeping writing of Yoruba history succinctly states that according to myth, "Oduduwa was sent by Olodumare from heaven to create the earth."³⁴¹ No mention is made of Oriṣa'nla as an agent of creation. Ulli Beier expands the telling of the tale:

Another Yoruba story relates that Oduduwa descended from heaven and found that everything was water. He placed a handful of earth on the water and a cock on top of it. Immediately the cock began to scratch and the land was thus spread over a wide area.³⁴²

³³⁹ Ibid., 19-20.

³⁴⁰ Ibid., 72.

³⁴¹ S. Johnson, *History of the Yorubas*, 143.

³⁴² Beier, "Historical and Psychological Significance," 18. See also Beier, *Yoruba Myths*.

Oduduwa's identify is a matter of some intrigue. There appears to be general agreement that the historical personage with whom the name is identified was the leader of a group that migrated into Ile-Ife and that comprise "the nucleus of a strand of the present Yoruba race." Upon arrival in Ife, the Oduduwa group encountered the autochthonous inhabitants whose leader was Oreluere, and whose tutelary divinity was Oriṣa'nla.³⁴³

These autochthones are mythologized as having been created in heaven in anticipation of populating the land at Ife. "Ọrẹ̀lúéré, one of the beings who had been prepared beforehand, was commissioned to lead a party of those beings down to earth."³⁴⁴ This precision cements the point that Oduduwa was of foreign origin.

In a popular variant of the creation myth, Obatala is given the commission to create land but does not carry it out. It is left to Oduduwa. This variation of the creation tale is an evident conflation of the Obatala and Oduduwa myths. In this version of the creation tale, recounted by Idowu, Beier and others, Obatala become intoxicated on palm wine before undertaking his mandate³⁴⁵.

While he was sleeping, Oduduwa took the tools of creation and accomplished the task.³⁴⁶ This variant, while recognizing the stature of Oriṣa'nla as the deity who receives the mandate from Olodumare, gives the deity a moral

³⁴³ Idowu, *Olódùmarè*, 23.

³⁴⁴ Ibid., 20.

³⁴⁵ See Idowu, *Olódùmarè*; Beier, *Yoruba Myths*; and Washington, *Our Mothers*.

³⁴⁶ Idowu, *Olódùmarè*, 18-29.

failing while making a hero of the invading deity. Oduduwa, therefore, is seen by many scholars as a usurper of Obatala's rightful position as creator of the land.

Deconstructing the Tales of Creation

Nla is a Yoruba adjective meaning "great."³⁴⁷ Oriṣa'nla is, therefore, the Great Oriṣa. His antiquity and seniority are such that he is regarded as the father of the Yoruba deities from whom they received the collective name of *oriṣa*.³⁴⁸ He occupies a venerable position. "Yoruba theogony, besides emphasizing that Oriṣà-nlá is the offspring of Olódùmarè, claims also that he is Olódùmarè's vicegerent here on earth."³⁴⁹ Oriṣa'nla is also "regarded as a co-worker with Ọlọrun." The human forms created by Oriṣa'nla were given the breath of life by Olodumare.³⁵⁰

The second tale of creation, wherein Oduduwa is creator is spoken of by Ulli Beier, who maintains that:

Having established their military superiority over the autochthons, the invaders then proceeded to legitimize their claim to the conquered land by creating a myth, which says that their divine ancestor Oduduwa was the *creator of the land*.³⁵¹

³⁴⁷ Crowther, *Yoruba Language*, 204.

³⁴⁸ Idowu, *Olódùmarè*.

³⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 73.

³⁵⁰ S. Johnson, *History of the Yorubas*, 27.

³⁵¹ Beier, "Historical and Psychological Significance," 25.

Beier further states that the Ugbo, from whom the Yoruba conquered this territory, have the identical myth about their ancestor. Thus showing how myths are usurped by conquering peoples to legitimize hegemony.

Oduduwa is believed to be the leader of a group that migrated into or invaded Ife sometime in the eleventh or twelfth century CE.³⁵² However, it is believed that Oduduwa was not the name of this leader but rather, the name of his deity.³⁵³ Upon entering Ife, battle for control of the land ensued between the invaders and the autochthonous Ugbo population, whose deity was Obatala. According to several scholars³⁵⁴ this historic battle is mythologized in the Ife tale of creation featuring Oduduwa and Obatala and reenacted during the annual Obatala festival in Ife.³⁵⁵

The Oodua-Obatala legends, the Igbo-Ife rivalries...answer unequivocally in favour of the "imposition of a new order from outside," of Oodua...encroaching upon, overthrowing and being resisted by the bearers of the indigenous culture...under the leadership of Obatala. Dynastic Ile-Ife was the fusion, the compromise of the two.³⁵⁶

The combined myth noted above is the likely result of this fusion. As the invaders intermarried and bore children with the autochthonous population, these "later generations who belong to both worlds found it not impossible to accept

³⁵² Obayemi, "Ancient Ile-Ife."

³⁵³ Idowu, *Olódùmarè*.

³⁵⁴ For example: Apter, *Black Critics and Kings*; Beier, "Historical and Psychological Significance"; Obayemi, "Ancient Ile-Ife."

³⁵⁵ Lawal, *Gẹ̀lẹ̀dẹ̀ Spectacle*.

³⁵⁶ Obayemi, "Ancient Ile-Ife," 171.

both versions of the story about the agent of creation and make a conflation of them.”³⁵⁷ Throughout *Odu Ifa* reference is made to the original inhabitants of Ife, the Igbomekun.³⁵⁸

Although it is speculated that the worship of Obatala was initially suppressed,³⁵⁹ marriage alliances undoubtedly introduced Obatala into the palace. Upon the death of Oduduwa his son, Obalufon I, reigned.

There is some evidence that the deity Obatala (the God of the autochthonous people—and presumably of Obalufon I’s mother) may have been made a state deity around that time.³⁶⁰

Elevation of Obatala to the status of state deity was possibly done to alleviate factional violence for rulership. In fact, Apter suggests that “the struggle between Oduduwa and Obatala may well refer to a dispute over the kingship in Ife between two rival factions...in which ‘Obatala’ may have solicited Igbo support.”³⁶¹

Although Obatala was defeated, he regained spiritual and cult preeminence. One manifestation of this ascendancy is that Oyo myths speak of contested primacy between Obatala and Şango, the major Oyo deity.³⁶² As well, royal

³⁵⁷ Idowu, *Olódùmarè*, 26-27.

³⁵⁸ Bascom, *Ifa Divination* (For example, in Oyeku-Owonrin and Ofun-Irosun).

³⁵⁹ Awolalu, *Yoruba Beliefs*.

³⁶⁰ Blier, “Kings, Crowns, and Rights,” 387 n. 21.

³⁶¹ Apter, *Black Critics and Kings*, 231 n. 25.

³⁶² Apter, *Black Critics and Kings*.

coronations take place in Obatala's temple at Ile-Ife,³⁶³ and "it is through him that authority to be and to rule passes to all Yoruba kings whose scepters derive from Ile-Ife."³⁶⁴

Oranmiyan

A third version of the creation tale is worth mention. Here, Oranmiyan (Oranyan)³⁶⁵ the grandson of Oduduwa is credited with creation of the land. In what Apter terms an "Oyo-centric"³⁶⁶ vision of Yoruba history, Johnson privileges the mythical account of Oranmiyan as creator of land over which he then held dominion. The most famous of Oduduwa's progeny, Oranmiyan became king. However, he left Ife on a quest, ostensibly to avenge the death of his great-grand father, Lamurudu.³⁶⁷

Oranmiyan is most revered as the founder of Oyo—called "the father of all Oyos...and was the universal conqueror of the land."³⁶⁸ He was father of Ọsango, the famed Yoruba ruler and deified ancestor. This politically motivated modification of myth is explained as follows:

³⁶³ Blier, "Kings, Crowns, and Rights."

³⁶⁴ Idowu, *Olódùmarè*, 28.

³⁶⁵ S. Johnson purports that this was a nickname, "his proper name being Ọdẹde" (10).

³⁶⁶ Apter, *Black Critics and Kings*, 19.

³⁶⁷ S. Johnson, *History of the Yorubas*.

³⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 148.

Now Ọrānyan is the forefather of the Ọyọ people and, by ascribing the creation of the earth to him, the Ọyọs were able to substantiate their claim to be the owners of the earth and therefore entitled to tribute from other Yoruba tribes.³⁶⁹

Biobaku substantiates this by attesting that “this myth accords...with the efforts by the Ọyọ to establish the supremacy of the Alāfin over other Yoruba Ọbas by making his ancestor the owner of the land.”³⁷⁰ Here the same patterns are seen of myth usurpation to support claims of hegemony.

Women in Yoruba Mythistory

In what is referred to as the Yoruba tale of the first creation of the world, Arugba, the “divine hand maiden”³⁷¹ of Olodumare, is the hand of creation. According to this account rendered by Şangode, Arugba is asked by Olodumare to convene the *orişa* for a special mission but not to tell them why Olodumare requests their presence. Because of Orunmila’s exceptional hospitality, Arugba tells him the reason for Olodumare summons and counsels him to request specific items to accomplish his task, including the accompaniment of Arugba.³⁷²

Unbeknownst to the other *orişa*, Arugba is hidden inside Orunmila’s bag, *Akpominijekun*, and from there guides Orunmila in the creation of solid earth. The *orişa* are frustrated and perplexed when they encounter the watery expanse of Earth, not knowing how to move forward. From *Akpominijekun*, Arugba whispers

³⁶⁹ Beier, “Historical and Psychological Significance,” 20.

³⁷⁰ Biobaku, *Origin of the Yorubas*, 15.

³⁷¹ Şangode, *The Goddesses*, 93.

³⁷² *Ibid.*

to Orunmila to pour the soil from the transported snail shell upon the waters—land begins to form. Then she tells him to place the hen on the newly forming earth to disperse and enlarge the land surface. Finally, it is Arugba who instructs Orunmila to set the chameleon upon the land to test its firmness and thus suitability for the *oriṣa* to walk upon.^{373 374}

The Yoruba claimed territory through the process of conquest and assimilation. The original inhabitants of Ile-Ife were the Igbo or Ugbo, a term that means forest or bush, thus forest or bush dweller. Though the aboriginal Ugbo of Ife are said to have no connection with the Igbo of eastern Nigeria,³⁷⁵ it seems only natural to speculate that in the course of the violent invasion of their territory, the majority of aborigines might have been pushed eastward across the Niger.

As part of Yoruba oral history, there are several myths associated with the encounters between the migrating Yoruba and the indigenous occupants of the land. One myth tells of the defeat of the Ugbo by the warriors of Ife (Oduduwa group). The Ugbo perpetrated frequent raids against the inhabitants of Ife, appearing to them as fierce, unearthly beings. Recorded in several sources³⁷⁶

³⁷³ Ibid.

³⁷⁴ During the 14-day Oṣun festival in Oṣogbo, Nigeria, the Arugba is the young female virgin to whom is given the honor of carrying the sacred calabash and leading the procession down to the Òsun River, where sacrificial offerings are presented to Oṣun. Arugba is respected as an embodiment of Oṣun. (See: Badejo, *Òṣun Ṣẹ̀ẹ̀gẹ̀sí*, Olupona, “Òrìṣà Òṣun.”)

³⁷⁵ Beier, “Historical and Psychological Significance.”

³⁷⁶ See Blier, “Kings, Crowns, and Rights,” 388; S. Johnson, *History of the Yorubas*, 147-148.

including the 1937 Meko, Nigeria field notes of William Bascom,³⁷⁷ Moremi was a beautiful wife of the *oni*, Oranmiyan. She, allowed herself to be captured during one of these raids to learn the secret of the Ugbo's fierce intimidation tactic against the Ife.

The Ugbo king was enchanted with Moremi, made her his wife and shared the raiders' secret. Once the knowledge was acquired Moremi escaped back to Ife, instructing the warriors to use fire against the Ugbo, for she had learned that the raiders were simply men costumed in raffia. The annual Edi festival in Ife is held in celebration of this Yoruba heroine.

To show appreciation for what she had done, Edi festival is celebrated, during which markets are closed and no one must stay at farm. In the old days it lasted for 3 months ... now it is only 7 days.³⁷⁸

This mythic history is corroborated by the presence of an Ugbo compound in Ile-Ife. More significantly, it is reported that "the innermost part of the Ooni's palace is still called Ilegbo...('Igbo house'),"³⁷⁹ honoring the original inhabitants of the land. There is also an annual ritual held in Ife "in which the descendant of the original king is recognized as the owner of the land."³⁸⁰

An interview was conducted with Akin Alao of Obafemi Awolowo University in Ile-Ife, Nigeria, director of the university's Institute of Cultural Studies and former head of the history department. During the interview he asserted that

³⁷⁷ Bascom, Meko, Nigeria Field Notes—Yoruba, 1937–1938 (27:34).

³⁷⁸ Ibid., "Edi festival," typed page 5, hand-written page 770 (28 October 1937).

³⁷⁹ Beier, "Before Oduduwa," 152.

³⁸⁰ Beier, "Historical and Psychological Significance," 27.

between the tenth and twelfth centuries, “women had a kind of control over the political space”³⁸¹ both in their associations with rulership and as monarchs. Archaeological finds from early Ife of terra-cotta sculptures topped by multi-tiered crowns depict both men and women.³⁸²

Conclusion

Of primary importance within this chapter was establishing the central place of myth to Yoruba historiography, a centrality that carries through subsequent areas of discussion. There are several Yoruba tales of creation. What they all have in common is the centrality of Ile-Ife.

The antiquity of the archaeological finds in present-day Ife, coupled with its numerous shrines and annual festivals, strongly indicates that the city played a major role in the historical development of what we now call Yoruba culture.³⁸³

In terms of worldview, however, some researchers believe that “the whole conception of *oriṣa* worship, and the philosophy and culture connected with it, seems in fact to have been brought by the invaders.”³⁸⁴ Immigration, whether peaceful or involving conquest, can result in a process of mutual assimilation. This process is likely the case here as “Yorùbá culture seems to have an usual power to absorb and assimilate others.”³⁸⁵

³⁸¹ Akin Alao, Ph.D., interview with the author, September 24, 2009, at Obafemi Awolowo University (OAU), Ile Ife, Nigeria.

³⁸² Blier, “Kings, Crowns, and Rights.”

³⁸³ Lawal, “Ejiwapo,” 38 n. 6.

³⁸⁴ Beier, “Before Oduduwa,” 149.

³⁸⁵ *Ibid.*

The people referred to as the Yoruba are in all likelihood the descendants of migratory waves of distinct groups from different areas north and east of the Niger River. Given the multiplicity of Yoruba kingdoms and the variations in governmental forms, it is evident that the Yoruba were not one monolithic entity. "From approximately the 8th century AD, adjacent village compounds called ile coalesced into numerous territorial city-states in which clan loyalties became subordinate to dynastic chieftains."³⁸⁶ The Yoruba are primarily an urban culture with agricultural cultivation undertaken in the countryside.

Yoruba migration theories and speculation being as they may, it is most plausible that later waves of migration occurred "from somewhere north of the Niger."³⁸⁷ Beier speculates that the Yoruba were the last arrivals, their power and size allowing them to establish regional hegemony.³⁸⁸

It appears that the Yorùbá encountered the Edos in the east, the Fon in the west, the Borgu in the north-west, and the Nupe in the north. However, the people who were met by the Yorùbá invaders in the heart of the Yorùbá country have completely lost their identity and the most we can get today is a name.³⁸⁹

Bascom notes that "linguistically, culturally, and physically, the peoples most closely related to the Yorubas are their neighbors in the forest belt of West Africa."³⁹⁰ This fact could indicate that far-traveling immigrants were virtually

³⁸⁶ Academic Room, "History of Nigeria," Yoruba, par. 1.

³⁸⁷ Beier, "Before Oduduwa," 149.

³⁸⁸ Beier, "Historical and Psychological Significance."

³⁸⁹ Beier, "Before Oduduwa," 152.

³⁹⁰ Bascom, *Yoruba of Southwestern Nigeria*, 9.

absorbed into the indigenous populations. However, the Yoruba are also linguistically related to the Igala who occupy the area near the Niger and Benue river confluence, leading to speculation that the Yoruba migrated from this region.³⁹¹ Archaeological evidence also relate the Yoruba to the Nupe and Nok.

The famous Ife bronzes have played a part in confirming the traditions of the relationship between Ife or Yorubaland and the Edo kingdom of Benin to the east. But the bronzes also relate Ife to Nupe and regions around the Niger. Clear similarities have been found between the large bronzes found in Nupe country and those of Ife. Accordingly, it has become clear that the 'Mecca' of the traditions did not refer to any place in the Middle East, to Egypt or to Meroe but to regions just across the River Niger to the north of present-day Yorùbá territory. In addition, the art of Ife has been compared to the Nok terracotta art in central Nigeria despite the time gap between the two cultures (-900 – + c. 200 for Nok, and c. +900 – 1300 for the height of Ife art).³⁹²

Summary

The Yoruba migrated across the Niger into Yorubaland encountering various indigenous populations along the way, including the Borgu and Nupe, who are significant in Yoruba mythistory. Ile-Ife is the locus of Yoruba identity. Settling in Ife, the Yoruba leader Oduduwa subdued the indigenous population. Some groups broke off from the main body of migrants both before and after Ife was reached. Descendents of the former can be found in the Republic of Benin and possibly Togo. Under the military expansionist Oyo Empire, Yoruba influence was exerted and its presence established in the Kingdom of Dahomey and Ghana.³⁹³

³⁹¹ Gibling, "Diffusion and Other Problems."

³⁹² Ogot, *Africa*, 440.

³⁹³ Beier, "Before Oduduwa"; Biobaku, *Origin of the Yorubas*; Falola and Heaton, *A History of Nigeria*; S. Johnson, *History of the Yorubas*; Obayemi, "Ancient Ile-Ife."

The *oni* of Ile-Ife claims to be a direct descendent of Oduduwa. There are several such claims among Yoruba kings, some recognized and others disputed. The Yoruba's mythic past and political history are closely linked as the privilege of kingship, primarily the legitimacy to wear a beaded crown, is tied to descent rights stemming from the mythic Yoruba progenitor, Odua/Oduduwa.³⁹⁴

Oduduwa is believed to be the goddess of a people who migrated into the region around present day Ile-Ife. The powerful leader of this people warred and intermixed with the original inhabitants of the land in a process of mutual assimilation.

Today, he is acknowledged by the Yoruba as the progenitor of their race; for, as the tradition has it, he begat several children who in due course became the progenitors of the various clans which, taken together, are the Yoruba people.³⁹⁵

The name Oduduwa came to be conflated with the warrior king of this migrating people, as after his death he was deified.

It is believed that the people who migrated away before the king's death carried the memory of their goddess with them. The goddess memory is retained by inhabitants of present-day Ado. Those who remained at Ile-Ife or migrated after the king's death and his subsequent veneration as a god, carry within themselves this memory. Therefore, the acceptance of Oduduwa as a male or

³⁹⁴ Bascom, *Yoruba of Southwestern Nigeria*.

³⁹⁵ Idowu, *Olódùmarè*, 23.

female deity is a regional question because “Oduduwa is accepted as either a god or a goddess, depending upon the locality.”³⁹⁶

Without going into detail Idowu states, “we are led to see [that Oduduwa was a goddess] primarily by the goddess-tradition in the land.” Further, “even in Ile-Ifé where the male-divinity tradition is strongest, there is in the liturgy a hint which strongly indicates that the divinity was a goddess.” Idowu also points to portions of the *Odu Ifa* which speak to the memory of a founding mother goddess:

Iyà dákun gbà wá o;
Kí o tó’ni, tó’mo;
Ògbègi l’ Adó

O mother, we beseech thee to deliver us;
Look after us, look after (our) children;
Thou who art established at Adó.³⁹⁷

Interestingly the gender of Obatala, or Orisa-nla, is also dual or indeterminate. Within the traditional religion Obatala “has masculine and feminine paths.”³⁹⁸ Statuettes representing Obatala in Yorubaland are rendered both as female and male. The female element of Obatala is represented wearing an iron bracelet and sometimes a necklace of white pearls. She holds a bowl to receive the juice or white blood of the snail, “the male element being represented by a statuette holding a fan and fly-whisk.”³⁹⁹

³⁹⁶ Ibid., 24.

³⁹⁷ Ibid., 27

³⁹⁸ Castellanos, “A River of Many Turns,” 37.

³⁹⁹ Ogot, *Africa*, 443.

Although evidence points to the matrilineal roots of the Yoruba⁴⁰⁰ and archaeological finds indicate the presence of female rulers, culture is not static. The Yoruba of Ile-Ife, and with them, their philosophical orientation and worldview, underwent many shocks, challenges, influences, and adaptations. One of note is the rise of the militaristic Oyo Empire, during which “non-Oyo Yoruba founding myths were subject to imperial revision.”⁴⁰¹ Discussion in the next chapter turns to the Oyo Empire.

⁴⁰⁰ Idowu, *Olódùmarè*.

⁴⁰¹ Apter, *Black Critics and Kings*, 19.

CHAPTER 4: HISTORIOGRAPHY 2

OYO EMPIRE THROUGH THE EARLY COLONIAL PERIOD

Foreign religions...often distort or contradict African values...
The West is also unrelenting in its attempt to foist its cultural and
religious values on the rest of the world especially Africa.⁴⁰²

This chapter continues exploration of Yoruba historiography with extension to the Oyo Empire and beyond to the early colonial period. Examination of the Oyo Empire includes a brief summary of its foundation, demise, rise, and subsequent decline. In the historical accounting of Oyo, especially later Oyo, is the first occurrence of consistent written records. As with Ife, the history of Oyo is a combination of myth and historical events. The kingdoms of Borgu and Nupe, situated north of the Yoruba, feature prominently in this history. The Yoruba referred to these as Ibariba and Tapa, respectively.

Falola and Heaton specify that “archaeological testing indicates that the town was inhabited as early as the eighth century AD.”⁴⁰³ However, it is Oyo’s mythic origins that are explored, again giving attention to the caveats attendant in conflating myth and history. While myths contribute to the study of history, “myths are not factual accounts of history. They are invented, adapted or usurped to support some political claim.”⁴⁰⁴

More germane to this work, the role of women within the Oyo palace structure is considered as are changes to women’s agency after Oyo’s fall during

⁴⁰² Elebuibon, *Invisible Powers*, xiii.

⁴⁰³ Falola and Heaton, *A History of Nigeria*, 49.

⁴⁰⁴ Beier, “Historical and Psychological Significance,” 25.

the nineteenth century. Colonialism's subsequent and significant impact on indigenous structures is introduced. This topic is discussed throughout the work, particularly as related to its effects on the lives of women. This dissertation chapter is primarily concerned with the "traditional" Yoruba relationship to women and women's power as represented in Oyo. This brief recounting of Oyo history, consequently, privileges the roles and contributions of women.

Founding Myth

As was seen in the last chapter in the exploration of creation myths, Oranmiyan is credited with founding Oyo. The creation myth positioning him as the agent of creation was used to bolster Oyo hegemonic claims. Ile-Ife retained its prominence and stature, however. As noted in the preceding chapter, the sword of state that "symbolizes the right to execute criminals and thus the right to rule as king"⁴⁰⁵ derives from Ile-Ife.

Oranmiyan is said to have ruled at Ife and Benin before setting out on the expedition that led to the establishment of Oyo.⁴⁰⁶ In his desire to avenge the expulsion of his grandfather or great-grandfather from an area conquered by Islamic forces, Oranmiyan set out on an expedition from Ife.⁴⁰⁷ At that time Nupe territory extended south of the Niger River. The Nupe blocked the peaceable and forceful attempts of the expedition to cross the Niger. Oranmiyan was faced with

⁴⁰⁵ Bascom, *Yoruba of Southwestern Nigeria*, 83-84.

⁴⁰⁶ Ogot, *Africa*.

⁴⁰⁷ Biobaku, *Origin of the Yorubas*.

a dilemma. He did not want to go back to life in defeat, and the road forward was blocked.⁴⁰⁸

Oranmiyan was near Borgu territory. A powerful kingdom during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, Borgu or Bornu, was situated under the northwest corner of the Niger River and extended over the northeastern third of what is today the Republic of Benin. The king of Borgu was approached by Oranmiyan concerning land on which to settle.

Tradition has it that the King of Ibariba [Borgu] made a charm and fixed it on a boa constrictor and advised Oranyan to follow the track of the boa and wherever it remained for 7 days and then disappeared, there he should build a town.⁴⁰⁹

Thus, Oyo was founded at the foot of a hill called Ajaka with the blessing of the king of Borgu, and enjoyed a peaceful and profitable coexistence for a long period.

A marriage alliance was formed between Oyo and Nupe. The princess, Torósi, “was the daughter of Elempe a Nupe king, who formed an alliance with Orańyan by giving him his daughter to wife, of which marriage Sango was the issue.” Şango, also identified as Olufiran, the third or fourth ruler of Oyo also became a deified ancestor and the tutelary deity of Oyo. He continues to enjoy the status of a major *orişa* in the Yoruba pantheon.⁴¹⁰

⁴⁰⁸ S. Johnson, *History of the Yorubas*.

⁴⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 11.

⁴¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 149.

One migration path traced has the Yoruba coming into contact with the populations of Nupe and Borgu, among others, before reaching Ife.⁴¹¹ The myth of the founding of Oyo in this case relates a return trip rather than initial contact. Adding a substantiating voice to the thesis of a major tenth-century migratory wave into the region, Ogot states that “Oduduwa, or a group of migrants, came to the area about 1000 years ago.”⁴¹² However, setting a founding date for Oyo is problematic as estimates range from the tenth to fifteenth centuries.⁴¹³

These founding stories place Ife, Borgu, and Nupe at the center of Oyo’s beginnings. Law believes this “is the result of the fusion of three originally distinct traditions” in a similar way to the fusing of the Oduduwa and Obatala creation myths reviewed in the last chapter. The ultimate vanquisher, of course, gets top billing. By way of explanation, Law further states that this “is probably to be accounted for by the fact that Oyo received dynasties from both its northern neighbors in turn.”⁴¹⁴

Subsequent Nupe expansion into and settlement within Oyo territory disseminated Nupe culture among the Yoruba. The Egungun cult is one such example⁴¹⁵ as is the god of smallpox, Sonponna.⁴¹⁶ Oya, Şango’s most devoted

⁴¹¹ Beier, “Before Oduduwa.”

⁴¹² Ogot, *Africa*, 440.

⁴¹³ Law, *The Oyo Empire*.

⁴¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 32, 33.

⁴¹⁵ S. Johnson, *History of the Yorubas*; Law, *The Oyo Empire*.

wife and a powerful *oriṣa*, is of Nupe origin, and one tale has her bringing the Egungun cult to Oyo.⁴¹⁷ Undoubtedly Ṣango's Nupe mother, Torósi, brought her worship to Oyo and the palace.

In Bascom's account Yemoja "came from near Bida in Nupe territory,"⁴¹⁸ married Oranyan and bore Ṣango. Yemoja is the mother of numerous Yoruba *oriṣa*.

The gods whose origin is thus accounted for as the offspring of Yemaja, are of various types. The Sea-god (Olokun), the Thunder-god (Shango), the Sun, the Moon, the Lagoon (Olosa), the three River-goddesses Oya, Oshun, Oba, the god of Mountains (Oke), and Ogun, god of iron and war and of the River Ogun, are all the product of Nature-worship, but are not of one type, for the Sun and Moon belong to the old order of things, to the same religious system as Olorun, and are personally divine, while the others belong to the new order, and are anthropomorphic. Shankpanna, god of small-pox, is personified pestilence, and belongs to another type; while Dada, Oshosi, Aje Shaluga, and Orisha Oko, as the respective patrons of vegetable production, hunters, wealth, and agriculture, may be regarded as the tutelary deities of industries, and as belonging to a third class of religious conceptions. The myth thus assigns a common origin alike to the ancient gods and to those which are more modern.⁴¹⁹

Given the foregoing, it is possible to understand Beier's conclusion that "the whole conception of *oriṣa* worship, and the philosophy and culture connected with it, seems in fact to have been brought by the invaders."⁴²⁰ The fact that

⁴¹⁶ Matory, *Sex and the Empire*.

⁴¹⁷ Kerr, *African Popular Theatre*.

⁴¹⁸ Bascom, *Yoruba of Southwestern Nigeria*, 88

⁴¹⁹ Ellis, *Yoruba-Speaking Peoples*, 86-87.

⁴²⁰ Beier, "Before Oduduwa," 149.

Yemoja's children are reportedly the product of rape⁴²¹ could speak to the violent supplanting of an older religious system by an interloper. *Oriṣa* worship could have been acquired and spread during southern migration waves. However, Opeola suggests that Yoruba origin of the *oriṣa* system is contained in the myth of Odù's creation of her sacred *apèrè* found in *Odu Ifa OṣeOyeku*.⁴²²

The cult of *Ifa* is also said to derive from Nupe,⁴²³ while another tale has it arriving in Oyo "from the Awori town of Ọta."⁴²⁴ Interestingly, in an interview conducted in March 2010 with Chief Priestess Adedoyin Faniyi Talabi Oloṣun of Oṣogbo, I was told that Ota is contemporarily and commonly known to be a town inhabited by a preponderance of witches. "Ota—it is in Ogun State—it is a town well-known for them... If you ask anybody which town is for *iyamis*, they will tell you Ota." Lawal characterizes Ota as "the headquarters of the *àjé*."⁴²⁵

The mother of *Alafin* Onigbogi, an Ọta woman, is said to have brought the (Ifa) cult to Ọyọ, but the Ọyọ refused to accept it. The subsequent Nupe sack of Ọyọ was believed to be a divine punishment for this refusal, and *Alafin* Ofinran therefore officially adopted the cult at Kuṣu.⁴²⁶

⁴²¹ Ellis, *Yoruba-Speaking Peoples*.

⁴²² Samuel Modupeola Opeola, interview with the author, September 27, 2009, Ile-Ife, Nigeria.

⁴²³ S. Johnson, *History of the Yorubas*.

⁴²⁴ Law, *The Oyo Empire*, 44.

⁴²⁵ Lawal, *Gèlèdè Spectacle*, 118.

⁴²⁶ Law, *The Oyo Empire*, 44.

Ellis reports that “Ifa first appeared on the earth at Ife” and in similar fashion the inhabitants of Ife ignored his teachings whereupon he left and taught others in the world the art of divination.⁴²⁷

Nupe Sack of Oyo⁴²⁸

Whatever the peaceful co-existence brokered between Oyo, Nupe, and Borgu, it was relatively short-lived. Ewe is related to languages spoken in Ghana, Republic of Benin, and Nigeria. Kathryn Geurts reports that the Ewe of southeastern Ghana traditionally trace their origins to the Oyo Empire and states the “Ewe speakers probably left there some time in the fifteenth or sixteenth century due to the advent of war among the Oyo, Borgu, and Nupe states.”⁴²⁹

Relations between the Oyo and Nupe were particularly contentious with each making incursions into their respective territories. Nupe prevailed. The capital Oyo-Ile was sacked with “the exile of the Oyo from their capital in the 15th century.”⁴³⁰

The sack of Oyo Ile was apparently but one episode in a general process of Nupe expansion into Yoruba territory...The Nupe apparently came to settle as well as to raid, for several northern Yoruba towns which later acknowledged the authority of Oyo claim to have been founded by Nupe immigrants.⁴³¹

⁴²⁷ Ellis, *Yoruba-Speaking Peoples*, 57.

⁴²⁸ As is problematic with oral tradition, the dating of the following is open to debate, with the fourteenth to early seventeenth century being cited.

⁴²⁹ Geurts, *Culture and the Senses*, 22.

⁴³⁰ Usman, “Early Urbanism in Northern Yorubaland,” 58.

⁴³¹ Law, *The Oyo Empire*, 38-39.

Borgu took advantage of the power vacuum in Oyo to launch its own raids into Yoruba territory. Various Borgu groups entered and took control of Yoruba towns. Those who controlled Igboho ultimately “won recognition as the legitimate rulers of Ọyọ and occupied the historic capital of the kingdom at Ọyọ Ile.”⁴³² This group managed to fend off attacks from both Borgu and Nupe with a conclusive victory against the Nupe that re-established Oyo’s regional power.

The influx of Yorùbá immigrants from the south to northern Yorùbá, particularly Igbomina, during the 16th century was encouraged by the defeat of Nupe and the establishment of Old Oyo authority in the area.⁴³³

A decisive factor in Nupe’s sacking of Oyo was the use of Hausa-obtained horses in warfare. Adoption of a cavalry for use against the Nupe was instrumental in their defeat by Oyo. “It is also noteworthy that according to Frobenius, the practice of representing Ẓango...as a rider on horseback was introduced by the second dynasty of *Alafin* which originated from Borgu.”⁴³⁴ With this second dynasty, “Oyo had reorganized its army and adopted a new policy of militarism.”⁴³⁵ Use of cavalry was key to Oyo’s subsequent hegemonic rise.

Oyo Re-establishment, Rise and Reach

Oyo’s power lay in its cavalry that it was able to develop thanks to the acquisition of horses through its trading relationship with the Hausa and “with the

⁴³² Ibid., 42.

⁴³³ Usman, “Early Urbanism in Northern Yorubaland,” 58-59.

⁴³⁴ Law, *The Oyo Empire*, 43.

⁴³⁵ Ogot, *Africa*, 442.

aid of Hausa veterinarians.”⁴³⁶ Oyo was located north of the forest zone that housed Ife and the multiple Yoruba kingdoms. Its location in the savanna put Oyo in contact with the trans-Saharan trade route. “Oyo may have obtained horses, *kanun* (potash) and *obuotoyo* (rock salt) among other products from the north, while exporting kola nuts, shea butter and palm products.”⁴³⁷

Over time Oyo came to subjugate its Borgu and Nupe neighbors, gaining control over a segment of the trade route and establishing trade routes southward to the Atlantic coast. Several Yoruba states were in existence at the time of Oyo’s establishment. Oyo assimilated Egba and Egbado in the southwest and many others, creating “vassal states including Owu in the south and Edi in the south-east” that served as an outpost.⁴³⁸

Among the Yoruba kingdoms, Oyo was by far the most vast and formidable, characterized as “a great imperial power.”⁴³⁹ The size of the Oyo Empire has been stated as “somewhere in the range of 18,000 square miles.”⁴⁴⁰ Apter assigns the area a more conservative figure, stating that Oyo was a “ten-

⁴³⁶ Matory, *Sex and the Empire*, 8.

⁴³⁷ Ogot, *Africa*, 442.

⁴³⁸ Ibid.

⁴³⁹ Law, *The Oyo Empire*, 50.

⁴⁴⁰ Falola and Heaton, *A History of Nigeria*, 49.

thousand-square-mile empire.”⁴⁴¹ The discrepancy is difficult to rectify as Falola and Heaton do not include Oyo domains outside of Nigeria.

According to Bascom, with few exceptions, Yoruba “recorded history begins with an account of Oyo’s cavalry invading the kingdom of Allada in southern Dahomey⁴⁴² in 1698.”⁴⁴³ Allada’s coastal location speaks to Oyo’s reach. The fact that Allada was obliged to pay tribute to Oyo speaks to its power. “Oyo ran a trade route to the coast through the territory of the Egba and Egbado and it was through this route in south-western Yorùbá country that Oyo power expanded to Dahomey.”⁴⁴⁴

The Kingdom of Dahomey occupied the southern third of present day, Republic of Benin. The native Fon began a trade in slaves with the Portuguese that endured 400 years, from in the mid-fifteenth century through the end of the nineteenth century and begot the West African coastal region its name of the Slave Coast.⁴⁴⁵

The Portuguese reached Dahomey, Lagos, and Benin in 1472 and “had established a trading post with the Benin kingdom at Gwarto (Ughoton) by

⁴⁴¹ Apter, *Black Critics and Kings*, 35.

⁴⁴² The Republic of Benin (known as Dahomey until 1975) is not connected to Nigeria’s historical Kingdom of Benin. Likewise, it is neither connected to present day Benin City of Nigeria nor to the Edo/Bini people of Edo state, Nigeria.

⁴⁴³ Bascom, *Yoruba of Southwestern Nigeria*, 12.

⁴⁴⁴ Ogot, *Africa*, 442.

⁴⁴⁵ Falola and Heaton, *A History of Nigeria*.

1480.⁴⁴⁶ The Fon raided Yoruba territory for slaves, which resulted in Oyo sending:

its cavalry against the Fõn kingdom of Dahomey in 1724 and 1728, and, as a result, the King of Dahomey began to pay annual tribute to the Alafin, King of Oyo...this tribute was continued for a century.⁴⁴⁷

Despite the great wealth and weaponry acquired from the slave trade, the Fon were defeated by and paid tribute to Oyo during the height of its military and political regional dominance. As a reflection of historical Yoruba influence upon the region, the primary indigenous languages spoken in that area today are Fon and Yoruba.⁴⁴⁸

Limits to Oyo Expansion

Oyo's power was most appreciably felt in the north and west of the region. Kingdoms in the forested areas of Yorubaland escaped direct Oyo subjugation because the horses so key to Oyo's dominance were susceptible to forest-borne disease, specifically trypanosomiasis. Sleeping sickness, as it is commonly called, is carried by the tsetse fly.

Oyo expansion was finally stopped by the forest-dwelling Ijesha...The Ijebu and the hill country of the Ekiti also escaped direct Oyo control. The Benin kingdom to the east proved another barrier to Oyo expansion and one tradition says that the two powers established a tree boundary at the town of Otun.⁴⁴⁹

⁴⁴⁶ Ibid., 52.

⁴⁴⁷ Bascom, *Yoruba of Southwestern Nigeria*, 12.

⁴⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁴⁹ Ogot, *Africa*, 442.

To the east and north, Oyo expansion did not extend to the “smaller state forms in the Ekiti area and others, such as the Igala,”⁴⁵⁰ who related more closely with people and events in the Niger-Benue valley. “Other states, such as the Owo and Ijebu, also appear to have had much more to do with the Edo kingdom of Benin than with Oyo.”⁴⁵¹

Oyo Palace Structure

It is recorded that at the height of Oyo’s dominance “the vassal or provincial kings and ruling princes were 1060”⁴⁵² over which the *Alafin* reigned.⁴⁵³

Oyo not only became pre-eminent among the Yoruba kingdoms, but also developed special features. Some of these derived from its location close to the Nupe and Borgu. For example, Oyo relied more heavily on officials of slave origin in the military and social organizations than did other Yoruba states.⁴⁵⁴

Many of the palace slaves were of Nupe, Borgu, and Hausa origin.⁴⁵⁵

Oyo was able to manage its large kingdom by means of a highly structured and imposing bureaucracy comprised primarily of slaves. “Only a highly extended

⁴⁵⁰ Ibid., 442.

⁴⁵¹ Ibid., 442 and 444.

⁴⁵² S. Johnson, *History of the Yorubas*, 41.

⁴⁵³ This number is likely used to represent “innumerable” as Johnson also uses it when discussing the uncharacteristically warlike nature of Ajaka’s second reign following his brother, Şango. Ajaka “was said to have been engaged in civil war with 1060 of his chiefs and princes” (S. Johnson, *History of the Yorubas*, 152). The use of such figurative numbers is not uncommon in Yoruba culture. The number of *orişa* is often referenced as 401 or 601, the 1 signifying that there are innumerable *orişa*. (See K. Abimbola, *Yorùbá Culture*; Idowu, *Olódùmarè*).

⁴⁵⁴ Ogot, *Africa*, 441.

⁴⁵⁵ Law, *The Oyo Empire*.

and efficient palace organization could assure continued royal control.”⁴⁵⁶ Owing to polygamy, the royal family was very large. Members were used to oversee kingdoms and states under Oyo control. These individuals did not supplant local rulers, and “they may take no part in the administration of affairs in the town.”⁴⁵⁷ However, they were a presence and a corporal link to Oyo-Ile and the *Alafin*.

With time, non-royal overseers were also dispatched to ensure the interests of the Oyo palace. Also, through these overseers and other emissaries of the empire, the worship of *oriṣa* Ṣango was propagated. In interview with Yoruba occultist Samuel Opeola, he maintains that Oyo’s hegemony resulted in many towns losing their purely indigenous *oriṣas*.

Within Oyo-Ile, there were many layers to the palace structure and duties that ranged from seeing to the *Alafin*’s personal comfort and safety, such as his food taster (the *Adà-há*) to counselors and an official stand-in for the king (the *Olosi*) allowed the privilege of wearing the royal crown and bestowed all royal honors.⁴⁵⁸

Johnson’s 1921 work on Yoruba history, gives a fascinating account and very detailed description of the palace structure and governance of Oyo. Palace officials were designated “titled officers,” “eunuchs,” and “ilaris.” Eight titled officers are noted and each has responsibility for numerous, often hundreds of, individuals who fall under their jurisdiction. Of special note is that unlike the

⁴⁵⁶ Matory, *Sex and the Empire*, 8.

⁴⁵⁷ S. Johnson, *History of the Yorubas*, 68.

⁴⁵⁸ Ibid.

custom in Ile-Ife and elsewhere in Yorubaland, executions are not carried out by the Ogboni society or their agents. The *Tètus* “are the sheriffs or King’s executioners. They are about 19 in number, each one of them with his subordinates.”⁴⁵⁹

“Emasculation was imposed upon men convicted of sexual offenses, such as incest, bestiality, and adultery with the wife of a king... Eunuchs were also, however, recruited from among war-captives.”⁴⁶⁰ Young boys were also purchased for the purpose of emasculation, the rationale being that castration before the age of puberty was more humane than castrating adult males.⁴⁶¹

The Yoruba term for the palace eunuchs is “*Iwẹfa* or *Iba-áfin*... i.e. lordlings of the palace.” This term reflects the high level of responsibility accorded to these individuals. Those of high rank and title exerted considerable authority within and outside the palace walls. For example:

The *Ọna’ẹfa* is a high legal personage; he hears and decides suits and appeals brought to the King whenever His Majesty cannot sit in person, and his decision is as good as the King’s.⁴⁶²

Johnson records the names of 68 primary male *ilaris*, the names being descriptive of some aspect of the king. He also lists the names 48 primary female *ilaris*. “Every male *Ilari* has a female counterpart... The male *Ilaris* are the King’s body guards... They are of different grades including high-placed servants,

⁴⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 59.

⁴⁶⁰ Law, *The Oyo Empire*, 70.

⁴⁶¹ S. Johnson, *History of the Yorubas*.

⁴⁶² *Ibid.*, 59.

messengers, and menials.”⁴⁶³ Those who win the king’s favor can become the heads of their own large compounds and even lords in their own right with control of several compounds. The *ilari* were often entrusted with diplomatic responsibilities.

It is noteworthy that the ambassadors from Oyo whom Landolphe met in the Benin area *c.* 1787 were literate in Arabic. Such ambassadors would normally be *ilari*, and these may well have been of northern (perhaps Hausa) origin.⁴⁶⁴

Oyo is a patriarchal society. “The right to the throne is hereditary, but exclusively in the male line or the male issue of the king’s daughter.” Also, the kingship is “hereditary in the same family but not necessarily from father to son.” The king’s eldest son held the title of *Aremo* (Crown Prince), enjoying a great deal of privilege and power during his father’s reign. For instance, a large section of Oyo-Ile was under his control. But perhaps most significantly, the *Aremo* “had equal powers of life and death over the King’s subjects.” This right was not shared by minor provincial rulers.⁴⁶⁵

Because the *Alafin*’s activities were generally confined to the palace, it is said that “the father is King of the palace, and the son the King for the general public.”⁴⁶⁶ This euphemistic phrase reflects the influence wielded by the *Aremo* during his father’s tenure as king and also reflects the reality that once crowned,

⁴⁶³ *Ibid.*, 62.

⁴⁶⁴ Law, *The Oyo Empire*, 70.

⁴⁶⁵ S. Johnson, *History of the Yorubas*, xx, 40, 41.

⁴⁶⁶ Law, *The Oyo Empire*, 71.

the *Alafin* “is henceforth forbidden to appear in public streets by day, except on very special and extraordinary occasions.”⁴⁶⁷

Though at one time the *Areṃo* succeeded his father as *Alafin*, suspicions of patricide put an end to this custom. It was thereafter decreed that “as the *Areṃo* reigned with his father, he must also die with him.” The law was in effect until 1858 when the ruling *Alafin* *Atiba* rescinded it to make way for his son, *Adelu*, to ascend the throne. *Oyo Mesi* approval was, nonetheless, still necessary.⁴⁶⁸

Oyo’s ruler, the *Alafin* was chosen from the royal family by the *Oyo Mesi*, a council of seven noblemen of non-royal lineage who also acted as a check on the king’s power. Each member of the *Oyo Mesi* has a title that is hereditary within his family and corresponding duties. The titles by rank are: *Osorun*, *Agbakin*, *Samu*, *Alapini*, *Laguna*, *Akiniku*, and *Asipa*. Members of the royal family are nominated for kingship by “three titled members of the royal family” on whom fall this responsibility. In selecting the *Alafin* by nomination from among those who are eligible, worthiness, age, and genealogical proximity to the throne are considered.⁴⁶⁹

The *Oyo Mesi* “represent the voice of the nation, on them devolves the chief duty of protecting the interests of the kingdom.” They also serve as counselors to the king in affairs of state and are in charge of the army. The *Iba Oṣorun* or, more commonly, *Baṣorun*, is senior among the *Oyo Mesi*. He wields

⁴⁶⁷ S. Johnson, *History of the Yorubas.*, 46.

⁴⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 41.

⁴⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 42.

more power than the other *Oyo Mesí* combined; his power is second only to the king's. His is the deciding voice in selecting the king and also the deciding voice if the king is to be dethroned.⁴⁷⁰

If the *Alafin* becomes tyrannical or otherwise unacceptable to his people, "it is the *Başorun's* prerogative as the mouth-piece of the people to move his rejection as King in which case His Majesty has no alternative but to take poison and die."⁴⁷¹ The *Alafin* is informed of this decision by receipt of parrot eggs. Also referred to as Eyeos by early writers, a description of this Oyo custom is recorded in the following:

When the 'Eyeos' (Yoruba) were dissatisfied with a king, they sent a deputation to him with a present of parrot's eggs, and a message that they considered he must be fatigued with the cares of government, and that it was time for him to rest and take a little sleep.⁴⁷²

Upon the *Alafin's* death, the *Basorun* immediately "assumes the chief authority, and nothing can be done without him." Although the *Basorun* holds considerable power, the king has it within his power to assign the title and succession to another family. Thus, the *Alafin* and *Basorun* exercise a check on their respective potential misuse of power.⁴⁷³

⁴⁷⁰ Ibid., 70.

⁴⁷¹ Ibid.

⁴⁷² Ellis, *Yoruba-Speaking Peoples*, 7.

⁴⁷³ S. Johnson, *History of the Yorubas*, 46.

Women in the Palace Structure

Women occupied positions of authority within the Oyo palace structure, most dealing with spiritual, religious, and ritual matters. Johnson lists their titles and, for most, gives a brief explanation of their functions. The following is extracted from his work. Eight titled women and eight priestesses occupy the highest rank in the structure. The eight women with titles in order of seniority include: *Iya Oba*, *Iya kere*, *Iya-Naso*, *Iya-monari*, *Iya-fin-Iku*, *Iyalagbon*, *Orun-kumefun*, and *Are-orite*. Each woman is “the head of a small compound within the palace walls.”⁴⁷⁴

The *Iya Oba* is the appointed “mother” of the king. Though originally this person was the king’s biological mother, this was subsequently changed. The king’s biological mother was required to commit suicide at the time of the king’s ascension to the throne because “the king is to humble himself before no mortal” on pain of the king’s death. Therefore, his biological mother has to die “so there will be no occasion to violate any filial duty imperative on a son who is at the same time the King. His majesty must be supreme.”⁴⁷⁵

The *Iya kere* is second in rank. “Greater deference is paid to the *Iya Oba*, indeed, but the *Iya kere* wields the greatest power in the palace.” She is the chief Şango priestess. It is the *Iya kere* who crowns the *Alafin* at his coronation. She is also keeper of all the regalia and paraphernalia of office and impressively, “she

⁴⁷⁴ Ibid., 63-67, 64.

⁴⁷⁵ Ibid., 48, 49.

has the power of withholding them, and thus preventing the holding of any state reception to mark her displeasure with the King when she is offended.”⁴⁷⁶

Presumably this offense went beyond the personal to encompass the affairs of women at large. Among other important functions, *Iya kere* initiated the *ilari*.⁴⁷⁷ Johnson states that she is in charge of all the *ilaris*. Law, however, conveys that the *Iya kere* “had charge of the female *ilari*.”⁴⁷⁸

As noted above, executions are the domain of the king’s titled officers, the *Tetus*. Execution is generally done by beheading. However, it is the function of the fourth ranking titled woman, the *Iya-monari*, “to execute by strangling any Sango worshipper condemned to capital punishment, as they are not to die by the sword.”⁴⁷⁹

The eight palace priestesses noted by Johnson are as follows: *Iya’le Ori*, *Iya’le Mọlẹ*, *Iya Orişanla*, *Iya Yemaja*, *Iya Oloşun*, *Iyafin Oşun*, *Iyafin Eri*, *Iyafin Orunfumi*, each being priestess of the named deity. *Iya’le Mole*’s role is an interesting one. She is caretaker of the king’s *Ifa* and active participant in its consultation.⁴⁸⁰

⁴⁷⁶ Ibid., 63.

⁴⁷⁷ Matory, *Sex and the Empire*.

⁴⁷⁸ Law, *The Oyo Empire*, 71.

⁴⁷⁹ S. Johnson, *History of the Yorubas*, 64.

⁴⁸⁰ Ibid.

However, what is particularly intriguing is Johnson's assertion that "she is the head of all the Babalawos [Ifa priests] in the city."⁴⁸¹ As provincial kings modeled their governments on that of the *Alafin's*, it is easy to imagine that each had an *Iyamole*, giving women leadership of the babalawos, a virtually exclusive male priesthood.

Additional priestesses are noted by Johnson as "other ladies of high rank." They include: *Iyamode*, *Iya'le Oduduwa*, *Qde*, *Qbagungte*, *Eri-Qja*, *Iya'le-Agbo*, *Iya-Qtun*, *Iyafin-Iku*. The *Iyamode* is of particular interest. The *Bara* (royal mausoleum) was under the care of this high priestess, referred to as *Baba* (father).

She is thus styled because being entirely devoted to the worship of Sango...she is often 'inspired' or 'possessed' by the god, and thus came to be regarded as the embodiment of that famous King.⁴⁸²

The King looks upon her as his father, and addresses her as such, being the worshipper of the spirits of his ancestors. He kneels in saluting her, and she also returns the salutation kneeling, never reclining on her elbow as is the custom of the women in saluting their superiors. The King kneels for no one else but her.⁴⁸³

Early in Oyo history, kings were crowned in the *Bara* in the spiritual presence of Oyo's antecedent rulers and to receive their blessings. Though rulers were later crowned at the shrine of Sango in Koso, a visit to the *Bara* before the coronation was requisite.⁴⁸⁴

⁴⁸¹ Ibid., 65.

⁴⁸² Ibid., 55.

⁴⁸³ Ibid., 65.

⁴⁸⁴ Ibid.

It is evident that women commanded authority and respect within the palace at Oyo and were an essential part of its effective operation. Representing their close association to the monarchy's functioning, "the female palace officials, and the female *ilarí*, were commonly known as *Ayaba (aya õba)*, or King's Wives."⁴⁸⁵ In addition to the above, the king's actual wives also played important roles primarily because they were not perceived as a threat to the king's reign unlike individuals of royal lineage who often intrigued to usurp power.

Outsiders without any natal claim to the throne, the *ayaba*—wives of the reigning king and his predecessors—were entrusted somewhat more safely with administrative functions and prerogatives. They served as the heads of empire-wide priesthoods, as royal advisors, as intermediaries between king and subject chiefs, and as provincial representatives of the palace.⁴⁸⁶

Matory sees the basis of this in the worship of Ọ̀ṣango as the tutelary deity of Oyo and the tropes of wifeliness and "wifely authority" associated with this deity. Oya, for example, was Ọ̀ṣango's stalwart wife, helpmate, and companion warrior. An early avenue of association could be that the tutelary deity of Oranmiyan, Oyo's mythic founder, was Oduduwa. Female divinity gives precedent for the spiritual authority and power of women.

Oyo Decline

Pressure upon the Oyo Empire was continual. Challenges were external as well as internal. Nupe aggression was one external stressor.

The incessant friction between the Nupe and Yorùbá, which occurred following Oyo's expansion into northern Yorùbá, has been described as 'frantic efforts by the Nupe to regain their lost territory.' Thus competition

⁴⁸⁵ Law, *The Oyo Empire*, 71.

⁴⁸⁶ Matory, *Sex and the Empire*, 9.

over space or resource use, or revenge for lost territory was probably the main cause of Nupe's aggression in Igbomina during the 16th and 17th centuries, and slave raiding both for export and for domestic use in the 18th century.⁴⁸⁷

Though outlawed by the British in 1807, other countries continued the trade in slaves late into the nineteenth century. Slave raids into Yorubaland from its Dahomey neighbors were a constant menace that escalated as Oyo focus became divided by pressures on other fronts. Slave raiding contributed to Oyo's internal strife and general warfare in the region. The accumulation of wealth and power among regional chiefs resulting from the transatlantic trade was a causative factor in "the steady aggrandizement of nonroyal political institutions and the decline of royal control over the empire"⁴⁸⁸ during the eighteenth century.

However, it was the abuse of power by members the royal family and the overreach of palace officials in the provinces that most contributed to Oyo's internal disintegration. As noted the *Aremo* was the Crown Prince accorded power almost equal to the monarch.

From the period of the greatest prosperity of the nation to the time of the intertribal wars, the *Aremo*s were almost invariably tyrannical, and given to excess; they contributed largely to the disloyal explosion that caused the civil wars and the breaking up of the unity of the Yoruba kingdom.⁴⁸⁹

Initial support of the infamous *Basorun Gáà* (or *Gáhà*) during the mid-eighteenth century was a reaction to "the dread in which [the populac] stood of the

⁴⁸⁷ Usman, "Early Urbanism in Northern Yorubaland," 59.

⁴⁸⁸ Matory, *Sex and the Empire*, 11-12.

⁴⁸⁹ S. Johnson, *History of the Yorubas*, 69.

Kings, because of their cruel and despotic rule.”⁴⁹⁰ *Basorun Gáà* proved no less despotic.

Beginning around 1754, the Prime Minister installed and deposed successive Alaafin at his personal pleasure...Gaa brutally suppressed provincial rulers and allowed his own sons to rule arbitrarily all over the empire.⁴⁹¹

Although the “reign” of Gaa, his children, all future progeny, and his collaborators was brutally brought to an end by *Alafin* Abiodun in 1774, the contradictions and cracks within the Oyo empire remained, especially in the relationship between the *Alafin* and *Oyo Mesi*.⁴⁹²

Abiodun’s reign has been characterized as one of peace and prosperity—calm after the storm. He brought stability to the empire and its control back to the palace. Palace officials played increased roles in the empire’s administrative, economic, and political management.

With his expanded corps of “wives”—*ayaba* (royal wives), *elegun* (possession priests), *iwefa* (eunuchs), and *ilari* (messengers)—Abiodun surpassed all of his forefathers in unifying a sprawling empire under direct royal control.⁴⁹³

This being as it may, the underlying tensions and contradictions within the empire resurfaced upon Abiodun’s death and the installation of an ineffectual king. “In a word, with Abiodun ended the unity of the Yoruba kingdom.”⁴⁹⁴

⁴⁹⁰ Ibid., 178.

⁴⁹¹ Matory, *Sex and the Empire*, 12.

⁴⁹² S. Johnson, *History of the Yorubas*.

⁴⁹³ Matory, *Sex and the Empire*, 12.

⁴⁹⁴ S. Johnson, *History of the Yorubas*, 187.

A direct hazard to Oyo-Ile was the northern Fulani Islamic reform movement and jihadist threat that was fostered by Usman dan Fodio and establishment of the Sokoto Caliphate, an expansive confederate that consolidated the centuries-independent Hausa states and that spread quickly to neighboring areas.

By 1810, most of the Hausa states...had come under the control of the newly established Islamic caliphate...By the 1830s, the Sokoto Caliphate had taken control of much of the territory formerly ruled by Jukun and Nupe, and toppled the Oyo empire, bringing the territory around Oyo Ile into the new emirate of Ilorin.⁴⁹⁵

The subjugation of Nupe and its proximity to Yorubaland provided a steppingstone for Fulani entry into the territory.

Through a combination of internal intrigue and Fulani stratagem, Ilorin was lost to Oyo and subsequently became a Fulani emirate. In retaliation for being passed over as *Alafin*, the *Afonja* who ruled Ilorin and “was commander in chief of the provincial army and one of the most powerful and important officers in the *alafin’s* retinue,” revolted against the *Alafin*. He solicited the assistance of jihadist Muslims and recruited the Hausa palace slaves and other Oyo Muslims to his cause. However, in 1823 this *Afonja* was killed by the Fulani, whereupon Ilorin was assimilated by the Sokoto Caliphate as were neighboring Yoruba states.⁴⁹⁶

External pressure from the Fulani jihadists and the internal pressures of rebellious Oyo chiefs and political in-fighting ultimately led to the fall of Old Oyo, which was razed by the Fulani in 1835. This event and the subsequent inter-tribal

⁴⁹⁵ Falola and Heaton, *A History of Nigeria*, 65.

⁴⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 74.

wars “ended the unity of the Yoruba kingdom,”⁴⁹⁷ resulting in tribal independence. Even before the fall of Oyo-Ile, as a result of military defeats and the rebellion of his chiefs, the *Alafin's* hegemony was broken.

Borgu and Nupe handed Oyo defeats in 1780; the Egba revolted and became independent of Oyo c. 1790; Owu, Oyo's principal ally, was sacked by the Ife and Ijebu c. 1822; Dahomey revolted and discontinued paying tribute to Oyo in 1823 and sacked Egbado c. 1830.⁴⁹⁸ By this time Oyo had also lost control of its lucrative trade routes and the provincial kings had ceased to pay tribute to Oyo and ceased to acknowledge the *Alafin's* authority.⁴⁹⁹

After Oyo-Ile was razed, it was resettled further south in the forest zone. The collapse of Oyo hegemony created a power vacuum and wide-spread battles for supremacy. Prior and ongoing regional warfare led to a flood of refugees that came together for safety and, by their numbers, created new centers of power during the 1820s—Ibadan, Ijaya, and Abeokuta.⁵⁰⁰

Abeokuta, which dates from 1825, became the landing and launch site for Christian missionary activities in Yorubaland beginning in 1842. Ibadan, established as a war camp tasked with protecting New Oyo, became the regional power with its 1840 defeat of Ilorin forces at Ogbomosho, “putting an end to the

⁴⁹⁷ S. Johnson, *History of the Yorubas*, 186.

⁴⁹⁸ Falola and Heaton, *A History of Nigeria*.

⁴⁹⁹ S. Johnson, *History of the Yorubas*.

⁵⁰⁰ Falola and Heaton, *A History of Nigeria*.

southward push of the Sokoto jihadists.” Ibadan cemented its position with the defeat of rival, Ijaye, in 1862.⁵⁰¹

Ibadan’s political system has been termed a “military meritocracy.”⁵⁰² Successful warlords with their army of “war boys” could control vast resources of land and people for personal enrichment and the buying of influence. Military might and conquest earned one a “stake in the governance of the city and its growing dependencies.”⁵⁰³ The Ibadan’s “are notorious for disturbing the peace of the interior countries; they are kidnappers, plunderers, and delight in war.”⁵⁰⁴

Ibadan’s grasping for ever-increasing power, however, resulted in the Ekitiparapo War, described as “all-out war...when forces from Egba, Ijebu, Ekiti, Ijesa, and Ife all joined to fight against Ibadan domination.”⁵⁰⁵ The war was ended with a peace treaty brokered by the British in 1886 that allowed them direct political entry into Yorubaland and opened the way for initiation of colonial rule in 1893.

In the period 1826 to 1840, the major cause for war was the determined attempt by the Fulani to take over the whole of Yorubaland and an equally spirited attempt by the Yorùbá to drive them completely out of Yorubaland...From 1840 to 1886, the Yorùbá wars were related to the struggle by emergent Yorùbá polities for hegemony in Yorubaland, the need to prevent the Fulani from further penetrating into Yorubaland, the

⁵⁰¹ Ibid., 76.

⁵⁰² Ibid.

⁵⁰³ Ibid.

⁵⁰⁴ Payne, *Table of Principal Events*, 56.

⁵⁰⁵ Falola and Heaton, *A History of Nigeria*, 76.

imperial expansion of Ibadan and the struggle for freedom from Ibadan imperial control.⁵⁰⁶

With the fall of Oyo-Ile and its political dominance, and with the power shift to Ibadan and the military commanders, a marked structural shift occurred in warfare, demographics, cultural diffusion, and traditional roles. Of interest for the dissertation is the shifting role of women as a result of this historical development that is investigated in the following section.

Women's Post-Oyo Roles

For reasons already noted, Matory characterizes the time of the Oyo Empire as the Age of Šango. Ibadan's tenure he characterizes as the Age of Ogun, the deity of war and iron, during which "generals and armies ruled in the place of kings and their 'wives.'"⁵⁰⁷ Ibadan was founded as a military camp by Oyo top generals charged with protecting New Oyo but over which the *Alafin*, in effect, had no control. War was Ibadan's sine qua non.

Because exploration of Yorubaland's interior proved fatal to Europeans due to malaria and other diseases, "Oyo remained outside the area of direct European influence [and]...did not use such conspicuous elements of the European trade as guns until the nineteenth century."⁵⁰⁸ Effective use of the new technology of war—guns—proved devastating to the region. Ogun's shrine

⁵⁰⁶ Usman, "Early Urbanism in Northern Yorubaland," 59-60.

⁵⁰⁷ Matory, *Sex and the Empire*, 15.

⁵⁰⁸ Ogot, *Africa*, 442.

became the focal point of the war camps that were populated by the warriors' families, refugees, and the war captives who served as slave labor.⁵⁰⁹

Ibadan, as Abeokuta, was a conglomeration of refugees from many Yoruba sub-groups, creating a diffuse religious and political mix.

In Ibadan, paradigmatically, the abandonment of royal capitals and ancestral towns coincided with the abandonment of an old order of politics, religion, and gender relations. Private traders—many of them women—and military commanders each established their private fiefdoms without the authorization or supervision of royal elites.⁵¹⁰

Unlike within the Oyo palace structure, there was no women's royal court and women did not play an extensive role in the administration of Ibadan nor did they generally act as delegates. In general, "a militaristic orientation works against a high status for women."⁵¹¹ Even more, women's sacred power in the domain of kingship was marginalized as Ibadan's military commanders sought no authority to govern from deity as sanctioned by a priestess.⁵¹²

Military might and wealth determined leadership. During the Age of Ogun, however, women did enjoy marked commercial freedom and had unrivaled opportunities for personal aggrandizement. The very successful, by their wealth, wielded considerable political, economic, and social influence.⁵¹³

⁵⁰⁹ Matory, *Sex and the Empire*.

⁵¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 15.

⁵¹¹ Boulding, *Underside of History*, 236.

⁵¹² Matory, *Sex and the Empire*.

⁵¹³ *Ibid.*

Iyalode

Breakdown of traditional Oyo power structures during the nineteenth century allowed an expanded role to women traders as the royal family no longer controlled or regulated commerce. Trade for women during the Age of Ogun included expanded breadth and potential for wealth accumulation. As the Oyo palace lost its privileged place in trade, it became obliged to engage its “wives” in trade, a gross departure from Oyo convention. Already:

by the early nineteenth century, palace women had become prominent in long-distance commerce...In 1830, at the beginning of the Age of Ogun, the Lander brothers encountered ‘not less than a hundred’ Oyo royal wives”⁵¹⁴ [engaged in trade in southern Yorubaland].

Women have always controlled the Yoruba marketplace. Wande Abimbola states that this has been so “from ancient times to the present...both in terms of their sheer numbers in the market and the day-to-day administration of the market.”⁵¹⁵ The title varies for the market administrator depending on region. But invariably this chieftaincy title is bestowed upon the most distinguished town woman.

The Iyalode (variously translated as Mother of the Town, Mother-in-charge of External Affairs, Mother of All Women, She Whose Business Is Women’s Affairs) is the head of all women in the town. Each town has an Iyalode who is elected by the women and appointed by the Oba (king) on the basis of her personal qualities of leadership, influence, and wealth.⁵¹⁶

Among her many functions is to speak to women’s issues and concerns on councils of state.

⁵¹⁴ Matory, *Sex and the Empire*, 21.

⁵¹⁵ W. Abimbola, “Images of Women,” 411.

⁵¹⁶ M. A. Oduyoye, *Daughters of Anowa*, 96.

In some areas she is “*ìyálajé* (mother who keeps *Ajé*⁵¹⁷)”⁵¹⁸ In other areas she is “*ìyálójà* (mother or leading woman in the market).”⁵¹⁹ In Ife it is the “‘Mother of the market’ (Yeyeloja, Yeyelioja) who was in charge of the market women and settled disputes between them.”⁵²⁰ The term used in Oyo and elsewhere, *Iyalode*—“Mother of the outdoors”⁵²¹ or “Ladies’ Queen”⁵²²—was introduced into Ife early in the twentieth century and does not carry equal significance.⁵²³

The *Iyalode* rose to power during a nineteenth century of massive structural shifts and the dismantling of what was considered customary among the Oyo. Among the most famous *Iyalode* were contemporaries and friends Efunsetan Aniwura of Ibadan and Efunroye Tinubu of Lagos and Abeokuta, as well as Madam Omosa of Ibadan. These women traded in an array of commodities but most famously traded in arms and were war financiers and suppliers. “During the Kiriji War (1878–1893), Madam Omosa organized trade

⁵¹⁷ *Ajé* is the Yoruba orisha of wealth and trade, not to be confused with *àjé*.

⁵¹⁸ W. Abimbola, “Images of Women,” 411.

⁵¹⁹ McIntosh, *Yoruba Women*, 291, n. 59.

⁵²⁰ Basom, *Yoruba of Southwestern Nigeria*, 33-34.

⁵²¹ Badejo, *Ọṣun Ẹ̀g̀g̀g̀s̀*, 162.

⁵²² S. Johnson, *History of the Yorubas*, 391.

⁵²³ Basom, *Yoruba of Southwestern Nigeria*.

caravans to supply food, arms, and ammunition to the Ibadan army on the battlefield.”⁵²⁴

The wealth of these women also garnered them political influence. Madam Tinubu successfully championed the 1851 reinstatement of Akitoye as *oba* of Lagos. Her activities became such a bane to the political ambitions of the British that “the colonial authorities expelled her from Lagos in 1856.”⁵²⁵ Madam Efunsetan had more than 2,000 slaves working on her farms and in her impressive Ibadan compound. She had the wealth to sustain a large personal army.⁵²⁶

Ibadan instituted the title of *Iyalode* early in the 1850s, and the *Iyalode* of Ibadan exercised great authority in many domains.

In the political arena, the *Iyalode* was a member of the ruling council, serving as an intermediary between the leading male chiefs and the town’s women. In the economic realm, the *Iyalode* oversaw the operation of the city’s market system and was responsible for women’s welfare. Judicially, the *Iyalode* held a court to which disputes concerning traders and commodity groups in the markets were referred. She arbitrated disagreements between women and between husbands and wives and was the custodian of women imprisoned for theft, malpractice in trade, and marital offenses.⁵²⁷

Iyalode also protested British domination. *Iyalode* Tinubu was an early and powerful example. In 1861, “Lagos became a British colony only after the

⁵²⁴ Denzer, “Yoruba Women,” 13.

⁵²⁵ Ibid.

⁵²⁶ Matory, *Sex and the Empire*.

⁵²⁷ McIntosh, *Yoruba Women*, 222.

British sent her into exile.”⁵²⁸ *Iyalode* also acted as diplomats. An Ibadan *Iyalode*,

Lanlatu:

played a vital role in negotiations between the Ibadan chiefs and British colonial officers to end the stalemate of the Yoruba wars. She was then a witness to the 1893 accord by which Britain gained control over Ibadan, one of the few examples of colonial treaties signed by women.⁵²⁹

Nonetheless, these powerful women and the successful *Iyalode* in general, were said to be “unwifely and antireproductive”⁵³⁰ because they were independent and often without biological offspring. The story of Efunsetan is a cautionary tale of women’s power as threat to patriarchal prerogative. She reportedly had one daughter whose death during childbirth in 1860 caused Efunsetan to become “strangely cruel to all her female slaves found in an interesting condition, using such cruel means to cause forcible abortion, most of which ended in death.”⁵³¹ Other cruel acts towards her slaves were attributed to her.

Johnson tells a first-hand account of her demise. Ibadan’s leading general, or *Are-ona-kakanfo*, deposed Efunsetan, stripping her of the *Iyalode* chieftaincy title on May 1, 1874 under pretext of her disrespect. Whereas the actual reason for this measure was the fact that he “had become jealous of this

⁵²⁸ M. A. Oduyoye, *Daughters of Anowa*, 97.

⁵²⁹ McIntosh, *Yoruba Women*, 222.

⁵³⁰ Matory, *Sex and the Empire*, 19.

⁵³¹ S. Johnson, *History of the Yorubas.*, 393.

Iyalode's wealth and influence.”⁵³² The act of deposing Efunsetan was a *de facto* death sentence.

“When a few days after the voice of the Agán was heard in the night (i.e. the Egungun that executes women) it was known that her death was resolved upon.” The Agan Egungun is also commonly known as “the executioner of women accused of witchcraft.” With the collusion of her adopted son, Kumuyilo, Efunsetan was murdered on June 30, 1874. “Two slaves instructed by Kumuyilo entered the room from the ceiling and dashed out her brains.”⁵³³

Though a story generally told, one sees within this account metaphors of Yoruba witchcraft—the achievement of great power and capital accumulation, and more pointedly the killing or devouring of children. The term “antireproductive” applied to successful *Iyalode* in effect brands them as child-devouring witches.

Efunsetan was so accused with attendant tales of her “powers” and cruelty. In a serendipitous meeting and brief interview with John Mason, noted scholar and author of several books on Yoruba culture and religion, he states that the singling out of women and the name *àjé* negatively ascribed to them is a “political issue. [It is] about power, about not wanting to share something.”⁵³⁴

During our interview, Akin Alao, professor of history at Obafemi Awolawo University in Ile-Ife, spoke of Efunsetan.

⁵³² Matory, *Sex and the Empire*, 19.

⁵³³ S. Johnson, *History of the Yorubas*, 392, 29, 392.

⁵³⁴ John Mason, interview with the author, February 16, 2011, at the Schomburg Center, New York City.

Efunsetan was not prepared to support his [the general's] military activities. And it became a public thing, and Efunsetan was characterized as bad, cruel, and so forth. And called an *àjé*. Forgetting that she had been using her powers, her resources, to finance previous wars... She was called an *àjé*. But she was not killed because she was *àjé*. But just by calling her that it labeled her bad.⁵³⁵

This labeling presumably supplied an excuse for her execution. A woman could be accused of witchcraft by the mere fact of her ability to accumulate capital and become wealthy. In this case she is accused of “eating the ‘blood’ of market circulation.”⁵³⁶ This accusatory critique does not seem to apply to wealthy men, however.

The following section investigates the role of outside influences. Primary among these exogenous factors is the imposition of colonialism on traditional Yoruba systems and values.

Outside Influences

Very generally, Western imperialism encompasses the imposition of Christianity and colonialism, which entails the settlement by large populations of Europeans on indigenous lands. Technically colonialism or colonization as such did not occur in southwestern Nigeria. However, the term colonialism has come to embrace the imposition of Western values and norms in addition to the physical settlement of Europeans and is often used interchangeably with or even preferentially to the term imperialism in the literature.

⁵³⁵ Akin Alao, interview with the author, September 24, 2009, at OAU, Ile Ife, Nigeria.

⁵³⁶ Apter, *Black Critics and Kings*, 235 n. 12.

Religion

Challenge to the perception and role of the *àjé* would arrive with the imposition of dissimilar cultural values in the form of religious tenets, taken from Islam and Christianity. The latter in particular came in the form of colonial impositions and attacks on indigenous systems. Wade Nobles states that “power is the ability to define reality and have other people respond to your definition as if it were their own.”⁵³⁷ The challenges to Yoruba traditional religion, frequently referred to as *ifa*, were initially imposed adaptations that once accepted as normative became socially self-regulating.

The above statement speaks to internalized oppression that is addressed in the works of authors such as Marimba Ani on the pernicious effects of colonialism⁵³⁸ and reflected in mandates from African scholars for their mental decolonization.⁵³⁹ “Christian and Muslim missionaries in Nigeria condemned all Yorùbá beliefs and rituals as ‘evil.’ A converted Christian felt he was expected to despise his parents, his culture and his religion.”⁵⁴⁰

In a paper presented at Lehman College, Okome speaks of her interview with a 74-year-old woman from the north Yoruba town of Tede. This woman recounted that during the Yoruba wars, Tede never lost a battle. Tede’s women

⁵³⁷ Nobles, *Africanity*, 107.

⁵³⁸ Ani, *Yurugu*.

⁵³⁹ Okome, “What Women, Whose Development?”

⁵⁴⁰ Beier, “Historical and Psychological Significance,” 24-25.

were active participants, gathering intelligence and engaging in combat. Some of their activities bring to mind the mysterious powers of *àjé*.

When they got to the enemy, they lifted up either their right or left foot, and they hear all that is being discussed. When the enemy shot their arrows at them, it did not hit them. They [the women] then lift up their bows and arrows, and shot at the enemy. That's the end of it. The battle was won.⁵⁴¹

The woman being interviewed was a devout Christian. Because of the contradiction of the above story with Christian tenets, Okome questioned her as to how those events could have transpired. Okome states:

She took great pains to explain to me that Africans had their own science before the advent of the European presence. She told me that much information has been lost, therefore, the picture that we have today is incomplete. When asked why, she told me that her own experience of Christianity entails turning one's back completely on the past, and becoming a new person, with a whole new outlook on life. Thus, it made total sense that the science of the past would be forsaken for the new deal. It also made sense that the corpus of knowledge becomes extinct through disuse and disbelief.⁵⁴²

There is further evidence for the deleterious role of religious imperialism on traditional culture in the following prayer recited today within many African Christian churches: "Help us destroy *Àjé*. Help us destroy Oso. Help us destroy all herbalists and all their works."⁵⁴³ Professor Alao stated that because of the impact of Pentecostalism, "you have a lot of pretensions especially on the part of African women who will not own up to this particular energy that they have."⁵⁴⁴

⁵⁴¹ Okome, "African Women," 7.

⁵⁴² Ibid.

⁵⁴³ Washington, *Our Mothers*, 32.

⁵⁴⁴ Interview with the author, September 24, 2009, at OAU, Ile Ife, Nigeria.

Professor Alao further reported that these churches use fear as a means of keeping their members within their fold. They foment the perception that all ills suffered by an individual are the result of *àjé* within the person's family and that the church is their only salvation.

During our interview Henry Drewal, Evjue-Bascom professor of art history at University of Wisconsin-Madison and author on Yoruba art and culture, stated that "the fastest-growing religious faiths are Pentecostal Christianity and fundamentalist Islam." The growth of these faiths has exacerbated the plight of *àjé* because within these "more fundamentalist ideologies where the distinction between good and evil is drawn very clearly... 'our mothers' fall on the negative side, from their point of view." Also, both religions "are attacking traditionalists those who are practicing *oriṣa* worship and who have a different view of what the *awon iyami* are about."⁵⁴⁵

Christianity came very early to North Africa. Carthage was a major center of early Christian learning. Second/third century church father, Tertullian, was North African by birth, as was St. Augustine.⁵⁴⁶ However, Christianity only arrived in Sub-Saharan Africa in the fifteenth century with the Portuguese. Islam enjoyed an early presence in sub-Saharan Africa by means of trade, particularly with the gold producing regions of Africa.⁵⁴⁷

⁵⁴⁵ Henry Drewal, interview with the author, October 28, 2010, Stanford, California.

⁵⁴⁶ Pagels, *Adam, Eve, and the Serpent*.

⁵⁴⁷ Falola and Heaton, *A History of Nigeria*.

Though introduced by the fifteenth century, Islam had few adherents in Yorubaland up to the time of the nineteenth century Fulani jihad,⁵⁴⁸ at which time the Fulanis “overran the northern provinces...The towns in the plain were swept with fire and the sword, with the alternative of the acceptance of the Koran, and submission to the Fulanis.”⁵⁴⁹ Within Yorubaland Christianity moved inland from the coast, being “introduced by the Church Missionary Society in 1842, first into Abeokuta via Badagry, and from thence to Ibadan in May 1851, and also Ijaye.”⁵⁵⁰

There were a variety of pagan religious practices throughout Europe before religious power was centralized in the Christian church and culminated in the mass repression of “heretics.” These practices had their base in connection to the Earth and included herbal expertise for benefit or bane, communing with spirit, and magic technologies to affect the natural environment or foretell the future. With the rise to power of the Catholic Church, these pagan religious practices were considered a threat or insult to the Church’s suzerainty.⁵⁵¹

Heretics included anyone who went against Church authority or who did not adhere to its teachings and practices. While initially little more than a veiled pretext for the confiscation of property, the Inquisition grew to encompass anyone who practiced what became called witchcraft. Pope Innocent VIII and Church leaders added a new twist. To justify the atrocities of the Inquisition, the Church

⁵⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁴⁹ S. Johnson, *History of the Yorubas*, 38.

⁵⁵⁰ Ibid., 39.

⁵⁵¹ Ginzburg, *Ecstasies*.

claimed that witches worshipped Satan and attributed to them any number of horrors such as indulging “in cannibalistic feasts of unbaptized babes.”⁵⁵²

Parrinder documents legislation against witchcraft dating back to 690 CE in Canterbury. As time passed the laws and penalties grew more severe as the acts attributed to witches mushroomed. “In 1484 Pope Innocent VIII...promulgated his bull *Summis desiderantes* which marks the open declaration of war by the Church against witches.”⁵⁵³ The fifteenth century also marks the debut of sustained European interaction with the western coastline and, later, hinterland of sub-Saharan Africa.⁵⁵⁴

Though the witch trials began much later in England than on the Continent and never quite descended to the same level of barbarity, the Christian doctrine regarding witchcraft was nevertheless clear. Exodus 22:18 within the King James version of the Bible reads: “Thou shalt not suffer a witch to live.” Witchcraft was synonymous with worship of the devil.

At some point during the protestant reformation, catholic inquisition and catholic counter-reformation (from the 15th to the 18th centuries with continuing influence thereafter)...catholic and protestant clergy identified women with the devil.⁵⁵⁵

⁵⁵² Parrinder, *Witchcraft: European and African*, 23.

⁵⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁵⁴ Falola and Heaton, *A History of Nigeria*.

⁵⁵⁵ Birnbaum, *Dark Mother*, 184-185.

In 1563 the Elizabethan Witchcraft Act was passed and in 1604 the more punitive Jacobean Witchcraft Act was decreed.⁵⁵⁶ Though Europe's draconian anti-witchcraft tactics were abandoned well before the arrival of the first Church Missionary Society Anglican missionaries at Abeokuta in the mid-nineteenth century, the missionaries carried within themselves and their teachings the view of witchcraft as unadulterated evil and the witch as the personification of evil, without virtue.

Peel states that "it is an unusual feature of the CMS Yoruba Mission that, right from its outset, its missionaries included many Yoruba...they were at once religious outsiders and socio-cultural insiders."⁵⁵⁷ As such they were arguably familiar with areas where Christianity could make inroad into Yoruba traditional religion, or where the ambiguity of non-duality could be manipulated.

Such was the case of *iyami àjé* and Eṣu, who encompass the spectrum of human experience and behaviors.⁵⁵⁸ *Àjé* and Eṣu do not fall within the Western dualistic construct of "good" or "evil." As noted by Hallen and Sodipo, "'evil' is an inappropriate concept to use as a cultural universal."⁵⁵⁹ An ambivalent attitude among the Yoruba is common towards *iyami àjé* and Eṣu. However, owing to this ambivalence both could readily be pulled into the Christian concept of evil and attitudes promulgating fear, sin, and redemption through Christ.

⁵⁵⁶ Dumycz, "Female Power: Witchcraft and Gender."

⁵⁵⁷ Peel, "Gender in Yoruba Religious Change," 137.

⁵⁵⁸ See Chapter 1 for a fuller discussion in this regard.

⁵⁵⁹ Hallen and Sodipo, *Knowledge, Belief, and Witchcraft*, 101.

The Church Missionary Society also used their platform and mission schools to inculcate the gender ideals of Victorian England—women as subservient domestic partners to men.⁵⁶⁰ This process “would change the role and status of women in the society and culture of the Yoruba.”⁵⁶¹ Whereas the spiritual potency of women was highly regarded and “men and women acquired status based on their spiritual acuity,”⁵⁶² colonialism brought about a reversal. Fear and mistrust became associated with women’s spiritual power.

Most of the myths about the Earth goddess belong in the realm of the esoteric knowledge...a close study of Yoruba oral tradition and the history of the Ògbóni shows that the latter originally had a female focus. The attempt to graft a male aspect onto the Yoruba Earth goddess is a relatively recent phenomenon...It is enough to say that the Ògbóni society now has two factions, the Aboriginal and the Reformed, with the latter reformulating the symbolism of the society to tally with the biblical idea of Adam and Eve.⁵⁶³

Alcamo speaks of the “Adam and Eve syndrome” among the Yoruba. The Christian belief that woman was the downfall of man and responsible for the creation of sin and evil “permeates all religious practices, workplaces, communities and homes.”⁵⁶⁴ Therefore, Yoruba women, associated with *àjé*, are seen as the nexus of evil and tragedy.

⁵⁶⁰ Robert, “‘Christian Home’ as a Cornerstone.”

⁵⁶¹ Olomo, “Iyami Osorongu,” 285.

⁵⁶² Ibid.

⁵⁶³ Lawal, *Gèlèdè Spectacle*, xxii.

⁵⁶⁴ Alcamo, *Iyá Nlá*, 23.

The form and structure of religion are created as response to the inner need to give meaning to one's lived reality at a given time within a given place. Upon becoming crystallized and non-adaptive their usefulness as connection to a wider reality and connection with spirit is diminished. Narrow-mindedness with its resultant maladies, such as religious war, can follow.

Yoruba traditional religion is fluid and adaptive. This adaptability of *Ifa* has allowed incorporation of both Christian and Islamic influences⁵⁶⁵ and has meant that these religions have had profound impact on the Yoruba worldview. "The Bible in the vernacular was the most potent factor in the spread of the religion."⁵⁶⁶ In the process, Olodumare became confounded or equated with the Abrahamic/Christian God and Eṣu became equated with Satan, for example. The Yoruba historian and Anglican pastor, Samuel Johnson, refers to Eṣu as "Satan, the Evil One, the author of all evil."⁵⁶⁷

The strong phallic representation associated with Eṣu probably led Christian missionaries to associate Eṣu with the lecherous satyr associated with the devil. Islam also impacted the Yoruba traditional religion in practical ways. In the early nineteenth century Muslim artisans would distribute verses of the Koran to native Yoruba that they would then attach to sticks and place at their doors as anti-witchcraft charms.⁵⁶⁸

⁵⁶⁵ Peel, "The Pastor and the *Babalawo*."

⁵⁶⁶ S. Johnson, *History of the Yorubas*, 39.

⁵⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 28.

⁵⁶⁸ H. J. Drewal and Drewal, *Gelede*.

The interplay of colonial and traditional interests and beliefs often results in complicated, bedeviling interactions. Because the popular conception of *àjé* held by most Yoruba is largely that of malevolent female beings, an interpretation reinforced by Christian and colonial views of women, “when Christian missionaries and colonial governments try to suppress accusations of witchcraft, many people believed that they were protecting evil witches.”⁵⁶⁹

Although colonialism encroached upon and often upended traditional values and systems, “more often than the colonial administrators liked to admit, their African subjects transformed European policies and institutions into new syncretic forms in tune with their own values and culture.”⁵⁷⁰

The most striking religious syncretisms resulting from European contact are to be found in a church established in Lagos in 1934, the *Ijọ Ọrunmila Adulawọ*, which was founded on the premise that the teachings of *Ifa* constitute the Yoruba Bible.⁵⁷¹

While in Nigeria, I had the good fortune of meeting a descendant of one of the church’s founders. Establishment of the church was a counter measure against the encroachment of Christianity. By mimicking the tropes of Christian worship such as the structure of its services, sermon, and hymns (while preaching the teachings contained in *Ifa*) *Ijọ Ọrunmila Adulawọ* attracted a wide membership.⁵⁷²

⁵⁶⁹ Bourdillon, “Witchcraft and Society,” 181-182.

⁵⁷⁰ Denzer, “Yoruba Women,” 14.

⁵⁷¹ Bascom, *Ifa Divination*, 12.

⁵⁷² Brandon, “Hierarchy Without a Head.”

Some aspects of colonial culture were also completely disregarded. The economic marketplace has been the dominion of Yoruba women for centuries. However, this ran counter to the British Victorian ideal of “husbands as economic providers and wives as mothers and homemakers.”⁵⁷³

Engaging in trade, therefore, was considered unsuitable especially for Yoruba Christian women from the elite class. “The expectation that Christian women would not have income-generating activities constituted a major break from Yoruba patterns.” Much to the consternation of the missionaries, most Christian Yoruba women simply ignored this aspect of their new faith.⁵⁷⁴

Colonial Attitudes

Using the work of Diop as a foundation, in which matriarchal culture and society are defined as “based on reciprocal, complementary, and therefore nonhierarchical relationships,”⁵⁷⁵ Dove goes on to document the link between patriarchy and racism. She further discusses the implications of this link within European colonialism *sic* the rationalization for subjugation and annihilation of peoples and cultures.

A society’s dominant paradigm and dominant religion are inextricably linked reflections of each other. Dove details the imposition of the Hindu caste system by the conquering Aryans upon the dark-skinned Dravidians as “a perfect example of how a belief in superiority and inferiority based on skin color can

⁵⁷³ McIntosh, *Yoruba Women*, 95.

⁵⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 96.

⁵⁷⁵ Dove, “African Womanism,” 522.

become a religious faith.”⁵⁷⁶ Within Christianity the Black race is said to be afflicted by the curse of Ham. Dove effectively argues that colonialism’s imposition of a Western patriarchal paradigm

leads to the potential subjugation of African women...by African men. In this light, it is possible to understand how the imposition of Western values on African people’s more egalitarian female-male relations is so insidious, especially when humanity is required to view this condition as progressive, universal, and natural.⁵⁷⁷

Washington asserts that even before the official pronouncement of colonialism, the European and Muslim presence in sub-Saharan Africa occasioned a patriarchal shift.

In Yorubaland, the shift occurred between the 1600s and the 1900s...The patriarchal shift, along with the adoption of a Eurocentric psychosexual ideology, contributed significantly to the male: good, female: evil dichotomy and promoted the social and political devaluation of women.⁵⁷⁸

Again, Victorian-era normative values such as the subordination of women to men were promulgated. This attitude of female devaluation stood “in contrast to Yoruba religion, which allowed female participation at all levels.”⁵⁷⁹ However, as the colonizer’s values were adopted by Africans, women’s political power and presence diminished, and “the codification of ‘native laws and custom’ also privileged male over female sources of knowledge.”⁵⁸⁰

⁵⁷⁶ Ibid., 529.

⁵⁷⁷ Ibid., 523.

⁵⁷⁸ Washington, *Our Mothers*, 51-52.

⁵⁷⁹ Olajubu, *Women in the Yoruba Religious Sphere*, 41.

⁵⁸⁰ Okome, “What Women, Whose Development?,” 85.

Therefore, women's voices were discounted, their authority ignored, and their rights unacknowledged. Women's ritual power and spiritual agency were disparaged.

As the pronouns of the *Oriki Ilẹ* and other texts reveal, women's roles as originators and key players in important societies such as Orò, Ògbóni, and Egúngún have been minimized or inverted.⁵⁸¹

Colonial Legislation

"In Yorubaland, the British assumed administrative control in a piecemeal fashion, beginning in 1851 with the seizure of Lagos." The formal inception of colonialism in Yorubaland is dated to 1893 with the signing of a number of treaties that effectively ended the Yoruba internal wars. Legislative measures were enacted by the British, some of which had drastic impact, both good and bad, on the lives of women. These included "regulations for easy divorce and redemption from slavery."⁵⁸²

It has already been stated that women's political functions declined under colonialism. Denzer acknowledges this and continues that "recent studies of women's economic and social history in Nigeria prove that women made some substantial gains in legal rights and economic opportunities under colonial rule."⁵⁸³

For instance, the consequences of the marriage laws enacted by the British in 1863 and 1884 were significant. "It gave women more freedom of choice

⁵⁸¹ Washington, *Our Mothers*, 52.

⁵⁸² Denzer, "Yoruba Women," 14.

⁵⁸³ *Ibid.*, 15.

in entering marriage, enabled them to end unsuccessful marriages, and increased their ability to move between communities.”⁵⁸⁴ When joined with the expanded economic opportunities afforded to women by colonial trade, women enjoyed unprecedented autonomy. As a consequence of the greater social and economic freedom women enjoyed, Yoruba men felt the need to take actions to suppress women’s independence.

Though women gained increased economic and personal independence under certain aspects of colonialism, this was a tightrope walk. Men thought that women enjoyed “inappropriate independence within marriage due to British ordinances and the availability of divorce.”⁵⁸⁵ Yoruba men feeling threatened by their loosened dominion over women had recourse to mechanisms of control, including witchcraft accusation, in an attempt to scare women into submission.

As women’s market wealth increased because of their dominance in palm oil production and trade, there was a corresponding increase in “*Orò* curfews and *Egúngún* appearances...in the mid-nineteenth century”⁵⁸⁶ designed to disrupt commerce and threaten women. Interestingly palm oil is a product associated

⁵⁸⁴ McIntosh, *Yoruba Women*, 97.

⁵⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 208.

⁵⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 207.

with witches.⁵⁸⁷ Women accused of witchcraft would be forced to undergo ordeals such as drinking sasswood poison.⁵⁸⁸

Female economic power was thought to hold dangerous consequences. Women's economic independence is particularly dangerous as it is considered to challenge male prerogative and the male lineage.⁵⁸⁹ Rea states that it is a:

well established fact that female aggrandizement is regarded as anomalous and held in deep suspicion by household members, especially by men. To develop and enlarge a reputation as a woman is risky business.⁵⁹⁰

The significant patriarchal shift that Washington states began in the seventeenth century was firmly entrenched by the early twentieth century.⁵⁹¹

Also for consideration is that under colonialism what some women gained in terms of better divorce laws and expanded economic opportunities, many other women lost in terms of economic and political power and authority in associated roles. The latter includes the *Iyalode's* loss of control of the market economy and the loss of stature and authority of the priestesses in their numerous former secular and religious roles.

⁵⁸⁷ Elebuibon, *Invisible Powers*.

⁵⁸⁸ Bascom, *Yoruba of Southwestern Nigeria*.

⁵⁸⁹ Apter, "Atinga Revisited."

⁵⁹⁰ Rea, "A Prevalence of Witches," par. 9.

⁵⁹¹ Washington, *Our Mothers*.

Summary

The chapter summary is taken from several sources cited throughout the discussion. It rests heavily on the following sources: Bascom, *Yoruba of Southwestern Nigeria*; Biobaku, *Origin of the Yorubas*; Denzer, "Yoruba Women"; S. Johnson, *History of the Yorubas*; Law, *The Oyo Empire*; Matory, *Sex and the Empire*; Ogot, *Africa*.

Mythic origin of the Oyo Empire is attributed to Oranmiyan, son or grandson of the Yoruba progenitor. Oyo fell to Nupe but was subsequently reestablished as a major power, its empire extending well east into Yorubaland as well as encroaching upon the Nupe and Borgu and stretching far south into Fon territory. Administration of the Empire necessitated a complex multi-tiered system in which women played central roles.

With the fall of the Oyo Empire, new centers of power emerged, most notably Ibadan. Women's roles and power shifted. Women, already controllers of the marketplace, became even more actively involved in trade. Here women as *Iyalode* could amass considerable wealth and, with that wealth, influence. However, women deemed threatening to patriarchal prerogative, as in the Oyo Empire, were not countenanced. Such women could find summary endings.

The mid-nineteenth century saw the implantation of Christianity and other forms of colonialism in Yorubaland, the impacts of which are still being felt and in some cases deepening. The patriarchal chauvinism of the British colonialists accorded men administrative powers while silencing women's voices. The dualism introduced with the new faith painted *àjé* with the same broad strokes as the Christian witch; *àjé* became unequivocally evil.

Christian and Victorian values ran counter to traditional women's agency while colonial legislation inadvertently reinforced women's agency in the area of trade. Men feeling threatened by the increased independence and amassed wealth of women used mechanisms of control such as the threat of witchcraft accusation to curtail women's activities. Further consideration is undertaken of colonial impacts in discussion of anti-witchcraft cults.

The next chapter turns to an examination of Yoruba cosmology and ontology. Here is discussed the relationship between the masculine and feminine principles in creation and in the culture.

CHAPTER 5: YORUBA COSMOLOGY AND ONTOLOGY

Oral tradition provides a means of understanding the world and one's place in the world. It seeks to answer broad cosmological questions that establishes a peoples ontology such as "Who made this world and all its fullness? And how are the affairs of the world managed?"⁵⁹²

Yoruba cosmology can be acutely challenging to individuals accustomed to the hierarchically linear cosmology found in the Christian religion. Yoruba traditional religion is not monolithic. There are marked regional variations in *odu*, emphasis, and ritual. Speaking of the Gelede ritual, Drewal and Drewal state: "We set out in search of the norm and instead we were struck by the diversity."⁵⁹³

In the Yoruba pantheon, the deity of highest stature is often defined by the individual doing the telling. The *oriṣa* of that individual's cult becomes the titular deity or central character. This tendency is seen with Salako, the Obatala priest whose 1951 recordings of Sixteen Cowrie divination (*mẹ̀rìndínlógún*) verses are compiled in William Bascom's book on the subject and "reputedly represents the total body of divination versus known to a single, knowledgeable diviner." In Salako's verses, Obanla (Obatala) becomes central and is at times conflated with Olorun being "identified...as another name for Ọlọrun." In a verse of the *odu* Ofun, he is identified as the father of Olorun.⁵⁹⁴

Odu Ifa

Yoruba cosmology and ontological orientation to the world is contained in *Odu Ifa*. "According to the Yorùbá, the Ifá corpus is the most comprehensive and

⁵⁹² Idowu, *Olódùmarè*, 18.

⁵⁹³ H. J. Drewal and Drewal, *Gelede*, xvii.

⁵⁹⁴ Bascom, *Sixteen Cowries*, 5, 9.

authoritative body of knowledge about their people, genealogy, history, belief systems, and philosophy.”⁵⁹⁵ *Ifa* comprises the sacred body of Yoruba cosmology, moral and ethical teachings of the Yoruba, and the divination system.⁵⁹⁶ *Ifa* is the instrument of spiritual guidance for the individual and community. It is said that even Yoruba deities (*oriṣa*) consult *Ifa* for guidance.⁵⁹⁷

Ifa itself is constituted of two parts—the literary corpus and the *odu* corpus.

Within the literary corpus are the stories (*itan*) that comprise much of the oral history of Yorubaland and in which are found:

explanatory answers to the questions posed by man by the very facts of his confrontation with the physical universe and his awareness of a world which, though unseen, is yet sufficiently palpable to be real to him.⁵⁹⁸

Here is found the *àjé* and stories of the *oriṣa*, their interactions among themselves and with humans. Here are also stories of the mortal quest for answers to the mysteries of birth, death, and life, as well as stories of mortal interactions with the seen and unseen forces of nature.

The *odu* corpus “is a body of recitals which belong to the intricate system of divination...and constitute, in a systematic way, the religious philosophy of the Yoruba.”⁵⁹⁹ The most accepted narrative is that the *odu* were passed on to humanity by the oracular divinity, Orunmila, who is also called Ifá and was

⁵⁹⁵ Badejo, *Ọṣun Ṣẹ̀ẹ̀gẹ̀sí*, 2.

⁵⁹⁶ W. Abimbola, *Ifá Literary Corpus*.

⁵⁹⁷ Badejo, *Ọṣun Ṣẹ̀ẹ̀gẹ̀sí*, 84.

⁵⁹⁸ Idowu, *Olódùmarè*, 7.

⁵⁹⁹ *Ibid.*

bestowed “the power to speak for the gods and communicate with human beings.”⁶⁰⁰

While fundamental principles and precepts remain intact, *Ifa* is fluid. It is not etched in stone, the unchanging dogma of calcified minds. Rather, interpretation and implementation reflect social and environmental realities. What is taught through the oracle is:

to investigate things following the guide of previous experiences (tradition) from past events in order to find out what works and does not work according to the era or time that we actually live in.⁶⁰¹

Bolaji Idowu in speaking of the role and power of the priests states:

Some of our elders, in their usual honesty, will not hesitate to say that some of the trappings of the religion of the Yoruba were first ‘invented’ to serve certain emergencies; but since they were found useful and good for religion, prudence has decreed that they should be allowed to stay on, and there they are today.⁶⁰²

There are 256 *odu* in the corpus—16 major and 240 minor. Stated differently, each of the 16 major *odu* has 16 minor *odu* for a total of 256. There is variation in the order and some variation in the names or spelling of the *odu* across Yorubaland and among authors. Also many of the *odu* have nicknames. Referred to as “the ‘mothers,’”⁶⁰³ the 16 major *odu* as commonly ordered and noted by Epega and Neimark are: Ogbe, Oyeku, Iwori, Idi, Irosun, Owronrin,

⁶⁰⁰ Bascom, *Ifa Divination*, 109.

⁶⁰¹ Alcamo, *Iyá Nlá*, 20.

⁶⁰² Idowu, *Olódùmarè*, 69.

⁶⁰³ Ellis, *Yoruba-Speaking Peoples*, 60.

Obara, Okanran, Ogunda, Osa, Ika, Oturupon, Otura, Irete, Ose, Ofun.⁶⁰⁴ The minor *odu* are referred to as “*omo* Odù, the children of Odù.”⁶⁰⁵

Each of the 16 major *odu* is said to “correspond to the sixteen ‘original’ Yoruba kingdoms [and]...each *odu* renders to the diviner a ‘true’ account of what happened in the past.”⁶⁰⁶ Thus, they are believed to contain an account of Yoruba history. Because of the strictness with which faithful rendering of the *odu* is enforced, the danger of revision and changes to the *odu* are diminished.⁶⁰⁷ What has been developed is “a rigorous system for the study, codification, transmission and dissemination of this vast body of literature and knowledge.”⁶⁰⁸

The *odu* themselves can be quite mysterious and nearly impenetrable if one is unaccustomed to taking meaning from parables and symbolism. It is also necessary to have a grasp of Yoruba epistemology. Where more clarity might be gained is in the *ese* or verses that accompany the *odu*. Each *odu* contains several *ese*. It is said that to each of the 256 *odu* “are attached one thousand six hundred and eighty stories or myths, called pathways, roads, or courses.”⁶⁰⁹ The

⁶⁰⁴ Epega and Neimark, *Sacred Ifa Oracle*, xiii.

⁶⁰⁵ Owomoyela, *Yoruba Proverbs*, 42 n. 3.

⁶⁰⁶ Apter, “Historiography of Yoruba Myth,” 12.

⁶⁰⁷ *Ibid.*

⁶⁰⁸ W. Abimbola and K. Abimbola, “Ifá and Contemporary Education,” par. 4.

⁶⁰⁹ Idowu, *Olódùmarè*, 8.

extraordinary number of *ese* reportedly associated with each *odu* is by way of saying that, “the number of *ese* in each *Odu* is unknown.”⁶¹⁰

Bascom refers to the *ese* as “verbal art, including myths, folktales, praise names, incantations, songs, proverbs, and even riddles.” He goes on to stipulate, however, that “to the Yoruba their ‘literary’ or aesthetic merit is secondary to their religious significance. In effect these verses constitute their unwritten scriptures.”⁶¹¹

Within Yoruba society there are individuals whose role it is to master the *odu* and transmit it to future generations. These individuals are members of the cult of Orunmila. They are the priests of Ifá, the *babalawo* (father of the secrets). Female Ifá priests are called *iyanifa* (mother of *Ifa* or mother of the mysteries) although Ifá priests are generally males. A reason for the preponderance of men in the priesthood is because the length of time it takes to master the *odu* generally conflicts with women’s child-rearing responsibilities.⁶¹²

For the Yoruba, children are precious and status is ascribed to child-bearing—“children are the crown of life.”⁶¹³ Coral and brass are highly valued among the Yoruba. “Only children are rated higher as possessions,”⁶¹⁴ as

⁶¹⁰ W. Abimbola, *Ifá Literary Corpus*, 26.

⁶¹¹ Bascom, *Ifa Divination*, 11

⁶¹² Olajubu, *Women in the Yoruba Religious Sphere*.

⁶¹³ Drews, “Guardians of the Society,” 15.

⁶¹⁴ Adepegba, “Osun and Brass,” 110.

reflected in the axiom “children are corals and brass.”⁶¹⁵ *Iyanifa* are often married to *babalawo* or come to *odu* mastery later in life. Additionally, daughters of *babalawos* often learn *Ifa* divination from their fathers and some women learn it from their husbands.⁶¹⁶

In divination the *odu* serve as prescriptive, and *ese* contain the commentary of the Ifá priests. Commentaries are based on the experience and results obtained once the prescriptions outlined by a particular *odu* have been fulfilled, or on the contrary, not carried out. This fact is why the number of *ese* in the *Odu Ifa* is said to be innumerable; each priest/diviner adds salient experiences from the lives of untold numbers of individuals to the body of the oral text. Regional variations are also accounted for in this manner.⁶¹⁷

The *odu* are not dogmatic canon. Ifá priest and scholar Philip Neimark states that “far from being literal and unalterable, the odus are alive. They are complex organisms, waiting to be meshed uniquely with each client’s personal energy before being ‘written.’”⁶¹⁸ The accumulation of *ese* has been occurring for centuries and are a keystone of the Yoruba people.

The *ese ifa* spread normative concepts, the cults of the major *oriša* and political idioms throughout the region, thus layering further foundations

⁶¹⁵ Ibid.

⁶¹⁶ McIntosh, *Yoruba Women*.

⁶¹⁷ Epege and Neimark, *Sacred Ifa Oracle*.

⁶¹⁸ Ibid., x.

(beyond existing affinities of speech and custom) for what would come to be recognized as Yorubaland.⁶¹⁹

Training to become a *babalawo*, to acquire mastery of the *odu* and its ritual components, is a patient and pain-staking task requiring great discipline and commitment. “It would take a child of four or five years old up to twenty to twenty-five years to graduate as a full-fledged priest or priestess of Ifá.”⁶²⁰ Other authors and informants put the length of tutelage under a master at approximately ten years. However, learning does not end when training is completed. “Most diviners continue to study Ifa as long as they live” through shared knowledge with colleagues or by paying for the specific expertise of other *babalawos*.⁶²¹

Showing the importance of the sacred feminine within Yoruba philosophy, the most important of the five grades of Ifá priests, the Babaláwo Olódu, “have been initiated into the secrets of *Odù*, the mythical wife of Ifá.”⁶²² *Ifa odu* IreteOgbe speaks of the marriage of Orunmila and Odù. One learns that Odù, to whom Olodumare gave the power of the bird (Aragamago), “is the power of the babaláwo...whoever does not possess this Odù will not be able to consult Ifá.”⁶²³

Because Orunmila accorded proper respect to Odù by following the wise prescriptive of divination, Odù shared her power with Orunmila.

⁶¹⁹ Peel, “Pastor and the *Babalawo*,” 344-45.

⁶²⁰ W. Abimbola and K. Abimbola, “Ifá and Contemporary Education,” par. 4.

⁶²¹ Bascom, *Ifa Divination*, 86.

⁶²² W. Abimbola, *Ifá Literary Corpus*, 13.

⁶²³ Verger, “Ìyàmi Òṣòròngà,” 172.

Through his wife Odu, Orunmila got his “sixteen children,” that is, the sixteen major divination signs known as Odu Ifa. Odu is represented in ritual by a closed calabash, usually concealed inside a larger container, which a woman carries during rituals.⁶²⁴

What is the great secret, the great power that Odù shares with Orunmila?

According to Margaret Drewal it is the secret of women’s blood mysteries. “Odu’s essential secret is the knowledge of birth.”⁶²⁵ The calabash is a recognized symbol for containers of life-force—the world and especially the womb.⁶²⁶

Childbirth is held sacred. Even now that the scientific specificity of conception, gestation, and delivery are known, sacredness continues to surround childbirth and motherhood. Attesting to this are the numerous icons, statuary and masks featuring women in the kneeling position of childbirth who are offering their breasts in generosity and nurturance,⁶²⁷ nursing mothers, and women surrounded by and carrying children on their backs. According to Rowland Abiodun, the Yoruba believe that if you have a serious health affliction, “a second suckling of your mother’s breasts...will heal your entire system.”⁶²⁸

⁶²⁴ M. T. Drewal, *Yoruba Ritual*, 73.

⁶²⁵ Ibid.

⁶²⁶ Drews, “Guardians of the Society.”

⁶²⁷ Also, considered a powerful posture of supplication to a deity.

⁶²⁸ Rowland Abiodun, interview with the author, January 26, 2010, Amherst, Massachusetts.

Among the legends of how the divination system came to humanity that are linked to Orunmila⁶²⁹ is another in which *Ifa* was given to Orunmila by the Yoruba elder deity, Olodumare.⁶³⁰ By means of this endowment, Orunmila's great wisdom could be imparted to humanity without the presence of Orunmila upon the Earth. Another version is that Orunmila himself imparted *Ifa* to his children in the form of the 16 sacred palm nuts (*ikin*) often used in divination, and yet another narrative states that Eṣu (trickster *oriṣa* of the crossroads, among other attributes) gifted Orunmila with the power of divination.⁶³¹

It is evident from this brief introduction that *Odu Ifa* is central to exploration of the Yoruba worldview. Attention now turns to the beings and forces that occupy the Yoruba cosmos.

The Yoruba Pantheon and Cosmological Forces

The Yoruba cosmos is conceptualized as a cosmic gourd (*Igba Iwa*), the bottom half of which is the domain of the earth mother (Ajalaye), the top half of which belongs to male sky (Ajalorun). In the beginning of time the two halves of the cosmic gourd fit snugly together. However, an argument ensued between Ajalorun (Olodumare) and Ajalaye (Ilé) in which the latter prevailed because of her seniority.

⁶²⁹ For there are tales that claim that the divination system came via secular means from other lands, such as recounted in W. Abimbola, *Ifá Literary Corpus*, 7–8.

⁶³⁰ Bascom, *Ifa Divination*.

⁶³¹ W. Abimbola, *Ifá Literary Corpus*.

Olodumare... caused the top half of Igba Iwa to separate from the bottom, and prevented rain from falling from the sky, thus disrupting the reproductive cycle in the terrestrial world. This obliged Ile to give in and acknowledge the apical position of Olodumare as the head of the cosmos.⁶³²

What the creation myths of Olodumare's agents, Obatala and Oduduwa, recounted in the chapter on Ife historiography omitted was the position or attitude of the pre-existing domain upon which creation was generated. Earth (Ilé), covered by the primordial waters, "is the domain of the earthmother Onile, leader of the earthspirits. As owner of half the cosmos she has the same eminence as Olorun, and so is coeval with him."⁶³³

In what might be considered an addendum to the most popular creation tale, the divinity of the primordial waters (represented below as Olokun), challenges the appropriation by Olorun (below referred to as Sky). It is interesting to note that though Olorun prevails in both tales, the primacy of Ilé is recognized. Just as the seniority of Ilé was acknowledged in the proceeding tale, the superior accomplishment of the female divine is acknowledged below.

In the following myth, the vast watery expanse of the planet, the realm of Olokun,⁶³⁴ was looked upon by several deities, especially Obatala, as desirable for development. Without so much as a by-your-leave from these deities of *orun*, the creation tale recounts how solid ground was formed, vegetation planted, and

⁶³² Lawal, "Ejiwapo," 25.

⁶³³ Witte, "Symboliek," 218.

⁶³⁴ Olokun, oriṣa of the ocean depths, has a male and female manifestation. In personal conversation with *Iyanifa* Chief Fa'jembola Fatumiṣe on October 19, 2005, it was learned that Yemederegbé is the name of the Nigerian female Olokun.

fauna established upon the earth. Being displeased with this invasion, Olokun inundated the land and made life difficult for the new inhabitants. However, this *oriṣa* of the watery depths—a domain associated with the Goddess-creatrix⁶³⁵ —relented when the *oriṣa* of the clouds and sky proved superior.

Not inconsequential to this account of usurpation is that Sky's superiority was made convincing through ruse. Sky did not have superior skill, just superior cunning in his use of subterfuge. The challenge of making beautiful fabric was issued in order to determine whether or not Olokun's waters would retake Earth. The color-mimicking and pattern-adapting prowess of the chameleon Alegmu was employed by Sky to copy the remarkable fabric works of Olokun and to convince Olokun that he (Sky) was the superior fabric maker.⁶³⁶

Another variant of the story of contest between the earth and sky tells how it was the vulture that succeeded in reaching sky with earth's sacrifice of capitulation.⁶³⁷ Vulture is associated with the river deity Oṣun who in *odu* OṣeTaura is referred to as the *àjé* in whose care the creator placed "all good things."⁶³⁸

Within the Yoruba worldview all things are conscious and alive, imbued with spirit; everything upon the earth and in the universe possesses its own awareness and energy (*aṣe*). *Oriṣa*, and *imole* are the Yoruba representations of

⁶³⁵ Sjo and Mor, *Great Cosmic Mother*.

⁶³⁶ Lynch and Roberts, *African Mythology A-Z*, ("Olokun," 99-100).

⁶³⁷ Castellanos, "A River of Many Turns."

⁶³⁸ Abiodun, "Hidden Power," 16.

this vastness of energy. Very loosely, *oriṣa* and *imole* are characterized as “the divinities of the sky and the earthspirits,”⁶³⁹ respectively, though the two do overlap. Technically, the river deities are *imole* but are generally classified *oriṣa*.

Particular to Yoruba traditional beliefs is the rich tapestry that has been created by the people of Yorubaland. Tens of millions of people constitute the Yoruba, located in southwestern Nigeria, the Republic of Benin, and Togo. Over centuries these peoples interacted and their gods interacted, intermingled, combined, were adopted and amended. According to John Pemberton III, this reality among the Yoruba and other groups in Sub-Saharan Africa reveals “the ‘openness’ in African religious thought and practice to adaptation and change”⁶⁴⁰ and no doubt accounts for the fact that “the Yoruba have one thousand and seven hundred divinities (orisa).”⁶⁴¹

However, this number is only one of several given for the teeming Yoruba pantheon. In truth because of the mixing and sharing of deities among the peoples that comprise the Yoruba, “the exact census of the pantheon no one is now able to tell.”⁶⁴² To underscore this fact, “the Odù corpus gives a confusing impression of the census of the pantheon.”⁶⁴³ Within it are noted the following

⁶³⁹ Witte, “Symboliek,” 217.

⁶⁴⁰ Pemberton, *African Divination*, 3.

⁶⁴¹ Mbiti, *African Religions*, 75.

⁶⁴² Idowu, *Olódùmarè*, 68.

⁶⁴³ *Ibid.*, 67.

varied number of divinities: 1,700, 401, 200 on the right hand and 200 on the left hand, 1,060, 1,460, and 600.

Kola Abimbola cites “400 primordial powers on the right, and 200 primordial powers on the left.” The “1” in 401 is symbolic of infinity, including the potential for incorporation of additional *oriṣa*. “This ‘plus 1’ principle allows new beliefs, new thought systems, and new deities to be brought into the fold of Yorùbá culture.”⁶⁴⁴

In addition, the journey of the Yoruba and their gods along the middle passage greatly affected the constitution and attributes of the deities. A conglomeration and consolidation of deities occurred as the slaves had a life and death struggle to keep even vestiges of their religions alive and families were forged across cultural lineages. Therefore, in the Americas and Caribbean a relatively small number of *oriṣa* are remembered. “The hierarchy...and indeed the names of the gods and goddesses may differ from city to city, region to region, and country to country.”⁶⁴⁵

Although the *oriṣa* are dressed in human form in their Yoruba personifications and are said to have “manifested as human beings [deified ancestors] during the time of Ogbe Sa,”⁶⁴⁶ it is critical to remember that *oriṣa* are primal energies, not egoic humans. This having been said, the Yoruba also believe that these energies can be entreated to act on behalf of humanity.

⁶⁴⁴ K. Abimbola, *Yorùbá Culture*, 44, 50.

⁶⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 27.

⁶⁴⁶ Olomo, *Core of Fire*, 46.

These forces can act as guiding spirits, as healing energies, and as general benefactors. The *oriṣa* are energies and personifications of the forces of nature with which humans have a personal and intimate relationship and which mediate on our behalf by means of ritual and *ebo* (sacrifice/offering). *Ebo* represents the principle of reciprocity by which balance and harmony are achieved.

To fulfill the wants and needs of the orisa and the ancestors, practitioners make sacrifices to them. In return, the orisa and ancestors are expected to meet the needs of the practitioners. This is believed to be the mutual exchange of ashé.⁶⁴⁷

Ebo involves not only the offering of objects but also the offering of oneself. In addition to material giving, *ebo* also encompasses the cessation of behaviors that are counterproductive to the attainment of one's destiny or the achievement of good character (*iwa pele*), the highest Yoruba virtue. In the words of Maulana Karenga, the latter is *ebo* as "moral practice." *Ebo* can entail "an expanded dedication, discipline and effort—in a word, an expanded giving of self."⁶⁴⁸

Ritual is the means of maintaining the balance between diverse forces; it is the technology that allows the manipulation of subtle energies. Ritual is also used to:

⁶⁴⁷ Clark, "Santeria," 123.

⁶⁴⁸ Karenga, *Odù Ifá*, vi, vii.

correct perceived violations in nature ...[as] the principal tool used to approach [the] unseen world in a way that will rearrange the structure of the physical world and bring about material transformation.⁶⁴⁹

As well, ritual itself can be an *ebo* prescribed as restitution to restore balance in the life of an individual or community. The requirements of *ebo* are not limited to the sphere of humanity but extend to the realm of the *oriṣa*.

Each *oriṣa* has a specific domain of major influence with numerous manifestations reflective of the vastness of the energy embodied. The *oriṣa* manifest within nature, within the individual, and within society. Relationship between individual and *oriṣa* can be a deeply personal communion. At the most mundane level, think of the relationship one can have with a tree or the response of plants that are lovingly spoken to. *Oriṣa* can also be brought to bear at the macro level of society.

The latter is most spectacularly displayed in royal ritual that functions to elicit the revitalizing and protective powers of the *oriṣa* on behalf of king and community.

When fed with sacrifices, flattered with praise, and glorified by drummers and dancers in commemorative displays, the *òrìṣà* will protect and revitalize the local community...the king is “invested” with the *òrìṣà*'s power (*àṣẹ*).⁶⁵⁰

Olodumare is said to have brought forth the *oriṣa*, which manifest Olodumare's principles in nature and among humans. There is a tradition that maintains that all *oriṣa* are derived from “Orisha, as the primordial *òrìṣà* was

⁶⁴⁹ Ogunade, “Environmental Issues in Yoruba Religion,” 5.

⁶⁵⁰ Apter, *Black Critics and Kings*, 99.

called.”⁶⁵¹ Orisha was fragmented into myriad pieces when his slave attempted to kill him by mowing him down with a boulder.

In an attempt to save Orisha, Orunmila gathered as many of the pieces as he could find and placed them in a calabash “named Orishanla, or ‘the Great Orisha.’ The scattered pieces which he failed to collect became the different *òrìṣà* found throughout Yorubaland.”⁶⁵² It is interesting to note that this tale is also an origin story for Orishanla (Obatala).

Each *oriṣa* is associated with specific functions and has many aspects that often seem paradoxical. The suggestion is made that it would be useful to study the praise names (*oriki*) and the stories (*itan*) associated with the *oriṣa*.

In them we find many different characteristics and sacred names for one Orisa. Several of these will translate into seemingly contradictory or non-linear concepts, but they help to illustrate how each energy in existence contains within itself every expression imaginable.⁶⁵³

Widely acknowledged as the Yoruba elder deity, Olodumare or Olorun is said to be the eldest child of the “King of the Air (Ọba Orufi)”⁶⁵⁴ and, as recorded in a verse of *odu* Ofun from *Sixteen Cowries*⁶⁵⁵ and a verse from IdiOkranran in *Odu Ifa*,⁶⁵⁶ the mother of Olodumare is Python (Ere). “Yoruba folk etymology

⁶⁵¹ Ibid., 154.

⁶⁵² Ibid.

⁶⁵³ Ogbé’Fun, “Many Faces of Orisa,” par. 4.

⁶⁵⁴ Bascom, *Ifa Divination*, 110.

⁶⁵⁵ Bascom, *Sixteen Cowries*, 215.

⁶⁵⁶ Bascom, *Ifa Divination*, 323.

derives Olodumare's name from Olodu-omo-ere, 'Olodu, the child of a female python.'"⁶⁵⁷

Though there are myths that speak to the biune or gynandrous nature of Olodumare,⁶⁵⁸ one more accurately conceives of Olodumare as beyond gender or form, as "the Supreme Creator Essence"⁶⁵⁹ or as "the Infinite Mystery"⁶⁶⁰ or possibly the Big Bang of astrophysics. Olodumare exists only in spirit;⁶⁶¹ "he' is not he, nor she, but is pure force—*àshe* of *àshe*."⁶⁶² Most significantly, Olodumare is not to be confounded with an Abrahamic-type God.

Unlike other *oriṣa* Olodumare has never spent time in the physical realm, and unlike other *oriṣa* there are no shrines or priesthoods devoted to Olodumare's worship. "Olódùmarè is believed to be too mighty to be captured by any anthropomorphic, artistic, literary, or iconographic representation."⁶⁶³

Nonetheless, Olodumare is involved in the lives and endeavors of humanity.⁶⁶⁴ As the *oriṣa* are thought to be manifestations of Olodumare, so

⁶⁵⁷ Lawal, "Ejiwapo," 26 .

⁶⁵⁸ Lawal, "Ejiwapo.

⁶⁵⁹ Badejo, *Ọṣun Ṣẹ̀ẹ̀gẹ̀sí*, 56.

⁶⁶⁰ Olomo, *Core of Fire*, 125.

⁶⁶¹ K. Abimbola, *Yorùbá Culture*.

⁶⁶² Thompson, *Flash of the Spirit*, 74.

⁶⁶³ K. Abimbola, *Yorùbá Culture*, 52.

⁶⁶⁴ Bascom, *Ifa Divination*.

Olodumare is seen “as containing all the Orisha within himself, and is often pictured as being composed of myriads of eyes.”⁶⁶⁵ This representation is used in the contemporary Nigerian (Nollywood) film *Osa Eleye*, another name for *odu* OsaMeji.

Orunmila, also known by the earlier name, Ela, is said to be the second child of the King of the Air and is referred to as “the father of the diviners,” renowned for his wisdom. As noted many of the multiple names ascribed to an *oriṣa* can be classified as praise-names or *oriki*, describing attributes or characteristics. For example Orunmila is said to mean ““Sky God recognizes Ẹla’ (Ọlọrun mọ Ẹla).” Among other names, Orunmila is also called Ifá and Alumo.

The name Ifa is interpreted as meaning scraping, because he “scrapes” (fa) sickness and other evils away from those who are afflicted, or because he scrapes the powder on the divining tray in marking the features...Ifa is also referred to as Alumọ, meaning “To beat and know” or that he beats palm nuts and knows the future.⁶⁶⁶

Orunmila is also referred to as Eleri-ipin (the witness of fate/creation) because he was on hand to witness Olodumare’s imprint upon the dawn of the universe. The name also refers to the fact that because he was on hand at the time of creation, Orunmila is privileged to know every person’s destiny, their “*ipin* (predestined share).”⁶⁶⁷

Details are given about Olodumare and Orunmila because there is relatively little contestation as to their rank and roles within the Yoruba cosmos.

⁶⁶⁵ Talbot, *Peoples of Southern Nigeria*, 29.

⁶⁶⁶ Bascom, *Ifa Divination*, 110, 107.

⁶⁶⁷ W. Abimbola, *Ifá Literary Corpus*, 113.

However, as seen in the discussion of creation myths the seniority, role, gender, and relationships between *oriṣa* are open to lengthy and complex debate with political reverberations.

Every kingdom...[positions] its own *òrìṣà* in relation to its dominant cults and corresponding bases of political power...Pantheons vary *within* kingdoms as well...Each *òrìṣà* cult organizes the pantheon around its own central deity.⁶⁶⁸

Attention now turns to discussion of the Yoruba conception of the universe within which the above and additional cosmological forces reside.

Yoruba Ontology

It is necessary to understand the role of religion in Yoruba traditional life.

As is true of most peoples in Africa in the context of traditional religion, there is no clear distinction between the secular and religious.⁶⁶⁹ Idowu confirms this as the Yoruba ontological worldview when stating:

In all things, they are religious. Religion forms the foundation and all-governing principle of life for them. ... It forms the themes of songs, makes topics for minstrelsy, finds vehicles in myth, folktales, proverbs and sayings, and is the basis of philosophy.⁶⁷⁰

Yoruba are linked by shared language, traditions, and religious beliefs and practices.⁶⁷¹ Although there exists this underlying unity, there is also wide diversity in religious thought and practice among the Yoruba.⁶⁷² However, among

⁶⁶⁸ Apter, *Black Critics and Kings*, 156.

⁶⁶⁹ Mbiti, *African Religions*.

⁶⁷⁰ Idowu, *Olódùmarè*, 5.

⁶⁷¹ Ibid.

⁶⁷² Lawson, *Religions in Africa*.

the unifying principles of Yoruba religion are included the concept of an original self-existent deity or deities, the interpenetration of the world of spirit (*orun*) and the material realm (*aye*), respect for the *oriṣa* (deities/forces of nature), ancestor veneration, practice of ritual, divination, and sacrifice/offering (*ebo*) as mediation.⁶⁷³

Ifa divination is central in the lives of the Yoruba because every major decision and event is carried out in consultation with *Ifa* to ascertain the right course of action or to determine required prescriptions to remedy problems. The function of the priest/ess is to mediate between the human and divine worlds. In the case of *Ifa* divination, the *odu* and *ṣeṣe* revealed to the priest/ess imparts to the querent the wishes of particular *oriṣa* in regard to the resolution of the querent's problem.

Each of the 256 *odu* reveals an archetypal situation that was resolved in the mythic past through sacrifice to an *oriṣha*. In the thousands of *Ifa* poems, the *oriṣhas* are organized into a community of spirits whose *ashe* [power] can be brought to bear on the problems of individual men and women in need.⁶⁷⁴

Of primary importance, however, is the use of *Ifa* in regards to an individual's destiny. The Yoruba believe that birth entails "a failure of memory" in this regard. It is thought that "humans have forgotten their fate and that such knowledge can be recovered through the process of divination."⁶⁷⁵

⁶⁷³ Fatunmbi, *Iwa-pele*.

⁶⁷⁴ Murphy, *African Spirits in America*, 20.

⁶⁷⁵ Lawson, *Religions in Africa*, 60.

Expanding upon the previously noted precepts, as stated, the Yoruba believe that every aspect of nature is imbued with *aṣe*, spiritual power. This *aṣe*, in the language of physics, is maintained to be electromagnetism. “According to Western science all of Creation is a manifestation of electromagnetic impulses. According to *Ifa* all of Creation is an expression of *àṣẹ*.”⁶⁷⁶

Verger further states that “*aṣẹ* is neither good nor bad, neither moral nor perverse, neither pure nor impure, any more than electrical or nuclear energy.”⁶⁷⁷ Just as electromagnetism is articulated in the invisible realm of energy through to the realm of matter, *aṣe* finds expression in the invisible and visible realms.

Orun is the realm of the *imolè* or invisible forces in nature, and *ayé* is the realm of the *oriṣa* or visible forces in nature that find basic expression in the four elements. *Orun* and *ayé* are often spoken of as sky and earth, and mistakenly interpreted as the realm of up in the heavens versus down on the ground. However, *orun* and *ayé* refer to differing planes of interpenetrating reality. The visible and invisible coexist in shared space.⁶⁷⁸

The Yoruba have an intimate and sacred relationship with nature. Respect for spirit is evidenced by the fact that “any violation of nature’s integrity requires rituals to appease the spirits that dwell in the environment.”⁶⁷⁹ One must atone for one’s misdeed. Respect is shown for the smallest creatures, even the

⁶⁷⁶ Fatunmbi, *Ifá Proverbs*, 183.

⁶⁷⁷ Verger, “The Yorùbá High God,” 30.

⁶⁷⁸ Fatunmbi, *Iwa-pele*.

⁶⁷⁹ Ogunade, “Environmental Issues in Yoruba Religion,” 4.

insect, as made clear in the Yoruba saying: "Side step your feet. Do not kill that insect. That insect you do not regard. God also created."⁶⁸⁰

A fundamental principle of *Ifa* is the maintenance of balance and harmony between **all** the forces of nature, the invisible and visible. By working to maintain this balance the individual is working to be in harmony with his/her highest destiny. The teachings contained within *Ifa* serve to guide this spiritual attainment. "In *Ifá*, spiritual transformation is understood to be any expansion of consciousness that produces a deeper connection with the Unity of Creation."⁶⁸¹

It is important to keep in mind that balance is not a static equilibrium. Rather it is the dance of energies constantly adjusting to newly evolving realities. The individual must constantly adapt to life changes in the quest for balance and unity with creation. Divination and ritual are critical to this endeavor.

Knowledge that adjusts and evolves is fluid and its relevance maintained because it addresses the changing needs of individuals and community. *Ifa* is described as:

a cosmology that strives to keep the spiritual and mundane worlds in balance, to keep all of its myriad forces harmonized despite the vagaries of existence, and to keep humanity attuned to its own potentialities and pitfalls.⁶⁸²

Ifa has evolved and adapted throughout time to address ongoing challenges to balance and harmony. In speaking generally of African traditional religions, John Mbiti states: "These traditions have been handed down from forbearers, and each

⁶⁸⁰ Ibid., 5.

⁶⁸¹ Fatunmbi, *Ifá Proverbs*, 181-182.

⁶⁸² Badejo, *Ọṣun Ṣẹ̀ẹ̀gèsí*, 3.

generation takes them up with modifications suitable to its own historical situation and needs.”⁶⁸³

Ifa is a reflection of indigenous mind in which either/or, right/wrong, good/bad are not the crystallized oppositional dichotomies they represent to the Cartesian mindset. Forces in apparent opposition are viewed as the necessary part and parcel of life’s balance. Using the story (*itan*) of Oṣun and the 16 male *oriṣa* from *Odu Ifa OṣeTaura*, Badejo concludes:

Thus good and evil are not measured merely in terms of offenses against the individual or even against the physical community. Instead, the wisdom invested within the corpus of *Ifá* oracle presupposes that a rupture is often simply one aspect of the destructive-creative synergy of the universe...Penance and retribution, therefore, are not always aspects of punishment for crime, but can be the first acts of a resumed awareness...and an appeal to the axiom of cosmic adjustment, or restoration.⁶⁸⁴

This “ambiguous dialectic” is characterized as essential within the indigenous mind perspective.⁶⁸⁵ Death and life go hand-in-hand. There does not seem to exist the Western obsession with conquering death. Health and well-being are valued, but the place of death is also recognized and honored. “The Yoruba hold that God created death for the purpose of recalling the person whose time on earth is fulfilled.”⁶⁸⁶ The ancestors are revered; their wisdom and counsel, imparted in dreams and brought forth through divination, is sought. The

⁶⁸³ Mbiti, *African Religions*, 3.

⁶⁸⁴ Badejo, *Oṣun Ṣẹ̀ẹ̀gẹ̀sí*, 69.

⁶⁸⁵ MacGaffey, “Cultural Tradition,” 19.

⁶⁸⁶ Mbiti, *African Religions*, 45.

wind that destroys is also honored as the wind that sweeps away outworn and decayed structures.

Paradox and ambiguity are accepted and acceptable. Dichotomy is complementary as contrasted to oppositional. Therefore, it is easy to ascertain that:

the Yoruba view the cosmos as a dynamic interplay of such opposites as heaven and earth, day and night, male and female, physical and metaphysical, body and soul, inner and outer, hot and cold, hard and soft, left and right, life and death, success and failure, and so on. This oppositional complementarity is evident in the popular saying: *Tibi, Tire la dá ilé ayé* (The physical world evolved out of Good and Evil).⁶⁸⁷

Other sayings with the same theme underscore the centrality of this concept within the Yoruba worldview:

“Buburu ati fere ni o nrin po” (“Bad and good things work together”)...“Aigba ire, ka ma gba ibi” (“Anything Good has some Evil in it”) and “Ninu ikoko dudu ni eko funfun ti njade” (“The white porridge comes from a black pot/A good thing may come from a bad one”).⁶⁸⁸

There is a moral judgment in the Western concept of evil that differs from the concept of evil among the Yoruba. In the West one would not label as evil natural phenomena such as earthquakes, floods, or hurricanes. Evil in the West carries with it a conscious intent to commit egregious harm. Although calamitous natural phenomena are labeled “acts of God,” conscious intent is not ascribed to natural phenomena.

However, a natural occurrence leading to grave loss is considered a personified evil among the Yoruba. Loss is one of the *ajogun* or “warriors against

⁶⁸⁷ Lawal, *Gẹ̀lẹ̀dẹ̀ Spectacle*, 22.

⁶⁸⁸ Lawal, “Ejiwapo,” 30.

humanity.”⁶⁸⁹ “The malevolent forces are the earthly calamities militating against human happiness and well-being.”⁶⁹⁰ Lawal adds barrenness and drought to the generally cited eight *ajogun* that afflict both humanity and the deities, including: “Ikú (Death), Àrùn (Disease), Òfò (Loss), Ègbà (Paralysis), Òràn (Big Trouble), Èpè (Curse), Èwòn (Imprisonment), Èṣe (Affliction).”⁶⁹¹

Division of the Yoruba cosmos places these malevolent forces on the left side. Beneficent forces, including the *oriṣa*, are found on the right side. The two sides, however, are not statically defined. The left side is also attributed to the female and characteristics such as calmness, peace, patience, and coolness. The right side is attributed to the male and attendant representation of being hard, rash, violent, and hot. The following prayer for a successful festival illustrates this point:

Our festival has arrived today,
May this festival turn out to be female in nature,
It is in femaleness that peace is buried,
It is the female that comforts,
It is the female that soothes,
May our festival not turn out to be male,
For it is in the male that toughness lies.⁶⁹²

In addition to the forces that occupy the left and the forces that occupy the right, there are those that straddle both. Eṣu and *àjé* are profound embodiments of ambiguity and complementary opposites within Yoruba culture. Interestingly,

⁶⁸⁹ Lawal, *Gẹ̀lẹ̀dẹ̀ Spectacle*, 22.

⁶⁹⁰ Ibid.

⁶⁹¹ K. Abimbola, *Yorùbá Culture*, 49.

⁶⁹² Apter, *Black Critics and Kings*, 111.

both were maligned and assigned stereotyped portrayals as one-sidedly negative beings with the establishment of Christianity in Yorubaland.⁶⁹³ The dualistic Christian mindset has difficulty with nuanced personifications of good and evil as represented by Eṣu and àjé.

Eṣu straddles both sides because he is the neutral “mediator between all the entities and forces on both sides of the right/left divide.”⁶⁹⁴ On the other hand, àjé are not considered to be neutral. “They are allies of the Ajogun,”⁶⁹⁵ those forces that militate against humanity. In fact, Wande Abimbola includes them among the *ajogun*.⁶⁹⁶ However, because àjé also perform beneficent acts, they are customarily considered as straddling both the left and the right sides of the cosmic divide. More detailed discussion of àjé can be found in Chapters 6 through 8.

Among other things, Eṣu “is the guardian of the àṣẹ”⁶⁹⁷ —“charm of command”⁶⁹⁸ —the vital force permeating all matter and which “*Olódùmarè* used to create the universe.”⁶⁹⁹ Kola Abimbola positions Eṣu as one of the primordial

⁶⁹³ Beier, “Historical and Psychological Significance.”

⁶⁹⁴ K. Abimbola, *Yorùbá Culture*, 49.

⁶⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 50.

⁶⁹⁶ W. Abimbola, *Sixteen Great Poems*.

⁶⁹⁷ Badejo, *Ọṣun Ṣẹ̀ẹ̀gẹ̀sí*, 43.

⁶⁹⁸ W. Abimbola, *Ifá Literary Corpus*, 187.

⁶⁹⁹ Badejo, *Ọṣun Ṣẹ̀ẹ̀gẹ̀sí*, 43.

deities along with Olodumare, Obatala, and Orunmila.⁷⁰⁰ However, several versions of *Odu Ifa* OṣeTaura speak of Eṣu's birth. Epega and Neimark remark that "Odù Ọṣétúrá speaks of the incarnation of Èṣù-Ọ̀dàrà."⁷⁰¹

The concept of rebirth is part of the Yoruba worldview⁷⁰² and subject of the verse of *odu IworiOdi* contained in Epega and Neimark.⁷⁰³ Therefore, Eṣu could be primordial and also born of Oṣun into an incarnation in physical manifestation depending on how one reads these *odu*.

Pursuant to her promise, it is the birth of a male child by Oṣun that stays her hand from forever impeding the work of the male *oriṣa*. Here, Eṣu as OṣeTaura is the son of Oṣun and Orunmila and is central in his role as mediator between the realms, ensuring that sacrifices reach the deities.⁷⁰⁴ Poetically stated: he is "the *oriṣa* who transforms the sacrifices of men into food for the gods."⁷⁰⁵

In the case of beings who refuse to perform *ebo*, Eṣu enacts the policing and punitive role of foiling plans and ambitions, thwarting receipt of blessings, or

⁷⁰⁰ K. Abimbola, *Yorùbá Culture*.

⁷⁰¹ Epega and Neimark, *Sacred Ifa Oracle*, 528.

⁷⁰² An individual is believed to possess three souls. The most important among these, the ancestral guardian soul (*iponri*), reincarnates and is involved in the choice of one's destiny (W. Abimbola, *Ifá Literary Corpus*).

⁷⁰³ Epega and Neimark, *Sacred Ifa Oracle*, 186.

⁷⁰⁴ W. Abimbola, "Bag of Wisdom."

⁷⁰⁵ H. J. Drewal et al. *Yoruba: Nine Centuries of African Art*, 22.

conveying negative consequences. Thus “the saying ‘*Ẹni ó rúbọ l’Èṣùú gbè*’ (Èṣù favours only those who have performed the prescribed sacrifice).”⁷⁰⁶

Obatala also has a hand in Eṣu’s birth because he changes the sex of the child in Oṣun’s womb; he “commanded the fetus to change into male with immediate effect.”⁷⁰⁷ In conversation with Rowland Abiodun, however, he posits the fascinating proposition that Oṣun gave birth to Eṣu by parthenogenesis; “almost the equivalent to immaculate conception.”⁷⁰⁸ He asserts that her power is such that she has no need of a male to produce a child. Oṣun “actually means *the source*...somebody who is the source, doesn’t need any other.”⁷⁰⁹

One of Oṣun’s symbolic icons, the vulture, is associated with her manifestation or road of Ibu’kole. The vulture is also associated with Neith, the Egyptian goddess of the heavens, who gave birth to the sun, the earth, and the Egyptian pantheon. Interestingly, “Neith was associated with parthenogenesis,”⁷¹⁰ as was the vulture.

In our interview Rowland Abiodun goes on to speak of Eṣu as the “principle of unpredictability” above and beyond the conception of Eṣu as trickster.

Even more than the trickster, more than the trickster, is the post-modernist essence in Yoruba culture. It’s the principle of unpredictability. You know

⁷⁰⁶ W. Abimbola, *Ifá Literary Corpus*, 187.

⁷⁰⁷ W. Abimbola, “Bag of Wisdom,” 145.

⁷⁰⁸ Rowland Abiodun, interview with the author, January 26, 2010, Amherst, Massachusetts.

⁷⁰⁹ *Ibid.*

⁷¹⁰ Jeffries, “Image of Woken,” 116.

when you've done everything right, you can be wrong. He is the one that explains why two perfectly good friends can have a fight, even though none of them ever intended to fight. The one that turns right into wrong, that turns wrong into right. Eṣu is the one that sleeps on the veranda—the veranda was too small for him. That sleeps in the house—the house was too small for him. He stands up; he cannot look into the cooking pot because he was too short. He sleeps in a nutshell; at last he could stretch himself. Eṣu hits his stone until the stone starts to bleed. The stone starts to bleed, not Eṣu. Eṣu throws his stone today and kills the bird yesterday. What kind of being did Oṣun give birth to? And this is called OṣeTaura. So we, males, asked for it. We got it from Oṣun. How about that for a gift? (laughter)

Eṣu's iconography often depicts this *oriṣa* as both male and female. A reason for this depiction is "because he is a mediator above sexual distinction...bringing opposed forces into contact...[and] mediates between all the conflicting forces of the universe."⁷¹¹

Gender Balance: Female/Male Complementarity

As noted, *Ifa* is the repository of Yoruba cultural heritage. In line with the maintenance of cosmic harmony explicated within *Ifa* is the centrality of the concept of balance between male and female. This balance, central within Yoruba ontology, is a reflection of the balance found in the natural world. It is reflected in the structure of the *odu* themselves, and is often reflected in *oriṣa* worship where clothing can have symbolic significance. "A woman wearing pants and a skirt and a man wearing pants and an apron represent the union of opposites which is a central theme in *Ifá* scripture."⁷¹²

With regard to the structure of the *odu*, the first two *odu* Ejiogbe and Oyeku Meji are said to give birth to the remaining 14 major *odu*. Ejiogbe, the first *odu*

⁷¹¹ Witte, "Invisible Mothers," 307-308.

⁷¹² Fatunmbi, *Ifá Proverbs*, 31.

“speaks of light, good, general welfare, victory over enemies, spiritual awakenings, long life, and peace of mind.” It is considered a masculine *odu*. Oyeku Meji on the other hand “signifies darkness and unhappiness and warns of death, sickness, worries, and a bad omen, yet also carries with it the solution to all these problems.”⁷¹³

Oyeku Meji is considered feminine. The only uniquely feminine and uniquely masculine *odu* are Oyeku and Ogbe, respectively. All other *odu*, the remaining 14 major *odu* and the 240 combined or minor *odu*, are a blend of masculine and feminine elements.⁷¹⁴

In addition to their inherent blend of masculine and feminine elements, the position of the *odu* components on the divining tray also has significance. As noted, each of the minor *odu* is a combination of two major *odu*. “The right component of an *odu* represents the male, linear, or temporal side; the left component represents the female, spiritual, and emotional side.”⁷¹⁵ A well-trained *babalawo* or *ijanifa* will be able to discern the often subtle significance of placement as pertinent to the client’s issue.

The fact that it is the priestess who places the ruler’s crown upon his head is one example of this balance enacted in the socio-political sphere.

Politically it creates a balance of power because the women can decline to crown the Chief until areas of dispute are settled. Spiritually it ensures that

⁷¹³ Epega and Neimark, *Sacred Ifa Oracle*, 1, 6.

⁷¹⁴ *Ibid.*

⁷¹⁵ *Ibid.*, xv.

the balance of Forces that exist in Nature remain reflected in the political process.⁷¹⁶

More significantly, however, it is the spiritual power of the priestess, the spiritual agency of the feminine that empowers the king and renders his position sacred.

The spiritual power for which the priestess is a conduit is the agency that invests the king's authority. Additionally, the priestess empowers the crown by incorporation of "oṣù...a medicinal package"⁷¹⁷ that is sewn under the top of the crown and often concealed under beaded bird motifs. "In the past the faces of kings were not to be seen, for it is in the crown, not the face that royal power resides."⁷¹⁸

Yoruba artwork and iconography also reflect the primacy of female/male interdependence and balance. In Yoruba art "linking of male and female...is expressive of the cultural theme of dependence of the sexes upon one another for the actualization of their essential natures (iwa)." Sculptures of male and female with interlocked arms or legs are one example.⁷¹⁹

More striking are dual-gender sculptures exhibiting both male and female anatomy. In terms of iconography, *edan* are a female/male pair of small bronze

⁷¹⁶ Fatunmbi, *Oshun*, 12.

⁷¹⁷ Abiodun, "Hidden Power," 21.

⁷¹⁸ H. J. Drewal et al. *Yoruba: Nine Centuries of African Art*, 30.

⁷¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 71.

statues that stand independently but are linked to each other, usually by a chain.

Edan are ritually associated with certain Yoruba organizations and *oriṣa*.⁷²⁰

The cosmology of the Yoruba has maintained the wisdom of respect and reverence for the feminine. Both masculine and feminine energies are recognized as an integral and necessary part of creation. The Yoruba cosmological orientation “prescribes balance and a unity of opposites among and within the eclectic forces of divinity, humanity, and nature alike.”⁷²¹

Within the *odu* are stories (*itan*) that highlight the importance of gender balance. Most often it is male hubris that sparks the imbalance and subsequent problems. Speculatively, this aspect is a possible reflection of social reality wherein women are purported to be under the authority of men even within matrilineage systems.⁷²² Among the Yoruba adult males expect to be accorded public deference by women that is in contrast to the latter’s perceived innate power.⁷²³

Borrowing the title of Peggy Reeves Sanday’s groundbreaking study of gender relations across cultures, Witte states that “male dominance and female power characterize the position of men and women in Yoruba society.”⁷²⁴

⁷²⁰ Lawal, “Ejiwapo.”

⁷²¹ Badejo, “Authority and Discourse,” 139.

⁷²² Little, *African Women in Towns*, 6.

⁷²³ Witte, “Invisible Mothers.”

⁷²⁴ *Ibid.*, 302.

Arguably, the most popular tales depicting this dynamic are “Town of Women” and the account of Oṣun and the male *oriṣa* contained in *Odu Ifa OṣeTaura*.

For obscure reasons but presumably because of indignities suffered, township women decide to leave their homes and live amongst themselves forming the Town of Women. This *itan* is part of *odu Oṣe* and referenced from Bascom’s *Sixteen Cowries*. The story of the Town of Women is also found in *Odu Ifa OgbeOsa* as summarized by Şangode. In the latter, it is because the men of Ife “decided to antagonize *iyami aje* [that they]...withdrew to the town of *Ilu Eleye*.”⁷²⁵

The women’s power was such that neither the wisdom of Ifá nor the might of the *oriṣa* could subdue them. “The women’s separation exposes the vulnerability and potential annihilation of humanity and deity alike, and again illuminates their interdependency.”⁷²⁶ Just as both women and men are necessary to perpetuate the cosmic cycle of birth, death (ancestors), and rebirth, it is humans that ensure the worship and, therefore, survival of the *oriṣa*.

Waging war on the Town of Women was counterproductive as all “efforts were neutralized by the superior prowess of the *iyami*.”⁷²⁷ Upon offering the prescribed sacrifice (*ebo*), *odu Oṣe* in *Sixteen Cowries* reports that Oṣun entered the town drumming on a calabash, dancing and singing:

⁷²⁵ Şangode, *The Goddesses*, 88.

⁷²⁶ Badejo, *Oṣun Şẹ̀ẹ̀gẹ̀sí*, 86.

⁷²⁷ Şangode, *The Goddesses*, 88.

“Sewele, sewele,
“Oshun is coming to play;
“Oshun does not know how to fight
“Sewele, sewele.”⁷²⁸

It is the gentle, playful aspect of Oṣun and the enjoyment of the women that bring them back to the community. Badejo notes the similarity of Oṣun’s tactic to the Gelede ritual of propitiation to *àjé* “perhaps suggesting that women’s power itself must be placated and cajoled.”⁷²⁹

Before considering OṣeTaura, demonstrating the importance of the male principle is a tale of Ogun, the *oriṣa* who is the Yoruba epitome of the masculine. Because his hard work on behalf of humanity and *oriṣa* alike was ill-appreciated, Ogun retired deep into the forest. Initially his absence was barely noticed. However, he was missed as iron implements became dull and worn and as need arose for his talents and tools—machetes to clear bush, plows for fields, arrow tips for Ochossi, sharpening of Oya’s sword, weaponry for soldiers, and so on.⁷³⁰

Again, the task of bringing Ogun back to civilization was not an easy one. Many *oriṣa* failed in the attempt. Oṣun’s mesmerizing honey enticed Ogun back to town at which point Ogun and his contributions to society were richly

⁷²⁸ Bascom, *Sixteen Cowries*, 417.

⁷²⁹ Badejo, *Oṣun Ṣẹ̀ẹ̀gẹ̀sí*, 89.

⁷³⁰ Castellanos, “A River of Many Turns.”

celebrated.⁷³¹ “Rejection of men, like rejection of women, causes cosmic rupture, an imbalance, a threat to human and divine continuity.”⁷³²

That Oṣun is central to both tales is not coincidence. Among her many aspects and roles, Oṣun is credited with bringing civilization to humanity. But most importantly, she bestows the gift of children thus perpetuating the cosmic cycle. “From her *oriki* (‘praise epithets’) one learns that Oṣun...governs ‘life, death, and rebirth.’”⁷³³

Odu OṣeTaura is probably the most well-known Yoruba lesson on the importance of respect for the power and place of the female principle in creation. Some of the details vary from version to version. For example, were the 17 *oriṣa* protagonists of the story the leaders of the 401 *oriṣa* sent to earth;⁷³⁴ were they the first wave of the 401 *oriṣa* to be sent;⁷³⁵ or were the 17 the only ones to be sent?⁷³⁶ However, the important content is the same across versions.

Olodumare sent 17 *oriṣa* to earth, including Oṣun, instructing them to make the earth a pleasing abode. Oṣun provided for the comfort of the 16 male *oriṣa* but was shunned as they went about their various tasks. However, no

⁷³¹ Ibid.

⁷³² Badejo, *Oṣun Ṣẹ̀ẹ̀gẹ̀sí*, 86.

⁷³³ Olupona, “Yorùbá Goddesses,” 128.

⁷³⁴ Fatunde, *Oṣun the Manly Woman*.

⁷³⁵ W. Abimbola, “Bag of Wisdom.”

⁷³⁶ Abiodun, “Hidden Power.”

endeavor the *oriṣa* undertook came to successful fruition. As recorded in

OṣeTaura:

They all decided not to countenance Ọṣun in their mission...
They never knew she was an “àjẹ.”
When they were coming from heaven,
God chose all good things;
He also chose their keeper,
And this was a woman.
All women are àjẹ.
And because all other Odù left Ọṣun out,
Nothing they did was successful.⁷³⁷

Orunmila went to Olodumare to tell of the *oriṣas*' plight on earth,
whereupon Olodumare inquired as to whether Oṣun had been consulted.
“Òrúnmìlà replied that since she was a woman, they did not involve her.”
Olodumare instructed that the male *oriṣa* were to implore Oṣun's aid. When Oṣun
decided to give her blessings, after the male *oriṣa* had performed *ebo* (as
restitution) to her, all went well.⁷³⁸

Although the foregoing is a much abbreviated and simplified telling of a
major verse (*ese*) within OṣeTaura, the lesson is not lost. Without the aid of the
lone female *oriṣa*, Oṣun, the single and combined powers of the 16 male *oriṣa*
came to naught. The male *oriṣa* working alone created imbalance. When they
returned from seeking the counsel of Olodumare, the *oriṣa* went to Oṣun and said:

We have been to the Creator. And it was there we discovered that all Odù
were derived from you [Ọṣun], and that our suffering would continue if we
failed to recognize and obey you.⁷³⁹

⁷³⁷ Ibid., 16.

⁷³⁸ W. Abimbola, “Bag of Wisdom,” 144.

⁷³⁹ Abiodun, “Hidden Power,” 17.

Here is seen the complexity of myth as oral tradition. Two renderings of OṣeTaura by two eminent Yoruba scholars exhibit important variations. Rowland Abiodun's version in "Bag of Wisdom" includes the detail that Oṣun is *àjé* and that all women are *àjé*. Wande Abimbola's version in "Hidden Power" includes a telling of how it is that *Oro* and *Egungun* became taboo for women. Oṣun established these taboos, it would appear, as a way of giving males a domain of their own, a counter-balance to her tremendous power. Upon establishing the taboos she cautions the male *oriṣa*: "but all other things you are doing, you must involve Oshun in them."⁷⁴⁰

There is a wealth of symbolic meaning in OṣeTaura that points to the power of Oṣun and the feminine. An entire thesis could be written on this *odu* alone. However, one example of this power is the following. The *oriṣa* in Abiodun's variant are referred to as *odu*, with the male *oriṣa* representing the 16 principal *Ifa odu* spoken of earlier.

Ifa divination is done using *ikin*, sixteen palm nuts representing the principal *odu* and "a seventeenth small ivory object called *olórí-ikin* ('The principal *ikin*'). The *olórí-ikin* reminds us of Oṣun, the seventeenth Odù with whom the destinies of the remaining sixteen Odù rested."⁷⁴¹ Stated directly, Oṣun controlled the ability of the male *oriṣa* to realize their destinies, to manifest their *aṣe*.

⁷⁴⁰ W. Abimbola, "Bag of Wisdom," 145.

⁷⁴¹ Abiodun, "Hidden Power," 15-16.

The lessons of OṣeTaura apply to the metaphysical and mundane realms. “Within the metaphysical realm, both male and female principles encompass life and operate jointly to maintain cosmological balance.”⁷⁴² In the realm of earthly existence, “thematically, this narrative illustrates that sexism generates chaos, and implies that men do come to terms with women’s roles even within a patriarchal system like the Yorùbá.”⁷⁴³

Yoruba society is patrilineal and characterized by patriarchy. Though this is the case, the style of patriarchy practiced by the Yoruba is distinct from Islamic and Christian patriarchy in at least one critical area. The Yoruba ontological orientation is one in which the feminine is revered and viewed as a central component in the balance of the universe as well as in maintaining social order and functioning.⁷⁴⁴

It is evident by its inclusion in *Odu Ifa* that sexism is a reality within Yoruba culture. However, equally evident is that this sexism is not condoned.⁷⁴⁵ Yoruba men have been described as holding ambivalence towards the women of their society.⁷⁴⁶ However, Yoruba patriarchy is not inherently misogynistic, unlike the patriarchy of the Abrahamic traditions in which woman is viewed as the downfall of

⁷⁴² Steady, “African Feminism,” 8.

⁷⁴³ Badejo, *Ọṣun Sẹ̀ẹ̀gẹ̀sí*, 179.

⁷⁴⁴ Olajubu, *Women in the Yoruba Religious Sphere*.

⁷⁴⁵ Badejo, *Ọṣun Sẹ̀ẹ̀gẹ̀sí*.

⁷⁴⁶ Abiodun, “Hidden Power.”

man, responsible for origin of sin and, therefore, destined to an existence of suffering.

Filomina Steady maintains that there exists parallel autonomy and complementary power between West African men and women that serves to foster “cooperation between women and men, rather than promote polarization and fragmentation.”⁷⁴⁷ Olajubu further specifies that “this neutral complementarity...refer[s] not to equality or parity but to cooperation and specified areas of control for the female as well as the male.”⁷⁴⁸

It is necessary, however, to keep in mind the caveat expressed by Olajubu of not seeing early Yorubaland as a “prepatriarchal ‘feminist Utopia.’”⁷⁴⁹ Patriarchy has been the dominant mode of social organization among the Yoruba for centuries.⁷⁵⁰ However, there is conjecture that the Yoruba were once a matriarchal culture and that the conflict concerning the gender of Oduduwa and the Oduduwa creation myth “marks transition from one philosophy of life to another, from an older to a newer social order.”⁷⁵¹

In Finch’s analysis of the emergence of patriarchy out of matriarchy, he traces the cosmogenic evolution of deities and rulership structure primarily within

⁷⁴⁷ Steady, “African Feminism,” 8.

⁷⁴⁸ Olajubu, *Women in the Yoruba Religious Sphere*, 10.

⁷⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 4.

⁷⁵⁰ Because of the distinctions of patriarchy within Yorubaland, *Iyánifa* Chief Fa’jembola Fatumise prefers use of the term patristic.

⁷⁵¹ Biobaku, “Use and Interpretation of Myth,” 21.

early Nile Valley civilizations. “The Afro-Kamitic cosmic mythos imperceptibly shifted over the millennia from a stellar to lunar to solar orientation.” He further states that “for purposes of ideological control, male deities were promoted to positions of equal or even superior importance to the maternal ones.”⁷⁵²

The biblical lands of Western Asia are part of what Diop refers to as the zone of confluence where patriarchal northern cultures and matriarchal southern cultures met and clashed. It is alleged that in the battle for dominion in the biblical lands, the matriarchy succumbed to excess including increasingly bloody sacrificial rites involving children. Such “savagery” alienated “its devotees to such an extent that patriarchal religion was able to sweep it away in late antiquity.”⁷⁵³

Whether this appraisal is true or the rationalization of patriarchy is beyond the scope of the present work. However, a similar argument is made with respect to male usurpation of female privilege in Yoruba myth. According to noted scholar Pierre Fatumbi Verger, “three periods may be distinguished”⁷⁵⁴ in Yoruba history—patriarchy, matriarchy, and a “juxtaposition of systems”⁷⁵⁵ to use Ifi Amadiume’s term. This segmentation is reflected in myth. The illustrative myth

⁷⁵² Finch, *Echoes of the Old Darkland*, 99, 100.

⁷⁵³ Diop, *Cultural Unity of Black Africa*, 109.

⁷⁵⁴ Verger, “Ìyàmi Òṣòròngà,” 62.

⁷⁵⁵ Amadiume, *Re-inventing Africa*, 78.

resembles that recounted above from OṣeTaura. This myth, however, comes from Osa Meji, an *odu* associated with the *àjé*.⁷⁵⁶

Three *oriṣa* are sent to earth. Ogun the *oriṣa* of war and the clearer of paths leads the way followed by Obarisa (Obatala) who has been accorded the power of creation. The female, Odù, is last and goes back to complain to Olodumare that she was not granted power.

Olodumare tells her “you will be their mother for all eternity; you will support the world.” He gives her the power of *ẹiyẹ*, the bird; he gives her the calabash of *ẹlẹiyẹ*, the bird keeper...Everything that she says is enacted through the power of the bird.⁷⁵⁷

Odù, also referred to as *àgbà* (a euphemism for *iyami*)⁷⁵⁸ received tremendous power that she intended to fully exercise with Olodumare’s blessing. However, s/he cautioned that the power was not to be used impetuously or abusively. If so, it would be removed. But one learns that:

Agbà the elder exaggerated (went to the extremes). She refuses to make the offerings prescribed by Ifá, refuses to listen to Olódúmarè’s suggestions, and refuses to act with calm and patience.⁷⁵⁹

Obatala’s jealousy at Odù’s power and the perceived usurpation of his creative prerogative and sovereignty prompts him to seek the counsel of Orunmila. Obatala follows the prescribed sacrifice (*ebo*), sharing consumption of some ingredients with Odù. Being pleased, Odù then shares with Obatala the

⁷⁵⁶ Bascom, *Ifa Divination*.

⁷⁵⁷ Verger, “Ìyàmi Òṣòròngà,” 59 and 61.

⁷⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁵⁹ Ibid., 60.

secret of her *egun* (ancestor) cloth.⁷⁶⁰ Odù and Obarisa (Obatala) worship *egun* together.⁷⁶¹

Later Obarisa returns, alters and dons the cloth. Speaking with the characteristic wheeze of Eégún, Obarisa frightens everyone, including Odù. “But she recognizes the cloth and she therefore knows that it is Ọbàriṣà inside. She sends her bird to perch on the shoulder of Eégún,”⁷⁶² sanctifying Obatala’s action.

In the version of OṣeTaura recounted by Wande Abimbola in “Bag of Wisdom,” it is Oṣun who decrees *egungun* taboo for women. Here, it is Odù. In both instances the gesture or concession to men was made after appeasement, one could say as a gesture of conciliation. Other tales recount that the acquisition of the *egungun* rites from women was done with more violence than here indicated.⁷⁶³ However, it was learned from “Town of Women” that it is futile to fight with *àjé*. *Àjé* must be appeased. Both Irunmole are *àjé*.⁷⁶⁴ In the current myth one witnesses the emergence of *ìyàmi àjé* in the deity Odù at the very start of creation.

Similar to Finch’s investigation, it is reportedly the excesses of the matriarchy (as represented by Odù) that prompted a patriarchal adjustment. This

⁷⁶⁰ Abiodun states that “eégún is also used as a euphemism for female genitalia.” (“Hidden Power,” 24). Could it be that Odù imparts the secret of the womb to Obatala?

⁷⁶¹ Verger, “ìyàmi Ọṣòrọ̀ngà.”

⁷⁶² Ibid., 61.

⁷⁶³ Ibid.

⁷⁶⁴ A deeper discussion of Odù and *àjé* is undertaken in Chapter 7.

female excess and patriarchal adjustment is made explicit in *Odu Ifa* Ogundalrete (Ògúndákẹ̀tẹ̀) as recorded by Epega and Neimark. The *odu* recounts that Ogun was required to carry out rituals designed by *Iyalode*.⁷⁶⁵ The next sentence reads: “All the women were punishing all the men.” Because Ogun performed the requisite sacrifice, women lost all the masking mysteries, including *egungun*. “Women were formerly the controllers of this mystery. They frightened men with it and did not, by then, obey men very much.”⁷⁶⁶

Unlike the description by Finch of the patriarchal fate that befell the biblical lands, the Yoruba experience is more in line with that of Egypt and elsewhere.

In many places, especially in Africa, compromises were worked out in social and economic relationships in order to balance the often competing demands of the entrenched clan mothers and the rising patriarchy.⁷⁶⁷

In Osa Meji, it is Obarisa who states:

Bend your knee for women,
Women brought us into the world,
That’s what makes us humans.
Women are the spirit of the earth.
Bend your knee for women.⁷⁶⁸

The work of Cheikh Anta Diop maintains that matriarchy is not hierarchical in nature; rather, as paraphrased by Nah Dove, it “highlights the complementarity aspect of the female-male relationship”⁷⁶⁹ demonstrated in the *itan* from Osa Meji.

⁷⁶⁵ An expression of *àjẹ*.

⁷⁶⁶ Epega and Neimark, *Sacred Ifa Oracle*, 444.

⁷⁶⁷ Finch, *Echoes of the Old Darkland*, 100.

⁷⁶⁸ Verger, “Ìyàmi Òṣòròngà,” 61.

⁷⁶⁹ Dove, “African Womanism,” 520.

“The social, cultural and spiritual order of matriarchal rules was based on...balanced behavior that practiced reciprocal equality [and] respect for everything.”⁷⁷⁰

The version of the myth recorded by Epega and Neimark is likely more recent than that cited by Verger in “Ìyàmi Òṣòròngà” and possibly highlights a shift in attitude reflective of alteration in social reality. No deference is accorded to women, no compromise struck. This account has a decidedly patriarchal tone. The last sentence reads: “Men, especially Ògún, have discovered a better way than the women’s way.”⁷⁷¹ Ogun, the *oriṣa* of war, is quite famously associated with Ibadan, the massive military-compound-turned-city that grew out of the nineteenth century Yoruba wars.⁷⁷²

If there is any historical truth to this myth, then it is understandable that as in the general ascendancy of patriarchy much of what is “associated with the matriarchal ways came to be negatively valued. What was once life-enhancing nature magic became witchcraft.”⁷⁷³ Within the Yoruba context, could this have been the juncture where *àjé* became predominantly feared, where *àjé*’s positive societal role was subsumed by her persona as the “angry mothers?”⁷⁷⁴ Reasons

⁷⁷⁰ Alcamo, *Ìyá Nlá*, 15-16.

⁷⁷¹ Epega and Neimark, *Sacred Ifa Oracle*, 444.

⁷⁷² Matory, *Sex and the Empire*.

⁷⁷³ Finch, *Echoes of the Old Darkland*, 104.

⁷⁷⁴ Verger, “Ìyàmi Òṣòròngà,” 58.

for *ìyàmi àjé*'s anger and animosity are also contained in myth and are investigated in Chapter 7.

Nah Dove maintains that "when viewed as a spiritual entity, matriarchal values are an important component in the relationship between social structure and the spiritual world."⁷⁷⁵ In myth Oṣun (*àjé*) challenged the male chauvinism and sexist attitudes of the male Irunmole. This challenge established precedent for the respect with which women were to be treated. As reiterated in OṣeTaura:

Let us all kneel and prostrate before women.
We are all born by women
Before we became recognized as human beings.⁷⁷⁶

Though a patriarchal culture, Yoruba language often reflects gender neutrality with respect to authority.

Genderless linguistic constructs in the Yoruba language illustrates the essentially human status in such roles as *òrìṣà* (divinity), *èníyàn* (human beings), *oba* (ruler), and *àgbàlagbà* (elder) as well as the pronouns *ẹ* (he or she for respect) and *ò* (she or he familiar). These terms argue that gender and sex roles are frequently asymmetrical, and often obscure.⁷⁷⁷

The gender neutrality of the term *oba* is demonstrated in the following traditional greeting used when addressing an *oba*:

One whose authority cannot be challenged
Who is endowed with àṣẹ
And ranks only with the òrìṣà
Death, the embodiment of finality
Ultimate Father-Mother.⁷⁷⁸

⁷⁷⁵ Dove, "African Womanism," 521.

⁷⁷⁶ W. Abimbola, "Bag of Wisdom," 146.

⁷⁷⁷ Badejo, *Oṣun Ṣẹ̀ẹ̀gẹ̀sí*, 176.

⁷⁷⁸ Abiodun, "Hidden Power," 21.

The terms husband and wife identify positions of relative authority as opposed to being gender specific. A “husband” among the Yoruba is one who has authority over another. Likewise a “wife” is subject to the authority of another. Both can be male or female. For instance, “as a daughter, [a woman] has wives, that is, women who are married into her own family—both her patrilineal and matrilineal sides—over which she exercises a form of authority.”⁷⁷⁹ Also, a wife refers to her husband’s male and female blood relations as husband.⁷⁸⁰ An example from traditional religion is that all initiates to the *oriṣa*, male and female, are referred to as wife (*iyawo*).

Oṣun is referred to as a “manly woman” to underscore her strength, bravery and willingness to fight for her children, as well as for her multiple contributions to society. “No adjective is enough to describe her and her deeds; she is mother, doctor, redeemer, human rights activists; she is surely a manly woman.” Powerful Yoruba women are often euphemistically referred to as *obinrin bi okunrin* (women who are like men). Women with this character “believe in the philosophy of Osun that what man can do, woman can do it as well, even better.”⁷⁸¹

This being as it may, the ambivalence with which men regard women is also expressed in social norms, language, and proverbs. Mothers are regarded with great esteem for giving life to and nursing children during their first three

⁷⁷⁹ Makinde, “Motherhood,” 167.

⁷⁸⁰ Bascom, *Yoruba of Southwestern Nigeria*.

⁷⁸¹ Fatunde, *Oṣun the Manly Woman*, 21, 113.

years, for perpetuating the lineage, sustaining the community, and ensuring humanity's continuance; she is "the conduit for the spiritual regeneration of the ancestors, the bearer of culture, and the center of social organization."⁷⁸²

Understanding the place of mothers in African cultures is critical to understanding the intricacies of social relationships. Ifi Amadiume asserts that "if we exclude mother-focused ideas/philosophies, we miss the dialectic of gender, and consequently fail to understand the system of checks and balances in these societies."⁷⁸³

The regard for mothers among the Yoruba is reflected in proverbs such as: "mother is gold" and "there is no deity like mother. It is the mother that is worthy of being worshiped."⁷⁸⁴ Along with its function as ritual propitiation of *àjé*, "*Gelede* is a form of advocating respect for motherhood."⁷⁸⁵ The counter orientation to, or at least ambivalence towards the power of motherhood, is also evidenced. Very telling are the euphemisms for *àjé*, *ìyàmi* (my mother) and *ìyá wa* (our mothers). Though such euphemisms speak to their "positive dimension,"⁷⁸⁶ these women do evoke fear.

Mother of the *oriṣa* and the icon of motherhood, Yemoja, is called "the generous and dangerous mother." One of her praise-poems declares her "the

⁷⁸² Dove, "African Womanism," 520.

⁷⁸³ Amadiume, *Re-inventing Africa*, 37.

⁷⁸⁴ Makinde, "Motherhood," 165.

⁷⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 166.

⁷⁸⁶ H. J. Drewal and Drewal, *Gelede*, 9.

pot-breasted mother” with an abundance of milk to nurture her children. Within the same praise-poem she is also “the owner of a vagina that suffocates like dry yam in the throat.”⁷⁸⁷

The fear of women’s mysterious power, as represented by the blood mysteries and the vagina, is evident in this imagery of the suffocating vagina or the analogous *vagina dentata* in the West. “The clitoris in particular is traditionally regarded as possessing ‘concealed power’ which women can use to accomplish whatever they desire.”⁷⁸⁸ The Yoruba hold that menstrual blood has the power to render ritual preparations or medicines ineffectual and its power “depletes energy forces, especially in sacred settings.”⁷⁸⁹

A woman’s status is in large measure dependent upon marriage and childbearing. Having a child confers upon a wife a measure of authority in the marital home. Though “a wife is referred to as ‘*eru*’ (slave)”⁷⁹⁰ to underscore her subordination to her husband, being unmarried carries a more burdensome social stigma for both women and men. The *Odu Ifa* address this in the following verse from OṣeTaura:

Having no wife calls for positive action
To keep quiet is to invite trouble and inconveniences
Having a wife is as difficult as having none
One without a wife
Should cry and weep publicly in the marketplace

⁷⁸⁷ Makinde, “Motherhood,” 166.

⁷⁸⁸ Abiodun, “Hidden Power,” 24.

⁷⁸⁹ Olajubu, *Women in the Yoruba Religious Sphere*, 92.

⁷⁹⁰ Makinde, “Motherhood,” 166.

It is neither an extreme action
Nor an overreaction.⁷⁹¹

Contained in the same verse that bemoans not having a wife is the
opposing attitude in line 3. Makinde explains this by saying:

The fear of having a wife...may not be unconnected with the fact that
women of any age are seen as potential witches who can use their
witchcraft to deal with their husbands positively or negatively.⁷⁹²

Wariness of women is warned in a verse of *Odu Ifa Oyeku Meji*:

Women are traitors
Women are covenant-breakers
Let no one confide in women⁷⁹³

Among the patrilineal Yoruba, nonetheless, it is believed that having a
female child as first born will bring blessings.⁷⁹⁴ “Such parents are believed to
start with *owó ẹ̀rọ* ‘the hand of propitiation.’”⁷⁹⁵ The view is also held that if one
only has female children, one is in essence childless and undeserving of
prestige⁷⁹⁶ because the father is responsible for terminating a branch of the
patrilineal line. This belief is illustrated through the tale (*itan*) of Orunmila found in
Odu Ifa Obara Oyeku.

⁷⁹¹ Ibid., 168.

⁷⁹² Ibid.

⁷⁹³ Fatunde, *Ọṣun the Manly Woman*, 39.

⁷⁹⁴ Makinde, “Motherhood.”

⁷⁹⁵ Abiodun, “Woman in Yoruba Religious Images,” 7.

⁷⁹⁶ Fatunde, *Ọṣun the Manly Woman*.

Though successful and blessed with many daughters, upon returning home after numerous years of traveling Orunmila found a deserted and dilapidated home because his daughters “had gone to their matrimonial houses, and the wives had gone to their children.”⁷⁹⁷ Orunmila had not had a son to maintain the family dwelling and perpetuate the line.

Fatunde cites several *Ifa* verses that echo this sentiment concerning the indispensability of male children. *Odu Ifa* Oturalwori states it succinctly:

Male child is the real child
Whoever bears female child
Bears public slave
Male child is the authentic child⁷⁹⁸

By the same token such evident sexism is challenged in *Odu Ifa* OṣeTaura. When the male *oriṣa* went to Olodumare to ascertain the reason for which their *aṣe* was rendered ineffective, s/he asked them to state the instructions they were given: “You advised to us against discrimination, oppression, exploitation, proudness, overconfidence and selfishness.”⁷⁹⁹ Male sexism is also confronted in the following verse from an Oṣun Festival song that “clearly ridicules and dismisses it: ... ‘Boys or men who don’t like us, can sit down, that is, stay behind’ ... [because] ‘we are members of a group, that is, sisterhood.’”⁸⁰⁰

⁷⁹⁷ Ibid., 25.

⁷⁹⁸ Ibid., 29.

⁷⁹⁹ Ibid., 52.

⁸⁰⁰ Badejo, *Oṣun Ṣẹ̀ẹ̀gẹ̀sí*, 178.

Previously observed is that the female (left side), among other considerations, is concerned with the dimension of spirit. The male (right side) addresses temporal matters. In Oşogbo, home to the Oşun Festival, this gender complementarity is reflected in the following:

Ìyá Oşun and *Atáója* coadminister both the spiritual and political needs of the festival and the township. Together they symbolize the balance and complementary functions within the sociocultural and political order.⁸⁰¹

OşeTaura and *itan*, such as “Town of Women,” are possible indicators and highlighters of mythistorical circumstances associated with the need to instill the importance of gender equity and balance. As Badejo succinctly concludes, women’s “positions of authority and social engagement are upheld by the Yorùbá pantheon.”⁸⁰² The fundamental lesson is that reclamation and revitalization of sacred balance is essential to self and world.

The Yoruba conception of cosmic harmony and equilibrium, with its emphasis on balance between the female and male principles, is reflected in a social ideal as articulated in the fundamentals of African feminism.

African patterns of feminism can be seen as having developed within a context that views human life from a total, rather than a dichotomous and exclusive, perspective. For women, the male is not ‘the other’ but part of the human same. Each gender constitutes the critical half that makes the human whole. Neither sex is totally complete in itself to constitute a unit by itself. Each has and needs a complement, despite the possession of unique features of its own.⁸⁰³

⁸⁰¹ Ibid., 180.

⁸⁰² Badejo, “Authority and Discourse,” 139.

⁸⁰³ Steady, “African Feminism,” 7.

Summary

Yoruba ontology is inestimably more vast and profound than presented in this brief telling. What has been presented here is of relevance within the limited discussion of this dissertation. In summary, this and the previous chapters on historiography introduced the importance of myth in Yoruba culture.

The present chapter focused on Yoruba cosmology and ontology, particularly as explicated through *Odu Ifa*. *Ifa*, containing the *odu* with their innumerable verses, myths, folktales, songs, and praises, holds the prescriptions by which humans come to live in balance with the forces affecting our lives. The priests and priestesses through their mastery of *Ifa* assist individuals in their quest for balance and to live in right relationship with the forces of nature both seen and unseen.

Balance between the male and female principles is of utmost importance and is reflected in the realms of both heaven (*orun*) and earth (*ayé*). This balance is critical among the *oriṣa* and among humans as is seen in the many verses of *Odu Ifa* dedicated to this principle such as found in Osa Meji and OṣeTaura. Balance between the world's oppositional complements and especially that which is represented by the male and female principles is necessary to community and individual peace, stability, fecundity, and blessings.

Women's power is abundantly reflected in *Odu Ifa*. This divinatory system with its wealth of wisdom is attributed to female deity. "Some priests of *Ifa* assert that it was Odu, Orunmila's wife, who disclosed the secret of *Ifa* to him."⁸⁰⁴

⁸⁰⁴ H. J. Drewal et al. *Yoruba: Nine Centuries of African Art*, 22.

Women's spiritual power is an explicit and fundamental aspect of Yoruba ontology. The knowledge that women are powerful beings is inscribed in the culture. Rowland Abiodun states that even though men don't know what the power is that women possess and:

even though Yoruba men don't all know the *odu*, they don't recite it; they don't have anything to do with it, but this thought is passed on from generation to generation that you don't mess with them [women].⁸⁰⁵

That being as it may, the mysterious power ascribed to women has also led to women being maligned. According to Professor Abiodun, when something is not understood the tendency is to shun it or push it aside. Women's concealed power "led the traditional religions, or protagonists of these religions, to dub women, their position, their role as being kind of devilish."⁸⁰⁶ The following three chapters are dedicated to investigation of *iyami àjé* and their complex portrayal within Yoruba society.

⁸⁰⁵ Rowland Abiodun, interview with the author, January 26, 2010, Amherst, Massachusetts.

⁸⁰⁶ Ibid.

CHAPTER 6: POLYVALANT ÀJÉ I

ÀJÉ / WITCH DELINEATION AND GENERAL DISCUSSION

“If there is one area where a foreign expression used to describe African realities is likely to fall short, or even mislead, it is in this area of witchcraft.”⁸⁰⁷

It is an interesting phenomenon to find similar themes and beliefs across disparate cultures. For instance, the motif of the sacrificial son is found in Egypt (Osiris), Greece (Prometheus), in the story of Jesus, and among the Yoruba in the story of the heroine Moremi and her son Olurogbo.⁸⁰⁸ The same cross-cultural phenomenon holds true for witches and witchcraft. The ancient Greek-adopted deity, Hecate, is known as “Queen of Witches,”⁸⁰⁹ and the history of European witch beliefs is well documented.⁸¹⁰ As set forth in the beginning of the dissertation present-day witch persecutions are occurring around the world.

The term witchcraft is used to couch an array of behaviors and activities and has been termed “unambiguously evil.”⁸¹¹ As will be brought to light in this chapter, the witch is perceived as someone who uses incantations, substances and objects to harm another either by projection or by having the person come into direct contact with harmful material. In contrast, a witch is also perceived as a being with the ability to harm another through psychic means and acts of will

⁸⁰⁷ Magesa, *African Religions*, 165.

⁸⁰⁸ S. Johnson, *History of the Yorubas*.

⁸⁰⁹ Varner, *Hecate: The Witches' Goddess*, 17.

⁸¹⁰ For example, see Ginzburg, *Ecstasies* and Martin, *The History of Witchcraft*.

⁸¹¹ Mair, *Witchcraft*, 15.

without the aid of anything material. This witch is born with the ability and is often not even aware of having this power until accused, or witchcraft is acquired and consciously employed.⁸¹²

This having been said, there is an important caveat against thinking “that witchcraft is some kind of conceptual and cultural universal.” While distinctions between cultures as to what defines the witch might be elucidated by researchers, there is nonetheless a flattening of perspective. The witches’ evilness, night-flights, and coven meetings are usually set in relief and used to demonstrate the similarity between witchcraft in Africa and Europe. Given that the preponderance of early research on witchcraft in Africa was carried out by Westerners, Hallen and Sodipo:

suggest that one reason those characteristics shared in common by the Western stereotype of the witch and the Yoruba *àjé* (as an example) receive undue emphasis is because these are the characteristics of the witch that the Western scholar who undertakes fieldwork in Africa already has in mind.⁸¹³

Therefore, Yoruba characterization of the witch is investigated. Once established this portrayal is compared to *àjé* for the purpose of delineating correspondence or divergence. The research writings of Hallen and Sodipo are extensively used because their research is explicitly formulated with the intention of delving into and assessing the conceptualization of the Yoruba *àjé* vis-à-vis the witch.

⁸¹² For example, Parrinder, *Witchcraft, European and African* and Orubu, “Witchcraft in African Religion.”

⁸¹³ Hallen and Sodipo, *Knowledge, Belief, and Witchcraft*, 117, 118.

Yoruba Witch

Àjé is translated as and mostly readily classified as witch/witchcraft.⁸¹⁴

But what defines a witch among the Yoruba? Though “the category ‘Yoruba witch’ does not allow for singular interpretation,”⁸¹⁵ to the witch is ascribed a defining set of characteristics and behaviors. Geoffrey Parrinder, who lived among the Yoruba and studied their culture for close to 20 years,⁸¹⁶ states:

The Yoruba believe that witches are generally women who fly about at night and meet in secret conclave. They are associated with birds, especially the nightjar which flies about at dusk. They suck the blood of their victims until they die.⁸¹⁷

Morton-Williams, writing in 1956 on the Atinga witch-finding movement that swept into Yorubaland earlier in that decade, states:

Witchcraft... may be defined as a capacity that is believed to exist in some individuals, enabling its possessor to cause bodily harm to another without attacking him physically, and not necessarily through the exercise of the will; in a particular instance, a witch’s action may be involuntary—even unconscious, so that the witch becomes aware of it only later.⁸¹⁸

During the early twentieth century interest in witchcraft in Africa was such that in 1935 the entire fourth quarter edition of the journal *Africa* was dedicated to the subject. It opened with Evans-Pritchard’s seminal research among the

⁸¹⁴ M. T. Drewal, *Yoruba Ritual*.

⁸¹⁵ Rea, “A Prevalence of Witches,” par. 12.

⁸¹⁶ Hallen and Sodipo, *Knowledge, Belief, and Witchcraft*.

⁸¹⁷ Parrinder, *Witchcraft, European and African*, 134.

⁸¹⁸ Morton-Williams, “The Atinga Cult,” 327.

Azande that demonstrated “the value of setting witchcraft in its social context...to identify and to assess the rational ends it serves.”⁸¹⁹

In addition to the research conducted by Western scholars, African voices from several cultures were also included. As part of the introduction to the section entitled, “The African Explains Witchcraft,” one reads: “It is obvious that in the discussion of an institution which affects native life so deeply, not only European observers, but also the Africans themselves should be heard.”⁸²⁰

Representing the Yoruba perspective on witchcraft, a teacher in Abeokuta stated the following:

Aje may be virgins (*wundia*), matrons (*adelebo*), or old women (*arugbo*). All of them can change themselves into small birds and fly to a meeting place in the bush, where they kill men by sucking their blood. Only the old women cry out when they fly about as birds. Ordinary people cannot recognize witches in everyday life. There is a medicine, however, which when applied to the eyes gives one the power to see witches...The medicine also enables one to recognize which people can turn themselves into witches...Witches have to find a way into a man and cannot affect anyone who is strong and healthy. Witches meet in companies, but in secret, for they will not admit that they are witches.⁸²¹

Witches are thought of as irredeemably evil. “The Witches have no other purpose in life than the destruction of Man and his property. They are therefore the archenemies of Man.”⁸²² Jacob Olupona states that Yoruba tradition and scholarship support the belief that witches are bent on effecting humanity’s

⁸¹⁹ Hallen and Sodipo, *Knowledge, Belief, and Witchcraft*, 94.

⁸²⁰ Westermann, “The African Explains Witchcraft,” 504.

⁸²¹ *Ibid.*, 548.

⁸²² W. Abimbola, *Ifá Literary Corpus*, 152.

distress and even demise although themselves being human. Their “reputed antisocial behavior obstructs the social and communal order.”⁸²³

The primary accusation against witches is that they are “inimical to the reproductive forces,”⁸²⁴ arresting fertility. The most accursed activity associated with the southern Nigerian witch is “the eating of the ethereal bodies of young children.”⁸²⁵ The reason for this deep disdain is summarized by Diedre Badejo:

Fertility is central to Yorùbá thought and cultural praxis... woman’s fertility, in particular, is highly prized and valued; infertility, or childlessness symbolizes disaster, stinginess, and non-productive life, the dissolution of àṣẹ.⁸²⁶

Writing in 1969, Lucy Mair accented the high infant mortality rate among the Yoruba as a factor in witchcraft accusations wherein “husbands suspect their wives, women their co-wives or their mother-in-law.”⁸²⁷ These suspicions can developed into what Lawal terms “a permanent ‘Cold War’ in which everybody takes protective or aggressive ritual measures.”⁸²⁸

Accusations of witchcraft are most frequently leveled against intimate relations, especially family members—“the Amọ̀niṣeni (those who-know-you-and-

⁸²³ Olupona, “ Òrìṣà Ọ̀ṣun,” 50.

⁸²⁴ Talbot, *Peoples of Southern Nigeria*, 203.

⁸²⁵ Ibid.

⁸²⁶ Badejo, *Ọ̀ṣun Ṣẹ̀ẹ̀gẹ̀sí*, 83.

⁸²⁷ Mair, *Witchcraft*, 35.

⁸²⁸ Lawal, *Gẹ̀lẹ̀dẹ̀ Spectacle*, 33.

harm you).⁸²⁹ In this regard elderly women are especially feared because “the enemy who knows your secret is best able to kill you, and the elderly widow knows more of the lineage secrets than do most sons of the house.”⁸³⁰ Fear of harm from family is expressed in the following Yoruba maxim: “*Bi iku ile kole pa enia, iku ode ko le pa a* (if death cannot strike one from within the home, death cannot strike one from without).”⁸³¹

Barren and post-menopausal women are the primary witchcraft suspects though women of all ages, even children, are potential witches.⁸³² However, individuals who have amassed wealth in a relatively short period of time or above their hereditary station are also suspect as it is believed their new found wealth and power were achieved at the expense of others. In essence it is thought this person has sucked the life force of others for personal gain. “If they are found guilty, they forfeit their money to the [adjudicating] Ogbonis. A Yoruba proverb says: ‘A witch kills but never inherits.’”⁸³³

Witch society or coven meetings “are held under or on top of big trees, at crossroads, under the water or on top of water bodies.”⁸³⁴ Talbot offers the

⁸²⁹ Elebuibon, *Invisible Powers*, 41.

⁸³⁰ Matory, *Sex and the Empire*, 56.

⁸³¹ Morton-Williams, “The Atinga Cult,” 326.

⁸³² Messinger, “Witchcraft.”

⁸³³ *Ibid.*, 61.

⁸³⁴ Orubu, “Witchcraft in African Religion,” 123.

precision that Yoruba witches are particularly fond of holding their meetings at the base of large trees such as the Baobab and Iroko that are believed inhabited by evil spirits.⁸³⁵ The crossroad of the witches is called *orita* or *oritameta* “where three paths meet.”⁸³⁶

Witches by turn are reportedly required to supply a human victim for shared consumption at these meetings.⁸³⁷ If not supplied, the witch whose responsibility it was to supply the “meat” could herself become the meal.⁸³⁸

These meetings are supposedly held during the hours of midnight to 3 a.m. It is between these hours that witches are generally thought to be most active.

Other activities associated with Yoruba witches include lifetime initiation of their children at a young age, transmogrification—especially into birds but also other creatures, and bilocation wherein the astral body of the witch carries out her destructive deeds while the physical form is sleeping. Witches attack or “feed upon” the spirit form of the victim; “a large proportion of all illnesses, of which the cause is unknown—particularly wasting sicknesses and lunacy is ascribed to them.”⁸³⁹

⁸³⁵ Talbot, *Peoples of Southern Nigeria*.

⁸³⁶ Elebuibon, *Invisible Powers*, 24.

⁸³⁷ Parrinder, *Witchcraft, European and African*.

⁸³⁸ Abali, *Rescued by Christ*.

⁸³⁹ Talbot, *Peoples of Southern Nigeria*, 206.

In some southern Nigerian cultures upon the death of a suspected witch, her abdomen was cut open in search of her “witchcraft substance.” However, among the Yoruba this internal examination was not performed.

If there was any doubt (as to a witch’s identity), while living, the Babalawo decided the question after rubbing ‘medicine’ on the accused person’s body. Among the Ekiti these had to submit to the Obbaw (sass-wood) ordeal. Condemned witches were handed over for execution to the Egungun, or in some places, such as Abeokuta, to the Ogboni or Oro societies.⁸⁴⁰

In his study of witchcraft among the Yoruba, Raymond Prince details many aspects of the witch as ascertained through informants. Some of these have already been mentioned such as transmogrification, astral travel, and the witch’s attack upon a victim’s etheric or spirit body. Here, the witch is said to be consuming or eating the life force of her victim. “The Yoruba word for witch is Aje and would appear to be a contraction of ‘Iya je’ meaning ‘mother eat.’”⁸⁴¹ Prince, among others, cautions that use of this term is said to be insulting to witches and so is uttered with great prudence. Euphemisms such as *iyami* (my mother) or *iyawa* (our mother) are preferential appellations.

In keeping with the belief that witchcraft is something that a person possesses, it is said to be an “immaterial substance which may be kept in a calabash hidden in a hole in the wall of the witch’s house, or in a hollow tree.” Alternately, it is conceived “as a more concrete substance which is present in the woman’s abdomen.” Though unusual, children are also thought of as potential witches. This might be because “the power itself may be lodged...even in a young

⁸⁴⁰ Ibid., 208.

⁸⁴¹ Prince, “Yoruba Image of the Witch,” 797.

child (age 1 to 8 years).” Such a child, serving as a vessel or container of an adult witch’s power, is protected from attack by other witches.⁸⁴²

Witchcraft can be obtained in several ways. It can be purchased, usually from the *Iyalode* (head of the market women). It can be given as an inheritance or as a gift in which case “it is often given mixed with certain foods.”⁸⁴³ Sometimes it is given to a person without that person’s consent or knowledge. A reformed witch tells of how she surreptitiously passed witchcraft to a friend through her saliva that was on a shared carrot.⁸⁴⁴

Transmission in utero from mother to daughter is the most common mode of transmission. Women’s primordial power is represented by the womb, by the blood mysteries of menstruation and birth. According to Prince, “there is some obscure fundamental relationship between witchcraft and menstrual blood.” Both the menstruating woman and the witch can render ineffectual the magic and medicines of the herbalist. Just as the threat of witchcraft can be used against a man, “it is believed that if a man is struck by a woman’s menstrual cloth he will have bad fortune for the rest of his days.”⁸⁴⁵

As noted the greatest fear associated with the witch is her antithetical relationship to fertility and reproduction. In this regard, it is thought that witches “control the menstrual flow of women. They can make it stop or flow excessively.

⁸⁴² *Ibid.*, 796.

⁸⁴³ *Ibid.*

⁸⁴⁴ Abali, *Rescued by Christ*.

⁸⁴⁵ Prince, “Yoruba Image of the Witch,” 798.

They may obstruct the expulsion of the child from the womb.”⁸⁴⁶ The eating of the fetus by a witch is also suspected in miscarriages and a verse of *Odu Ifa OfunOṣe* as recorded by Bascom speaks to this.

To wring out “shunin,” the diviner of Cloth, was the one who cast Ifa for Cloth when she was weeping because she was childless. They said she would become pregnant, but that as a sacrifice against the witches she should offer one cloth wrapper, one she-goat, and one shilling three pence.⁸⁴⁷ Cloth heard but did not make the sacrifice. When Cloth became pregnant, the pregnancy disappeared from her body.... Ifa says this is a woman who will become pregnant; but she should make a sacrifice against witches,⁸⁴⁸ so that the pregnancy will not disappear from her body. And then again there is a woman who is already pregnant who should make the sacrifice so that her pregnancy will not leak away.⁸⁴⁹

Male impotence among the Yoruba is attributed to witchcraft, for the witch is thought to “borrow” a man’s penis and use it in nocturnal intercourse with other women. The result is impotency of the men and barrenness in the women thus visited, as well as attendant sleep disturbance and unusual dreams.⁸⁵⁰ A verse of *IworiOyeku* recorded by Bascom speaks of witches being responsible for a man’s

⁸⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁸⁴⁷ “5000 cowries” is quoted in the original Yoruba from which this was translated.

⁸⁴⁸ The euphemism or praise-name *ar(a)-aiye* (people of the earth) is used in the original Yoruba.

⁸⁴⁹ Bascom, *Ifa Divination*, 549.

⁸⁵⁰ Prince, “Yoruba Image of the Witch.”

impotence.⁸⁵¹ Sleep disturbance associated with witchcraft is the subject of *Odu Ifa OwonrinOgbe* as recorded by Epega and Neimark.⁸⁵²

Again, elderly women are frequently suspected of being witches because “by drinking the life blood of numerous victims, the witch is thought to be able to prolong her own life.”⁸⁵³ In addition to elderly women, other women suspected of having witchcraft include “a woman with a beard,⁸⁵⁴ a domineering or cantankerous woman or a woman who engages in odd behavior.”⁸⁵⁵ The witch is “credited with sharp photographic memory”⁸⁵⁶ used to recall perceived slights and to nurse grudges that are never forgiven. Witches are also considered devious, “usually cheerful to conceal their sinister motives.”⁸⁵⁷

The Yoruba witch is believed to be a fundamentally misanthropic being, one who wishes ill and has the power to enact ill upon fellow humans.

A witch’s malignancy may be turned upon a man for almost any reason—for some slight impoliteness, or because he accuses her of being a witch,

⁸⁵¹ Bascom, *Ifa Divination*, 285.

⁸⁵² Epega and Neimark, *Sacred Ifa Oracle*, 88.

⁸⁵³ Prince, “Yoruba Image of the Witch,” 798.

⁸⁵⁴ Literal hair on her chin and, euphemistically, meaning to act like a man.

⁸⁵⁵ Prince, “Yoruba Image of the Witch,” 798.

⁸⁵⁶ Elebuibon, *Invisible Powers*, 40.

⁸⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

or because he is just getting too high in the world or often for no reason “just because they are evil women.”⁸⁵⁸

This perception of witches as maliciously evil beings is seen repeatedly in the diabolical acts they are said to perpetrate and the catastrophes for which they are allegedly responsible:

sudden death, epidemic, famine, crop failure, flood, accidents, human infertility, [and] snake bites.... The soul of the witch... invisibly attacks an unsuspecting victim, sucks his or her blood and gradually consumes the flesh.⁸⁵⁹

The foregoing popular portrait of the Yoruba witch has been termed an “exoteric stereotype” by Hallen and Sodipo to contrast it with more complete understandings of *àjé* that these authors position as an “esoteric model.” As part of the latter, the personality characteristics ascribed to the witch are claimed at odds with *àjé* in Yoruba language syntax where one states that “a person ‘has *àjé*’ or ‘uses of *àjé*’ rather than that a person ‘is *àjé*.’”⁸⁶⁰

In the next section attention turns to a fuller rendering of *àjé* in large measure based on primary accounts of “what the Yoruba ‘witches’ in fact believe they are.”⁸⁶¹ Hallen and Sodipo challenge the equivalence of the witch and *àjé* on three fronts—gender, character, and the use of medicine to effect change.

⁸⁵⁸ Prince, “Yoruba Image of the Witch,” 797.

⁸⁵⁹ Elebuibon, *Invisible Powers*, 23.

⁸⁶⁰ Hallen and Sodipo, “Comparison of the Western ‘Witch,’” 6-7.

⁸⁶¹ Hallen and Sodipo, *Knowledge, Belief, and Witchcraft*, 101.

Àjé as Yoruba Witch?

Hallen and Sodipo differentiate *àjé* from the witch based on contrasting the personality and traits of the witch with the attributes of *àjé*. The latter was ascertained in their discussions with Ekiti area *onisegun* (masters of medicine)⁸⁶² as “the *oníṣẹ̀gùn* represent and exercise a level of understanding and analysis of Yoruba life and thought that is more critically sophisticated than that of the ordinary person.”⁸⁶³

The *onisegun* reiterated many of the witch associations discussed in the previous section and that comprise “a kind of Yoruba popular stereotype.”⁸⁶⁴ However, beyond these one finds the distinguishing characteristics of *àjé* described below.

Male *àjé*. *Onisegun* assert that there are as many male *àjé* as female *àjé*. However, they claim that “the male *àjé* are more successful at concealing themselves.” Not all male *àjé* are herbalists or diviners though both are included among the male *àjé*. Often stated obliquely, the *onisegun* attributed the power and efficacy of their medicines to the fact that they themselves are or have *àjé*. They are “in fact the most powerful amongst the *oníṣẹ̀gùn* or *babaláwo*.”⁸⁶⁵

⁸⁶² “medicine” generally being a combination of herbs and magic.

⁸⁶³ Hallen and Sodipo, *Knowledge, Belief, and Witchcraft*, 10.

⁸⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 103.

⁸⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 103, 107.

This actuality cannot be common knowledge because of the fear generated by *àjé*. Personal success is, therefore, attributed to divinity. Cures are often laid at the feet of a patient's deity.

But this is a deception to which the *oníṣẹ̀gùn* must have recourse for if he were to claim the responsibility for himself, he would risk being identified by other members of the community as *àjé* and this could lead to his personal and professional ruin.⁸⁶⁶

Àjé character (*iwa*): Unlike the witch stereotype, *àjé* are not unequivocally evil. The acts of an *àjé* are dependent upon the character of the individual and not upon the fact that they are/have *àjé*. An *àjé* can be a bad person (*èniyàn burúkú*) or a good person (*èniyàn rere*). Many statements of the *onisegun* bore this out. For example, "There are some [*àjé*] who do good things...*Àjé* is not meant to be used in bad ways. *Àjé* is created so that the world may progress."⁸⁶⁷

The *onisegun* continue: "The *àjé* behaves according to how its self (*ẹ̀mí*) is. Not all of them do bad things. There are some who use their own [intelligence and ability] to develop life."⁸⁶⁸ The most direct statements simply read: "There are some *àjé* whose moral character (*iwa*) is good."⁸⁶⁹ "*Àjé* is *èniyàn rere*. Not all the *àjé* are *èniyàn burúkú*. There are some good ones."⁸⁷⁰

⁸⁶⁶ Ibid., 103-04.

⁸⁶⁷ Hallen, *Good, Bad, Beautiful*, 92.

⁸⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁸⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁷⁰ Hallen and Sodipo, *Knowledge, Belief, and Witchcraft*, 106.

Àjé use of medicine: Hallen and Sodipo primarily use Parrinder's delineation of the witch as a point of departure for their arguments and claim that Parrinder considers witchcraft "a *purely* psychical phenomenon."⁸⁷¹ Although Parrinder is inspired by the Evans-Pritchard study of the Azande and opens a section of discussion with the Evans-Pritchard's assessment that Azande witchcraft operates uniquely through a psychic projection of will, Parrinder also describes the use of physical substances by witches in other African cultures. For example, he reports the use of poisons by Tiv (central Nigeria) witches and by witches in Kenya and Rhodesia (present-day Zimbabwe).⁸⁷²

Parrinder makes no definitive statement about the means by which the Yoruba witch operates,⁸⁷³ and an example was given in the previous section of a witch's use of material substance to achieve a goal. Nonetheless, it is a widely held view that the Yoruba witch operates psychically. Yemi Elebuibon *awíṣe* of Oṣogbo⁸⁷⁴ states:

They [witches] use their inner power (òmùsu ìdì) to achieve their aim. They have the ability to imagine something, closely focus their thoughts upon it in meditation and make the thing happen.⁸⁷⁵

⁸⁷¹ Ibid., 108.

⁸⁷² Parrinder, *Witchcraft, European and African*.

⁸⁷³ Ibid.

⁸⁷⁴ *Babalawo* and spokesperson for the *Ifa* priests of Oṣogbo.

⁸⁷⁵ Elebuibon, *Invisible Powers*, 41.

However, from the *onisekun* Hallen and Sodipo learned that “many *àjé* use medicine to achieve their ends,”⁸⁷⁶ even those who are not herbalists. As reported by an *onisekun*: “If the *àjé* learns the medicine for making rain, it will fall immediately.”⁸⁷⁷ Also, the use of drugs and herbs by *àjé* was discussed in interview with senior Oṣun priestess, Adedoyin Faniyi Talabi Oloṣun of Oṣogbo, Nigeria.⁸⁷⁸ *Àjé*s power is not derived from medicine, but their medicinal preparations are believed superior to those prepared by non-*àjé*.

Using the above markers of distinction, Hallen and Sodipo determine that the witch and *àjé* are not equivalent.⁸⁷⁹ The next order of business is to ascertain the abilities that earmark an individual as *àjé*. According to Hallen, the powers of *àjé* “are clearly linked to superior intelligence and ability.”⁸⁸⁰ Abiodun concurs with this stating that individuals like Isaac Newton or Albert Einstein, “all these geniuses, would have been properly labeled *àjé* in many Yoruba cultures.”⁸⁸¹

Keen “intuitive insight” and “predictive ability” are associated with *àjé*. These abilities are summarized by an *onisekun* as “his [*àjé*s] words never miss.”

⁸⁷⁶ Hallen and Sodipo, *Knowledge, Belief, and Witchcraft*, 108.

⁸⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁸⁷⁸ Adedoyin Faniyi, interview with the author, March 21, 2010, Miami, Florida.

⁸⁷⁹ Hallen and Sodipo, *Knowledge, Belief, and Witchcraft*.

⁸⁸⁰ Hallen, *Good, Bad, Beautiful*, 92.

⁸⁸¹ Rowland Abiodun, interview with the author, January 26, 2010, Amherst, Massachusetts.

Another states that *àjé* also have the ability to know what is occurring at a distance, in other locations.

Their intuitive insight (*òjú ínú*) is more powerful. There will be two [eyes] outside and two inside... Their intuitive insight (*òjú ínú*) may be seeing other places. We call them *àjé*.⁸⁸²

A euphemism for *àjé* is *abara meji* "one with two bodies."⁸⁸³ The Ekiti *onisekun* express similar meaning when saying that the "*àjé* have two selves (*èmí*)"⁸⁸⁴ It is this special attribute of *àjé* that allows them to execute the improbable and seemingly inexplicable. "As a second vital element, it is this *àjé* *èmí/ínú* that a person can send out or use to go out and away from himself to accomplish those things that make him extraordinary."⁸⁸⁵

In terms of how one becomes *àjé*, the *onisekun* speak of it as a choice of destiny that an individual makes before earthly incarnation. "These [*àjé*] also are persons (*ènìyàn*). But the *àjé* [ability] has been created with them when they were coming from heaven (*òrun*). They chose this [as a destiny]."⁸⁸⁶ Therefore, *àjé* is

⁸⁸² Hallen, *Good, Bad, Beautiful*, 93.

⁸⁸³ M. T. Drewal, *Yoruba Ritual*, 177.

⁸⁸⁴ Hallen, *Good, Bad, Beautiful*, 92.

⁸⁸⁵ Hallen and Sodipo, *Knowledge, Belief, and Witchcraft*, 110.

⁸⁸⁶ Hallen, *Good, Bad, Beautiful*, 94.

considered innate. “You cannot use medicine to make *àjé*,”⁸⁸⁷ and its associated powers “cannot be taught”⁸⁸⁸ according to the *onisegun*.

Babatunde Lawal interviewed women on the subject in the Lagos region of Nigeria. Speaking of these women he states:

These female informants disagreed with the widely held notion that every woman is a potential aje. According to them, a woman becomes an aje only after being initiated into the “secret” association of women (*egbè imùlè*).

However, they do concur that the power is passed from mother to daughter, and the power thus acquired might be unbeknownst and used unconsciously, causing unintentional harm. It is only upon noticing the actualization of their negative wishes that these young women realize they are *àjé*.⁸⁸⁹

From the research of Hallen and Sodipo among the Ekiti area *onisegun*, one learns that *àjé* differs from the popular conception of the Yoruba witch in several critical details. Males as well as females can be *àjé*. *Àjé* methods are not exclusive to the psychic realm; they do make use of medicine to achieve desired ends. Most significantly, *àjé* are not preternaturally or unequivocally evil. “*Àjé* may be a good person—intentionally benevolent, using their extraordinary talents for the welfare and benefit of mankind.”⁸⁹⁰

⁸⁸⁷ Hallen and Sodipo, *Knowledge, Belief, and Witchcraft*, 109.

⁸⁸⁸ Hallen, *Good, Bad, Beautiful*, 94.

⁸⁸⁹ Lawal, *Gèlèdè Spectacle*, 33.

⁸⁹⁰ Hallen and Sodipo, *Knowledge, Belief, and Witchcraft*, 117.

That being established, it is important to specify that neither are all *àjé* beneficent nor is any individual *àjé* totally bad or totally good. Women interviewed by Lawal on the subject of *àjé* affirmed:

There are two types of aje, the good one (*àjé rere*) and the bad one (*àjé burúkú*). A good *àjé* uses her power to attract all the good things of life—to heal, to restore men’s and women’s fertility, to ensure safe childbirth, good harvest, and so on. A bad *àjé* acts in the opposite direction.⁸⁹¹

The negative dimension of *àjé* does indeed correspond to the portrait of the Yoruba witch. However, an important consideration here, as spoken to above by Hallen and Sodipo, is that the popular one-sided portrayal of *àjé* reflects Western cultural influence including the mistranslation of the word *àjé* and attendant published and generalized misconceptualization of *àjé*.

It is likely because of its misconceptualization that the term is considered pejorative. Drewal and Drewal state that “no one would address a woman suspected of possessing such power as *àjé*, not just out of fear but because such women also work positive wonders.”⁸⁹²

In the foregoing discussion, Prince was quoted as stating that *àjé* derives from “iya je” and translates as “mother eat.”⁸⁹³ This translation is accurate if applying the Yoruba verb *jé* (to eat), and the association is clearly borne out by *àjé* mythology. However, *àjé* could just as readily be translated as akin to *mother who is effective*, owing to the fact that the Yoruba verb *jé* (to be) when paired with a noun adds the meaning of efficacy. For instance, *jé oògùn* means “to be

⁸⁹¹ Lawal, *Gèlèdè Spectacle*, 33.

⁸⁹² H. J. Drewal and Drewal, *Gelèdè*, 9.

⁸⁹³ Prince, “Yoruba Image of the Witch,” 797.

efficacious (medicine or charm).⁸⁹⁴ The first meaning rendered reflects the fearsome witch persona while the second speaks to *àjé*'s superior abilities.

Although it can be argued that *jé* (to be) is employed specifically as a prefix, it can equally be argued that the diacritical mark used in *jẹ* (to eat) is inconsistent with that used in the word *àjé*. In a language where tonal marks are as weighty as vowels, their inclusion or lack is significant. It might be that the identical diacritical marks associated with the word *àjé* and the verb *jẹ* are argument for the latter interpretation. The Yoruba are well-known for their creative wordplay. Therefore, it would not come as great surprise if the word *àjé* was originally conceived to represent both negative and positive manifestations of this energy.

In the noted Abraham Yoruba dictionary, *jẹ* carries the same meaning of eating. To *jé* is affixed the primary meaning of “allowed” and the secondary meaning of “is allowed to do.”⁸⁹⁵ Here one can argue for an interpretation similar to the above meaning ascribed to *jé* because the mothers, through their power, “allow” manifestation of the events and activities attributed to them.

In our brief conversation, John Mason, renowned scholar of Yoruba culture and religion, confirmed that the translation of “to eat” for *àjé* is inaccurate. His contention is that *àjé* translates to “compliant”—“those people that are

⁸⁹⁴ Fakinlede, *Yoruba Modern Practical Dictionary*, 585.

⁸⁹⁵ Abraham, *Dictionary of Modern Yoruba*, 342.

compliant or get along.”⁸⁹⁶ Dr. Mason did not elaborate but stated his intention to write a book on the subject of *iyami àjé* in the near future.

Based on the findings of their research, Hallen and Sodipo suggest “a two-tiered model, or perhaps two models—one to suit the popular stereotype...and a second comparatively esoteric model of the *àjé* based upon the remarks of the *oníṣégùn*.”⁸⁹⁷ The foregoing discussion was undertaken as groundwork. Its purpose was to clearly distinguish generally held notions of what a witch is and does in comparison to *àjé*.

Although Hallen and Sodipo establish the distinction between witch and *àjé*,⁸⁹⁸ it is found that most authors use the terms interchangeably, with many authors actually foregrounding the “esoteric” dimension of *àjé*.⁸⁹⁹ What follows is a sketch of general characterizations of *àjé*. Some of the themes already encountered are re-emphasized. The section precedes a more focused examination of *àjé* in *Odu Ifa* and *àjé* in Yoruba social roles.

Àjé: General Discussion

The most common description of the *àjé* is that they are powerful beings. However, *àjé* is both an endowment and a state of being—one can have *àjé* that one exercises and one can be characterized as *àjé*. “One more often hears that a

⁸⁹⁶ John Mason, interview with the author, February 16, 2011, at the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, New York City.

⁸⁹⁷ Hallen and Sodipo, *Knowledge, Belief, and Witchcraft*, 111.

⁸⁹⁸ Hallen and Sodipo, “Comparison of the Western ‘Witch.’”

⁸⁹⁹ For example, Abiodun, “Hidden Power” and Badejo, *Ọṣun Ṣẹ̀ẹ̀gẹ̀sí*.

woman 'has witchcraft' (*ní àjé*) than that she 'is a witch' (*àjé ni*)."⁹⁰⁰ In addition, though expressed most directly by women, as noted, *àjé* is not limited to women.

Àjé is said to be innate, endowed, or acquired. Because it is believed that *àjé* is transmitted in the womb, both males and females can come into the world with *àjé*, which can be developed. Children, known as *Obanje*,⁹⁰¹ also manifest this power. Aina Olomo, who is a priestess of *Şango*, *Ifá* and an *Iyagan*,⁹⁰² speaks of *àjé* as connected to a matrix of energy. *Àjé* is "a manifestation of a collective primordial soul"⁹⁰³ that incarnates as both females and males. Because *àjé* is energy of the primal feminine, however, the power of the male *àjé* "flows from the mothers."⁹⁰⁴

As reported by Hallen and Sodipo, the male Yoruba diviners (*babalawo*) and herbalists (*onisegun*) who are most proficient attribute their abilities to the fact that they have *àjé*. However, this fact is not something readily admitted because of the implications for one's safety occasioned by the prejudice against *àjé*.⁹⁰⁵ This being said, men manifesting *àjé* are treated differently than women with the same power. Washington points out that owing in great measure to the effects of

⁹⁰⁰ Matory, *Sex and the Empire*, 56.

⁹⁰¹ Olomo, "Iyami Osorongá," 282.

⁹⁰² Mother of the Ancestral Cloth (Egungun).

⁹⁰³ Olomo, *Core of Fire*, 124.

⁹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 129.

⁹⁰⁵ Hallen and Sodipo, "Comparison of the Western 'Witch.'"

colonialism and the layering of Western values on indigenous concepts, the man as wise wizard—woman as evil witch dichotomy is evidenced.⁹⁰⁶

As is true of the *oriṣa*, “the *Iyami* also have a pantheon.”⁹⁰⁷ *Àjé* can be endowed by initiation into the cult of *àjé* or *Iyami* Society.⁹⁰⁸ Initiation is a key step because it connects one to a network of power. This power is the network of numinous energy, of the spiritual energy accumulated and harnessed through centuries or millennia of focused spiritual work—the directing of *aṣe*. There are several levels of initiation and elevations in skill and wisdom associated with these.⁹⁰⁹ One’s *àjé*, one’s power, increases accordingly.

However, Ifá priest Adekanmi Adewale Ifagbuyi asserts that one cannot merely be initiated physically. “*Iyami* is a very powerful something. No one can initiate someone to it. No one can.”⁹¹⁰ He maintains that if the *iyami* want you, they will furtively give you something to ingest that will render you in their midst by astral projection once you fall asleep. Initiation occurs in the realm of spirit.

Individuals seeking to acquire *àjé* can do so through the *Iyalode*.⁹¹¹ This title designates a powerful woman in Yoruba society and literally means “mother

⁹⁰⁶ Washington, *Our Mothers*.

⁹⁰⁷ Olomo, *Core of Fire*, 130.

⁹⁰⁸ Elebuibon, *Invisible Powers*.

⁹⁰⁹ Abali, *Rescued by Christ*.

⁹¹⁰ Adekanmi Adewale Ifagbuyi, interview with the author, October 9, 2009, Lagos, Nigeria.

⁹¹¹ Washington, *Our Mothers*.

of the outside,” which speaks to this woman’s force outside the home. From the *Iyalode* one receives “a calabash, an image of the world and container of her [àjé’s] power.”⁹¹²

During our lengthy interview, Yoruba occultist Samuel Opeola had the following to say on the subject:

In the past people say, ok, any woman above 50, or something like that, is an àjé. But...now-a-day we get people as young as 12 or 10 years that are àjé. And...the thing required they say is giving a calabash and therefore [you] become an àjé...with the bird inside or something like that. And it is just a sort of perversion so that people may not know the secrets. They perceive it’s like that. But it’s nothing like that. Some even say it is inherited. All those are speculations. Everybody is a potential àjé. Everybody. It depends upon the type of training you have.⁹¹³

Àjé is spoken of as a “force of artistic, biological, spiritual, and ecological creation, maintenance, destruction, and re-creation.”⁹¹⁴ It is spiritual power.

When asked to define àjé, Yoruba occultist Samuel Opeola stated:

Àjé means whoever has the power to say something and it will happen; to do something which cannot be done by natural means. They have power, mystical power. Àjé is a sort of mystical power.⁹¹⁵

Àjé is the mysterious force of the Great Mother that began creation and ensures its evolution. It is said in Yoruba lore that this original mother shared this force

⁹¹² Verger, “Ìyàmi Òṣòròngà,” 42.

⁹¹³ Samuel Opeola, interview with the author, September 27, 2009, Ile-Ife, Nigeria.

⁹¹⁴ Washington, *Our Mothers*, 8.

⁹¹⁵ Samuel Opeola, interview with the author, September 27, 2009, Ile-Ife, Nigeria..

with the deities and select humans so that they would maintain the balance and structure of the world. As such it also has social and political ramifications.

Based on my understanding, *àjé* is power whose use and effect depends on the reasons for its use and the motivations of the wielder of that power. *Àjé* is neutral. It is the power of the plant to heal or harm, of the womb to bring forth life, of the spoken word to manifest reality. As the primal power, *àjé* is not only the author of creation but also holds mastery over time, melding linear time to the eternity of sacred time.

An example of this time mastery is found in *Odu Ifa Osa Meji* when the *àjé* shortened “the length of the ensuing days and nights”⁹¹⁶ to their advantage. *Àjé* is power that operates beyond Western secular conceptions of space and time. It holds with the general African attitude or epistemology of linking spirituality and effect, “in which the African is able to move beyond ordinary time and space to a higher level on which events can become meaningful in terms of cosmic or universal causation.”⁹¹⁷

This being as it may, *àjé* is said to represent an inherent attribute of all women.⁹¹⁸ Others can possess *àjé* but only women can be *àjé*.⁹¹⁹ This spiritual force is present within women as primordial female power, whether awakened or awaiting potentiation. Mortal women who comprise the *àjé* “are not vessels *lyàmi*

⁹¹⁶ Şangode, *The Goddesses*, 80.

⁹¹⁷ Ani, *Yurugu*, 66.

⁹¹⁸ Abiodun, “Hidden Power.”

⁹¹⁹ W. Abimbola, “Images of Women.”

possesses, nor are they priests or devotees of the Mother—they are the actual living embodiments of *Ìyàmi*; they are *Àjé*.”⁹²⁰

The sacred womb confers upon women the role of owners and administrators of *àjé*. The *àjé* “are an embodiment of power and an expression of the matrix of potentiality from which that power emanates.”⁹²¹ Abimbola states:

In this sense, all powers both good and evil derive from woman because of her special powers of giving birth to all other human beings. For this simple reason, all other powers and principalities of this earth must bow down before them.⁹²²

Àjé are “‘owners of the world’ (*oni loni aiyé*)”⁹²³ for all things emerged from the primordial womb. Although young women have a degree of *àjé*, elderly women are considered most powerful.

Elderly women are emissaries of the Great Mother, *Iya’Nla*. They are imbued with her potency, charged with the function of community guardianship and accorded great respect. “Whether at a family meeting, a wedding, a burial ceremony, a political meeting or a religious gathering, homage must be paid to the *Iya Mi* in Yorubaland.”⁹²⁴

As women age, their vital force or *aṣe* is believed to become concentrated and powerful. One reason for this enhanced *aṣe* is that after menopause, the

⁹²⁰ Washington, *Our Mothers*, 20-21.

⁹²¹ Badejo, *Ọṣun Ẹ̀g̀g̀s̀í*, 76.

⁹²² W. Abimbola, “Images of Women,” 403.

⁹²³ H. J. Drewal, “Art and Perception of Women,” 551.

⁹²⁴ Olademo, *Gender in Yoruba Oral Traditions*, 41-42.

Yoruba believe a woman retains her *aṣe*-rich blood. A praise name for the post-menopausal woman is “Òbò tó dorí kodò tí ò sẹ̀jẹ̀ (the one with the vagina that faces the earth without dripping blood).”⁹²⁵

Menstrual blood in particular is considered extremely powerful having the ability to “bring misfortune to a man and neutralize any medicinal preparations.”⁹²⁶

It is said that “the ‘mothers’ control the blood of menstruation.”⁹²⁷ Knowing the secrets of the womb, *àjẹ* are the keepers of esoteric knowledge, and they are the keepers of covenants between individuals and groups.

Post-menopausal women are respected for their longevity and their “coolness,” meaning their ability to be patient and remain composed in the face of harsh realities. The Yoruba differentiate between one’s inner/spiritual head (*ori inu*) as distinct from the outer/physical head (*ori ode*). The inner head, what might be termed the mind or consciousness, is the controller of thoughts and actions as well as being where “the character, personality, and potential of an individual reside.”⁹²⁸

Verbalized thoughts and actions belie *ori inu*. Among the Yoruba it is important to keep *ori inu* concealed or be willing to assume the responsibility for and repercussions of words and deeds. As daughters of the Great Mother, women are believed to be much more proficient than men at keeping *ori inu*

⁹²⁵ Elebuibon, *Invisible Powers*, 45.

⁹²⁶ H. J. Drewal and Drewal, *Gelede*, 79.

⁹²⁷ Beier, “Gelede Masks,” 6.

⁹²⁸ H. J. Drewal and Drewal, *Gelede*, 73.

hidden. “The Great Mother herself is the epitome of patience; that is, her inner head is composed.”⁹²⁹

An integral part of *àjẹ*'s aura is the aspect of secrecy and covertness. This attribute is also a weapon as the mothers express neither their desires nor their grievances in an open or heated manner. “When angered, the mothers operate surreptitiously to seek out and destroy their victims...The inscrutability of the mothers and their mysteries intensify their power in the minds of men.”⁹³⁰

The mothers are also owners of “a soothing, disarming and softening kind of power...called *ẹrọ*, which is capable of normalizing, negating, or rendering impotent any other power, life, or substance...*ẹrọ* operates noiselessly and unceremoniously.”⁹³¹ One might not know that it is the mothers who are causing tribulation until it is revealed in divination. Through divination one also learns what it is that *iyami* desires, the sacrifice that will appease.⁹³²

Àjẹ is a woman with “dual spiritual-material mobility...[a woman whose] spirit becomes a force equal to or greater than her physical being.”⁹³³ Three terms in particular describe this duality as well as the fact that the power of *àjẹ* can manifest both constructively and destructively. “Terms such as *oloju meji*, ‘one with two faces,’ *abaara meji*, ‘one with two bodies,’ *aláàwọ meji*, ‘one of two colors’

⁹²⁹ Ibid., 15.

⁹³⁰ Ibid., 74.

⁹³¹ Abiodun, “Woman in Yoruba Religious Images,” 12.

⁹³² Verger, “*Ìyàmi Ọ̀ṣòrọ̀ngà*.”

⁹³³ Washington, *Our Mothers*, 16.

aply express this duality.”⁹³⁴ The designation “one with two bodies” is associated with their power of transformation that includes the terrestrial phenomenon of pregnancy and reaches into the sky with astral travel.

The latter is most commonly described as the belief that *iyami* are endowed with the ability to shape-shift or transmogrify, becoming night creatures, particularly birds that congregate in trees. This ability is evidenced in the meaning of *ẹ/ẹyẹ* (owners of birds/wielder of bird power) an additional name for the *àjẹ*.⁹³⁵ In *odu* Osa Meji, one learns that *ẹ/ẹyẹ* is a name stemming from Olodumare’s granting Odù “the power of the bird” contained in a calabash. Thus, “from the ancient time of Odù to this day, an *ẹyẹ* (bird) enclosed in a calabash has symbolized *Àjẹ*.”⁹³⁶

There is association between the traits of birds and characterizations of the *àjẹ*. Attributes of powerful birds such as the hawk include the ability to fly high, see far, perceive accurately, and strike swiftly. Birds are endowed with mystical qualities such as the night flight of owls. They are also awesome creatures; the vulture will rip out the guts of what is dead. As “birds” *àjẹ* have the ability to see far and deep, both within their environments and within the hearts and minds of individuals. As put forth in an *àjẹ* praise-poem (*oriki*):

My Mother Osorong, famous dove that eats in the town
Famous bird that eats in a cleared farm who kills an animal without sharing
with anyone

⁹³⁴ H. J. Drewal and Drewal, *Gẹlẹdẹ*, 74.

⁹³⁵ W. Abimbola, “Images of Women.”

⁹³⁶ Washington, *Our Mothers*, 23.

One who makes noise in the midnight
Who eats from the head to the arm, who eats from the liver to the heart.

As fearsome as these women might be, *iyami àjé* “are considered neither antisocial nor the personification of evil. Rather they form an important segment of the population in any town and tend to be shown much respect and affection.”⁹³⁷

Àjé fiercely guard the balance and harmony of the world. Breaches of cosmic order or natural law are assessed by group judgment and met with punishment, when necessary. This is their most feared role. Another praise-poem declares the *àjé* as: “She who kills and eats fellow humans. Famous person at night. She who eats raw liver without vomiting.”⁹³⁸ Taken in isolation the fearsome images evoked by these lines would indeed lead one to cast *àjé* as evil witches.

However, the following prayer was recorded by Ulli Beier that he characterizes as a prayer that “does not sound very different from the prayer to any other kind of deity:”

“I have woken up today
I am going to my work today.
You Iyalashe the hunter
Accompany me today.
When I am going to the farm
Accompany me today
When I am returning from the farm.

⁹³⁷ H. J. Drewal and Drewal, *Gelede*, 74.

⁹³⁸ W. Abimbola, “Images of Women,” 404.

You, my mother, bird of the night,
Be with me today.”⁹³⁹

According to the sixteenth major *odu*, Ofun Meji, requests for financial prosperity can be taken to *àjé*.⁹⁴⁰ But this according to some is not a straight-forward proposition. Although *àjé* might use their powers for good, because they are said to “operate within a set of natural laws,”⁹⁴¹ there is purportedly negative backlash—a cosmic variant of Newton’s third law of motion.

For example, if a witch wants to use her power to enrich her husband, then she must be prepared to shock-absorb the bitter consequences in terms of the death of the members of her family. There is always a price-tag.⁹⁴²

Observably, this view is a fatalistic assessment of the movement and distribution of energy.

Agreeing in principle with the *onisegun* with whom Hallen and Sodipo conducted research,⁹⁴³ Elebuibon speaks of the dual character of *àjé* and affirms that “men can also have the power.” However, although Elebuibon concedes that the witch uses objects including “nails, hair, clothes or other possessions of the victim,”⁹⁴⁴ the primary mode of attack does not involve use of materials or medicine. He goes on to discuss six methods by which *àjé* operate.

⁹³⁹ Beier, “Gelede Masks,” 6.

⁹⁴⁰ Epega and Neimark, *Sacred Ifa Oracle*.

⁹⁴¹ Orubu, “Witchcraft in African Religion,” 122

⁹⁴² Ibid.

⁹⁴³ Hallen and Sodipo, *Knowledge, Belief, and Witchcraft*.

⁹⁴⁴ Elebuibon, *Invisible Powers*, 45, 56.

“Àgógó ẹnu: This refers to the power of the tongue.” As noted above witches recall and harp upon even minor slights. They are known for having a vicious tongue. “Awopa Àjẹ: Looking without blinking.” This method is akin to giving someone the evil eye. However, the implications are graver because using this power *àjẹ* can scrutinize a person’s interior organs. “Moreover, she can see into the future of the victim...[and] can alter it adversely.” Third is “Òfà Àjẹ nínà: Shooting a witchcraft arrow.” The arrow is a psychic projectile targeted against the victim. *Àjẹ* are believed capable of attacking anyone from any distance using this method.⁹⁴⁵

“Igbá Ìwà: This is the sacred calabash that contains the sacred bird that is the symbol of witch power.” As already discussed, *àjẹ* are believed capable of transforming themselves into birds. It is this bird of the calabash that is said to house the spirit of the *àjẹ* as she flies to accomplish her deeds. Next is the all-important “Àṣẹ...the vital force behind the universe.” Also referred to as the “charm of command” guarded by Eṣu, and granted to *àjẹ* by Olodumare, this ability is considered *àjẹ*’s most fearsome weapon. “Whatever the mysterious beings say, it must come to pass... Àṣẹ is the absolute authority that has the touch of the divine.”⁹⁴⁶

Sixth is Òmùsu Àjẹ. “This mysterious power is believed to reside in the vagina of women” and is associated with the mouth of the cervix. In addition to being a general power accessed by *àjẹ* to achieve their ends, and also called

⁹⁴⁵ Ibid., 55.

⁹⁴⁶ Ibid., 56.

òmùsu idi, it is potently used in intimate male–female relationships. Without going into detail regarding how, Elebuibon states: “Only those who know it can appeal to it and make use of it.” From the examples offered one ascertains that this “knowing” is in the biblical sense. What is made clear, however, is that “many men have fallen into problems due to their maltreatment of women who invoke the omusu to punish them.”⁹⁴⁷

Elebuibon disclosed a few aspects of the initiation into the *àjé* secret society (Ègbé Ìmùlé) that he witnessed first-hand. At the end of the initiation process a chant is recited by the initiating priestess. The following is a small portion of the chant, highlighting one of the powers of *àjé*:

He forged power of speech (Àgógó)
He gave it to the mysterious mother Òsòròngà...
My mother, Òsòròngà, don't cut me
with the blade of your tongue.⁹⁴⁸

The dominant or popular perception of *àjé* is that they are malevolent beings, whose actions are primarily motivated by spite and jealousy. In brief, as expressed in Yoruba lore, the *àjé*'s malevolence lies in their ability to thwart the plans, endeavors, and schemes of humans. *Àjé* can arrest manifestation and fulfillment of ego desires, as well as afflict their fellow humans with a host of maledictions. What compounds this threat is that “ordinary human beings have no

⁹⁴⁷ Ibid., 56, 41, 56.

⁹⁴⁸ Ibid., 65.

powers against them”⁹⁴⁹ because the power of *àjé* is rooted in the primordial matrix of manifestation.

Women who are *àjé* and who hold the designation of *iyami* belong to a secret society⁹⁵⁰ around which swirls such mystery as to further enhance the legendary powers of the *àjé*. “Silence indicates not the ignorance of blind tradition or limited thought but the understanding that when knowledge *is* power, it must be differentially distributed in the public domain.”⁹⁵¹

As stated previously, *iyami* are women whose *àjé* is of exceptional potency and who are members of the highly shielded Iyami Society. Again, not every woman who wields *àjé* is an *iyami*. However, every *iyami* is *àjé*. Aina Olomo speaks of *iyami* as a “female collective entity... To me that collective consciousness has all the wisdom, the rage, the fears, the knowledge of everything ever experienced by women.”⁹⁵² Olomo goes to state that:

Aje is one of the manifestations of Iyaami... These personality types typically will have psychic powers or spiritual powers and abilities that are not common... They have access to portions of their brain that other people don't have.⁹⁵³

In our interview Samuel Opeola added important details that distinguish *iyami* and *àjé*. He asserts:

⁹⁴⁹ W. Abimbola, “Images of Women,” 403.

⁹⁵⁰ The *Àjé* Egbe or Iyami Society.

⁹⁵¹ Apter, *Black Critics and Kings*, 116.

⁹⁵² Olomo, “Iyaami Osorongá,” par. 19.

⁹⁵³ *Ibid.*, par. 43.

Not all of them are having the power of being able to attend the meetings of *iyami*...[It is] like a hierarchy; some of them have not got enough knowledge and enlightenment to behave in the proper way for admission into the Council. Not everybody is in the Council.⁹⁵⁴

Opeola goes on to state that the term *iyami* is often used loosely:

When they say *Iyami Osoronga*, that is a derogatory appellation of the Council of Witches. And when they say *awon iyami* without the *Osoronga* appellation, it applies to the supreme Council of the witches, the Council of the wise women... *Osoronga* is not a good appellation... It makes one look like one of the “Weird Sisters” [the 3 malevolent witches from *Macbeth*] rather than a benevolent mother....When you say *Osoronga* that means the witches that are vindictive.⁹⁵⁵

Writing in 1926, Amaury Talbot makes the claim that in southern Nigeria “witchcraft is chiefly feared in those regions where there are most traces of a former matriarchal regime and of a belief in the great Mother Goddess.” He further states that generally this great Mother Goddess was “identified with the Goddess of the Earth, like *Odudua* among the Yoruba.”⁹⁵⁶

Areas with a matriarchal past could expectantly be regions where women’s power and authority—spiritual and temporal—are in evidence. Drewal maintains that in addition to elderly women “priestesses of the deities, wealthy marketwomen, and female title-holders in prestigious organizations...are affectionately called ‘our mothers’ (*awon iya wa*). The positions they have attained...are evidence of their power.”⁹⁵⁷ Additionally, wealthy men of influence

⁹⁵⁴ Samuel Opeola, interview with the author, September 27, 2009, Ile-Ife, Nigeria.

⁹⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁹⁵⁶ Talbot, *Peoples of Southern Nigeria*, 203, 16.

⁹⁵⁷ M. T. Drewal, *Yoruba Ritual*, 177-78.

and power, “Big Men,” are commonly assumed to have achieved their status with the assistance of *àjé*.⁹⁵⁸

Although great secrecy surrounds *àjé*, Oṣogbo *babalawo*, Yemi Elebuibon writes that “in the olden days, an old woman who has the supernatural power of *iyami* would identify herself with three cowries tied around her ankle.”⁹⁵⁹ One wonders if such self-identification could have been more prevalent in areas such as Oṣogbo whose titular deity is Oṣun, “leader of the *àjé*.”⁹⁶⁰

Even in present-day Nigeria, secrecy surrounding *àjé* is not uniform in all regions. “There are parts, or areas that the *iyamis*, they are private. And some parts, they are not private; they are public.... Either day or night they are out.... Ota—it is in Ogun State—it is a town well-known for them.”⁹⁶¹ The large and proud population of *àjé* in Ota are not hiding in secret. Ota is also said to be “the town where the *iyami* came into the world.”⁹⁶²

Is it possible to say that the roots of the *àjé* and the *Ìyàmi* Society extend back to a pre-patriarchal Yoruba origin? The notion of matriarchal political organization among the early Yoruba is intriguing speculation that finds support if one looks at the primordial divinities. The primordial *àjé* Odù and Oṣun are central to Yoruba myths of creation. “Ìyámí is deeply connected with the myth of the

⁹⁵⁸ Apter, *Black Critics and Kings*.

⁹⁵⁹ Elebuibon, *Invisible Powers*, 40.

⁹⁶⁰ Badejo, *Oṣun Ṣẹ̀ẹ̀gẹ̀sí*, 77.

⁹⁶¹ Adedoyin Faniyi, interview with the author, March 21, 2010, Miami, Florida.

⁹⁶² Verger, “Ìyàmi Òṣòròngà,” 45.

Yorùbá world's creation."⁹⁶³ Verger briefly sites several myths relating *iyami àjé* to creation that were recorded by nineteenth century authors of Yoruba religion and culture.⁹⁶⁴

The society of witches is said to have been the first secret cult, being called "the mother of all secret cults."⁹⁶⁵ Onile, who owns or reigns over *ile* (the domain of earth and water), is considered unequivocally female. The accounts of her domain's usurpation by Olorun, who reigns within the heavens, and his agents are rendered in the chapter on Yoruba cosmology.

This usurpation could be viewed as evidencing transition to a patriarchal social orientation by the Yoruba. In discussing patriarchy's emergence, Lerner specifies that "the dethroning of the powerful goddesses and their replacement by a dominant male god occur in most Near Eastern societies following establishment of a strong and imperialistic kingship."⁹⁶⁶ Such is seen with the establishment of city-states and central kingship among the Yoruba, during which time Obatala and other male gods assume prominence. In addition, the gender of the Yoruba progenitor and principle creation deity, Oduduwa, morphs from female to male.

⁹⁶³ Ibid., 66.

⁹⁶⁴ Verger, "Ìyàmi Òṣòròngà."

⁹⁶⁵ Orubu, "Witchcraft in African Religion," 120.

⁹⁶⁶ Lerner, *Creation of Patriarchy*, 9.

A second characteristic of the transition to patriarchy is that “the Mother-Goddess is transformed into the wife/consort of the chief male God.”⁹⁶⁷ This aspect is particularly relevant within Yoruba context, where the primary connotation of husband is to assume authority over another.⁹⁶⁸ Odù and Oṣun are prominent within the Yoruba myths of creation as powerful, primordial beings and àjé. Obatala, who is given the task of making humans—forming them from Onile’s clay—becomes the husband of Odù. Orunmila, the divinity of wisdom present when Olorun created the universe, is arguably Oṣun’s primary husband. Orunmila is also considered “Òrìsà ọkọ àjé”⁹⁶⁹ (husband to àjé).

According to a verse of *Odu Ifa* ObaraOkanran, men were once in a subservient position to women. Men were responsible for all the domestic duties such as washing clothes, sweeping, and cooking. To indicate the level of apparent debasement, one reads: “When a son rode on a horse, the father would hold its tail.”⁹⁷⁰ When men could no longer stand their burden, they consulted Ifá and performed the substantial requisite sacrifice.

That changed their fortune and the burden was transferred to their wives. Their status was enhanced. They started to command their wives and enjoy all the privileges that they are now enjoying in the society.⁹⁷¹

⁹⁶⁷ Ibid., 9.

⁹⁶⁸ Makinde, “Motherhood.”

⁹⁶⁹ Adéwálé-Somadhi, *Yorùbá Religion*, 157.

⁹⁷⁰ Elebuibon, *Invisible Powers*, 99.

⁹⁷¹ Ibid.

Summary

There exists differing versions of *àjé*: the popular stereotype and the esoteric model. *Odu Ifa* Irete Meji paints an image of *iyami àjé* “conformant to the one created by popular belief.”⁹⁷² It speaks of *iyami àjé* sending her “bird” on missions to “eviscerate” a victim or to “remove the pregnancy” from the belly of a woman.⁹⁷³ It seems that the bird or the spirit of *iyami* can transform itself to bring fear to a victim or to confound.

It may become a ghost;
It may become an Òrìṣà⁹⁷⁴

Olomo states that “the *iyami* are shape-shifters and not bound by physical form...They have the power to be whatever they want to be.”⁹⁷⁵

The esoteric model is also contained in *Odu Ifa* and the oral tradition of herbalists such as those interviewed by Hallen and Sodipo.⁹⁷⁶ This model speaks to the exceptional powers and abilities of *àjé* that can be used for benefit as well as harm. Also seen is that there is differing opinion as to who is an *àjé* and how *àjé* is acquired. While generally thought that every woman is a potential *àjé*,⁹⁷⁷

⁹⁷² Verger, “*Ìyàmi Òṣòròngà*,” 43.

⁹⁷³ *Ibid.*, 77.

⁹⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 79.

⁹⁷⁵ Olomo, *Core of Fire*, 128.

⁹⁷⁶ Hallen and Sodipo, *Knowledge, Belief, and Witchcraft*.

⁹⁷⁷ Abiodun, “Woman in Yoruba Religious Images.”

there are others who disagree with this, believing that it is only through initiation that one becomes an *àjé*.

Talbot's assertion in *The Peoples of Southern Nigeria* concerning the connection of witchcraft fears to a matriarchal past begs the question of a Yoruba matriarchal legacy. There is evidence for this in the historical, spiritual and temporal authority of Yoruba women. More convincing, *Odu Ifa* evidences the tell-tale patterns of male usurpation of female power among the divinities, and there are *odu* that speak directly to the establishment of male hegemony.

In the chapter on Yoruba cosmology, it was learned that Olodumare bestowed the power of *àjé* upon the first woman upon the earth (Odù / Oşun) when the *orunmole* or *orişà* were coming here. In the next chapter, the exploration of *àjé* continues. *Àjé* in *Odu Ifa* is further developed as is the relationship between *àjé* and the deities as well as *àjé* and human beings.

CHAPTER 7: POLYVALANT ÀJÉ 2

ÀJÉ IN ODU IFA—INTERACTION WITH DEITIES AND HUMANS

“Witchcraft emerges not as something inherently evil but as a neutral force which can be used for both benevolent and malevolent ends.”⁹⁷⁸

Of primary importance for investigation regarding the *àjé* is their role and function as well as attitudes towards them as found in Yoruba oral tradition. Apter states that “cosmological meanings are never simply fixed.”⁹⁷⁹ They in fact shift and are mediated between culture and society. Culturally, the deep symbolism of *àjé* power and efficacy inspire reverence and awe. Socially, the reality is fear of *àjé* that engenders scapegoating and attack.

Cultural models do not shape what Apter calls “material relations” in isolation “but dialectically, under historical conditions of political and economic competition and transformation.”⁹⁸⁰ This assertion underscores the crux of the current investigation pertaining to the *àjé*: the dialectic between Yoruba oral tradition and Yoruba social reality with respect to *àjé*.

In looking at themes that correspond among the many sub-cultural groups that comprise Yorubaland, cultural unifiers were identified corresponding to the fact that the *Odu Ifa* is the sacred text of the Yoruba as a whole. Another cultural unifier is the place and significance of *àjé* among the Yoruba.

As an oral text there are understandably regional variations in *Odu Ifa*, particularly in the *odu ẹsẹ* (verses). Likewise, relationship to *àjé* undoubtedly

⁹⁷⁸ Olupona, “Yoruba Religious Tradition,” 253.

⁹⁷⁹ Apter, *Black Critics and Kings*, 6.

⁹⁸⁰ *Ibid.*

exhibits variation among regions, and the roles of *àjé* are often obscured. For instance, the spectacular Gelede masquerade in propitiation of *iyami àjé* has its home primarily among the Egbado and Ketu.⁹⁸¹ Within the male Egungun cult there is a woman whose job is ostensibly to assist with the dressing of Egungun.⁹⁸² However, the *iyagan's* symbolic and spiritual function runs much deeper as the conduit for the powers of the mothers to manifest, blessing and empowering the proceedings.

The power of the *àjé* is perceived to come from their spiritual authority. According to myth it was the Yoruba creator of the universe, Olodumare, who bestowed *àjé* with their power. This fact is expressed in the chapter Osa Meji within the Yoruba sacred text, *Odu Ifa*.⁹⁸³

He says, to this woman (Odù) is given the power,
which makes her their mother.
He says, you, you will support the earth.
Olodumare gives her power.
When he gives them [the two accompanying male *oriṣa*] power,
he gives her the power of the bird,
he bestowes her with the power of ẹlẹiyẹ (the birdkeeper).
When he has given her power of ẹlẹiyẹ Olodumare says, this is good.⁹⁸⁴

Àjé power is also manifest in their ability to coexist in both the realms of *orun* (spirit) and *aye* (matter). The immanence of spirit is central to the Yoruba worldview. Great respect is held for individuals who can communicate with spirit

⁹⁸¹ H. J. Drewal and Drewal, *Gelede*.

⁹⁸² Abiodun, "Woman in Yoruba Religious Images."

⁹⁸³ Abiodun, "Hidden Power."

⁹⁸⁴ Verger, "Ìyàmi Òṣòròngà," 134.

on behalf of others. A telling example of the importance of spirit is the significance of divination to the Yoruba, wherein answers are deemed to come from the domain of spirit—from the ancestors and *oriṣa*. The realm of spirit, however, is not divorced from the realm of matter, spirit and matter are considered interpenetrating domains.⁹⁸⁵

Also, although the Yoruba do distinguish good from evil, the distinction is not in terms of a dualistic construct. Coexistence and balance between these forces is thought to maintain balance in the world.⁹⁸⁶ Hallen, for example, makes the case that it was the prejudiced perceptions of the colonialists which colored, and still color, *àjé* as inherently evil.⁹⁸⁷ It is said that *Oṣun*, leader of the *àjé*, “abhors evil machination.”⁹⁸⁸ Akin to coexisting in *orun* and *aye*, *àjé* straddle the worlds of *good* and *evil*. The *ajogun*, who war against humanity’s well-being, are allied with *àjé*.⁹⁸⁹

This being as it may, *àjé* have historically been an accepted and integral part of Yoruba society, an example of which is seen in civil government where the *oba*’s staff of rulership is emblazoned with symbols of the *àjé*.⁹⁹⁰ As well, the

⁹⁸⁵ Idowu, *Olódùmarè*.

⁹⁸⁶ Ogungbile, “Eérìndínlógún.”

⁹⁸⁷ Hallen, *Good, Bad, Beautiful*.

⁹⁸⁸ Ogungbile, “Eérìndínlógún,” 51.

⁹⁸⁹ K. Abimbola, *Yorùbá Culture*.

⁹⁹⁰ Ogungbile, “Eérìndínlógún.”

Gelede festival is an annually held ritual that honors the *àjé*.⁹⁹¹ These women who walk within the spiritual and material realms and who straddle good and evil have been accepted and honored members of their society for centuries.

As noted *àjé* is generally translated (or mistranslated and misconceptualized) as witch/witchcraft. The term witch, attached to Western religious tradition, is loaded with meaning and elicits strong reactions as it has been the lightning rod of ills and evil and the locus of dramatic historical occurrences against women. Washington states:

The misguided assumption that complex African concepts can and must be defined by false European language equivalents has led to much confusion and impeded a true understanding of *Àjé* and similar powers.⁹⁹²

Members of the Iyami Society generally hide the fact of their membership out of concern for their safety. Closely linked with this phenomenon is the present-day witch scare menacing some areas of Africa, notably the Congo, South Africa, northern Ghana, and the Nigerian Delta.⁹⁹³

The present chapter expands on prior discussion of *àjé* in *Odu Ifa* and the mythic realm, as well as look at *àjé* on the terrestrial plane. *Àjé* is spiritual power, and it is simultaneously the primordial beings said to own this power, as well as earthly women endowed with this power. *Àjé*'s cosmic origin and link to the primordial mothers of the Yoruba pantheon are revisited and briefly elaborated upon. Following this the exploration turns to the interaction and relationship

⁹⁹¹ Lawal, *Gèlèdè Spectacle*.

⁹⁹² Washington, *Our Mothers*, 8.

⁹⁹³ For example, Evans, "Killing of Women"; Lampman, "Targeting Cities"; Nossiter, "Witch Hunts."

between *àjé* and the *oriša*, especially Obatala and Orunmila. From here discussion delves into *àjé*'s arrival on earth and their relationship with humans.

Àjé and Female Divinity

Osa Meji and OşeTaura tell of *àjé* bestowal upon female divinity by the Yoruba creator of the universe, Olodumare. In the apportioning of power, the lone female *oriša* among the *oriša* tasked with making earth a pleasing abode was made the mother of all in whose care was placed “all good things.”⁹⁹⁴ Specified as Odù or Oşun, there is a unifying primal female energy from which these deities emanate.

Often identified as the first female in the Yoruba universe...*Ìyá Nlá* (Great Mother) remains an enigma. This is because she is Mother Nature. She is *Yewajóbi, Ìyàmi, Ìyá* (the Mother of All and the mother of mothers), epitomizing the maternal principle in the Yoruba cosmos, combining in her nature the attributes of all the principal female deities—Yemoja (mother of all waters), Olókun (sea goddess), Oşun (goddess of the Oşun river), Odù (founder of witchcraft), Oòduà (Earth goddess), Ilẹ̀ (Earth goddess), and Oya (goddess of the Niger River).⁹⁹⁵

The Great Mother encompasses all duality and her daughters are a reflection of their mother, personifications of the ancient primordial energy that is Iya'Nla. Therefore, it is Iya'Nla who is “the grand matron of the *àjé*.”⁹⁹⁶ Iya'Nla is also referred to as “the Creator Mother”⁹⁹⁷ and is venerated in several guises that also serve as praise names. Some include: “*Ìyàmi Òsòròngà* (*the Great and*

⁹⁹⁴ Abiodun, “Hidden Power,” 16.

⁹⁹⁵ Lawal, *Gèlèdè Spectacle*, 71.

⁹⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 73.

⁹⁹⁷ Alcamo, *Ìyá Nlá*, 19.

Mysterious Mother), *Ìyá Agbè (Mother of the Closed Calabash)*...[and] *Ìyàmi Wa (Our Primordial Mother)*.⁹⁹⁸

Yemoja is “mother of witches,”⁹⁹⁹ and Oṣun, identified with Iyami Oṣoronga, is “leader of the aje.”¹⁰⁰⁰ Though noted by Lawal that Odù is “founder of witchcraft,”¹⁰⁰¹ the name Odù has several associations that speak to her breadth and power. Opeola asserts that “Odù is a corporate name...representing [a] certain aspect of the belief system of the Yoruba.”¹⁰⁰² He maintains that the core link between Odù and *àjé* “is the accurate something.”¹⁰⁰³

Odù is most widely known as the wife of Orunmila. To become a full Ifá priest, one must be initiated into Odù’s secrets and allowed to look inside her pot, the formation of which is described in OṣeOyeku.¹⁰⁰⁴ OṣeOyeku identifies Odù as a venerable elder goddess of whom guidance and counsel were widely sought. It is upon her approaching death after a long esteemed life of earthly existence that Odù assembles the *apèrè Ìgbádù* (Igba Odù). Within it Odù incorporates essential elements of her four younger companion deities—Obarisa, Ogun,

⁹⁹⁸ Ibid.

⁹⁹⁹ Apter, *Black Critics and Kings*, 113.

¹⁰⁰⁰ Badejo, *Oṣun Ṣẹ̀ẹ̀gẹ̀sí*, 77.

¹⁰⁰¹ Lawal, *Gẹ̀lẹ̀dẹ̀ Spectacle*, 71.

¹⁰⁰² Samuel Opeola, interview with the author, September 27, 2009, Ile-Ife, Nigeria.

¹⁰⁰³ Ibid.

¹⁰⁰⁴ Verger, “Ìyàmi Òṣòròngà.”

Obaluaiye, and Odudua—and states that it is to the *apèrè Ìgbádù* that her children can turn for her guidance.

From this day on, we worship Odù inside the apèrè.
If the babaláwo wishes to adore Ifá,
if he enters the forest of Ifá,
if he has not (previously) propitiated Odù in the apèrè,
then he will accomplish nothing.¹⁰⁰⁵

When Obatala was coming to Earth to perform the work of creation, Olodumare bestowed a portion of his attributes upon Obatala. “What he gave him is called *Odù*. In this case it means an endowed attribute of supreme authority to speak and act and be implicitly obeyed.”¹⁰⁰⁶ As discussed, Oduduwa is of great significance in the origin myth of the Yoruba people. In deciphering the components of the name Oduduwa, “*Odù* means in this case ‘the supreme head’, ‘chief’, or ‘one who bears the scepter.’”¹⁰⁰⁷ From the foregoing, one can certainly sense *Odù*’s antiquity and power and with it, that of *àjé*.

Iya’Nla and *Odù* are generally spoken of conjointly or interchangeably as a nexus of female energy. Washington writes that “Ìyánlá (Great Mother)...is *Odù*, *Oòdùà*, *Odùduwà*, and *Odúdùà*.”¹⁰⁰⁸ Alcamo states:

Our primordial Mother, the first female principle, symbol of origins, wisdom, integration, evolution and resolution. She created the balance based on complementary pairs....Ìyá Nlá’s (*Odù*) energy of wisdom in any

¹⁰⁰⁵ Ibid., 183.

¹⁰⁰⁶ Idowu, *Olódùmarè*, 72.

¹⁰⁰⁷ Ibid., 24.

¹⁰⁰⁸ Washington, *Our Mothers*, 36.

representation is so powerful that her names in any aspect must be mentioned with respect and humbleness.¹⁰⁰⁹

One shows respect for and humility towards *iyami àjé* by touching the ground¹⁰¹⁰ or lifting oneself slightly from a seated position when their name is mentioned.

The latter is referred to as *mogbe di-o*,¹⁰¹¹ literally, “I lift my rump.”

The many aspects and manifestations of the primordial mother all have the power of *àjé*, “each one of her aspects carries the force of *Eleiye*.” Alcamo continues that sadly “all have been classified as *witches*.” Ileana Alcamo is an *Ìyálájà*, a designation that includes that of *Ìyálàjé*, an *àjé* initiate. She maintains that the Christian “Eve propaganda gives the idea of the innate superiority of men over women,” which in turn is used to justify distortions of the cosmology including “a specific male image for God.” Citing a few examples, Alcamo maintains that male interpreters of *Odu Ifa* have painted a fearsome portrait of women and their powers, their *àjé*.¹⁰¹²

Controversially, Alcamo disputes the popular belief based on the *Odu Ifa*, that Odù was the wife of Orunmila. “According to Dahomian scriptures, Gbadu (*Ìyá Nlá / Odù*) was never anyone’s mystical or terrestrial wife.”¹⁰¹³ As noted in Chapter 5, the term husband among the Yoruba carries the connotation of having

¹⁰⁰⁹ Alcamo, *Ìyá Nlá*, 27.

¹⁰¹⁰ Verger, “*Ìyàmi Òṣòròngà*.”

¹⁰¹¹ Yoruba priestess Osunfunmilayo, interview with the author, October 9, 2009, Lagos, Nigeria.

¹⁰¹² Alcamo, *Ìyá Nlá*, 29, 29, 23, 23.

¹⁰¹³ *Ibid.*, 23.

mastery over another.¹⁰¹⁴ Further, as seen in Chapter 3 the Yoruba migrated early into Dahomey (present-day Republic of Benin).

Illuminating the relationship between Oṣun, whose metal is brass, Oṣoronga, and *àjé* is the following *oriki* (praise-poem):

Homage, my mother, the Òṣòròngà
Mother with the beautiful eyes,
Who has a bunch of hair in her private part,
The Mother who owns a brass tray
And a brass fan,
The famous bird of the night that flies gracefully.¹⁰¹⁵

Additional linkage between *àjé* and fans, an Oṣun icon, is seen in the assertion by Hoch-Smith that “there are fans, which the ‘mothers’ use, concealing poison; while fanning a ‘mother’ can use it as a means of throwing death or injury or madness upon a person.”¹⁰¹⁶ In OgbeOgunda the *àjé* state that honey is “the thing we use to make an oath,”¹⁰¹⁷ and honey is intimately associated with Oṣun.¹⁰¹⁸

In Elebuibon’s telling of Oṣetaura (OṣeOtura), one learns that it was Oṣun who formed the earthly *iyami*. When Oṣun, the lone female divinity among the deities sent by Olodumare to administer the world, was shunned by the male deities, “this aroused her anger. She then went to form a gang of Àjé.”¹⁰¹⁹ These

¹⁰¹⁴ Makinde, “Motherhood.”

¹⁰¹⁵ Lawal, *Gẹ̀lẹ̀dẹ̀ Spectacle*, 74.

¹⁰¹⁶ Hoch-Smith, “Radical Yoruba Female Sexuality,” 265.

¹⁰¹⁷ Verger, “Ìyàmi Òṣòròngà,” 104.

¹⁰¹⁸ Adewale-Somadhi, *Yorùbá Religion*.

¹⁰¹⁹ Elebuibon, *Invisible Powers*, 110.

àjé, with Oṣun as their leader, disrupted the work of the male *oriṣa* causing much distress upon the earth.

When informed by Olodumare that their disrespect of Oṣun was the cause of their problems and that they needed to apologize and ask her forgiveness, they did so. However, Oṣun stipulated that three conditions be met for the restoration of peace and order:

(i) a woman will be allowed to attend men's meetings. (ii) all initiation ceremonies performed for men will be extended to women. (iii) a woman will be allowed to participate in all civic functions.¹⁰²⁰

Male dominance and unfair treatment of women are spoken to in this and similar *odu* that highlight disparity, such as a version of Osa Meji where one reads: "Men were maltreating the women. Men enslaved them and treated them harshly."¹⁰²¹ Thus, it was women who went to Olodumare and were granted the power of *àjé*. Bestowed by deity, *Odu Ifa* demonstrates that exercising the power of *àjé* is remedy to patriarchal paternalism as well as patriarchal bullying.

It will be seen in Chapter 9 that Yemoja is integrally linked to the Gelede ritual held in honor of Iya'Nla and in propitiation of *àjé*. Iya'Nla "in her popular aspect as Yemoja...is the generous and dangerous mother."¹⁰²² Washington discusses Yemoja as *àjé* in terms of the superior abilities that she embodies, stating: "Ìyá Yemoja's Àjé is as diverse as her 'roads,' or manifestations of self,

¹⁰²⁰ Ibid., 111.

¹⁰²¹ Olajabu, *Women in the Yoruba Religious Sphere*, 27.

¹⁰²² Lawal, *Gẹ̀lẹ̀dẹ̀ Spectacle*, 73.

are many.”¹⁰²³ In addition to her well-known association with fertility reflected in her name’s etymology—“Yèyè-ọmọ-ẹja (‘mother of fishes’)”¹⁰²⁴—Washington delineates that Yemoja is master dancer, healer, diviner, and warrior.

According to Robert Farris Thompson, Yemoja, Oṣun, and Oya “are famed for their ‘witchcraft.’”¹⁰²⁵ Oya is widely associated with “the winds of change” and the realm of the ancestors—“Ìyá Nlá’s manifestation of movement...the forces of instability and the force of the Egungun which [Oya] uses to help society rid itself of instability.”¹⁰²⁶ The ancestors can be called upon to reestablish personal and communal harmony. Oya’s *àjé* resides in the powers of transformation and transcendence. She is present at the portals of death and birth, the two fundamental points of transformation and transcendence in human lives. Oya also has the power of utterance. “Àjé is the force that gives the power of the word the intensity needed to effect change.”¹⁰²⁷

As the deity of earth, the body of the earth itself, Ilé is indeed ancient. Robert Farris Thompson describes Ilé as being “beyond sex or class or any consideration contaminated by singleness of expectation...[Ilé] was here before the goddesses and before the gods. [This antiquity] implies a power beyond ‘her’

¹⁰²³ Washington, *Our Mothers*, 44.

¹⁰²⁴ Matory, *Sex and the Empire*, 150.

¹⁰²⁵ Thompson, *Flash of the Spirit*, 74.

¹⁰²⁶ Alcamo, *Ìyá Nlá*, 49.

¹⁰²⁷ Washington, *Our Mothers*, 49.

sex.”¹⁰²⁸ Uniformly considered a goddess, she is Onilé, owner of the earth, venerated by the judicial Ogboni Society. “Ògbóni derives its divine authority from Ilé, the earth goddess whose propitiation is crucial to peace, happiness, social stability, and human survival.”¹⁰²⁹

Ilé is considered a generous mother to her children, feeding and sheltering them from her body. However, “like Earth goddesses in other cultures...[she] brings death to her children” consuming their bodies. In this aspect she is Ọ̀gẹ̀rẹ̀. “Highly irascible and vindictive; she is the grandmatron of àjẹ́.”

Earth, Ọ̀gẹ̀rẹ̀, who combs her hair with a hoe.
The owner of a bag full of evil.
She has a stomach big enough to swallow human beings.¹⁰³⁰

Lawal has given the title of àjẹ́ “grand matron” to both Iya’Nla and Ilé, no doubt to honor their antiquity. In a version of the above *oriki* presented by Washington, the phrase “wicked bags” is used instead of “bag full of evil.” She goes on to specify that “these bags contained healing salves, poisons and, most important, tombs. The bags are ‘wicked’ because one never knows which of their many skills—curing, cursing, or devouring—the Mothers will employ.”¹⁰³¹

Whether endowed by the Yoruba “Creator Essence,”¹⁰³² Olodumare, or a natural endowment of the “Great Mother”/ “Creator Mother,” Iya’Nla (Odù)—who

¹⁰²⁸ Thompson, *Flash of the Spirit*, 74.

¹⁰²⁹ Lawal, *Gẹ̀lẹ̀dẹ̀ Spectacle*, 34.

¹⁰³⁰ *Ibid.*, 35.

¹⁰³¹ Washington, *Our Mothers*, 41.

¹⁰³² Badejo, *Ọ̀ṣun Ẹ̀gẹ̀gẹ̀sí*, 56.

some consider senior to Olodumare¹⁰³³—*àjé* has been present since the dawn of existence. *Àjé* as power, the divinities who embody *àjé*, and the earthly daughters gifted with *àjé* have been present since creation began.

Àjé and the Oriṣa

In an *oriki* or praise poem for Orunmila, one finds the phrase “Òrìṣà ọkọ àjé...Òrìṣà, àjés’ (witches’) husband. It means that Ọ́rúnmìlà is revered by the witches.”¹⁰³⁴ *Odu Ifa IreteOgbe* speaks of the early relationship between Orunmila and Odù. Odù arrived on earth with her powerful bird, Aragamago. Orunmila wanted to marry Odù but was advised to “make an offering to the earth”¹⁰³⁵ before even approaching her.

They say, Odù whom you wish to take as a wife,
They say, a power is in her hands...
They say (so that) she would not kill and eat him with her power,
because the power of this woman was greater than that of Ọ́rúnmìlà.¹⁰³⁶

Odù was impressed by Orunmila’s generous offering and agrees to become his wife, his ally and defender.

She says, you Ọ́rúnmìlà.
She says she has come.
She says her powers are many.
She says that she will not let them fight you.
She says that she does not wish to fight Ọ́rúnmìlà.
She says, even if someone were to ask her assistance, and told her to fight you,

¹⁰³³ Lawal, “Ejiwapo.”

¹⁰³⁴ Adewale-Somadhi, *Yorùbá Religion*, 157.

¹⁰³⁵ Verger, “Ìyàmi Ọ̀ṣòròngà,” 169.

¹⁰³⁶ *Ibid.*

she says, she will not fight you,
because, she says they will not cause Ọ̀rúnmìlà to suffer.¹⁰³⁷

Odù adds that “no àjé will be able to destroy anything belonging to Ọ̀rúnmìlà.”¹⁰³⁸

This *odu* also speaks to the relationship between Odù and *babalawo*. Orunmila admonished his children, the *babalawo*, “never to joke with her [not treat lightly] because Odù is the power of the *babaláwo*.”¹⁰³⁹

Within the *Odu Ifa* are numerous stories of Orunmila and the *àjé*. A verse of IreteOkanran, as told by Epega and Neimark, provides a possible example of Orunmila being saved from murder by *iyami*. In it a bird spoke out to warn Orunmila against putting on poison-tainted clothes or sitting on a poison-tainted mat.¹⁰⁴⁰ An origin myth for the Gelede ritual of appeasement to the *iyami* from *odu* Osa Meji involves an encounter between Orunmila and *àjé*. “With requisite attire and demeanor, Ọ̀runmila journeys safely into the midst of the owners-of-birds, where he sings and dances.”¹⁰⁴¹

Odu IreteOwanrin tells of Orunmila’s meeting with and escape from *iyami* in the town of Ota, to this day renowned for its population of *àjé*. Orunmila went to Ota to discover the secret of the *iyami* and did so with Eṣu’s assistance. IreteOwanrin is also “referred to as Ìrètẹ̀ Ọ̀lótà (Ìrètẹ̀ keeper of Ọ̀tà), thus

¹⁰³⁷ Ibid., 170.

¹⁰³⁸ Ibid., 171.

¹⁰³⁹ Ibid., 172.

¹⁰⁴⁰ Epega and Neimark, *Sacred Ifa Oracle*, Oracle 196.

¹⁰⁴¹ H. J. Drewal and Drewal, *Gelede*, 18.

indicating by name the relations of this *odù* with *Òtà*, the town where the *Ìyámí* came into the world.”¹⁰⁴² The arrival of the *iyami* in Ota is related in *Odu Ifa Irete Meji*.

The importance of divination was spoken to in the chapter on Yoruba cosmology. With respect to Sixteen Cowrie divination, one finds that *àjé* are honored. Before beginning, the diviner “pays homage to *Ilé* [earth deity] pointing to the ground, and to *Ìyàmi* [*Àjé*] pointing to the sky, and says:

Your worship!
You are the custodians of mysteries,
I am ignorant.
Reveal this secret to me.
Do not reveal good instead of evil.
Do not reveal evil instead of good.”¹⁰⁴³

A verse of *Odu Ifa Ogbe Ate* (Ogbelrete) reveals that Orunmila taught *Ifa* divination to the *àjé*. “*Ifa* taught them how to write on divination board.” The same verse also reveals that Orunmila beheaded impertinent *àjé* and the subsequent problems experienced as the “sacred bird of *Àjé*...started to fight *Òrúnmlà*.” It was only after a substantial sacrifice, which included 200 parrot feathers that he obtained from *Oṣun*, identified in this *odu* as leader of the *àjé*, that Orunmila found peace.¹⁰⁴⁴

Orunmila was required to provide restitution for his rash act, an act that was all the more alarming because he is the deity of wisdom. Also recorded by Badejo, she states:

¹⁰⁴² Verger, “*Ìyàmi Òṣòròngà*,” 45.

¹⁰⁴³ Ogungbile, “*Eérìndínlógún*,” 195.

¹⁰⁴⁴ Elebuibon, *Invisible Powers*, 92.

When Orunmila murdered the aje in anger, he created havoc. The disrespect and defiance of aje...are unjustifiable....The crime violates the intent of *ogbón* [wisdom] which suggests reasonableness and a rational resolution to offenses and problems.¹⁰⁴⁵

Further identifying the link between Orunmila and *àjé*, in a verse of OfunOgunda one learns how Orunmila distinguished his faithful priests/teachers: "He shaved their heads, leaving a spot of hair as he wore his, and in it he put a red feather from the tail of the parrot."¹⁰⁴⁶

Fraught is a tame word to describe the relationship between *àjé* and Obatala. Politically, this might be a reflective remnant of the early tension between the indigenous population represented by their deity, Obatala, and the invaders whose titular deity was female, Oduduwa. There are many stories relating the animosity between *àjé* and Obatala.

Their saga begins with a creation myth that has Oduduwa and Obatala as the occupants of the cosmic calabash, *Igba Iwa*. Oduduwa occupied the supporting lower half of the gourd identified as "the 'mother' (Iya Agbe)," while Obatala occupied the offspring-like upper region.¹⁰⁴⁷

In this narrative Obatala is husband to Oduduwa and apparently Oduduwa was a nag who blamed Obatala for their discomfort within the confining calabash.

A violent quarrel ensued, in the course of which, in a frenzy of rage, Obatala tore out her eyes because she would not bridle her tongue. In

¹⁰⁴⁵ Badejo, *Ọṣun Ẹ̀gègèsí*, 96.

¹⁰⁴⁶ Bascom, *Ifa Divination*, 111.

¹⁰⁴⁷ Lawal, "Ejiwapo," 26.

return she cursed him saying “naught shalt thou eat but snails,” which is the reason why snails are now offered to Obatala.¹⁰⁴⁸

As discussed in the chapter on Ile-Ife mythistory, Obatala was the male titular deity of the indigenous population, which the Yoruba subdued, and Oduduwa was the female titular deity of the invaders.¹⁰⁴⁹ Could this myth speak to a resurgent masculinist focus overtaking the invader’s more female-focused belief system? According to Blier this resurgence of Obatala might have occurred during Ile-Ife’s early dynastic period under the reign of Obalufon I.¹⁰⁵⁰

In the chapter on Yoruba cosmology, the myth in *Odu Ifa Osa Meji* was encountered wherein Odù forfeits her power to Obatala and Obatala uses deception to steal the Egun mysteries that Odù controlled. Another *itan* within Osa Meji tells of Obatala stealing water with which to mold humans from *iyami*’s river once his own water source ran dry. Upon discovering that their water was being pilfered, *iyami*’s anger was roused and they went in pursuit of Obatala.

Obatala ran in turn to the homes of Egun and Ogun. However, *iyami* is stronger than both. To Egun “they say, all your power, we shall swallow it.” To Ogun they say, “all your iron tools...all your work, we shall take it and swallow it.” Obatala, Egun, and Ogun then run to the home of Orunmila. Orunmila in his

¹⁰⁴⁸ Ellis, *Yoruba-Speaking Peoples*, 42.

¹⁰⁴⁹ Obayemi, “Ancient Ile-Ife.”

¹⁰⁵⁰ Blier, “Kings, Crowns, and Rights.”

wisdom fetes *iyami*, who in satisfaction pardons the offending Obatala and his would-be protectors.¹⁰⁵¹

In four variants encountered of this *itan*,¹⁰⁵² while Egun was always present, Obatala also sought assistance from Oro and Şango. Additionally, action taken to counter *iyami* ranged from the provision of a feast seen above, to the *iyami* being stuck to their seats and bludgeoned to death by Orunmila.¹⁰⁵³ In this latter telling, the offense that angered the *iyami* was graver than the stealing of water.

Human beings made their own brook separately,
And the Witches also made their own brook separately...
When the brook of human beings dried up,
Yemòó went to draw water from the Witches brook.
She was having her menstruation at that time.
When she finished drawing water,
She used her menstrual pad to wash her private part in the remaining water.¹⁰⁵⁴

Yemòó was the human wife of Obatala, to whom the witches complained about her action. However, instead of acknowledging the seriousness of the offense and making restitution, “Òòşàálá (Obatala) said that his wife had done nothing wrong.”¹⁰⁵⁵ The foregoing is a telling introduction to the relationship between *àjé* and humans, which is explored in the next section.

¹⁰⁵¹ Verger, “Ìyàmi Òşòròngà,” 161, 162.

¹⁰⁵² W. Abimbola, *Ifá Literary Corpus*; Beier, *Yoruba Myths*; Şangode, *The Goddesses*; Verger, “Ìyàmi Òşòròngà.”

¹⁰⁵³ W. Abimbola, *Ifá Literary Corpus*.

¹⁰⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 177.

¹⁰⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 174.

Odu Ifa Idi Meji provides an alternate view of how the *àjé* received their power. It also provides a view of the limits to *àjé*'s power. Eṣu is referred to as the "father" of witches and wizards in OkanranIrosu,¹⁰⁵⁶ and in OgundaKete (Ogundalrete) Eṣu sacrifices so that "the people of the world (*omo araye*) might obey him,"¹⁰⁵⁷ *omo araye* being a euphemism for *àjé*. According to Idi Meji, it was to Eṣu that *àjé* went to acquire their power. This fact could possibly be associated with Eṣu's role as "the guardian of the àṣẹ."¹⁰⁵⁸

Eshu was willing to give it to them but he had to refer them to Orunmila, the God of Fate. Orunmila would not allow them to go out into the world with the power of witchcraft until they promised to honour certain signs and materials to serve men as protections against their power. They agreed to this but it was necessary for them to go on to Olorun, the Lord of all, to make their agreement binding.¹⁰⁵⁹

The essence of the agreement as to the limits of *àjé* power is rendered axiomatically and summarized by Lawal:

(1) that nobody eats a tortoise with the shell; (2) nobody eats a ram along with the horns; (3) nobody eats a porcupine along with the spines; and (4) nobody eats a fowl along with the feathers.¹⁰⁶⁰

Lawal omits a line of the prohibitions delineated in *odu* Idi Meji that reads: "It is forbidden to eat soap."¹⁰⁶¹

¹⁰⁵⁶ Epega and Neimark, *Sacred Ifa Oracle*, Oracle 130.

¹⁰⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 444.

¹⁰⁵⁸ Badejo, *Ọṣun Ṣẹ̀ẹ̀gẹ̀sí*, 43.

¹⁰⁵⁹ Prince, "Yoruba Image of the Witch," 795.

¹⁰⁶⁰ Lawal, *Gẹ̀lẹ̀dẹ̀ Spectacle*, 31-32.

¹⁰⁶¹ Prince, "Yoruba Image of the Witch," 796.

The motif of a snake attempting to swallow a tortoise or a porcupine is seen in Gelede masks and speaks to the limitations of *iyami àjẹ*'s power as represented in *Odu Ifa* Idi Meji. The symbolism of this motif is said to be that although the porcupine and tortoise appear to be fairly innocuous creatures, their "sharp quills or hard shell will in the long run destroy the predator."¹⁰⁶²

Àjẹ and Humans

Several myths tell the story of *iyami àjẹ*'s arrival among humans. There is myth that holds that *iyami* and humans arrived on earth at the same time.¹⁰⁶³ For example, in Verger it is noted that when *iyami* arrived in Ota, humans arrived at the same time.

Ifá was consulted for 201 people
who came to earth from heaven.
Ifá was consulted for 201 birdkeepers
who came to earth from heaven.¹⁰⁶⁴

There are other myths that seem to indicate that *iyami* arrived later with the primary intention of disrupting human existence. The following is found in Odi Meji (Idi Meji):

He met the Ìyámí on the road.
Òrúnmílà says where are you going?
They say they are going to earth.
He says, what are you going to do there?
They say, those who will not be their followers, they shall ruin.¹⁰⁶⁵

¹⁰⁶² Lawal, *Gẹ̀lẹ̀dẹ̀ Spectacle*, 248.

¹⁰⁶³ W. Abimbola, *Ifá Literary Corpus*.

¹⁰⁶⁴ Verger, "Ìyàmi Òṣòròngà," 76 (Irete Meji).

¹⁰⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 118.

Iyami continues with a list of the maledictions with which they will abuse humans.

Iyami either arrived on earth within the body of Orunmila—although this appears to have been an aborted attempt as Orunmila returned to and the *iyami* exited from his stomach at “the place where he had originally swallowed up the Witches”¹⁰⁶⁶—or they arrived within the body of Osa Meji. Or alternately, they arrived on their own.

Osa Meji is thought of as the witches’ *odu*, containing many verses and stories (*ese* and *itan*) that pertain to *iyami àjé*. Osa Meji is also “known as *Òsá Èlẹ̀yẹ̀*,”¹⁰⁶⁷ a name that clearly links it with *iyami àjé*. Further, “the mystic representation of Osa Meji is a female face surrounded with a lunar crescent and a sky filled with stars, which symbolizes the secrets of female power.”¹⁰⁶⁸

Greatly significant is that it was Osa Meji who brought the aged and frail *Iyami Osoronga* to the world when no other divinity would do so. For both to be transported safely across the insubstantial bridge linking heaven and earth, *Iyami Osoronga* “took up a position inside his stomach.” However, once reaching the earth *Iyami Osoronga* refused to relinquish her comfortable position with its ample supply of internal organs for food.¹⁰⁶⁹

In a panic Osa Meji performs *Ifá* divination and is instructed to cook the liver, heart, and intestines of a goat. When *Iyami Osoronga* smells the delectable

¹⁰⁶⁶ W. Abimbola, *Ifá Literary Corpus*, 180.

¹⁰⁶⁷ W. Abimbola, “Images of Women,” 403.

¹⁰⁶⁸ Fatunmise, *Iyami Osoronga*, 13.

¹⁰⁶⁹ Şangode, *The Goddesses*, 70.

aroma, she exits Osa Meji's stomach. Because it is "forbidden for her to eat in full view of anyone," Osa Meji erects a tent with the white cloth that was part of his prescribed sacrifice (*ebo*). While Iyami Osoronga is enjoying her meal, Osa Meji escapes, entering the womb of a woman.¹⁰⁷⁰

A subsequent *itan* in this *odu* recounts that Osa Meji, however, has not escaped from *iyami*. "Little did he know that he was 'merely running from the frying pan into the fire' because the woman who was to become his mother was a member of the 'cult of Iyami Osoronga.'"¹⁰⁷¹ And thus begins Osa Meji's journey in the world with *iyami*.

Two *itan* are included by Verger that appear to speak of *iyami* coming into the world independently of people, *Odu Ifa Odi (Idi) Meji* and *OgbeOsa*. In *Odi Meji*, Iyami Osoronga is used as a corporate name to designate *iyami àjé* as a group.

Ifá was consulted for the Ìyámí Ọ̀ṣòròngà,
who came to the earth from heaven...
They say they have come to earth.¹⁰⁷²

Odu OgbeOsa refers to *iyami àjé* by their epithet, *eleiye*—bird keepers or master of birds.

Both *Odi Meji* and *OgbeOsa* speak of the seven trees upon which *iyami* establishes residency. *Odi Meji* maintains that the *iyami* move from tree to tree not finding any suitable until they alight upon "the top of the tree that they call ọ̀pẹ̀

¹⁰⁷⁰ Ibid.

¹⁰⁷¹ Ibid., 71.

¹⁰⁷² Verger, "Ìyàmi Ọ̀ṣòròngà," 117.

şęgişęgi on the river Awinrinmògún.”¹⁰⁷³ On the other hand, each of the seven trees mentioned in OgbeOsa has significance as an indicator of the specific action the *iyami* will undertake.

They say, if they climb onto the íwọ tree, if they think of someone,
They said it’s good luck that you think of if you climb into the íwọ.
You say, he will remain a long time on earth, he will be happy (just) on earth.
You say, the one you were thinking of (when you are) on the arère,
all the things that please him, you will destroy.¹⁰⁷⁴

Upon three of these trees the *iyami* will work to one’s detriment, and upon three the work is for one’s good. However, upon the tree that holds the most power for *iyami àjé*, “the àsùrìn tree,” both good and bad can be set in motion. From this tree *iyami* can accomplish anything.

If you say, you are going across the entire earth,
even if you say you are going to heaven,
you will rapidly arrive there,
when you shall stay on the àsùrìn tree.
The àsùrìn tree is the place where the ẹlẹiyẹ obtain their power.
Not anyone can stay there.¹⁰⁷⁵

In terms of *iyami* interaction with ordinary people, *odu Oyeku Okanran* describes an initially cordial, sisterly relationship between *iyami* and mortals. “Town of Women,” discussed in the chapter on Yoruba cosmology, also alludes to a once close relationship between *iyami àjé* and ordinary beings.

The bond between *iyami* and humanity is represented by the symbols of Oşun’s ebo, the items with which she brings *iyami* back to society. As an example

¹⁰⁷³ Ibid., 119.

¹⁰⁷⁴ Ibid., 127.

¹⁰⁷⁵ Ibid., 129.

Washington states: “The thread symbolizes umbilical cords, headties, and long lives [longevity], all of which are owned by Àjẹ and connect them to human beings.”¹⁰⁷⁶

In *Odu Ifa* Oyeku Okanran it is said that both came to the world together along with their brother, Iroko, who preferred an isolated existence in the forest. Ogbori (mortals) had 10 children while *iyami* only had one, a son. When Ogbori went to the market, her 10 children were all well cared for by *iyami*. When it was *iyami*'s time to go to market, she asked Ogbori to look after her one and only child. While *iyami* was at the market, “the 10 children of Ogbori became interested in ‘killing a bird to eat.’”¹⁰⁷⁷ And did so.

Iyami was distraught and angry at the discovery and went into the forest weeping. Iroko heard her cries and “invited her in to find out what was happening.” She explained that Ogbori's children killed her son and that Ogbori was unable to stop them. “Iroko pacified her and assured her that from then on, they were to ‘feed’ on the children of Ogbori (mortals).”¹⁰⁷⁸

Another version of this *itan* is contained in *Odu Ifa* “Obaàràyango.” When *e/eye* and humans were coming to earth, both groups agreed upon an oath. “With the oath they were not to kill each other. The Èḷẹyẹ must not kill human beings and human beings must not kill the Children of Èḷẹyẹ.”¹⁰⁷⁹

¹⁰⁷⁶ Washington, *Our Mothers*, 47.

¹⁰⁷⁷ Şangode, *The Goddesses*, 84.

¹⁰⁷⁸ Ibid.

¹⁰⁷⁹ Elebuibon, *Invisible Powers*, 19.

Human children began playing with a child of *eleye* though told not to do so by their parents. The human children played with the bird, killing it. They then played with another bird, maliciously causing its death. Because of the actions of humans, the oath was broken and *eleye* began to retaliate.¹⁰⁸⁰

Human beings complained to Olodumare whereby *eleye* pled their case. “Èlẹyẹ said they kept to the oath, but human beings did not as they started to use their children as toys and killing them. They even went ahead to consume them.” It was humans who first betrayed *eleye*. From that day, began the fight of *iyami* against humans and the struggle of humans “to be released or keep themselves away from the claws of Èlẹyẹ.”¹⁰⁸¹

Orunmila, through *Ifa* divination, offers humanity the prescriptive of appeasement to *iyami àjẹ*. More than once within *Odu Ifa* does one find Orunmila coming to the direct aid of individuals targeted by *eleye* and subsequently given permission to intercede with *iyami* on behalf of humans. Two *itan* from *odu* OgbèOgunda as recorded by Verger make this clear. The first *itan* contains a list of nonsensical words of actions and items that humans are warned against under threat from *iyami àjẹ*. It has been said of this *odu* verse that it represents the unreasonable, maliciously deceptive side of *iyami àjẹ* that purposefully ensnares humans by posing obscure prohibitions “because that way she may always claim that men transgressed her.”¹⁰⁸²

¹⁰⁸⁰ Ibid.

¹⁰⁸¹ Ibid., 19–20, 20.

¹⁰⁸² Verger, “Ìyàmi Òṣòròngà,” 46.

However, several lines within this verse of OgbeOgunda are explanation of exactly what *iyami* expects, and the riddle of the obscure terms is deciphered. It becomes clear as one continues reading that the confounding terms are euphemisms for behavior that *iyami* finds particularly offensive.

Those that have good crops,
that bring yams, that bring maize,
if the ẹ̀lẹ̀iyẹ̀ then see that they do not give them a share of it,
then they say that whatever they have gathered is the osun Alọran...

If the men have not given them anything to eat,
if they have not made them anymore offerings or sacrifices,
if they have not begged them with goods,
they will kill them...

Someone who goes out to buy something without giving them
anything to eat,
they will say that he has twisted his body behind the house of Monsionto,
because he has gone out to buy something without giving them
anything to eat.¹⁰⁸³

Notwithstanding, people do not seem to be aware of the cause of their predicament. Orunmila offers “all the things he owns”¹⁰⁸⁴ as restitution.

They say that if they were angry before, they are no longer angry.
The day when they say that they are no longer angry at Ọ̀rúnmìlà,
they also had given permission to Ọ̀rúnmìlà,
to deliver all the people’s children from the ẹ̀lẹ̀iyẹ̀ hands.¹⁰⁸⁵

Similar to the plight of Obatala and the *oriṣa* to whom he runs for assistance, recited above, the second offered verse of OgbeOgunda sees “the people’s children” running for protection to the homes of several deities—Egun, Obatala, Ọ̀ṣango, Oya, and Oba. However, none can protect them from *eleye*’s

¹⁰⁸³ Ibid., 91-92.

¹⁰⁸⁴ Ibid., 93.

¹⁰⁸⁵ Ibid., 94.

anger. They run to the home of Orunmila, but not even Orunmila can placate “the children of ẹ̀lẹ̀iyẹ̀.” The dispute is adjudicated by OgbeYonu (OgbeOgunda), who finds the people’s children guilty and by extension, Orunmila.

Eṣu intercedes, convincing *iyami* to carefully examine Orunmila’s offering. Eṣu, who was present with *iyami* in heaven and when they arrived on earth and because he was content after Orunmila fed him, had previously told Orunmila what items to assemble for the *ebo* and later instructed Orunmila on the items he would need to correctly answer *iyami*’s riddle. Orunmila’s offering contains select plant leaves and other items of symbolic significance. *Iyami* is pleased but poses a riddle to Orunmila:

They say that he has to be able to answer the riddle that they shall ask...
But if he does not know this riddle,
they will not accept his pleading,
they will be forever angry with him.
But if he is able to give the answer, it is finished.¹⁰⁸⁶

Thanks to Eṣu, Orunmila correctly answers the enigmatic riddle. Thus Orunmila saved the humans and received the blessing of *eleye*.

The children of ẹ̀lẹ̀iyẹ̀ say you have saved the people...
The children of ẹ̀lẹ̀iyẹ̀ say you have won for the people...
They say all good things that Ọ̀rúnmìlà has not seen,
they say Ọ̀rúnmìlà will come to see them.¹⁰⁸⁷

Odu Ifa Odi Meji (Idi Meji) was referenced above in connection with *iyami*’s antagonism towards humans and *iyami*’s seven trees. This *odu* also explains how it came to be that *iyami* respects the voice of Orunmila’s children,

¹⁰⁸⁶ Ibid., 104-105.

¹⁰⁸⁷ Ibid., 106, 109.

the *babalawo* and *iyanifa*. In order that his children be spared their wrath, the

“Ìyámí Qṣòròngà” give Orunmila the following instructions:

They say Ọ̀rúnmìlà speak to your children,
so they have ọ̀gbọ̀ leaves,
so they have calabash,
so they have the tip of an òkété rat’s tail,
so they have the body of an òkété rat as well,
so they have chicken eggs,
so they have ọ̀rìn leaf and cornmeal paste mixed with palm oil,
so they have palm oil,
so they have four shillings.¹⁰⁸⁸

Iyami àjé torment humans who seek remedy from “the children of Ọ̀rúnmìlà.” *Iyami* tells them that in order to help people, they must make their offering on *iyami*’s mound of earth, and “they will have to chant in a sad voice.”

The chant begins:

Little mother, you know my voice.
Ìyámí Qṣòròngà, you know my voice.¹⁰⁸⁹

Orunmila’s children will then be able to remedy the afflictions of the people seeking aid.

As the Ìyámí authorized these children of Ọ̀rúnmìlà on that day, all the things they do will come to pass.¹⁰⁹⁰

Aside from the remedies prescribed by Orunmila and his children through the *Odu Ifa*, there is little that ordinary individuals can do to counter *iyami àjé*. In “Obaarayango” presented by Elebuibon, when Olodumare determined that human beings were indeed guilty of betraying *e/eye* and killing their children, he advised

¹⁰⁸⁸ Ibid., 118.

¹⁰⁸⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰⁹⁰ Ibid., 121.

humans “to protect [themselves] with charms....He gave them some tips on how to ward off the witches.”¹⁰⁹¹ Elebuibon lists several plants and other organic items used to counter witches.

Epega and Neimark provide at least two examples of protective medicines against witches. One is found in *odu* OturaKa (Oturalka),¹⁰⁹² another is found in IreteŞe (IreteOşe) and is as follows:

Ifá leaves: Collect a tortoise, a snail, a snake, the bark from two *irókò* trees, and Ifá *okú* (a dead man’s Ifá). Burn them together and keep the powder in an *ado*. Take out a small quantity on occasion, mark Odù Iru-Ẹkùn (Odù Ìrètẹ-Sé is also known as Iru-Ẹkùn) on it, and recite the incantation just before mixing it with palm oil and licking it. It may also be used as an ointment to rub on the body. Some of it may be given to other people to use. This Ifá is a preservative against all witchcraft.¹⁰⁹³

When the *iyami* has sent her bird on an errand (when her spirit is away from her body), she is particularly vulnerable. At that time, her body can be rubbed with “a red pepper so that when the spirit returns it may no longer occupy the stained body.”¹⁰⁹⁴

Among the Yoruba there is a maxim that expresses a highly prized human value: “Character is Beauty.” Possession of good character, *iwa’pele*, is esteemed. “Ìwàpẹ̀lẹ̀ is a conglomeration of principles of moral conduct...that arise vis-à-vis issues of co-existence amongst beings.”¹⁰⁹⁵ In a myth relating why

¹⁰⁹¹ Elebuibon, *Invisible Powers*, 20.

¹⁰⁹² Epega and Neimark, *Sacred Ifa Oracle*, Oracle 230.

¹⁰⁹³ *Ibid.*, 537.

¹⁰⁹⁴ Verger, “Ìyàmi Òşòròngà,” 43.

¹⁰⁹⁵ K. Abimbola, *Yorùbá Culture*, 85.

Sonponna, the deity of smallpox and infectious diseases, dislikes merriment, Kola Abimbola informs the reader that it is due to the bad character displayed by the deities.

Sonponna is old and lame; when he attempted to join the other deities in dance, he fell, at which point the other deities laugh at him. The disrespect displayed by the deities led to Sonponna's own negative response that resulted in him being exiled to the bush.

Ṣònpònnò's...role in smallpox must therefore be understood within the context of an ongoing cycle of revenge, punishment and vengeance against the descendants of the other gods. This chain of events was started by the other divinities when they exhibited ìwà búburú (bad character).¹⁰⁹⁶

It is possible to see the anger of *iyami àjé* and their actions as response to deity and human *iwa buburu*. This included the bad character exhibited in the disrespect shown by the male *oriṣa* whom *iyami àjé* accompanied on the mission to make earth hospitable, the stealing and the befouling of her waters, and the usurpation of her position and power. It also includes the bad character exhibited in the killing of her children, and the bad character exhibited when the rules agreed upon for peaceful coexistence were broken.

Yoruba occultist Samuel Opeola spoke of three major rules given by *iyami àjé* to mortals to ensure harmonious coexistence.

When they were descending to this world, those with power gave certain rules for the mortals [in order] to be in harmony. They said if you want to live in harmony with us on Earth, this is what has to be done: Don't claim yourself as an herbalist, as a medicine man that can use any herbs because all herbs belong to us. And if you do that you will offend us. And we are going to punish you. And if you get to the Earth, and you become

¹⁰⁹⁶ Ibid., 86.

rich, prosperous, and you become pompous or you cheat people or you don't have any compassion for people, we will take the riches away from you. And if you get to the Earth, and you don't take care of the old members of society—when you have money, you don't give to them, when you have food you don't give to them—we are going to sanction you for those things. Those are the three major rules. And if you don't offend those rules, you will live in harmony with us.¹⁰⁹⁷

It is said that “*ìyámí* remains forever angry and is constantly ready to unleash her anger on humans”¹⁰⁹⁸ with or without apparent provocation. The anger of the mothers is covert, that is why it is said that they hide their identities and intentions behind a pleasant disposition.¹⁰⁹⁹

It is not *Iyami* Osorongá's appearance as an “irascible female” that should give one cause for concern; rather it is when she is hiding her anger at offense behind a smile. The “Great Mother is the epitome of patience.”¹¹⁰⁰ As her daughters, *iyami àjẹ* behave accordingly, biding their time until the time is ripe to strike an offender.

However, Elebuibon maintains that “before witches will move against someone, there usually is an act of omission or commission on the part of the person. They don't just strike blindly or arbitrarily.” In addition, permission of the

¹⁰⁹⁷ Samuel Opeola, interview with the author, September 27, 2009, Ile-Ife, Nigeria.

¹⁰⁹⁸ Verger, “*ìyàmi Òṣòròngà*,” 46.

¹⁰⁹⁹ Elebuibon, *Invisible Powers*.

¹¹⁰⁰ H. J. Drewal and Drewal, *Gẹlẹdẹ*, 15.

Iyami Society is needed before an attack can be initiated by an *e/eye*, and “she must adduce a cogent reason for her desire.”¹¹⁰¹

Patriarchal appropriation and the mistreatment of women by men are noted catalysts to *iyami's* anger. In *Odu Ifa* Ogunda Meji is a story of the premature deaths of several kings and the detention of Ifá priests who could not deduce the cause. Orunmila realizes that “an old indigo dyer, a witch” was responsible.

He explained to the king that
The old woman confessed
that lack of good treatment from previous kings
was responsible for her wickedness.
He advised King Ọlọfin to treat her well.¹¹⁰²

As recorded in *Osa Meji*, it was due to men’s mistreatment of women that they went to Olodumare who accorded them the power of *àjé*. Not insignificantly, “*aje* is superior to the powers given to men.”¹¹⁰³ As rationale for his statement that witchcraft is more prevalent in areas with an antecedent of matriarchy, Talbot asserts:

The detestation in which such practices are now held has partly arisen in connection with man’s struggle for supremacy, and so it is, to some extent, due to sex jealousy....[As a result women as priestesses and devotees of the Great Mother] may have become more devoted to the darker aspect of her lore on the advent of patriarchy.¹¹⁰⁴

¹¹⁰¹ Elebuibon, *Invisible Powers*, 31, 48.

¹¹⁰² *Ibid.*, 81, 82.

¹¹⁰³ Olajubu, *Women in the Yoruba Religious Sphere*, 28.

¹¹⁰⁴ Talbot, *Peoples of Southern Nigeria*, 203.

In her 1953 MA thesis, Messinger's primary-source research uncovered the fact that a very common reason for which Yoruba women acquire witchcraft is leverage against men. "The possibility that a woman may be a witch serves as a potential threat to men and modifies their behavior [where] they have the advantage of their dominant status."¹¹⁰⁵ Writing in 2009, McIntosh echoes the same sentiment.

It has been suggested that Yoruba women subscribed to witchcraft beliefs in part because it gave them such a mighty weapon with which to challenge their subordination and vent their antagonism to men.¹¹⁰⁶

Another way of looking at the actions of *iyami* against humans is as a counter-balance or check to selfish over-striving by humans. Human beings came into the world to "achieve all good things of life like money, wives, children, houses, horses, cars and so on."¹¹⁰⁷ It has been noted that "all good things" were placed in the care of *àjé* by Olodumare.¹¹⁰⁸ Therefore, *àjé* are at liberty to bestow wealth and blessings or withdraw them.

Seen above, two of the three rules given to humans by *àjé* to ensure peaceful coexistence center around humans demonstrating good character—*iwa'pele*. Ostensibly, *iyami àjé* "upturns all the good things that human beings have laboured to achieve"¹¹⁰⁹ when these rules are breached.

¹¹⁰⁵ Messinger, "Witchcraft," 62.

¹¹⁰⁶ McIntosh, *Yoruba Women*, 194.

¹¹⁰⁷ Elebuibon, *Invisible Powers*, 18,

¹¹⁰⁸ Abiodun, "Hidden Power."

¹¹⁰⁹ Elebuibon, *Invisible Powers*, 18,

Wealth itself is not at issue, after all, wealthy market women are considered *àjé*. Rather, it is the conduct of the wealthy individual—their generosity or lack thereof, their compassion or lack thereof, their honesty or lack thereof, their care of the elderly or lack thereof—that *àjé* will judge as the “guardians of society.”¹¹¹⁰

As demonstrated in *Odu Ifa*, the concept of sharing one’s bounty is essential to *iyami àjé*. The principal *ebo* to *iyami àjé* incorporates generous amounts of food. Feeding another is among the most basic aspects of caretaking. *Iyami* is particularly concerned with the care of the most vulnerable and often marginalized members of Yoruba society—elderly women.¹¹¹¹ These women are often perceived as consuming food and other resources without producing children or labor.

This emphasis on the sharing of food, and generally showing respect for the elderly, is seen in *Odu Ifa* IdiOwonrin. Idi, who was a hunter, regularly shared his catch with his family and compound. However, on an unsuccessful expedition he returned only with a chewing stick wrapped in leaves. The old women of his compound saw his return and expectantly awaited their share of the catch. When none was forthcoming, the perceived act of selfishness and disrespect angered these women.¹¹¹²

¹¹¹⁰ H. J. Drewal and Drewal, *Gẹ̀lẹ̀dẹ̀*, 9.

¹¹¹¹ Makinde, “Motherhood.”

¹¹¹² Elebuibon, *Invisible Powers*.

Idi became ill and with *ifa* divination the cause was uncovered. Idi was instructed to appease those he had inadvertently offended by offering as *ebo* “the chewing stick that he cut along with a giant rat and palm oil. He should also beg for forgiveness.”

Ìdí, you killed a rat, you shared it.
Ìdí, you caught the fish, you shared it.
Ìdí, why did you refuse to share the chewing stick?
Ìdí, quickly share the chewing stick
so that your blessings will not elude you.¹¹¹³

Odu Ifa repeatedly demonstrates that the anger of the *iyami àjé* can be appeased through propitiation. The elaborate Gelede spectacle, to be discussed in an upcoming chapter, is designed specifically for this purpose as a “quest for peace and social harmony.”¹¹¹⁴ However, on a smaller scale there are items of which the *iyami àjé* are particularly fond. Some of these include: *okete* (giant rat), *epo pupa* (red palm oil), *eko* (cornstarch pudding), and *eyin* (eggs).¹¹¹⁵

The *okete* or “giant rat” is the favorite food or offering to *iyami àjé*. Though also accepted by Orunmila, it is far down on the list of his offerings, and the head and tail of *okete* are taboo to this deity. As a primary offering, *okete* appears to be uniquely associated with *iyami*.¹¹¹⁶

Thus where *okete* is included in the list of items offered, one can be fairly assured that *iyami àjé* is being invoked and propitiated. For example, at the

¹¹¹³ Ibid., 48.

¹¹¹⁴ Lawal, *Gẹ̀lẹ̀dẹ̀ Spectacle*, xvii.

¹¹¹⁵ Adéwálé-Somadhi, *Yorùbá Religion*.

¹¹¹⁶ Ibid.

coronation of the Oyo Alafin, a new palace entrance is made “for his exclusive use...during his reign” and through which he enters for the first time as king.

Among the offerings made to consecrate this threshold is the *okete*.¹¹¹⁷

The twelfth *odu*, Ejila Seborá, of the Sixteen Cowries divination system refers to *okete* as part of the prescribed sacrifice.¹¹¹⁸ This *odu* is an example wherein offerings are made to *iyami àjé* so that they will not interfere with one’s good destiny. Instead, they will allow good destiny to come to pass and not do anything to thwart it. In this case, *ebo* is being performed as a preemptive measure in addition to its functions of appeasement and request for assistance.

Summary

Àjé is the power of the primordial mothers and a name of identification for these venerable dieties. Iya’Nla and her daughters—the ancient Odù and Onile, as well as the numerous female deities—are all *àjé*. Alcamo estimates that “the 256 Odù Ifá have 1680+ *itan* which are related to or talk about manifestation of Ìyá Nlá (Odù) in terrestrial forms.”¹¹¹⁹ Like the figures given for the number of verses (*ese*) within *Odu Ifa*, Alcamo’s figure might also be a way to indicate that innumerable references are made to Ìyá Nlá (Odù) and her manifestations within *Odu Ifa*.

In this chapter numerous *odu* have been reviewed that speak to the tempestuous relationship between *iyami àjé* and deity as well as *iyami àjé* and

¹¹¹⁷ S. Johnson, *History of the Yorubas*, 45.

¹¹¹⁸ Bascom, *Sixteen Cowries*.

¹¹¹⁹ Alcamo, *Ìyá Nlá*, 29.

humans. The anger of the *iyami àjé* personified in Iyami Osorongá can be traced to the disrespect accorded to her by male divinity and betrayal at the hands of humans. The latter supports the general belief that “somebody is vulnerable to attacks of witches when s/he commit[s] moral transgressions.”¹¹²⁰

As demonstrated in a variety of *odu*, the power of the *àjé* is formidable, and it is generally said that only Orunmila can subdue them. “In other words; the only possible protection against witchcraft is to follow the advice of the oracle and meticulously to fulfill all ritual obligations.”¹¹²¹

In addition, *iyami àjé* can be propitiated through gaiety. Connecting *iyami* to the dawn of existence and the Great Mother, Lawal maintains that Iya’Nla was a sea out of which land emerged and life, humanity, and culture were sustained. Iya’Nla is a great lover of music and dance. Not surprisingly, “her earthly disciples, the ‘powerful mothers,’”¹¹²² also enjoy music and dance and favor all who honor them with such entertainment.

Though not generally disseminated, association exists between *iyami* and the *oriṣa* cults. Verger writes that “no ceremony was carried out without making offerings to her [*iyami*].”¹¹²³ As for the relationship between *oriṣa* devotees and *àjé*, Elebuibon claims that “the Orìṣà permit their devotees to engage in witchcraft only if it is aimed at ensuring progress, happiness and well-being of human

¹¹²⁰ Drews, “Guardians of the Society,” 21.

¹¹²¹ Beier, *Yoruba Myths*, 68.

¹¹²² Lawal, *Gẹ̀lẹ̀dẹ̀ Spectacle*, 74.

¹¹²³ Verger, “Ìyàmi Òṣòròngà,” 70.

beings.”¹¹²⁴ To demonstrate this, he offers the following song of invitation

performed by Oṣun devotees:

Our society is for the rich ones
Our society has no place for a thief
Our own witchcraft bequeaths fertility
Join us, and fill your home with children.¹¹²⁵

In the next chapter attention turns to the roles of *àjé* within Yoruba society and to her symbolic icons.

¹¹²⁴ Elebuibon, *Invisible Powers*, 35.

¹¹²⁵ *Ibid.*

CHAPTER 8: POLYVALANT ÀJÉ 3

YORUBA SOCIAL ROLES AND SYMBOLIC ICONS

Witchcraft beliefs serve as an effective counterforce to male dominance by being a constant reminder of female suzerainty and power which needs to be considered in order to maintain social and individual well-being.

In the final analysis, *aje* is about balance.¹¹²⁶

Besides the cosmological *àjé* as represented by the Great Mother and her daughters, the primordial female deities, mortal women also carry and wield *àjé*. As the daughters of the female divinities who are the containers, owners, and holders of *àjé*, mortal women are naturally endowed with *àjé*. Often referred to simply as *àjé*, Olomo characterizes them as “physical incarnations of a society of powerful women.”¹¹²⁷

Although Abiodun¹¹²⁸ and Apter¹¹²⁹ believe every woman to be *àjé*, the ability or gift often lies dormant. Being a woman who possesses *àjé* and who knows how to employ it effectively defines a woman of power. These women are found throughout Yoruba history in the legendary female figures and female rulers that populate Yoruba mythistory as well as in the historical narratives of Yoruba women. Unfortunately:

In the attempt to realign history with patriarchy, recent male rulers have tried to obliterate women rulers from Yoruba history, and debate about the

¹¹²⁶ Drews, “Guardians of the Society,” 18.

¹¹²⁷ Olomo, “Iyami Osorongá,” 278.

¹¹²⁸ Rowland Abiodun interview with author, January 26, 2010, Amherst, Massachusetts.

¹¹²⁹ Apter, *Black Critics and Kings*.

gender and import of many spiritual and historical female figures in Yorubaland continues to this day.¹¹³⁰

The power and importance of women within the Oyo palace structure was discussed in Chapter 4. Here is examined a limited sampling of the roles and functions of *àjé* within Yoruba society as well as the symbols and iconography associated with *iyami àjé*, concluding with contemporary representations of *àjé*.

Social Roles

Women's *àjé* is the ability to harness spiritual power. That translates materially and practically into many domains. Among the primary roles of *àjé* within Yoruba society are her function within the Ogboni Society, that of priestess to the deities, and *Iyalode*. In discussing the social role of *àjé*, one comes back to the fact that "all good things" were entrusted to their care and keeping,¹¹³¹ as such *àjé* are their guardian.

Makinde asserts that this "suggests an important role for women: that of being the guardians of society."¹¹³² *Àjé* administer the good things of life including children, wealth, and long life, bestowing, withholding, and withdrawing these things as they deem appropriate. "Àwọn òyá Wa are teachers whose gifts, lessons, trials, and punishments compel their communities to seek higher levels of spiritual evolution and redirect misguided destiny, direction, or power."¹¹³³ In the

¹¹³⁰ Washington, *Our Mothers*, 52.

¹¹³¹ Abiodun, "Hidden Power," 16.

¹¹³² Makinde, "Motherhood," 172.

¹¹³³ Washington, *Our Mothers*, 14.

role of mother (*iyami*), *àjé* is protective and nurturing. *Àjé* also exacts justice against those who transgress cosmic and societal laws, especially moral offenders.

To highlight the ability of *àjé* to exist on both the planes of *aye* (matter) and of *orun* (spirit), an *oriki* (praise-poem) says that *àjé* “sit in the centre of the boundary between heaven and earth.”¹¹³⁴ As such, they are believed to know the true nature and behaviors of individuals and to be able to effectively and secretly mete out punishment as warranted. Though that is the case, *àjé* can neither act singularly nor unilaterally. There are codes to which *àjé* must adhere; there is a judicial system. The person to be judged is given both a trial and, if convicted, is afforded a grace period to rectify his/her actions.¹¹³⁵

“Contrary to popular belief [*àjé*] cannot use their powers to kill for fun or to satisfy a personal vendetta.” The work of the *àjé* is carried out as a collective, and *àjé* must answer to the “Earth Mother (*Ìyá-Ayé*)” for their actions. Popular perception aside, *àjé* are not bloodthirsty and will argue on behalf of one who has been accused. Deliberations are said to occur in the astral realm, where punishment is also administered. Subsequently, this astral punishment detrimentally affects the physical being.¹¹³⁶

Arguably, a role or duty of the *àjé* might have been the avenging of serious wrongs done to women, as women were disfavored by Yoruba standards of civil

¹¹³⁴ Ibid., 23-24.

¹¹³⁵ Awolalu, *Yoruba Beliefs*.

¹¹³⁶ Washington, *Our Mothers*, 35, 33.

justice. Rape, not considered a criminal offense, was punished by fine.¹¹³⁷ Prior to the colonial divorce decrees, a woman divorcing her husband was virtually unheard of for several reasons.¹¹³⁸

A wife seeking divorce was obliged to pay her husband a partial “refund of the bridewealth and other gifts made at the time of the marriage.” A woman leaving her husband generally returned to her birth home. However, parents commonly sent their daughters back to their husbands. If a father spoke against his daughter’s plea for divorce, it would not be granted.¹¹³⁹

The varied and seemingly contradictory praise names and oriki for *iyami àjé* point to their nature as beings who encompass all aspects of reality—pleasant and unpleasant. “Yoruba concepts of power do not allow a dichotomization between mothers and witches.”¹¹⁴⁰ However, names of affection such as “our mothers” recognize “their positive dimension as protective progenitors, healers...and guardians of morality, social order, and just apportionment of power, wealth, and prestige.”¹¹⁴¹

Iyami àjé’s dual aspect could be configured as *Iyami Osorongá* and *Iyami Odù*. *Iyami Osorongá* is the aspect of anger and vengeance. *Àjé*’s wrath is felt “when they are not paid necessary respect or when religious or moral laws and

¹¹³⁷ Bascom, *Yorùbá of Southwestern Nigeria*.

¹¹³⁸ McIntosh, *Yoruba Women*.

¹¹³⁹ Bascom, *Yorùbá of Southwestern Nigeria*, 40.

¹¹⁴⁰ Drews, “Guardians of the Society,” 20.

¹¹⁴¹ H. J. Drewal and Drewal, *Gelede*, 9.

behaviors are transgressed.” This wrath is made manifest in “problems, obstacles, blindness, irrational thinking, misfortune, hunger, sickness and droughts.”¹¹⁴²

Iyami Odù might be seen in the role of mother and dispenser of justice, given that she is “the keeper of the matrix of conception and birth”¹¹⁴³ and given her centrality to the *Ifa* oracle. Iyami Odù can be envisioned as embodying principles that Lucia Birnbaum states were carried out of Africa and along migratory paths throughout the world.

Attributes as guardians of justice and social order are among those brought forward by the primordial African mothers and taken with them along the original migrations paths out of Africa after 60,000 BCE to infuse the consciousness of all the world’s peoples—justice with compassion, equality, non-violent transformation,¹¹⁴⁴ and “values of caring, sharing, healing, and vision.”¹¹⁴⁵ The justice with compassion is exemplified by the fact that an offender has 17 days to redress a wrong and rectify the situation before punitive action is taken.

Iya’Nla’s:

cycle (*seventeen days to rectify our misdeed*) of judgment, sanction and settlement stands as a warning to encourage of us to seek her help, before

¹¹⁴² Alcamo, *Iyá Nlá*, 27.

¹¹⁴³ Olomo, *Core of Fire*, 126.

¹¹⁴⁴ Birnbaum, *Liberazione della Donna*.

¹¹⁴⁵ Birnbaum, *Ancient Heart*, 66.

She punishes...removing the Àse or the soul, astral removing of the person's organs that will have physical consequences.¹¹⁴⁶

The numerous *odu* examined establish that offering sacrifice (*ebo*) is the means of redressing acts of transgression. In the civil arena, individuals among the Yoruba:

who deviate from the norm or the established moral code are punished through fines, chastisement, ostracization, or public ridicule. There is a strong belief in retributive justice: the *òrìṣà*, it is believed, will catch up with and punish criminals who escape human detection.¹¹⁴⁷

Yemoja, Oṣun, and Oya are said to be “supreme in the arts of mystic retribution and protection against all evil.”¹¹⁴⁸

Given the emphasis on retributive justice, in addition to *ebo*, is there a restorative dimension? According to Diedre Badejo there is. Using the events and lessons contained in *Odu Ifa Oṣe Taura*, she affirms that offense and retributive justice are part of the “destructive-creative synergy of the universe” calling forth “cosmic adjustment, or restoration”¹¹⁴⁹ that brings benefit to humanity, nature, and spirit.

Role in Ogboni

The patrilineal clan compound is responsible for self-administration and the maintenance of law and order. Breaches of moral code are brought before family and ancestors in the compound's “Àyà Ilé,”¹¹⁵⁰ the place of honor and

¹¹⁴⁶ Alcamo, *Ìyá Nlá*, 34.

¹¹⁴⁷ Lawal, *Gẹ̀lẹ̀dẹ̀ Spectacle*, 26.

¹¹⁴⁸ Thompson, *Flash of the Spirit*, 74.

¹¹⁴⁹ Badejo, *Oṣun Ṣẹ̀gẹ̀sí*, 69.

¹¹⁵⁰ Elebuibon, *Invisible Powers*, 82.

propitiation for the earth deity. Here lying is an egregious offense believed to be severely punished by Ilé, “the invisible third party”¹¹⁵¹ to and “the binding force”¹¹⁵² of oaths and secrets.

Serious disputes or offenses are referred by compound heads to the Ward heads, and those which cannot be resolved by the latter are referred to the king (*oba*), who rules in consultation with a council of elders sometimes called *Ògbóni* or *Òṣùgbó*.¹¹⁵³

Historically, the power of this secret society of accomplished and respected elders varied significantly by region. Among the Ijebu and Egba, who refer to the Ogboni Society as Osugbo,¹¹⁵⁴ their power is marked. Osugbo “are the chief executive; they have the power of life and death, and the power to enact and repeal laws.”¹¹⁵⁵ However, in the provinces of Oyo, Ogboni served primarily in a “consultative and advisory”¹¹⁵⁶ capacity to the ruler. Only the ruler had the right to decree execution.

Àjé have traditionally played a central role in administering justice within Yorubaland, being particularly concerned with “the morals of their societies.”¹¹⁵⁷

¹¹⁵¹ Lawal, “Edan Ogboni,” 44.

¹¹⁵² Ibid.

¹¹⁵³ Lawal, *Gèlèdè Spectacle*, 25.

¹¹⁵⁴ Lawal, “Ejiwapo.”

¹¹⁵⁵ S. Johnson, *History of the Yorubas*, 78.

¹¹⁵⁶ Ibid.

¹¹⁵⁷ Akin Alao, interview with the author, September 24, 2009, at OAU, Ile Ife, Nigeria.

Again, as administrators and dispensers of justice, *àjé* do not act in isolation. The Ogboni Society¹¹⁵⁸ is a traditional organization charged with the maintenance of societal order.

Comprised of men and women considered to have *àjé*, it “wielded considerable political, judicial, and religious powers among the Yorùbá in precolonial times and still does, to some extent, today.”¹¹⁵⁹ *Àjé* and Ogboni work together. “These ‘partners in progress’ undertake holistic work that includes enforcing laws and developing society through application of spiritual knowledge.”¹¹⁶⁰

The Ogboni Society venerates the earth divinity, Ilé or Onile, from whom Ogboni “derives its divine authority.”¹¹⁶¹ Although there is currently some confusion and controversy surrounding Ogboni symbolism, the importance of female divinity is evident. Edan Ogboni, the primary iconographic referent, are paired male and female brass figures that, among other things, are said to represent the importance of balance between the male and female principles.¹¹⁶²

Edan, the “intermediary between humanity and Ile” who conveys Ilé’s judgments, is referred to as a single entity. Importantly, “the reference to the

¹¹⁵⁸ As opposed to the Reformed Ogboni Fraternity (ROF), formed by an Anglican priest in 1914 (Lawal, “Edan Ogboni”).

¹¹⁵⁹ Lawal, “Edan Ogboni,” 37.

¹¹⁶⁰ Washington, *Our Mothers*, 31.

¹¹⁶¹ Lawal, *Gẹ̀lẹ̀dẹ̀ Spectacle*, 34.

¹¹⁶² Lawal, “Edan Ogboni.”

paired figures as *Iya*, 'mother'...clearly shows that they are two sides of the same coin," in addition to the fact that the "edan are also called *Ololo*, a feminine name." The female edan is often bearded, identifying her as "the wise judge of human morality who possesses the supernatural powers of *aje*."¹¹⁶³

Ogboni/Osugbo members throughout Yorbuland recognize themselves as "Omo *Iya*, 'children of the same mother'" and greet each other by saying: "The mother's breast milk is sweet; we all suck it."¹¹⁶⁴ Such is the primacy of the female principle within Ogboni.

"Odu Idingbere identifies the Earth (*Ile*) as the mother of *Erelu*, who originated the rituals of Ogboni."¹¹⁶⁵ The female members of the Ogboni Society hold the chieftaincy title of *erelu* among the *Ijebu*. Their acknowledged ritual power is crucial to the cult's functioning. "There is a saying that...without the *Erelu*, the *Osugbo* cult cannot perform its rituals."¹¹⁶⁶

In addition, their cognomen "*Àbíyè*...embodies the prayer 'May the young live to old age'"¹¹⁶⁷ and identifies these women as having the *àṣe* to mitigate

¹¹⁶³ *Ibid.*, 43, 43, 43, 46.

¹¹⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 45, 46.

¹¹⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 41.

¹¹⁶⁶ Makinde, "Motherhood," 169.

¹¹⁶⁷ Lawal, *Gẹ̀lẹ̀dẹ̀ Spectacle*, 35.

infant deaths. “This power links the female members directly with Ilé, the Earth goddess”¹¹⁶⁸ and identifies them as *iyami àjé*.

Post-menopausal women are members of Ogboni. “Elderly women, endowed with wisdom that is tempered by life’s vicissitudes, are considered the most evolved, balanced, and powerful.”¹¹⁶⁹ Because of their acquired wisdom, they are respected arbiters of justice. In addition to their ritual function, *erelu* represented the interests of the community’s women, giving them a voice within male-dominated society. Unfortunately, however, as the colonial era advanced respect for the *erelu* declined.

In Ijebu Ode...by the early 1940s, almost no women wanted to take up that title...previous *Erelús* had found that they were allowed to take little part in the society other than cooking for meetings.¹¹⁷⁰

The functioning of the Ogboni Society was generally weakened by colonialism. “Rationalized by British models of politics and religion,”¹¹⁷¹ the imposed forms of colonial administration assigned authority to area chiefs who supported the colonial presence or imbued the male *oba* with near absolute authority, thus undermining indigenous power sharing structures, such as Ogboni.

Additionally, introduction of the Reformed Ogboni Fraternity in 1914 by Anglican priest Reverend Thomas Adesina Jacobson Ogunbiyi and its overshadowing of the traditional Aboriginal Ogboni Fraternity forced the latter to

¹¹⁶⁸ Ibid.

¹¹⁶⁹ Washington, *Our Mothers*, 15.

¹¹⁷⁰ McIntosh, *Yoruba Women*, 221.

¹¹⁷¹ Apter, *Black Critics and Kings*, 165.

make amendments to rituals and symbolism. “It was in the process of modernizing the traditional Ogboni that many of the female associations were either downplayed or reformulated.”¹¹⁷²

As noted, the justice with which *àjé* are concerned is cosmic justice, “the spiritual and terrestrial laws governing the universe.”¹¹⁷³ Traditionally, *àjé* served the primary role of keeping the community in alignment via a system of checks and balances. “They maintain an ontological equilibrium between several forces within the spiritual and mundane worlds....They play the dual roles of furthering and thwarting the plans of human beings.”¹¹⁷⁴

Like a mother and her children, the presence or existence of *àjé* served as deterrent to one’s straying too far outside the bounds of responsible social conduct. They were a main element in the maintenance of social cohesion as theirs was an authority that went beyond secular governance. The authority of the *àjé* was linked to their spiritual agency. Even the *oba* (rulers) acknowledged that they exercised authority under the aegis of the *àjé*.¹¹⁷⁵ To this day the symbols of *àjé* festoon the material symbols of the *oba*’s power and authority.

Role as Priestess

A priestess is a liminal human connecting the corporeal and the numinous realms. Therefore, “all priestesses are said to have access to *àjé*, because

¹¹⁷² Lawal, “Edan Ogboni,” 40.

¹¹⁷³ Washington, *Our Mothers*, 35.

¹¹⁷⁴ W. Abimbola, *Ifá Literary Corpus*, 180.

¹¹⁷⁵ Murphy and Sanford, “Introduction.”

otherwise they could not fulfill their roles properly.”¹¹⁷⁶ In speaking of elderly

women and priestesses as *àjé*, Drewal and Drewal state:

Because of their special power, they have greater access to the Yoruba deities. They occupy a position subordinate to those of the supreme deity, Olodumare, and of Ọrunmila, God of the Ifa divination system, and equal or superior to that of the gods.¹¹⁷⁷

Though not all deities possess their priests, the capacity to be open to displacement of the will and ego by a spirit force or entity is an aspect of the abilities of the priestess as *àjé*. Women’s knowledge of and ability to enter into trance states of spiritual possession was frightening to men.¹¹⁷⁸ Though this may have been true, or perhaps because of its truth, women’s spiritual agency was highly regarded. Priestesses constituted “a bridge between mortals and the Supreme being...Women were also in custody of the ritual power that sustained the Yoruba community.”¹¹⁷⁹

Women’s ritual power, spiritual agency, and political agency are closely linked. It was the role of the priestess to place the crown on the monarch’s head, enthroning the ruler by divine sanction of deity. “The mothers have been the containers of power that elevate the consciousness of kings to divine status.”¹¹⁸⁰ In dynastic Oyo it was the *Iyakere*, chief Ọsango priestess and holder of great

¹¹⁷⁶ Drews, “Guardians of the Society,” 13.

¹¹⁷⁷ H. J. Drewal and Drewal, *Gelede*, 74.

¹¹⁷⁸ Matory, *Sex and the Empire*.

¹¹⁷⁹ Olajubu, *Women in the Yoruba Religious Sphere*, 25.

¹¹⁸⁰ Olomo, “Iyami Osoronga,” 281.

power within the palace, who placed the crown upon the *alafin*'s head.¹¹⁸¹ A

verse of *Odu Ifa EjiOgbe* refers to *àjé* bestowing rulership:

Going to take a title at Ejigbomekun market.
They said that a bird would make them king.¹¹⁸²

Men also have *àjé*, but they are dependent upon the good graces of women and dependent upon women's *àjé* for the actualization of their *àjé* as men.¹¹⁸³ An example is reflected in the relationship between the king and the priestess. There is little doubt that kings, as divine rulers, have *àjé*. However, it is the priestess in her role as conduit of the mothers who vitalizes the king at his enthronement and revitalizes him during annual festivals.

As a divine ruler, Oba William Adetona Ayena in the northeastern Yorùbá kingdom of Ila-Orangun, while referring to the cluster of birds on his great crown, is reported to have said, "Without 'the mothers,' I could not rule."¹¹⁸⁴

"While men in principle held political offices and authority, women controlled the ritual base that made political rule possible." The *Iyakere* could withhold the *alafin*'s paraphernalia of office in protest of his actions, and women in general had "the ability to dethrone a bad ruler through protest processions."¹¹⁸⁵

During our interview Akin Alao, professor of history at Obafemi Awolowo University in Ile-Ife, stated that at the time of the "very old kingdoms" there was a

¹¹⁸¹ S. Johnson, *History of the Yorubas*.

¹¹⁸² Bascom, *Sixteen Cowries*, 57.

¹¹⁸³ Washington, *Our Mothers*.

¹¹⁸⁴ Abiodun, "Hidden Power," 19.

¹¹⁸⁵ Olajubu, *Women in the Yoruba Religious Sphere*, 26.

great deal of respect for *àjé* because of their political role. Even in contemporary Yorubaland:

We see these very old women (*àjé*) as members of the inner caucus, the inner cabinets of the political heads, the oba.... Women have succeeded in negotiating a control over the political space, even without being visible.¹¹⁸⁶

“The esoteric power of women, embodied in the Orisa priestesses, encodes not only fertility, but also the reproduction of the social polity.”¹¹⁸⁷ Ritual is a window into a people’s ontological orientation. In addition, through ritual subversive claims are made that challenge hegemonic truths. At the center of this, are found women in their role as priestesses.

Apter details the intricate dynamics and esoteric aspects of the Ayede Yemoja festival that serves both to revitalize the king and remind him that he serves at the pleasure of Yemoja and with the support of her priestesses. It is “the *Yèyéolókun* priestess who carries the ritual calabash, to revitalize the king.” Aspects of the ritual also enact seditious challenges or claims to the king’s authority and “convey the deeper and more subversive threat of civil revolt.”¹¹⁸⁸ This counter-hegemonic theme is represented during the Ayede ritual in the figurative violent encounter between the Yemoja priestesses and Oriṣa Iyagba¹¹⁸⁹ “warrior” priestesses.

¹¹⁸⁶ Akin Alao, interview with the author, September 24, 2009, at OAU, Ile Ife, Nigeria.

¹¹⁸⁷ Rea, “Prevalence of Witches,” par. 11.

¹¹⁸⁸ Apter, *Black Critics and Kings*, 103, 157.

¹¹⁸⁹ Iyagba is a euphemism or praise-name for *iyami àjé*.

More generally, however, priestesses serve their communities as diviners and healers, assisting individuals who seek their counsel. Priestesses facilitate “the successful operation of day-to-day human affairs including marriage, career, travel, birth, health, wealth, death, enemies, and immortality.”¹¹⁹⁰ As *àjé*, all the above comes under their purview as “guardians of society.”

Role as *Iyalode*

One’s time upon the earth is likened to going to the market before returning home to be with the ancestors. Described as “a liminal place, where spirits intermingle with human beings,”¹¹⁹¹ the market is the province of women. While most farming is done by men, it is women who bring their husband’s produce to market for sale¹¹⁹² as well as engaging in other commerce. A woman could amass considerable wealth independently of her husband through her trading activities.

Having highest status among female chiefs, the *Iyalode* is administrative head of the market. “Appointed by the king or senior male chiefs, the *Ìyálóde* and her assistants supervised the market system and its traders and resolved disputes between women.”¹¹⁹³ Originating in Old Oyo and spreading from there, the designation was given to “provincial chiefs who determined trade policy, ran the markets, and served as intermediaries between the women of local communities

¹¹⁹⁰ Badejo, “Authority and Discourse,” 131.

¹¹⁹¹ H. J. Drewal and Drewal, *Gẹ̀lẹ̀dẹ̀*, 10.

¹¹⁹² Drews, “Guardians of the Society.”

¹¹⁹³ McIntosh, *Yoruba Women*, 221.

and the royal administration.”¹¹⁹⁴ In Ile-Ife, the title of the market head was *Yeyeloja* “Mother at the market,”¹¹⁹⁵ which predates the Oyo *Iyalode* designation.

Although the power of the *Iyalode* and the scope of her duties varied by region, she generally represented the interests of women on the king’s council. Discussion of the *Iyalode* can be found in the chapter on Oyo history because of their prominent role after the decline of Old Oyo. Legendary *Iyalode* Efunsetan Aniwura of Ibadan and Efunroye Tinubu of Lagos and Abeokuta are taken up in that chapter.

By mark of accomplishment, the *Iyalode* is considered a woman with *àjé*. Mythically, the *Iyalode* is linked with *iyami àjé* as a person to whom mortal women come to receive *àjé*, “a bird.” *Odu Ifa* Irete Meji, which speaks of the arrival of the *iyami* in Ota, also gives *Iyalode* her designation.

They named one of them *Ìyálóde* in *Ọ̀tà*.
The one who wishes to receive (a bird) carries her calabash alongside her.
She says that she wishes to receive her bird.
It is placed inside.
When she has placed the bird inside,
the calabash is covered and given back to them.¹¹⁹⁶

Though not the case universally, “in many communities, *Ìyálódes* lost much of their political and economic power across the colonial period.” Given the values of the colonial power and given that these values meshed with local male interests, the authority of Yoruba women was not recognized. Men assumed or

¹¹⁹⁴ Ibid.

¹¹⁹⁵ Bascom, *Yoruba of Southwestern Nigeria*, 33.

¹¹⁹⁶ Verger, “*Ìyàmi Ọ̀ṣòròngà*,” 76.

were appointed to positions of responsibility formerly held by women. Glaringly, “in Egbaland, no new woman chiefs were selected between 1898 and 1930.”¹¹⁹⁷

In some cases, women retained their titles. However, the import, meaning, and duties associated with the title were lost. In Abeokuta, for example, “women complained in 1937 that *Ìyálódes* and their assistants now dealt with little more than petty matters of sanitation.” The advantage many *Iyalodes* enjoyed was that they were not employed by the colonial administration. Therefore, “they were able to protest against unpopular government policies without fear of losing their jobs” such as the taxation of women.¹¹⁹⁸

The following is a telling anecdote regarding Yoruba perceptions of women’s power and the interface with colonial values.

Because the Yoruba were accustomed to accepting the authority of some women, even a person who held no formal title or office might be allowed to wield power when needed.¹¹⁹⁹

Such was the case when a woman stepped in to resolve a dispute between two women on a public bus in 1950 Ibadan. The matter was resolved and an account of the incident given in a local newspaper. McIntosh states:

It is interesting that although her authority was accepted by those on the bus, she was described in masculine and not altogether complimentary terms in the newspaper’s account.¹²⁰⁰

¹¹⁹⁷ McIntosh, *Yoruba Women*, 224.

¹¹⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 224, 223.

¹¹⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 225.

¹²⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 226.

This example indeed speaks to the Yoruba ambiguity towards women and their power.

Rulers, Regents, and Chiefs

Great antiquity is attributed to the powerful roles played by women within Yoruba society as supported by archeological evidence.¹²⁰¹ Bronze and terracotta artifacts found primarily in the region of Ile-Ife, appear to represent women as rulers and chiefs. For example, a pair of brass figures found in 1957 shows that “the female brass figure dresses as an important chieftain with all the regalia of office which is not in any way inferior to that of her male counterpart.”¹²⁰²

Rulers

Ondo’s founding myth is perhaps the most well-known example of woman as founder and ruler. Pupupu, exiled as an infant twin with her mother who was a wife of King Oduduwa, became Ondo’s “first paramount ruler and was accorded the rights and privileges of an *Oba*.”¹²⁰³ On certain ritual occasions the present-day *oba*, whose title is *Osemawe*, dresses in female clothing as commemoration of the kingdom’s founding by a woman.¹²⁰⁴

¹²⁰¹ Abiodun, “Woman in Yoruba Religious Images”; Blier, “Kings, Crowns, and Rights.”

¹²⁰² Abiodun, “Woman in Yoruba Religious Images,” 2.

¹²⁰³ Olupona, “Women’s Rituals, Kingship and Power,” 316.

¹²⁰⁴ Matory, *Sex and the Empire*.

Though the historical occurrence of Yoruba female rulers is acknowledged, it is considered a comparatively rare phenomenon.¹²⁰⁵ Women are only said to have ruled “twice in the remote past”¹²⁰⁶ of Ile-Ife. However, *oba* is an ungendered title denoting a ruler though it has been given the masculinist translation of king. Because of this neutral term for monarch and because “Yoruba names are with few exceptions common to both genders,”¹²⁰⁷ there might in fact be more female rulers among the Yoruba than current estimates suggest. The following traditional greeting for an *oba* is inclusive of both genders:

| | |
|--------------------|--|
| <i>Kábíyèsí</i> | One whose authority cannot be challenged |
| <i>Aláṣẹ</i> | Who is endowed with <i>áṣẹ</i> |
| <i>Èkejì-Òrìṣà</i> | And ranks only with the <i>òrìṣà</i> |
| <i>Ikú</i> | Death, the embodiment of finality |
| <i>Bàbá-Yèyé</i> | Ultimate Father-Mother ¹²⁰⁸ |

At about the time of the Nupe sack of Oyo, Nupe incursions extended deep into Yoruba territory. On two occasions Nupe attempted unsuccessful invasions of Ijesa country. Queens reigned Ijesa at these junctures. “The date of these Nupe invasions is admittedly very uncertain. They are attributed to the reigns of *Ọwa Yeyewaye* and *Ọwa Yeyeori* (both female rulers).”¹²⁰⁹

Denzer states that “six women appear in the lists of Ilesha obas... They reigned at various times from the mid-seventeenth to the mid-eighteenth

¹²⁰⁵ Afolabi and Olasupo, “Female Gender in Traditional Leadership.”

¹²⁰⁶ Bascom, *Yoruba of Southwestern Nigeria*, 32.

¹²⁰⁷ S. Johnson, *History of the Yorubas*, 83.

¹²⁰⁸ Abiodun, “Hidden Power,” 21.

¹²⁰⁹ Law, *The Oyo Empire*, 38 n. 71.

centuries.”¹²¹⁰ However, Murphy and Sanford believe the number of female rulers among the 39 identified rulers might be higher.¹²¹¹

In Ijebu-Ode three princesses ascended to the throne prior to 1760, and in Ado-Ekiti “a woman known as Yeyenirewu assumed power as the fifth *ewi*” and reigned from 1511 to 1552. The thirteenth *deji* of Akure was a woman named Eye Aro Obabinrin, who enjoyed a reign that was “prosperous and unusually long.” The twenty-sixth *deji* was also a female ruler, Eye Mohin Obabinrin.¹²¹²

Oyo Dynasty’s Alafin Orompoto is listed as the twelfth ruler in Johnson’s kings list. Johnson earlier refers to this ruler as “Prince *Ọrọmpọtọ*, brother of Eguguoju, and son of Ofinran.”¹²¹³ However, Oyewumi asserts that this ruler was female and continues that though “four *aláàfin* are identified as females”¹²¹⁴ the number of Oyo female rulers could in fact be greater. Western and Christian influence injected “a male-biased gender ideology”¹²¹⁵ into the research and writing of Johnson and other early Yoruba scholars.

¹²¹⁰ Denzer, “Yoruba Women,” 8.

¹²¹¹ Murphy and Sanford, “Introduction.”

¹²¹² Denzer, “Yoruba Women,” 8.

¹²¹³ S. Johnson, *History of the Yorubas*, 161.

¹²¹⁴ Oyewumi, *Invention of Women*, 88.

¹²¹⁵ *Ibid.* 89.

Regents

When a monarch has succeeded to the throne at a young age and is too juvenile to rule, a regent assumes the office of sovereign until the monarch becomes of age. A regent is also appointed in the interregnum between the death of one monarch and the selection and installation of another.

The traditions certainly attest the importance of the *Alafin*'s mother at the *Ọyọ* court, for on two occasions when the *Alafin* had succeeded as a minor, a regency was exercised by his mother: thus in the early years of *Alafin Kọri*'s reign his mother *Iyayun* is said to have ruled as Regent, while in the minority of *Alafin Ofinran* the kingdom was ruled by his mother *Adasobo*.¹²¹⁶

Johnson gives the precision that as regent *Kori*'s mother, *Iyayun*, wore the crown and the royal robes, was endowed with all the paraphernalia of sovereignty, "and ruled the kingdom as a man until her son was of age."¹²¹⁷

Upon a monarch's death the process of selecting, vetting, and installing a new ruler can be a lengthy one. A female regent frequently rules in the interim; "she is often the first daughter of the dead king." Echoing Johnson's statement, this regent is invested with the dead king's regalia and authority. She also assumes the responsibilities of the office.

She oversees the governing council and amicably settled whatever crisis may arise in the town....She becomes the husband of all royal wives (*ayaba*) except her mother....She caters to the needs of family members of the extended family as well as administering family properties.

¹²¹⁶ Law, *The Oyo Empire*, 70-71.

¹²¹⁷ S. Johnson, *History of the Yorubas*, 156.

Once a new ruler is enthroned, the relationship between that ruler and the former regent varies according to local tradition. In some areas the two never meet and in others, the former regent serves in an advisory capacity to the ruler.¹²¹⁸

Chiefs

As true of the *Iyalode*, chiefly roles and authority varied according to regional customs. However, “they normally had some mixture of economic, political, judicial, social, and religious duties.”¹²¹⁹ “The head of the elder women of Ife held the title ‘Mother Ojumu (Yeye Ojumu).’¹²²⁰ Yeye Ojumu is said to have a role with women similar to the Orunto who holds the titles:

‘King of the town of Ife’ (Ọbalufe, Oba ilu Ife) and as ‘Ọni of the outside’ (Ọniode) because he rules outside the palace in contrast to the king himself who is ‘Ọni of the house’ (Ọni ile).¹²²¹

Female chiefs carry out important ritual functions. As noted above the title of *Iyalode* is a chieftaincy title as is *erelu*, within the Ogboni Society. Among the Ondo, “the paramount female chief is called Lọbun...[and] is also referred to as Ọba Obinrin, or woman-king.”¹²²² While the Lobun’s primary function is installation of the *oba*, she is chief priestess of the deity of wealth and also head of the market.

¹²¹⁸ Olajubu, *Women in the Yoruba Religious Sphere*, 90, 91.

¹²¹⁹ McIntosh, *Yoruba Women*, 220.

¹²²⁰ Bascom, *Yoruba of Southwestern Nigeria*, 33.

¹²²¹ *Ibid.*

¹²²² Olupona, “Women’s Rituals, Kingship and Power,” 318.

Among the Ondo there is a parallel chieftaincy structure for men and women. “Female chiefs [are] referred to as *Opoji*”¹²²³ and occupy high chieftaincy positions exercising considerable power and are accorded great respect.

The sociological explanation for this Ondo feature lies principally in the manner in which succession to rights is traced not exclusively or even predominantly in the male line but in both male and female lines.¹²²⁴

This “bilateral kinship system”¹²²⁵ is not unique to the Ondo but is also present among other eastern Yoruba groups¹²²⁶ as well as among the Ijebu and in certain coastal areas.¹²²⁷

The foregoing was a glimpse of the varied and important roles played by “powerful women” in Yoruba society. Powerful women, as *àjé*, assist to maintain balance within the society in their nurturing as well as punitive manifestations. Within Ogboni they exercise judicial power in one of *iyami àjé*'s most important functions as arbiters of justice.

As priestesses they embody sacred and ritual power, imbuing the ruler with the *oriṣà*'s blessing thus raising this individual to divine status. The *Iyalode*, as administrative head of the market and trade, controls the economic heart of the community. As rulers, regents, and chiefs they oversee all areas pertaining to the

¹²²³ Ibid.

¹²²⁴ Obayemi, “The Yoruba and Edo,” 224.

¹²²⁵ McIntosh, *Yoruba Women*, 289.

¹²²⁶ Ibid.

¹²²⁷ Henry Drewal, interview with the author, October 28, 2010, Stanford, California.

social administration and control of kingdoms. It is in such roles that *iyami àjé* function as the “guardians of society.”

Symbolism and Iconography

A number of animals, items, and images are symbolic of or associated with *iyami àjé*. A few are examined below.

Birds

Without doubt *iyami àjé* is most widely associated with birds, also being known as *eleye*. “As ‘awon Eleye’ (owners of birds), it is believed that witches are human beings who transform into different kinds of birds under different circumstances.”¹²²⁸ Ellis speaks of *àjé*’s metamorphosis into an owl,¹²²⁹ for example.

Odu Ifa Osa Meji recounts that Olodumare bestowed “the power of *ẹlẹiyẹ*”¹²³⁰ upon female deity, and by extension women. That the power was housed in a calabash, representative of the world and the womb,¹²³¹ underscores the message given to female divinity: “Your Ase shall be to sustain the world.”¹²³²

¹²²⁸ Elebuibon, *Invisible Powers*, xii.

¹²²⁹ Ellis, *Yoruba-Speaking Peoples*.

¹²³⁰ Verger, “Ìyàmi Òṣòròngà,” 134.

¹²³¹ Washington, *Our Mothers*.

¹²³² Fatunmise, *Iyami Osoronga*, 44.

In *odu IreteOgbe* one learns the bird's name, "Aragamago."¹²³³ Verger refers to the bird as "the power of the witch...at once her spirit and that which carries out the malicious deeds."¹²³⁴ Olomo states that "birds are life forms that are not earth bound."¹²³⁵ They are unconstrained by the physical laws that keep other creatures tethered and limited.

In part, this symbolic representation of *iyami àjé* speaks to her freedom of movement between realms, beyond the constraints of physical laws. Fagbemileke Fatunmise offers this praise name for *iyami àjé*: "The Elegant Bird that Flies Upside Down." This upside down flight is an allusion to astral travel. More significantly, it speaks to power. An example of this power is the ability "to make manifest things that are thought to be impossible or improbable."¹²³⁶

Though many birds are associated with *àjé*, of special significance are the vulture and the parrot.

The vulture is the symbol of "the mothers" in Benin and Yoruba art of Nigeria....The vulture is the elder woman who has acquired special hidden powers without which mortuary and installation rights for kings could not be completed.¹²³⁷

One of Oṣun's manifestations, that of Oṣun Kole, is associated with the buzzard and is said to represent Oṣun's witch magic that "is ultimately protective

¹²³³ Verger, "Ìyàmi Òṣòròngà," 167.

¹²³⁴ Ibid., 43.

¹²³⁵ Olomo, *Core of Fire*, 130.

¹²³⁶ Fatunmise, *Iyami Osoronga*, 81.

¹²³⁷ Jeffries, "The Image of Woken," 116.

of her people.” Thompson refers to turkey buzzard feathers as “witch feathers,” indicating that five of these feathers attached to a vessel that is suspended from a ceiling transform it “into a kind of elevated devouring force...believed to protect the habitation from evil.”¹²³⁸

The African Grey parrot’s distinctive red tail feathers are the dominant iconographic representation and identifier of *iyami* and the power of *àjé*. Drewal and Drewal speak of red parrot feathers as “supreme symbols of the mystical powers of the mothers, for they are termed ‘the cloth of the [female] elders’ (*aşo agbalagba*).”¹²³⁹

Iya’Nla the “grand matron” of *àjé* “has a paraphernalia to work with, such as her staff, the crown of parrot tail feathers (*sign of witchcraft power*) and the fan.”^{1240 1241} Red parrot feathers are worn by priestesses and are found in bunches of three on the Yemoja sacred calabash¹²⁴² that is a key component to the king’s revitalization as part of the annual Ayede festival spoken of above.

Parrot eggs were used to deliver a fatal message to rulers who had lost the support of their people. Death, whether induced or self-inflicted, was the expected fate of a deposed monarch. In Ile-Ife the unfortunate *oni* “opened a ‘calabash of

¹²³⁸ Thompson, *Flash of the Spirit*, 80.

¹²³⁹ H. J. Drewal and Drewal, *Gẹlẹdẹ*, 215.

¹²⁴⁰ Alcamo, *Ìyá Nlá*, 36-37.

¹²⁴¹ For connection between *àjé* and the fan, see the Oşun praise-poem and Hoch-Smith quote in *Àjé 2*.

¹²⁴² Apter, *Black Critics and Kings*, plate 5.

death' containing a powerful charm made of parrots' eggs...the sight of it killed him."¹²⁴³ Among the Oyo, the council of chiefs sent the ruler:

a present of parrot eggs, and the message that they considered he must be fatigued with the cares of government, and that it was time for him to rest and take a little sleep. Upon receiving this message, the king...gave directions to his women to strangle him, which they accordingly did.¹²⁴⁴

The bird iconography of *iyami àjé* is typically found upon the crowns of Yoruba rulers. Thompson's eloquently vivid portrayal is fitting:

Birds, especially those connoting the *àshé* of "the mothers," those most powerful elderly women with a force capable of mystically annihilating the arrogant, the selfishly rich, or other targets deserving of punishment, are often depicted in bead embroidery clustered at the top of the special crowns worn by Yoruba kings signifying that the king rules by mastering and participating in the divine command personified by them. These feathered avatars brilliantly rendered in shining beads protect the head of the supreme leader.¹²⁴⁵

Even within the *àjé* iconography of birds, one finds what could be construed as a depiction of male dominance and control. Alternatively it could be a message that the king's moral conduct and his adherence to justice, his righteous leadership, ensures him the support of *iyami àjé*.

Many royal crowns (*adé*) depict birds gathered in a circle around one bird higher than all the rest. The central bird represents the monarch himself, whose leadership forestalls the chaos that these free and powerful women can cause.¹²⁴⁶

¹²⁴³ Bascom, *Yoruba of Southwestern Nigeria*, 31.

¹²⁴⁴ Ellis, *Yoruba-Speaking Peoples*, 7-8.

¹²⁴⁵ Thompson, *Flash of the Spirit*, 7, 9.

¹²⁴⁶ Matory, *Sex and the Empire*, 56.

However, a story of guidance from “these free and powerful women” is told by the brass figure of a king discovered at Ile-Ife and dated to between the twelfth and fifteenth centuries CE. The king is depicted wearing a crown with what appears to be a bird prominently mounted at the crown’s front above the king’s forehead.¹²⁴⁷

Anatomy

Whether the penis of Ogun or the vagina of the mothers, “anatomical features are metaphors for spiritual power.”¹²⁴⁸ Brass statues believed to be of Onile depict her with a “wide open labia and a clitoris in erection. This last detail would indicate that the woman is as strong as a man.”¹²⁴⁹ More germane, it is an indication of her tremendous spiritual power.

The mask of the Great Mother (Iya’Nla) portrayed in the Gelede ritual features a long beard. A beard seen in association with the feminine is a sign of “extraordinary spiritual power.”¹²⁵⁰ The length of the beard on the Iya’Nla mask and its whiteness speak to the degree of her spiritual power, her wisdom, and her longevity.

Trees

Several varieties of trees are believed to be inhabited by spirits. In *Àjé* 2 it was seen that *Odu Ifa* Odi Meji and OgbeOsa speak of seven trees in relation to *iyami* and their actions. Conventionally, the trees most often associated with

¹²⁴⁷ Blier, “Kings, Crowns, and Rights.”

¹²⁴⁸ M. T. Drewal, *Yoruba Ritual*, 179.

¹²⁴⁹ Witte, “Symboliek,” 221.

¹²⁵⁰ H. J. Drewal and Drewal, *Gelede*, 71.

iyami àjé are the *Iroko* and *Baobab*. The *Apa*, too, has significance. The *Iroko* (silk-cotton tree) is often connected with the *àjé*'s nocturnal gatherings and is considered their abode. "The *Iroko* is used chiefly for building, whence probably it comes to be the emblem of refuge."¹²⁵¹

In terms of both trees being thought of as places where *àjé* gather, "it is significant that witches are said to meet in *Baobab* and *Iroko* trees. These trees are pollinated by bats which make a twittering noise like people talking."¹²⁵² Along with *Baobab* trees, many *Iroko* trees were destroyed by the witch-hunting Atinga movement.¹²⁵³

The *Apa* (African mahogany) is used for making drums and "is the emblem of vengeance." Within this tree, too, *àjé* are believed to hold their clandestine meetings. The *Apa*'s special significance is that its "indwelling spirit is believed to assist them in their malpractices."¹²⁵⁴

Cats

In addition to birds *iyami àjé* is reported capable of transmogrification into any assortment of animals, including cats. Interestingly, the relationship between *iyami* and cats is contained in a verse of *Odu Ifa Owonrin Meji*. The tale is as follows: *Gọrọmaafiyun Gọrọmaafibọ* performed Ifa divination for 165 animals when they were setting out on a journey. The animals were prescribed the

¹²⁵¹ Ellis, *Yoruba-Speaking Peoples*, 115.

¹²⁵² Parrinder, *Witchcraft, European and African*, 146.

¹²⁵³ Morton-Williams, "The Atinga Cult."

¹²⁵⁴ Ellis, *Yoruba-Speaking Peoples*. 115, 116.

With respect to *àjé*, one finds the colors white, red, and black used as terms of categorization. Respectively these are “*ẹlẹyẹ funfun, pupa, ati dudu.*”

White *ẹlẹyẹ* are beneficial; they bring prosperity and the good things in life. Red *ẹlẹyẹ*, on the other hand, bring suffering (*iponju*), while black *ẹlẹyẹ* cause death. It is the nature of human actions, rather than the person, that is color-classified in this way. Therefore, a powerful woman may bring prosperity on one occasion, but suffering or death on another.¹²⁵⁸

Adekanmi Ifagbuyi also spoke of these “three types of *iyami*”¹²⁵⁹ and stated that the red *àjé* are more dangerous than the black because one can beg the black *àjé* for mercy. “But the red one, once you do something they kill you.” He goes on to state that the power of *àjé funfun* “can conquer any of them, black or red.”

Fatumise also speaks of these colors in association with *àjé*. “Aje Funfun” is associated with blessings and the *oriṣa* Obatala, generally thought of as conveying coolness and calm. However, Aje Funfun bring “blessings while exposing the truth of the matter...[and] can and will issue in the hot if necessary.” “Aje Pupa” are related to the *oriṣa* Ṣango and Olokun. Their hot, passionate energy “will spark at any given moment when the situation warrants it,” such as when long simmering issues are left unaddressed. “Aje Dudu” are closely linked to the night-hunting Screech Owl. The danger lay in the fact that their color association, black, “is not penetrable; thus, one cannot know what inlay there.”¹²⁶⁰

¹²⁵⁸ M. T. Drewal, *Yoruba Ritual*, 178.

¹²⁵⁹ Adekanmi Adewale Ifagbuyi, interview with the author, October 9, 2009, Lagos, Nigeria.

¹²⁶⁰ Fatunmise, *Iyami Osorongu*, 88, 89.

During our interview discussion of these colors in association with *iyami*, Opeola expressed the uniformity of power among the three: "It's the same force." How the force is used depends on the ethics of each individual with the power. "A person has his [or her] own...ethics, which cannot be changed. If a person is principally bad in upbringing, vengeful...the element of that will still be in his heart."¹²⁶¹

Contemporary Portrayals and Àjé in Diaspora

The witch is very much alive in the Nigerian popular imagination. "Although belief in the powers of òrìṣà and ancestors has decreased sharply, belief in the witches is still widespread....Schooling does not necessarily obliterate fantasies about witches."¹²⁶² In "A Prevalence of Witches" William Rea speaks of the "media witch," the common representation of the witch reflective of the interface between modern and traditional worlds.

Always set in the present with the advances and problems of modernity, portrayals also use traditional tropes of witchcraft such as a witch transforming into a bird to fly to meetings or perform her evil deeds.

The media witch sells newspapers, provides the standard character in popular videos and is a staple of soap opera....[They are also] found in comic books, but these comic witches are indicative of, and largely copied from, other representations circulating in Nigeria.¹²⁶³

¹²⁶¹ Samuel Opeola, interview with the author, September 27, 2009, Ile-Ife, Nigeria.

¹²⁶² Elebuibon, *Invisible Powers*, 33.

¹²⁶³ Rea, "Prevalence of Witches," par. 24.

Characters are generally well-to-do urban families and “the scenarios that the characters inhabit all tend toward the highly commoditized.” Witches enter the scene usually to aid an avaricious character by causing infertility in a rival, orchestrating someone’s death, or worse.¹²⁶⁴

The Nollywood movie *Osa Eleye* (2000) is a mythological tale giving a one-sided stereotyped portrayal of *àjé* as frightening witch. *Àjé* range in age from adolescent to elderly and shoot arrows from their eyes into the innocent and deserving, alike. Some *àjé*, especially the young, are not aware of their effect. *Iyami* are seen at a tree-top meeting along with their anticipated human meal bound within a cauldron.

Helen Ukpabio, the infamous child-witch hunter and head of Liberty Gospel Church in southeastern Nigeria, is the story writer of feature-length videos offered through her Liberty Films production company that present gruesome, sensationalized depictions of adult and child witches. Her films include *End of the Wicked* (1999) and *Married to a Witch* (2001).

Nigerian folk-poet, Olatubosun Oladapo, employs *àjé* as a “metaphorical representation of traditional values” in “Emi lo maa faje e re se?” Oladapo’s poem is social critique enmeshed within conversations of how individuals would use their obtained *àjé*. The fact that he chose to use *àjé* as metaphor “shows the centrality of this force to Yoruba ethos of the postcolonial milieu.”¹²⁶⁵

¹²⁶⁴ Ibid., par. 26.

¹²⁶⁵ Ajibade, “Endogenous and Exogenous Factors,” Conclusion, par. 7.

As social critique the poem assesses politicians and their actions, gauging their use of the political *àjé* with which they are endowed. He likens politicians to either beneficial *àjé*—those who use their skills to help develop the country—or destructive *àjé*—those who would leach away the life blood of the country by corruption, the “kleptocrats.”¹²⁶⁶

Oladapo opens his poem with the assertion that *àjé* is existent in all things, stating several examples. Everything has its witchcraft—its wisdom, its talent, its special ability. Through his poem Oladapo encourages individuals to use their *àjé* for the betterment of Nigeria.

My dear friend, if you receive the calabash of elderly witches
After you have become Eleye, and you have become owner of the world
What would you do with your witchcraft?
This matter concerns the initiates
It also concerns non-initiates.¹²⁶⁷

Released in the United States in 2009, *District 9* is an independent science-fiction film based in South Africa. Cat food is an addictive substance for ghettoized Earth-bound aliens. Control of this lucrative drug trade is in the hands of a notoriously ruthless Nigerian *cum* warlord. His personal priestess/witch is an attractive wild-eyed Nigerian woman.

In a particularly telling scene of *District 9*, she holds out a severed arm and has enthusiastically persuaded the warlord that to eat the flesh of his enemy would give him power. This woman personifies the stereotypical witch, capable of cannibalism. As seen, *iyami àjé* are popularly believed to supply a human meal

¹²⁶⁶ Ibid., par. 17.

¹²⁶⁷ As quoted in Ibid., par. 51.

for their meetings. It must also be remembered that those who disrespect Iyami Osorongá can pay the price with their lives.

There is evidence for the presence of *àjé* in Brazil. Lawal states that “the Yoruba of Brazil address Yemoja as Òdù-Ìyámi.”¹²⁶⁸ Henry and Margaret Drewal indicate that December 8th is the date on which *iyami àjé* is worshipped in Salvador along with the deities Oṣun and Onile.¹²⁶⁹ In addition two books coming out of the Brazilian Quimbanda tradition focus on directed interaction with the cosmic *àjé* or *àjé* spirits. Honoring Iyami Osorongá as “Mother of the Aje Spirits,”¹²⁷⁰ these are books of practical magic both authored by the same individual.

The Sacred Mothers contains rituals for invoking and working with the spirits and powers of the *àjé*. Elemental and moon magic as well as recipes for charmed oils are also included. The second book “contains information about how to correctly prepare, make and present the sacred mysteries of the Aje Spirits initiation ceremony.”¹²⁷¹ Also contained in this book are instructions on preparing offerings to *àjé* as well as various rituals.

¹²⁶⁸ Lawal, *Gẹ̀lẹ̀dẹ̀ Spectacle*, 71.

¹²⁶⁹ H. J. Drewal and Drewal, *Gẹ̀lẹ̀dẹ̀*.

¹²⁷⁰ Montenegro, *The Sacred Mothers*, 14.

¹²⁷¹ Montenegro, *The Aje Spirits*, 5.

Summary

The complex view of women among the Yoruba is mirrored in the complexity of *àjé*, and the polyvalence of *àjé* speaks to the Yoruba woman's polyvalent portrayal.

In effect, womanhood is full of complexity and contradictions. In one breath, she is a precious stone and, in another, she is an '*eru*' (slave). She is good and, at the same time, evil! She is a priestess and a deity; she is also a witch known as *Iya Mi Osorongá*.¹²⁷²

As discovered, *àjé* has a commonly perceived character and one that is less well known because it is contained in the sacred oral scripture of *Odu Ifa* and is, therefore, less accessible.

The last three chapters began with a review of the prevalent view of the *àjé*, what Hallen and Sodipo referred to as an exoteric model.¹²⁷³ Here is found the frightful, destructive *àjé* as women whose only aim is to disrupt human endeavors and destroy human happiness. Hallen and Sodipo's esoteric model then presented *àjé* from the point of view of traditional herbalists (*onisegun*). Within this broader model both men and women are considered *àjé*, and *àjé* work for good as well as ill. *Àjé* is seen as an attribute, and endowment of special abilities.¹²⁷⁴

Àjé 2 turned to a fuller inspection of *Odu Ifa* with regard to *àjé*. Examination of *odu ẹsẹ* (verses) deepened understanding of *àjé* as an

¹²⁷² Makinde, "Motherhood," 170.

¹²⁷³ Hallen and Sodipo, "Comparison of the Western 'Witch'"; Prince, "Yoruba Image of the Witch."

¹²⁷⁴ Hallen and Sodipo, *Knowledge, Belief, and Witchcraft*.

endowment from the “Supreme Creator Essence,”¹²⁷⁵ Olodumare, and the relationship of *iyami àjé* to deity and humanity. Olodumare bestowed female divinity with *àjé* as a power greater than that which was held by male divinity and entrusted female divinity with the care of “all good things”¹²⁷⁶ upon the earth.

Subsequent *Odu Ifa* examined—Osa Meji¹²⁷⁷ and Obara Okanran¹²⁷⁸—tell of female divinity losing some of her power to male divinity and the ever-present consequence in terms of Yoruba masking societies. These *odu* also appear to tell the tale of patriarchy’s evolution among the Yoruba.

As an attribute of the primordial female divinity, the Great Mother—Iya’Nla (IyaNla/Odu)—female *oriṣa* are *àjé*. Yemoja is called the “mother of” and Oṣun the “leader of” *iyami àjé*. *Odu Ifa* also speaks of this relationship. Fertility (its enhancement or its withering) is, therefore, naturally associated with *iyami àjé*.¹²⁷⁹

Exploration of *Odu Ifa* was further undertaken to gain insight into the relationship between *iyami àjé* and the deities Obatala and Orunmila. The difficult relationship between Obatala and *iyami àjé* is seen in light of the disrespect

¹²⁷⁵ Badejo, *Ọṣun Ṣẹ̀ẹ̀gẹ̀sí*, 56.

¹²⁷⁶ Abiodun, “Hidden Power,” 16.

¹²⁷⁷ Verger, “Ìyàmi Ọ̀ṣòròngà.”

¹²⁷⁸ Elebuibon, *Invisible Power*.

¹²⁷⁹ Lawal, *Gẹ̀lẹ̀dẹ̀ Spectacle*.

accorded *iyami àjé* by Obatala and his human wife. *Àjé*'s superior power is also witnessed as she subdues deities to whom Obatala runs for assistance.¹²⁸⁰

Many of the myths examined are purported to show the mean-spirited nature of *iyami àjé*. In reading these myths with the aim of discovering the original problems and causes of *àjé*'s anger, however, it became clear that in all cases it was the hubris and disrespect of deity or humans that precipitated *àjé*'s anger. Thus, affirming that they do not act unless provoked. Additionally, within the *Odu Ifa àjé* give precautions and rules as to the behaviors that instigate their anger.¹²⁸¹

Orunmila is able to allay the anger of *iyami* through appeasement. Several *odu* verses bear this message—ultimately one must appease *iyami àjé* through *ebo* (sacrifice). The vital role of *Iyami Odù* in the *Ifa* divination system, attributed to Orunmila, is also examined through *Odu Ifa*. Contrary to the view of some, Orunmila does not dominate or subjugate *iyami àjé*.¹²⁸² As the deity of wisdom, Orunmila's lesson to humanity is that the best course of action is following the prescriptions of *Ifa* with respect to appeasement of *iyami àjé*.

Iyami's arrival upon the earth plane and their interaction with humans is addressed. Within *Odu Ifa* one learns that it was human betrayal by the breaking of an oath that led to the widely perceived contentious relationship. One also

¹²⁸⁰ W. Abimbola, *Ifá Literary Corpus*.

¹²⁸¹ Verger, "Ìyàmi Òṣòròngà."

¹²⁸² Alcamo, *Ìyá Nlá*.

learns that the ire of *iyami àjé* is raised by disrespect and lack of generosity in their regard.¹²⁸³

In *Àjé* 3 focus was on the roles played by *iyami àjé* as members of society. As “guardians of society,” they are primarily tasked with justice and cosmological balance, which includes the moral conduct of ordinary individuals as well as that of rulers. Their presence also serves to mitigate male dominance and gender inequality.¹²⁸⁴

As members of the Ogboni Society they are direct arbiters of justice. As priestesses they help assure cosmological balance as well as the welfare of people in their communities. Threat of their displeasure and punitive action is seen to moderate male abuses of power and the subordination of women.¹²⁸⁵

Àjé have also historically assumed prominent positions of power and influence such as the *Iyalode* (controller of the market and trade), chiefs, regents, and sovereigns.¹²⁸⁶ Common icons and symbols of *iyami àjé*, such as birds, were then examined. Finally, current media portrayals of *iyami àjé* in Nigeria and beyond were briefly visited.¹²⁸⁷

¹²⁸³ Elebuibon, *Invisible Powers*.

¹²⁸⁴ Drews, “Guardians of the Society.”

¹²⁸⁵ Lawal, “Edan Ogboni”; Olajubu, *Women in the Yoruba Religious Sphere*.

¹²⁸⁶ Denzer, “Yoruba Women”; McIntosh, *Yoruba Women*; Olupona, “Women’s Rituals, Kingship and Power.”

¹²⁸⁷ Ajibade, “Endogenous and Exogenous Factors”; Rea, “Prevalence of Witches”; Thompson, *Flash of the Spirit*; Witte, *Symboliek*.

It behooves society to keep the mothers happy in order to receive their blessings. Besides showing them honor and respect in personal interaction and by their inclusion in secular affairs (pursuant to the agreement of the male deities with Oṣun), *àjé* enjoy music and dance.

As one informant put it, “Ìyá Nlá likes music and dance so much that she can celebrate for weeks without caring for food.” Her earthly disciples, the “powerful mothers,” have a similar love of the performing arts. Indeed, in one Ifá divination verse (*Odù Ogbè Ìyónú*), the “powerful mothers” disclose to Ọrúnmìlà that they would favor all those who honor them with music and dance.¹²⁸⁸

The Gelede masquerade is a spectacle of music and dance bestowing honor and respect upon the “powerful mothers” and “is considered one of the most effective means of seeking their favors.”¹²⁸⁹ It is to Gelede that the next chapter is devoted.

¹²⁸⁸ H. J. Drewal and Drewal, *Gelede*, 74.

¹²⁸⁹ *Ibid.*

CHAPTER 9: GELEDE—HONORING THE MOTHERS

“Gelede masks. The masks celebrate the spiritual powers of ‘our mothers’: elderly women and witches.”¹²⁹⁰

The Gelede dance is the expression of the bad conscience of the men towards women, dating from the changeover from matriarchal to patriarchal society...and to compensate her for her loss of political position.¹²⁹¹

Gelede is ritual enactment that highlights cultural reality, possibly shining a light on the historical past. As noted there is documented history of female secular power and authority in Yorubaland.¹²⁹² Uncovering the origins and place of the female divinities and female power among the Yoruba involves weaving myth, history, archaeology, and imagination.

Archaeological finds have revealed that after the inception of iron smelting, “manipulated copper, brass, and tin became important ceremonial and luxury items during the late first millennium CE.”¹²⁹³ These metals are associated with the female *oriṣa* Oya, and Oṣun, and with Obatala, who has both male and female manifestations.

The mythic importance of female power among the Yoruba has been made evident. In no manner is this more clearly demonstrated than the Gelede spectacle. This multi-day celebration, which has been referred to as “the ultimate

¹²⁹⁰ Olupona, “Yoruba Religious Tradition,” 253.

¹²⁹¹ Beier, “Gelede Masks,” 7.

¹²⁹² For example, Blier, “Kings, Crowns, and Rights”; S. Johnson, *History of the Yorubas*; McIntosh, *Yoruba Women*.

¹²⁹³ Falola and Heaton, *A History of Nigeria*, 20

spectacle”¹²⁹⁴ for its lavish display and social significance, has the core purpose of honoring female power and agency, especially the power of the mothers, *iyami àjẹ*. Also known as *iya un*.

They are the rightful owners of the Gelede ceremony...Iya un have a lot of praise names, or oriki, with various meanings— especially during performances. One example is adananlojuomi, meaning she whose heart is the open sea.¹²⁹⁵

The mothers are truly honored.

Discussion of Gelede begins with a first-hand account of its connection to *iyami àjẹ* then moves into Gelede’s origin and history followed by description of the components comprising the festival and the socio-cultural significance of the performance. While scattered references to Gelede can be found in the literature, there are two full-length works on Gelede that are considered definitive and from which most of this material is drawn.

The first, *Gelede*, was co-authored in 1983 by Henry Drewal and Margaret Drewal, art historians who undertook extensive investigations of Yoruba art and cultural expression. The second, written by Yoruba art and cultural historian Babatunde Lawal, a former dean at Obafemi Awolowo University in Ile-Ife, was published in 1996 and is entitled, *The Gelede Spectacle*.

Gelede and The Mothers

The “Yoruba conceive spectacle as a permanent, otherworldly dimension of reality which, until revealed by knowledgeable actors, is inaccessible to human

¹²⁹⁴ Lawal, *Gẹ̀lẹ̀dẹ̀ Spectacle*, 46.

¹²⁹⁵ Ibitokun, *Dance as Ritual Drama*, 36-37.

experience.”¹²⁹⁶ Gelede celebrates “our mothers” (*awon iya wa*), as such it celebrates the power of women, specifically women’s spiritual or unseen powers.

The mothers are the “owners of the world,” the “gods of society” and to this extent, they mediate the power of the gods and the ancestors in “the world.” Thus, the mothers and the gods and ancestors are “working hand-to-hand,” as Yoruba often say. This applies as much to the cults of the ancestors (Egungun) and the deities as it does to *Gelede*. *Gelede* simply treats the subject of the mothers and their role in society more explicitly than do any other Yoruba cults, at least more explicitly than the literature on these cults presently acknowledges.¹²⁹⁷

Information on Gelede was collected by William Bascom during his field work among the Meko. Meko is in southwestern Nigeria and sits near the border with the Republic of Benin. The discussion that follows is primarily taken from information provided to Bascom by his informant, Chief Isiaka. There are two sets of notes. The first dated, November 6, 1950, comprises pages 35-38. The second is dated January 12, 1951 and contains pages 275 and 276.

Chief Isiaka relates how Gelede was brought to Meko at about 1850 by Meko inhabitants who had participated in the Gelede rituals of Iranjin, a town located approximately 35 miles south of Meko among the Oho Yoruba. Meko asked permission and was instructed in the worship of Gelede. The people of Meko “wanted to copy it because it helped people (not because pretty). Gives children, money, cures sickness, brings good trade.”¹²⁹⁸

Though Gelede is considered an *oriša*, “Gelede never lived like Shango, Ogun, Orunmila, Oshun,” nor are any special stones, beads, colors, leaves, or

¹²⁹⁶ M. T. Drewal, *Yoruba Ritual*, 13.

¹²⁹⁷ H. J. Drewal and Drewal, *Gelede*, 276 n. 1.

¹²⁹⁸ Bascom, Meko, Nigeria Field Notes—“Gelede,” Chief Isiaka interview, 35.

even sea shells associated with Gelede, whose origin and home is the sea. Gelede is the “biggest orisha in Mèkò, bigger than Shango and all the others.” Chief Isiaka elaborates a few pages later: “The reason that it is the biggest is because of the witches” and the power of life and death that they wield. In the second set of notes one learns that the “witches” are believed to be more powerful than any other *oriṣa*, besides Ogun.¹²⁹⁹

Chief Isiaka continues: “Those who believe in Gelede must first believe in witches.” Witches are the power behind Gelede. Gelede is the vehicle through which the witches are worshipped and propitiated by the entire community. It is said of Gelede that “he likes witches very much, and takes them as his mothers.” However, the “real Gelede is female, witch.” When the Gelede mask is fed, it is the witches who are fed.

Never kill the animals for Gelede and put the blood on the masks; take the food and the live animals to the baobab tree and leave it there, for witches to eat at night.¹³⁰⁰

Membership in the Gelede society is open to all. Christians and Muslims can belong to the society without worshipping the deity—“can be Gelede without worshipping Gelede.” In this instance, they must “never enter *ile Gelede*, which is called *iṣiroko*” and “*oju iya mi wọn* (face of my mothers).” It is believed that *iṣiroko* is a reference to the iroko tree, which is sacred to *iyami* and upon which it is said the mothers congregate.¹³⁰¹

¹²⁹⁹ Ibid., 37, 35, 38.

¹³⁰⁰ Ibid., 38, 38, 275, 38.

¹³⁰¹ Ibid., 37.

Chief Isiaka recounted his personal experience of *iyami* to Bascom. For three years Chief Isiaka suffered with elephantiasis to such a severe extent that he could not leave his home. He finally had *Ifa* divination performed and was told by the *babalawo* that the *iyami* “said if [he] could offer them a big she-goat, he would get better.” He bought a large she-goat that he kept in his house. Everyone knew that it was earmarked for the mothers. This latter point is important. The honoring of his pledge to the mothers had to be common knowledge because “witches are old women in town.”¹³⁰²

At this point, the swelling began to go down. When he was well enough, Chief Isiaka “took it to *işiroko* (as he had been told) and killed it and cooked it for the witches....All the old women came to eat it.” He was shortly thereafter completely cured.¹³⁰³

Of course, for some this story might beg the question of whether it was the *iyami* that afflicted Chief Isiaka. Had he insulted or displeased the *iyami* in some way for which he needed to make amends? Or, were the *iyami* acting benevolently in curing him? Within the portrayal of the Yoruba cosmos, the *iyami* are enemies of humans. Therefore, the assumption is that *iyami* cause affliction. They are generally thought disinclined to assist us humans out of our predicaments.

If a suffering individual had *Ifa* divination performed that prescribed *ebo* or sacrifice to a specific *orişa*, the assumption would not be that the *orişa* caused

¹³⁰² Ibid., 38.

¹³⁰³ Ibid.

the individual's problem. The supposition would be that the particular *oriṣa* is best placed to assist the individual. However, if one is prescribed an *ebo* for *iyami*, the assumption is that it is reparation for one's offense against them.

Meko Gelede performance is held annually and lasts four days. However, Gelede can be danced more often if a member of the Gelede society dies. Masks are carved and painted without payment to the craftsman. This work is their part of the communal contribution. "Gelede is an orisha which he must not refuse...so much so that if ask him to do it and he refuses, he will die (witches will kill him) or he may have bad sickness."¹³⁰⁴

In concert with the element of worship, Gelede is "dance for play, for joy." Gelede is more light-hearted and less restrictive than, for example, Egungun (the ancestor masquerade). In both cases only men dance the masquerade. However, with Gelede, women "can hold his hand, pilot him, talk to him, blow air for him, [and] see his face."¹³⁰⁵

Etymology

Olumide Lucas, an early scholar of Yoruba religion, traces the etymology of the term Gelede to Egypt—ascribing to it the meaning, "Geb who pierces." He goes on to state that "it is difficult to know why such a name was given to such a harmless incarnate spirit as Geḷeḷe."¹³⁰⁶ Given Gelede's association with *iyami àjé*, conjecture is readily available.

¹³⁰⁴ Ibid., 35.

¹³⁰⁵ Ibid., 36, 35.

¹³⁰⁶ Lucas, *Religion of the Yorubas*, 148.

Geb is an earth and fertility God of ancient Egypt, whose character was both benevolent and malevolent—benevolent provider of grains, malevolent prisoner of the dead. He is famously the twin sibling/consort of Nut, parents of Isis and Osiris.¹³⁰⁷ I cannot speak to the accuracy of Lucas' etymological analysis. However, the coincidence between the attributes of Geb and *àjé* is striking.

As discussed, *iyami àjé* exhibits the same dual character. Gelede is propitiation of *àjé*, an entreaty to her powers of abundance and fertility. A representation of *iyami àjé* in the more solemn Gelede night ritual is a bird with a blood red beak. In her displeasure, *iyami àjé* is said to pierce and suck the blood of her victims.¹³⁰⁸ “Geb who pierces” seems a fitting epitaph.

However, more recent scholarship ascribes to the term Gelede a meaning more in line with its function.

Gè means “to soothe, to placate, to pet or coddle”; *è/è* refers to a woman's private parts, those that symbolize women's secrets and their life-giving powers; and *dé* connotes “to soften with care or gentleness.” Together these ideas convey the significance of *Gèlèdè*, performances carefully conceived and executed to pay homage to women so that the community may partake of their innate power for its benefit.¹³⁰⁹

Mythic Origin and Historiography

Gelede is an example of the intersection of sacred myth, historical myth and historical reality. Following are two divination verses from *Odu Ifa* said to offer the mythic origin of Gelede. The first is from Iwori Meji:

¹³⁰⁷ Pinch, *Egyptian Mythology*.

¹³⁰⁸ H. J. Drewal and Drewal, *Gèlèdè*.

¹³⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, xv.

“You are looking at me, I am looking at you.
Who has something up his sleeves between the two of us?”
Thus declared the oracle to Yewájobí,
Who was weeping for not being able to bear children
And who was broken-hearted because she could not have a baby to
carry on her back.
She was advised to offer sacrifices.
She was advised to sacrifice plenty of mashed corn
And plenty of crockery
After offering these sacrifices,
She should commission from carvers
Plenty of wooden images.
She should dance with these wooden images
With metal anklets on her feet.
The oracle said she will become a nursing mother.
Yewájobí did as she was told.
Soon after,
She started bearing children.¹³¹⁰

Yewájobí is another name of the deity Yemoja. Here the origin of Gelede is related to reproductive fertility. This prescriptive ritual or *ebo* is given to Yemoja, who though she had previously given birth to several children, “could not have a child after marrying Olúwèrì, a native of Ketu”¹³¹¹ The reference to Ketu is significant as will be seen below.

After performing the *ebo*, Yemoja gave birth to two children, a boy nicknamed Èfẹ followed by a girl nicknamed Gẹ̀lẹ̀dẹ̀. As adults, both children were prescribed the same sacrifice to remedy their infertility. Lawal maintains that “because of their effectiveness, these rites were gradually developed into the

¹³¹⁰ Lawal, *Gẹ̀lẹ̀dẹ̀ Spectacle*, 39.

¹³¹¹ Ibid.

Gèlèdè masked dance, having been perpetuated by descendants of Èfè and Gèlèdè.”¹³¹²

Next is an *Ifa* divination verse taken from Osa Meji, which relates the mythic origin of Gelede to *iyami àjé*:

Prudence was the ancient wisdom of the Ègba
Prudence was the ancient wisdom of the Ijèṣa
It was divined for Ọrunmila, who was going to the town of the owners of
birds [i.e., spiritually powerful women]
That he must put on an image [mask], head ties, and leg rattles
He obeyed, he put them on, he arrived in the town of the owners of birds
and he survived
He rejoiced in dancing and singing—
“I have covenanted with Death, I will never die
Death, worrisome Death
I have covenanted with sickness, I will never die
Death, worrisome Death”¹³¹³

This *Ifa* divination verse is drummed at the start of the Lagos Gelede performance. What is important to note is the emphasis placed here on the careful and respectful manner in which Orunmila approaches *iyami* “by donning a mask (*aworan*), head tie (*ọja*), and leg rattles (*iku*), three essential elements found in all Èfè and Gèlèdè costumes.”¹³¹⁴

Lawal also includes the divination verse from Osa Meji in his text. However, his translation of *ọja* is “baby sash” as contrasted with the Drewals’ translation, “head tie.” Verification of the translation with a female native speaker

¹³¹² Ibid., 40.

¹³¹³ H. J. Drewal and Drewal, *Gelede*, 17.

¹³¹⁴ Ibid., 17-18.

of Yoruba revealed that “baby sash” is the more accurate translation.¹³¹⁵

However, this person also indicated that the term *oja* is used to describe anything that ties. Lawal’s use of “baby sash” seems more appropriate given that a purpose for performing Gelede is to ensure fertility.

Bridging the Osa Meji and Iwori Meji variants of Gelede’s mythic roots, Lawal reports: “The dance is one of the most effective means of placating the ‘powerful mothers’ because Yewájọbí is their matron, and because she loved dancing.”¹³¹⁶ Also of note is that the Yewa River runs through the area of southwestern Yorubaland most associated with Gelede. There are many and varied accounts as to the historical beginnings of Gelede with most associating its origin with requests for or celebration of fertility. The popular place of origin myth recounted below is an exception.

While reverence and respect for “our mothers” and the awesome power of women is ancient and “pan-Yoruba,” to use Henry Drewal’s term,¹³¹⁷ honoring the Mothers through Gelede is a relatively recent phenomenon. Lawal’s research indicates that “all the historical traditions collected so far point to three possible places of origin for Gẹ̀lẹ̀dẹ̀. These are Old Ọ̀yọ̀, Ketu, and Ìlóbí.”¹³¹⁸

¹³¹⁵ Peju Esimai, Ph.D., e-mail message to author, January 22, 2011.

¹³¹⁶ Lawal, *Gẹ̀lẹ̀dẹ̀ Spectacle*, 40.

¹³¹⁷ H. J. Drewal and Drewal, *Gẹ̀lẹ̀dẹ̀*, xv.

¹³¹⁸ Lawal, *Gẹ̀lẹ̀dẹ̀ Spectacle*, 46.

Yemoja is thought to be of Nupe origin¹³¹⁹ and is the mythical mother of Ọ̀sango, an ancient and legendary king-turned-deity of Old Oyo. Ọ̀sango's mother, Toroṣi, "was the daughter of Elempe a Nupe king, who formed an alliance with Orańyan by giving him his daughter to wife, of which marriage Ọ̀sango was the issue."¹³²⁰ Therefore, it is likely that Yemoja was a divinity brought to Oyo by Torosi. The argument for Oyo origin maintains that:

The word Gẹ̀lẹ̀dẹ̀ is a distortion of Gbàràdá (the one who stole the show). Gbàràdá was the nickname of a Nupe man who won the prize as the best entertainer at a theatrical contest sponsored in the capital city of Old Ọ̀yọ̀ by Aláàfin Àjàgbó, who reigned probably in the mid-seventeenth century.¹³²¹

Gbàràdá accompanied a grandson of the *alafin* in his relocation to Ègbádò country, "thus introducing Gẹ̀lẹ̀dẹ̀ traditions to southwestern Yorubaland." Old Oyo's case as the founding locale of Gelede is tenuous because, to date, there is no corroborating evidence. As well, no Gelede society exists in present-day Oyo, which was founded by refugees fleeing the destruction of Old Oyo by Fulani jihadists in about 1837.¹³²²

According to Ketu and Gelede oral tradition as recounted to Henry and Margaret Drewal by Father Moulero of Ketu, at the death of Alaketu (king) Akebiolu (circa 1780 – 1790), divination revealed that the younger of male twins should become the kingdom's ruler. The elder twin, Akan, plotted the murder of

¹³¹⁹ S. Johnson, *History of the Yorubas*.

¹³²⁰ *Ibid.*, 149.

¹³²¹ Lawal, *Gẹ̀lẹ̀dẹ̀ Spectacle*, 46.

¹³²² *Ibid.*, 47.

his sibling, Adebija (aka Edun). Fleeing from his brother, Adebija traveled southward into Egbado with his brother on his heels. Adebija stopped on the southern edge of present-day Egbado at the town of Ilobi, which was once part of the kingdom of Ketu.¹³²³

“Ilobi traditions, which say the town was founded by a member of one of Ketu’s royal houses, trace a long history in the area now called Egbado.” At one time Ilobi was located well north of its present location. However, Margaret and Henry Drewal uncovered documentation attesting that “the Ilobi left Ketu because of an accession dispute and migrated southward through Itolu (near the present site of Ilaro) to their present location in southern Egbado.”¹³²⁴

It was here that Adebija prepared the ruse that would thwart his brother’s fiendish plans and initiate Gelede.

He quickly gathered many snail shells and strung them together on two long cords, which he then tied to posts placed on both sides of the path leading to his hiding place. Between these two strings of shells he placed a large trunk on which he had sculpted the face of a man. For clothing he encircled the wood with dry banana leaves. Then he took a piece of calabash, carved it in the form of a mask, painted it white with kaolin, and put it on the head of the figure. When he had finished preparing the trap, he called his followers together.¹³²⁵

Adebija also taught his followers a song. A few nights thereafter, four to be exact, Akan and his horde arrived at Ilobi. Upon hearing their approach, Adebija pulled the cords. The frightful noise of the snail shells, and one would

¹³²³ H. J. Drewal and Drewal, *Gelede*, 226-227.

¹³²⁴ *Ibid.*, 225, 228-229.

¹³²⁵ *Ibid.*, 226.

imagine the frightful countenance of the disguised tree stump, terrified the attackers. They fled vowing never to return.

Though it is difficult to state with absolute assurance that this mythic event marks the debut of Gelede, within Adebija's hoax is established "Gẹ̀lẹ̀dẹ̀ ritual elements (nocturnal ruse, costume, white-faced mask, rattles, and song)."¹³²⁶ Even the element of pairing, important within Gelede, is evidenced by Adebija's use of two cords.

The name that Adebija gave to his hoax was *Olọ̀ku-ajàró-òkòtò*. Drewal and Drewal have employed the translation "man of the sea who fought with the sound of snail shells."¹³²⁷ Olokun (Olọ̀ku) is the *oriṣa* of the sea to whom either male or female gender can be ascribed. For example, in a verse from *Odu Ifa Ogbe Meji* recorded by William Bascom, Olokun is titled "Sea Goddess."¹³²⁸ Further, Drewal and Drewal state that they "have collected similar praise names for Gẹ̀lẹ̀dẹ̀ at Ilaro and Ọja Odan, but Olokun was replaced by Oluaiye ('Owners-of-the-World'), a reference to the mothers."¹³²⁹

Along with the assertion that Gelede comes from the sea, this same praise name (*Olọ̀ku-ajàró-òkòtò*) was given by Chief Isiaka to William Bascom during his research in Meko. In this instance Olokun (Olọ̀ku) is rendered as "owner of sea."

¹³²⁶ Ibid., 227.

¹³²⁷ Ibid.

¹³²⁸ Bascom, *Ifa Divination*, 159.

¹³²⁹ H. J. Drewal and Drewal, *Gẹ̀lẹ̀dẹ̀*, 277 n. 10.

One also learns that “okoto are big snails in the sea... [and that] ajaro means master of sea shells.”¹³³⁰

Adebiya returned to his home, and upon becoming Alaketu of Ketu (circa 1816),¹³³¹ he established Gelede. Though Gelede was first enacted in Egbado territory at Ilobi (circa 1795–1816), it was born of a Ketu father and was instituted in Ketu. There are accounts chronicling the introduction of Gelede in towns near Ketu that specify that permission for instruction in and enactment of Gelede performance was obtained from Ilobi. In one case it is learned that an individual from the small town of Ofia near Ketu, “went to Ilobi to learn the art of Gelede after being granted permission by Alaketu Adebiya.”¹³³²

With a little imagination, it is possible to see how the picture of Gelede’s origin could be a blending of these tales. Maybe Gbàràdà did win the contest in mid-sixteenth century Old Oyo and for many years continued to entertain the *alafin* and others with his “spectacular masks.” As part of Oyo’s trade-fueled southern expansion, the *alafin*’s grandson migrated to Egbado territory bringing Gbàràdà and his art, which surely entertained local royals. Adopted, adapted, and embellished, Gbàràdà’s art might have been the germ of Adebiya’s ruse.

This being as it may, however, a succession dispute is not reenacted in Gelede. The main thrust of the spectacle is honoring and placating The Great

¹³³⁰ Bascom, Meko Field Notes—Nigeria, “Gelede,” 37.

¹³³¹ Alaketu Adebiya “of the Mefu royal line” is estimated to have reigned 1816–1853 (Lawal, *Gèlèdè Spectacle*, 47–48).

¹³³² H. J. Drewal and Drewal, *Gèlèdè*, 228.

Mother, Iya'Nla, and her daughters, *iyami àjé*. This fact gives greater credence to Gelede's emergence being associated with fertility rites. There is also "widespread, though vague, testimonies that Gèlèdè evolved from dances formerly performed in honor of the patron deities of small children,"¹³³³ collectively referred to as *òrísà ọlómọwẹwẹ*.

These dances involved the carrying of wooden carvings. Lawal speaks of a "pre-masking phase of Gèlèdè when both men and women reportedly danced with woodcarvings on the head,"¹³³⁴ as women continued into contemporary times during the Yemoja festival in Ibarà, Abeokuta that ushered in Gelede. These dances evolved to include calabash face masks and anklets of sea shells.

Over the centuries it is believed the costuming and dance grew in sophistication and intricacy to the contemporary Gelede spectacle. Again, in the vein of adopting and adapting, "the [succession] dispute may have influenced the evolution of the Gèlèdè costume or the details of its performance."

The belief that the "powerful mothers" can influence human fertility and are responsible for many premature deaths in the community may explain why a "fertility dance" for *òrísà ọlómọwẹwẹ* was transformed into an elaborate masked performance aimed at persuading these women to use their power for corporate survival.¹³³⁵

Similarly, testimonies relate the Gelede tradition to *àbíkú*. An *àbíkú* is a child believed to be born repeatedly to the same mother only to die shortly after each birth. It is thought that the child's friends in the spirit world attract the child

¹³³³ Lawal, *Gèlèdè Spectacle*, 49.

¹³³⁴ *Ibid.*, 59.

¹³³⁵ *Ibid.*, 50, 62.

back to that realm. “The most popular way of preventing the *Àbíkú* child from returning to these companions is to put an iron anklet on one or both legs.” This anklet serves to anchor the child to the physical realm, and the noise made by the anklet keeps the spirit companions away. “It is significant that the iron anklet of the *Àbíkú* child is a miniature of that worn by the Gèlèdè masker.”¹³³⁶

If the birth and preservation of children features in Gelede’s origin, then it is reasonable to suggest that this origin dates well before the eighteenth century, for the impulse and imperative to perpetuate the species is primordial.

Indeed, the Yoruba terms for the Gèlèdè masker—*arugi* (wood carrier), *agbèrù* (load bearer), *ajógi* (he who dances the wooden image), and *ajó-Gèlèdè* (he who dances Gèlèdè)—betray the derivation of the mask from an ancient fertility ritual performed by women dancing with woodcarvings balanced on the head.¹³³⁷

Gelede—Growth and Expansion

Though Gelede might not have had its genesis at Oyo, and there is divergence of opinion on its date of origin,¹³³⁸ Oyo’s increased presence in southwestern Yorubaland during the nineteenth century helped disseminate the Gelede tradition. Though remaining relatively small, Ketu is estimated to have been established between the twelfth and fourteenth centuries and traces its

¹³³⁶ *Ibid.*, 51.

¹³³⁷ *Ibid.*, 57.

¹³³⁸ *Ibid.*, 70.

lineage directly from Ile-Ife and Oduduwa.¹³³⁹ “Ọ̀yọ́ accounts recognize the seniority of Ketu people and their origins at Ile-Ife.”¹³⁴⁰

Straddling today’s Republic of Benin and Nigeria to the upper portion of the Yewa River, Oyo trade routes along the western edge of Ketu during the seventeenth century introduced Oyo influence into the area. It is suggested that the relationship between Oyo and Ketu was symbiotic, for in addition to economic advantages, “Old Ọ̀yọ́ would protect Ketu from Dahomey in return for permission to control the trade route passing through Ketu territory.” This trade route passed through Fon territory to the port of Whydah.¹³⁴¹

In large measure because of Oyo’s involvement in the lucrative slave trade under Alafin Abiodun during the late eighteenth century, the trade route was relocated to the eastern edge of Ketu to facilitate access to the ports of Badagry and Porto Novo. Oyo sent representatives to establish communities to secure its trade routes and oversee its interests. “As a result...Ọ̀yọ́ immigrant towns were established further south, along the eastern boundary of Ketu, what is today Egbado and Anago territory.”¹³⁴²

Drewal and Drewal conjecture that in the process of Oyo’s economically motivated regional expansion, the Gelede tradition spread from Ketu. Gelede towns that correspond to the route through Egbado down to the port of Badagri

¹³³⁹ S. Johnson, *History of the Yorubas*.

¹³⁴⁰ H. J. Drewal and Drewal, *Gelede*, 222.

¹³⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 276 n. 2.

¹³⁴² *Ibid.*, 223.

include Joga, Işaga, Ibeşe, Ilaro, Igan-Okoto, Emado and Aibo. Gelede has also been found in Brazil and Cuba. For along with slaves, Gelede was transported to the Americas. “The Yoruba of Cuba once celebrated Gèlèdè in honor of Yemoja-Olókun.”¹³⁴³

Gelede Variants

Propitiation in the form of masks and dance is also made to female deities to ensure the birth and survival of children in non-Gelede areas of Yorubaland. The use of women's head ties (*gele*) and baby sashes (*oja*) in rituals associated with procreation and infant survival and their incorporation into the costumes worn on these occasions is ubiquitous throughout all Yorubaland.¹³⁴⁴

In Ọwọ, located in eastern Yorubaland, the mask is “*Àghòbí* (the thing one looks at to give birth to a baby).” In Ìbàdàn, Èdẹ, Ọşogbo and surrounding area, the deity honored is clearly linked in temperament to *iyami àjẹ*. *Elérikò* or *Ègbẹ* is a goddess associated with *àbíkú* (children born to die).

She is an ambivalent goddess. When properly appeased, she gives children to barren women and plays with small children in the daylight without anyone seeing her. But when displeased, she harasses children in their sleep, afflicts them with diseases, or kills them by luring away their souls to join *Ará'gbó* (beings of the forest).¹³⁴⁵

As in Gelede, men don the masks and the clothing of women to pay this deity tribute.

¹³⁴³ Lawal, *Gèlèdè Spectacle*, 71.

¹³⁴⁴ Ibid.

¹³⁴⁵ Ibid., 63, 62.

Purpose and Power

The detail of Gelede “varies greatly as a result of historical factors and inherited or acquired worship patterns within lineages.” What is comprehensively true, however, is that “the fundamental purpose of Gelede spectacle is to pay tribute to and therefore to derive benefit from female mystical power.” Although the Gelede masks and masqueraders can represent males or females, only men perform Gelede. Men are directly paying homage to the mothers with whose support they exercise power in the world.¹³⁴⁶ As noted in Chapter 8, this support of male secular power is clearly evidenced by the king’s crown and other regalia that carry icons of the mothers.

The Great Mother, Iya’Nla is described as “an enigma” because she encompasses all aspects of reality within her being.

As an embodiment of the good and evil of the physical world, she is Olúwayé (ruler of the world), and Iyàmi Osorongá, the first female to whom the Supreme Being gave a special power (àse) in the form of a bird enclosed in a calabash, copies of which she presented to her disciples, the “powerful mothers.”¹³⁴⁷

Though Gelede masquerade can be used in other contexts, “its most popular function is to placate Iyá Nlá (the Great Mother), and her earthly disciples, the ‘powerful mothers.’” Interestingly, Olúwayé is seen as a “hot” *oriṣa* and usually represented as male—Baba Olúwayé. “Hot” goes against Yoruba social convention of the ideal female, who is considered cool in nature. The foregoing is

¹³⁴⁶ H. J. Drewal and Drewal, *Gelede*, 7.

¹³⁴⁷ Lawal, *Gelede Spectacle*, 71.

another aspect of IyaNla's enigmatic nature, as is the fact that Yemoja, who is the maternal epitome, "is the generous and dangerous mother."¹³⁴⁸

Gelede is enacted primarily by the western Yoruba¹³⁴⁹ and communities having historical association with Oyo.¹³⁵⁰ Situated between the Weme River in the Republic of Benin and the Ogun River in Nigeria, some of these cultural groups straddle both nations—the Ketu, Ogori, and Anago. The Sabe are mainly located in the Republic of Benin, while the Ibarapa, Egbado, and Awori are in Nigeria.

Gelede is performed in the main marketplace. This fact is significant for two primary reasons. First, trading and the marketplace are the purview of women in Yoruba culture and the source of women's wealth and economic power. Over 70% of Yoruba market traders are women.¹³⁵¹ The woman in charge of market operations, the *Iyalode*, holds the highest chieftaincy title accorded to women and represents the interests of women on the king's council. "By bringing the spectacle into the market, the *Gẹ̀lẹ̀dẹ̀* society introduces it directly into women's realm, the place where their collective social power is most consciously felt."¹³⁵²

¹³⁴⁸ Ibid., 71, 73.

¹³⁴⁹ H. J. Drewal and Drewal, *Gẹ̀lẹ̀dẹ̀*.

¹³⁵⁰ Lawal, *Gẹ̀lẹ̀dẹ̀ Spectacle*.

¹³⁵¹ McIntosh, *Yoruba Women*.

¹³⁵² H. J. Drewal and Drewal, *Gẹ̀lẹ̀dẹ̀*, 10.

Second, in Yoruba tradition, the marketplace is considered a liminal space that is frequented by mortals as well as spirit beings in human or animal form. For example, in *Odu Ifa Osa Ogunda* one finds the tale of the “Deer Woman of Owo.” This myth is of a shape-shifting spirit, a deer that removes her skin and becomes human to go to market and the subsequent epic results. Among other things, the myth explains the origin of the Igogo festival held in Owo, Nigeria. More significant to Gelede’s association with fertility is the belief that the souls of unborn children come to the market to choose mothers.¹³⁵³

The market is usually situated at a crossroad, a symbol for the meeting of the material and spiritual realms. Thus, “the marketplace itself symbolizes Gelede’s transitory, worldly manifestation, while at the same time it represents its otherworldly dimension.” Gelede is considered to be a success, that prayers and propitiation have been accepted, if it is felt that many “strangers” or visitors from the realm of spirit were in attendance.¹³⁵⁴

The marketplace is also a metaphor for earthly existence. Human incarnation is likened to going to market to conduct business before returning home to the realm of the ancestors. Humans and spirit beings intermingle in the marketplace and the *iyami* “are mortals who have access to the otherworld.”¹³⁵⁵

Gelede’s most sacred aspect is performed at night. Nighttime occurrence is a common feature of Egungun and *oriṣa* festivals that is also common to

¹³⁵³ Lawal, *Gelede Spectacle*.

¹³⁵⁴ H. J. Drewal and Drewal, *Gelede*, 10.

¹³⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

initiations and other rites were participation of spirit is entreated. "Occasions involving the interpenetration of realms are most appropriate at night, when spirits are thought to be most attentive." Beginning around midnight, Gelede's most sacred ceremony closes at daybreak. A more important consideration for Gelede's nocturnal occurrence is highlighted by the following:

Darkness is the natural abode of the mothers and the creatures most often associated with them, such as birds, bats, rats, and reptiles. The obscurity of the night adds to their awesome, unknowable qualities. If the market is the place inside the community where spirits are most likely to mingle with humans, then the most likely time for intermingling is at night in the market.¹³⁵⁶

In the novel, *Moi, Tituba Sorcière*, about the Black witch of Salem, Maryse Condé speaks poetically of the power and significance of the night.

Nuit, nuit, nuit plus belle que le jour! Nuit, pourvoyeuse de rêves! Nuit, grand lieu de rencontre où le présent prend le passé par la main, où vivants et morts se mêlent!¹³⁵⁷

Night, night, night more beautiful than day! Night, purveyor of dreams! Night, great meeting place where the present takes the past by the hand, where living and dead mingle!¹³⁵⁸

Gelede is community theater, play, and sacred ritual. It strengthens group bonds and cooperation, and reinforces the norms of expected conduct.

The Gelede spectacle is a lavish two-part multimedia production created by singers, dancers, carvers, drummers, and spectators... Gelede has been called 'the ultimate spectacle' for its ability to shape society and to create a lasting impression.¹³⁵⁹

¹³⁵⁶ Ibid., 11.

¹³⁵⁷ Conde, *Moi, Tituba Sorcière*, 188.

¹³⁵⁸ Author's translation.

¹³⁵⁹ H. J. Drewal and Drewal, *Gelede*, 12.

All members of the community participate to render Gelede a pleasing display to the mothers.

It is an outpouring of generosity, a hallmark of good character among the Yoruba. Donations of time, talent, and money are contributed in organizing the festival. “Social harmony finds unique expression in the costume of the mask—a blend of materials contributed by individuals with different personalities and dispositions.”¹³⁶⁰

As the community’s pride and future, and possibly to show the mothers that for which the community is grateful, the children are dressed in fine clothing. Great energy and expense are put forth so that the elderly women of the community, the mothers, feel entertained and pampered. “It is precisely its capacity for entertainment that enables Gèlèdè to function as an *etutu* to assuage this collectivity of powerful women, the gods of society.”¹³⁶¹

Gelede Structure

Gelede is performed in two parts. The first is the Efe performance at night followed by the afternoon Gelede masquerade. Fundamental elements and themes are pervasive within Gelede. However, the performance is more or less elaborate depending upon a community’s wealth, and variations in Gelede enactment occur across regions. Ketu performance and costuming, considered the most ancient, are among the most intricate.¹³⁶²

¹³⁶⁰ Lawal, *Gèlèdè Spectacle*, 169.

¹³⁶¹ H. J. Drewal and Drewal, *Gèlèdè*, 14.

¹³⁶² *Ibid.*

Within the Gelede costume, “the mythic elements of the ensemble— image, head wraps, and leg rattles—must be present.” Women’s head wraps (*gèlè*) are transformed into baby sashes (*òjá*) when used to carry infants on their backs. This item features prominently in the costumes that represent both men and women. The contribution of their head wraps/baby sashes and other articles of clothing attests to community participation in bringing about the Gelede spectacle. “The assembled cloths are referred to as *aşọ egbé*, ‘cloth from the society.’”¹³⁶³

Though all the dancing is done by men, gender is reflected “through distinctive male and female costumes, thus publicly acknowledging the complementarity of the two sexes.”¹³⁶⁴ More significantly, the costuming speaks to the vital supportive role of women within their communities and to the central Gelede theme of honoring women. A male mask costume might simply have a woman’s baby sash at the waist.

Female mask costumes have exaggerated feminine attributes created by forms to simulate breasts, hips and buttocks that are wrapped and covered with a profusion of women’s head-ties, baby sashes, and cloth. A carved wooden form with protruding breasts and stomach representative of pregnancy is also worn by men. The carved image of a child might also be affixed to the back. These, as

¹³⁶³ Ibid., 132, 121.

¹³⁶⁴ Lawal, *Gèlèdè Spectacle*, 75.

well as masks portraying nursing mothers, relate Gelede to its probable origin as an appeal for fertility.¹³⁶⁵

In addition to the head-ties and baby sashes, common Gelede costume features include, arm wraps, leggings, and leg rattles. The nighttime masks are colored white or yellow. Superstructures vary in form and elaborateness. Birds and snakes are a common motif, but the themes and scenes portrayed atop Gelede masks vary widely. The masks themselves, however, depict a calm, composed female face representing the cool, patient, inwardly turned, secret nature of women and the idealized state of the inner head or *ori inu*.¹³⁶⁶

Before the creation of a mask begins, sacrifice is made. Before felling a tree for its wood, permission must be obtained from the tree's spirit residents. Permission is entreated through kola nut divination. A four valve kola nut is opened and thrown down at the base of the tree; the configuration is read for answer to the request. The kola nut itself is propitiation but "sometimes special offerings of gin or palm oil are required."¹³⁶⁷ Propitiation is also made to Ogun, the god of iron and metal workers, before carving begins.

The power, sanctity and reverence with which the Great Mother mask is held are reflected in the sacrifice made to ensure its successful carving. For example:

¹³⁶⁵ Ibid.

¹³⁶⁶ H. J. Drewal and Drewal, *Gelede*.

¹³⁶⁷ Ibid., 262.

In Qh̄ori country, a goat, cock, dove,—all completely white—oil, kola nuts, a large piece of white cloth and a substantial sum of money are offered. In Ketu similar gifts must be offered, and all work must be done at night.¹³⁶⁸

Gelede Night Masquerade

One might encounter the herald, Amokoko, approximately one week before the start of Gelede. His announcement of the upcoming spectacle builds anticipation in the community. Gelede is begun with sacrifice to the *oriṣa* Eṣu and Ogun, who open the road and clear the path for the entry of spirit as they “mediate the transition between everyday, ordinary activity...and spiritual activity.”¹³⁶⁹

As night falls people begin to assemble in the main marketplace. Elderly community women are given choice seats on the perimeter of the performance space from which to enjoy the spectacle. The drummers arrive and begin playing rhythms of proverbs and of praise. A chorus of male and female singers consisting of members of the Gelede society enters in procession while singing a song announcing readiness to begin. A lighthearted puppet show might be performed to delight the children, after which Efe night commences.¹³⁷⁰

A series of masqueraders enter to ritually prepare the performance space. First to enter is Ogbagba, the representative of Eṣu. “As mediator between men and the gods, Eṣu/Elẹgba is honored first and encouraged to ‘open the way’ (*ago*

¹³⁶⁸ Ibid.

¹³⁶⁹ Ibid., 65.

¹³⁷⁰ Ibid.

l'ona) for a successful ceremony.” Not insignificantly, Eṣu is “confidant of the mothers.”¹³⁷¹

Next to enter is Arabi Ajigbálẹ̀ dressed in raffia palm and wearing iron anklets, representing Ogun. The god of iron “clears the way” and cleanses the space, sweeping away obstructions. Following this, Agbéná (Fire Carrier) might appear.

These series of masquerades ritually reenact the steps taken in establishing a shrine, a house, or a settlement, actions of entry, clearing, and finally burning off the remains, actions presided over by Eṣu and Ogun.¹³⁷²

The last of the opening masqueraders, Apana (Fire Extinguisher) makes a quick but significant entry and exit.

“Owner of the fire, kill your fire!
The hoopoe is coming,
Put down your load,
Because one does not light fires
To regard the bird of the night.”¹³⁷³

Bird of the Night

At this point all lights are extinguished for the appearance of “‘bird of the night,’ the most sacred of Eṣẹ and Geṣẹ forms.” Either of two mask forms will appear, which “dramatize the spiritual side of womanhood in two of its aspects—a bearded woman, often called The Great Mother (Iyanla), and Spirit Bird (Eṣẹ Ọ̀rọ̀)” also called Bird of the Night (Eṣẹ Ọ̀ru). These masks are invariably white and

¹³⁷¹ Ibid., 20, 76.

¹³⁷² Ibid., 22.

¹³⁷³ Beier, “Gelede Masks,” 9-10.

noted for the distinguishing feature of their large size that sets them apart from other Gelede masks. The costume's fabric is long, uncut white cloth.

Whiteness...connotes post-menopausal women and intensified force inherent in that state. Furthermore, whiteness conveys the coolness that characterizes covert power and actions as well as affirms ritual purity, calmness, and patience—soothing feminine qualities.¹³⁷⁴

The great scale of the mask speaks to social importance, spiritual strength, “suggests the mother's awesome powers” and “stresses the inner head, the source of women's covert power.” The Yoruba philosophical concept of the inner head (*ori inu*) was discussed earlier. Drewal and Drewal further state that “this emphasis on size is an expression of awe for something that cannot be encompassed, a power that is omnipotent.” The long expanse of uncut cloth is likely symbolic of her ancient and enduring maternal link to the community and symbolic of the fact that from her stems all life and its continuity.¹³⁷⁵

The masquerader appears, crouched and bent with age, moving slowly to the rhythm of the drums that are echoed in her ankle rattles. She moves in a gentle dance (*jjó jẹ̀jẹ̀*) while trailing the long white cloth of her costume. The chorus and crowd sing praise songs that speak to her complex nature. She makes only one circuit around the performance space and this while surrounded by Gelede society elders. This shielding by society elders and the darkness of the night punctuate the mystery that is the ineffable Mother.

The Spirit Bird mask, *Ẹ̀yẹ Ọ̀rọ̀*, is the head of a large white bird with small eyes and a long, blood-red tipped beak. The dancer's body is covered by a long

¹³⁷⁴ H. J. Drewal and Drewal, *Gelede*, 22, 65, 81.

¹³⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 81.

white robe. This mask exemplifies the mother as her praise name Bird-of-the-Night and “symbolizes Ìyá Nlá’s aspect as leader of ‘the-wielders-of-bird-power.’”¹³⁷⁶ In descriptions of the mothers in their transformed state, one finds the bird to be the most ubiquitous reference. The mask also has carved features such as hair and human ears that “highlight the liminality of the bird mother image in the synthesis of human and animal features.”¹³⁷⁷

This same blending of realms is found in the Great Mother mask. The liminality of the Spirit Bird and Great Mother masks as evidenced in their blurring of animal/human, male/female “defy ordinary worldly/supernatural categories as recognized by the community” The community’s elderly women and priestesses, *iyami àjẹ*—representatives of Iya’Nla—are perceived to “move freely between realms, unlike ordinary mortals.”¹³⁷⁸

The Bearded Great Mother, Iya’Nla

As stated above the Great Mother mask is large in size. The beard or “long flat, boardlike extension below the chin,” can extend 12 to 24 inches in length. This mask is also known for its relative simplicity when compared to the elaborate masks on display during Gelede. The features, however, are boldly rendered being described as “strong, massive, and clearly defined.” Ears sometimes have an animal-like appearance. In addition to a variety of hair

¹³⁷⁶ Lawal, *Gẹ̀lẹ̀dẹ̀ Spectacle*, 183.

¹³⁷⁷ H. J. Drewal and Drewal, *Gẹ̀lẹ̀dẹ̀*, 73.

¹³⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 82.

representations, “the only other motifs are a snake encircling the head or a bird perched on top.”¹³⁷⁹

Among other things the animal-like ears as well as the snake and bird motifs allude to the shape-shifting or transformative powers of the mothers. The following is a song offered during the Efe night appearance of the Great Mother:

Honored elder *apake* come and dance with us
All birds come dance with us¹³⁸⁰

As already noted, birds are most closely associated with the mothers. Based on its movement, the shedding of its skin and its habitat in holes or in water, the snake is regarded as a symbol of “dynamism and renewal...as mediators between the physical and spiritual realms...as embodiments of supernatural forces.”¹³⁸¹

A man with a white beard is considered an elder (*àgbàláàgbà*) wise with age. “But in the feminine realm, the beard takes on additional meanings, for by definition a bearded woman possesses extraordinary spiritual power.” The whiteness and exaggerated length of the Great Mother’s beard connote her great wisdom and longevity, a longevity that incites respect and fear for “such old age among women implies awesome spiritual powers derived from the termination of menstruation and the consumption of the life blood (i.e., *aṣṣe*) of victims.”¹³⁸²

¹³⁷⁹ Ibid., 65.

¹³⁸⁰ Ibid., 71.

¹³⁸¹ Lawal, *Gẹ̀lẹ̀dẹ̀ Spectacle*, 247.

¹³⁸² H. J. Drewal and Drewal, *Gẹ̀lẹ̀dẹ̀*, 71, 81.

The mask of the Great Mother inspires reverential awe. The power that the mask incarnates lies in the ingredients that activate its potency—the medicine with which it is vivified and potentiated. This medicine imbues the mask with or brings within it the spirit of the Great Mother. Without this substance, the mask is an inert compilation of wood and pigment. “With medicine, it becomes a receptacle for the spirit of the Great Mother.”¹³⁸³ Such is the perceived power of this mask that “in Kétu, the masker usually does not wear the Ìyá headdress; it is hand-borne and covered with cloth.”¹³⁸⁴

On some Great Mother masks, hair is carved as a tuft. The significance of this tuft of hair is linked to initiatory rites whereby an initiate has medicine rubbed into incisions placed on the scalp. This medicine links the initiate with the *oriṣa* to whom s/he is initiating. The initiate might be bald except for a tuft of hair grown over the incision that signifies the presence of medicine and thereby, power.

“The infusion of substances possessing *aṣẹ* plus invocations activate the mask and ensure efficacy.” A song and accompanying drumming are used to invoke some of the substances applied as medicine to the mask:

Chewing stick, come and dance
Rope from the forest, come and dance
Anthill, come and dance
Dust from the road, come and dance
Honored ancestor *apake*, come and dance¹³⁸⁵

¹³⁸³ Ibid., 78.

¹³⁸⁴ Lawal, *Gẹ̀lẹ̀dẹ̀ Spectacle*, 201.

¹³⁸⁵ H. J. Drewal and Drewal, *Gẹ̀lẹ̀dẹ̀*, 76.

The mother masks are only danced during Gelede and during times of community crisis such as drought or epidemic. When at rest, the mask is shielded, housed in a special shrine and covered with white cloth. The nature of the shrine varies depending upon the community. But in all instances, the mask is treated with the utmost reverence.

The Great Mother masquerade appears briefly and is viewed only fleetingly by those assembled. She is flocked by elders of the Gelede society who obscure the view of the crowd. The shroud of darkness and mystery surrounding its appearance “reminds the community of the awesome powers they must assuage.” The appearance of the Mother masquerade “also signals the mothers’ approval and their sanction of the spectacle to come—the singing masquerades.”¹³⁸⁶

Oro Efe

The first singing masquerade to appear functions to herald the imminent arrival of and “to prepare the way for Ọrọ Ẹfẹ with chants (ijúbà) that honor the mothers, the gods, and the assembled elders.” The form of masquerade varies by community. “In the Ẹgbado town of Ilaro, Ọrọ Ẹfẹ is preceded by a singing male masquerader named Ajákuena.”¹³⁸⁷

Among the Ketu it is Tètèdédé, a name given to the female first born twin. Considered the junior twin, she comes to “test the world” before the emergence of her sibling. Tetede is considered by some to be the wife of Oro Efe.

¹³⁸⁶ Ibid., 82.

¹³⁸⁷ Ibid., 25, 85.

In one town, this masker is referred to as 'Cool World' (Aiye Tutu), for her presence soothes, cools, and placates the various powers present in the assembled community, thus making it safe for Ọrọ Ẹfẹ to appear.¹³⁸⁸

This cooling or soothing of the environment is the primary role of the masquerader that precedes Oro Efe whether considered companion, brother, sister, or wife.

For among the tasks of Oro Efe, a mask that "can be worn only by the senior members of the [Gelede] society,"¹³⁸⁹ is to speak hard truths to the community in his role as regent and agent of the mothers.

Before Oro Efe appears, two of his attendants enter and kneel before the entryway or "the mouth of authority" from which Oro Efe will emerge. "They carry special medicines to protect Ọrọ Ẹfẹ throughout his performance." Next, the female Gelede society head and her assistant, dressed in white to honor the "cool" deities and the Great Mother, strike sacred bells that "ritually call Ọrọ Ẹfẹ to the world, announce his coming, and insure that he is protected."¹³⁹⁰

The emphasis on protection through the incantations of Tetede and the medicine carried by Oro Efe's attendants highlights the dangerous mission undertaken by Oro Efe. Exposure of misdeeds can cause rancor; praising of one can lead to jealousy in another. Oro Efe speaks in the language of song and poetry, which "is loaded with humor, with ridicule (*yẹyẹ*), jokes (*àwàdà*), and jest (*àpára*), even when dealing with a serious matter."¹³⁹¹

¹³⁸⁸ Ibid., 82.

¹³⁸⁹ Beier, "Gelede Masks," 8

¹³⁹⁰ H. J. Drewal and Drewal, *Gelede*, 26.

¹³⁹¹ Lawal, *Gelede Spectacle*, 130.

Commentary is offered by Oro Efe on national and international affairs in addition to local matters. Topics addressed include “thefts, sex scandals, corruption, wickedness, abuses of office, and political oppression.”¹³⁹² Little wonder he needs protection from the wrath of those exposed, especially the powerful and wealthy with the means to retaliate.

Oro Efe enters, the slow, resolute beat of his leg rattles announcing his arrival. Again, the element of protection is evidenced as, among other things and reflected in the Gelede origin myth, the sound of the leg rattles dispels negative forces, offering spiritual protection. Oro Efe enters, reciting incantations that establish his presence and power after which he “begins to honor deities, ancestors, the mothers, and elders. His sharply inclined torso and slow, methodic stamping express reverence to these spiritual powers.”¹³⁹³

The opening incantations of Oro Efe serve to entrance the audience and “neutralize all potential opposition.” The force of the incantations makes it clear that Oro Efe:

is no longer an ordinary mortal...he represents the willforce of the whole community which no individual would dare to challenge and...he speaks with the divine authority (*àṣẹ*) of *Ìyá Nlá*...For the night, he is the favorite son of *Ìyá Nlá*, and the *àjé* cannot harm him.¹³⁹⁴

This shielding is significant as Oro Efe might be obliged to speak about destructive behavior by someone in the community who is *àjé*.

¹³⁹² Ibid., 132.

¹³⁹³ H. J. Drewal and Drewal, *Gelede*, 27.

¹³⁹⁴ Lawal, *Gelede Spectacle*, 114.

After the opening incantations, Oro Efe proceeds with a long series of praise poems (*ijúbà*) to honor supernatural and secular forces, entreating their good favor.

The *àjé* feature early in the *ijúbà* not only because they are the guests of honor, but also because the women, whose power they represent, control the marketplace, both economically and ritually.¹³⁹⁵

Before speaking on community matters, Oro Efe offers blessing (*ìwúre*) that are amplified in power because of Oro Efe's connection to The Great Mother. During the *ìwúre* individuals in attendance pray for solution to personal problems and the community prays for remedy from social woes. "But if anyone is threatening the corporate existence of the community or betraying its cause, the wrath of Ìyá Nlá is invoked against that person during this part of the program."¹³⁹⁶

Curses are dispensed. An example is given of WWII soldiers who were abusive to a community. An Efe song (*epé*) requested the removal of the soldiers, and "within a few days 'the soldiers began to die.'"¹³⁹⁷

The Efe masquerade goes by different regional names: *Ọrọ Ẹfẹ*, *Elẹfẹ*, and *Apaşa*. Costuming and staging also vary considerably by region. This being as it may, central themes of masculinity, authority, and the mothers are consistently portrayed in motif and iconography. Drewal and Drewal describe the Efe masquerade of Ketu as being among the most elaborate and intricate, and the

¹³⁹⁵ Ibid., 124.

¹³⁹⁶ Ibid., 129.

¹³⁹⁷ H. J. Drewal and Drewal, *Geleşẹ*, 51.

descriptions are primarily there derived. “Moreover, Gelede in Ketu represents the ideal according to participants throughout western Yorubaland.”¹³⁹⁸

Evidence of Oro Efe’s stature and his relationship to the mothers is seen in his costume and headdress. Oro Efe epitomizes masculine stature and authority. His powerful voice pierces the night, and his countenance inspires respect. The size of his chest is amplified with the addition of bamboo hoops and many layers of cloth (head ties and baby sashes). Images of overt masculinity and implied forceful action, courage, and physical strength are “projected in the persistent images of hunters, warriors, and references to Ogun.”¹³⁹⁹

Oro Efe carries a flywhisk (*irukere*), a symbol of royal or priestly authority with which he blesses those assembled. His costuming displays additional symbols of “the sacred leadership of kings, chiefs, and priests: interlace patterns, leopards, veils of beads, shells, medicines, umbrellas.” Not only does his white mask provide dramatic focus and counterpoint to the night, it relates Oro Efe:

to the “white” deities (*oriṣa funfun*), who are covert and cool in their demeanor. They are primarily the goddesses, their priestesses, and the spiritually powerful women, “the gods of society” for whom Oro Efe acts as spokesman.¹⁴⁰⁰

Oro Efe often carries a fan. The fan carries multiple connotations. In keeping with Oro Efe’s role as kingly emissary of Iya’Nla, the fan is “a symbol of calm, grace, kindness, and sociability—virtues associated with leadership and

¹³⁹⁸ Ibid.

¹³⁹⁹ Ibid., 101.

¹⁴⁰⁰ Ibid., 101, 102.

divinity.”¹⁴⁰¹ Most significant is that the fan is an emblem coupled with the deities Oṣun¹⁴⁰² and Yemoja,¹⁴⁰³ matriarchs of *iyami àjé*. “As a function of Gèlèdè ritual powers, the fan...keeps the peace with Ìyá Nlá and the *àjé*.”¹⁴⁰⁴

The Oro Efe headdress or superstructure sits atop the mask. Some portray the interplay between masculine and feminine forces, such as those exhibiting Ogun and *iyami* representations. The iconography of Ogun is displayed in the carvings of knives and cutlasses and, in some instances even speaks to Muslim influence in Ketu with the addition of amulets. Birds and snakes, icons of the mothers, are common elements as is the crescent moon (*òṣùpá*).

The crescent moon has multiple signification. It can identify the wearer as Muslim, be an indicator of supernatural power, specify the important night time aspect of the performance, or refer to clarity brought by the moon. This latter is reflected in:

the Yorùbá saying that “the moon over Ọyọ helps the alaafin to know what is going on in the provinces.” The monarch, his all-seeing powers symbolized by the moon, knows and exposes all sorts of plots, scandals, or disorders within his realm, just as Ọrọ Ẹfẹ does in the course of his performance.¹⁴⁰⁵

Mirrors are an element of adornment in some Oro Efe headdresses. This addition might be symbolic “for in a sense Ọrọ Ẹfẹ holds up a mirror to society as

¹⁴⁰¹ Lawal, *Gèlèdè Spectacle*, 189.

¹⁴⁰² Thompson, “Orchestrating Water.”

¹⁴⁰³ Thompson, *Flash of the Spirit*.

¹⁴⁰⁴ Lawal, *Gèlèdè Spectacle*, 189.

¹⁴⁰⁵ H. J. Drewal and Drewal, *Gèlèdè*, 89.

he reveals the foibles of the gathered community.”¹⁴⁰⁶ Mirrors are also an icon of the deity Oṣun, one of the *oriṣa ọlómọwéwé*, who has been referred to as “leader of the *àjé*.”¹⁴⁰⁷

The bird symbolizing the mothers “is the supreme symbol of spiritual power.”¹⁴⁰⁸ Its presence atop many Oro Efe superstructures clearly demarcates Oro Efe as one who has received the mothers’ sanction and to whom the mothers have granted spiritual authority. In the same way, the bird perched atop the crowns of Yoruba kings carries the equivalent connotation. Oro Efe offers blessings and dispenses curses with the sanction of the mothers from whom he derives his spiritual authority and power.

An additional “reference to the royalty and sacred leadership of Ọṛọ Ẹṣẹ”¹⁴⁰⁹ is in the fact that “by putting on Ọṛọ Ẹṣẹ’s headdress, *iyalaṣẹ* mirrors the crowning of a new king by an elderly female official in the palace.”¹⁴¹⁰ Head of the Gelede society, “*iyalaṣẹ* (Mother full of *aṣẹ*)...is herself the representative of the Great Mother, head of the witches.”¹⁴¹¹ By fact of her title and significance, it is

¹⁴⁰⁶ Ibid., 103.

¹⁴⁰⁷ Badejo, *Ọṣun Ṣẹ̀ẹ̀gẹ̀sí*, 77.

¹⁴⁰⁸ H. J. Drewal and Drewal, *Gelede*, 90.

¹⁴⁰⁹ Ibid., 92.

¹⁴¹⁰ Ibid., 90.

¹⁴¹¹ Witte, “Symboliek,” 261.

known to all that *Iyalaṣṣe* and the palace officials are among the “owners of the world.”¹⁴¹²

Ulli Beier speaks of the significance of the *Iyalaṣṣe* to rituals associated with the installation of a new monarch:

In many parts of Yoruba country, the new Oba is made to eat the heart of the deceased Oba during the installation ceremonies. This symbolizes the continuity of kingship. The Oba is one though he is personified by different titleholders. Now, it is the Iyalashe who takes out the heart of a deceased Oba and gives it to the new one. Thus, the “mothers” also control the installation of kings, and the king must become a member of the Gelede society himself.¹⁴¹³

Within Yoruba culture, the source of secular power lies within the spiritual power of the Great Mother as wielded by the mothers, *iyami àjẹ*. A similar concept of spiritual sanction and source of secular power is seen in the European doctrine of the divine right of kings, which asserted that monarchs derived their authority from God.

With only periodic breaks, Oro Efe performs throughout the night until dawn. During these brief interludes, “the drum ensemble offers a variety of praise poems, proverbs, jokes, and riddles.”¹⁴¹⁴ At dawn Oro Efe’s headdress is covered with cloth to prevent the mask’s exposure to the morning light. “Since the Èfẹ mask is a nocturnal being (*Ajòru*), it is taboo for him to perform in daylight.”¹⁴¹⁵ At this juncture, the appearance of a hyena-masked masquerader

¹⁴¹² H. J. Drewal and Drewal, *Gelede*, 11.

¹⁴¹³ Beier, “Gelede Masks,” 7-8.

¹⁴¹⁴ H. J. Drewal and Drewal, *Gelede*, 27.

¹⁴¹⁵ Lawal, *Gelede Spectacle*, 143.

on stilts diverts the attention of the audience, allowing Oro Efe to reenter the “mouth of authority.” This act signals the conclusion of Efe night.

Gelede Day Masquerade

In the late afternoon of the day following Efe night, the crowd again assembles in the marketplace. One will see men in the audience dressed as women or wearing baby sashes “to attract Ìyá Nlá’s protection and blessings.”¹⁴¹⁶ Drummers and chorus take their places. The Gelede day masquerade, with its profusion of masks and superstructures, costumes and ebullient dancing, is set to begin. Just as:

Ọṛọ Ẹfẹ speaks out...stressing unity and adherence to traditions as a way to honor the mothers, the Gẹlẹdẹ dancers, representing generalized roles or groups both inside and outside the traditional society, are the “children” of the mothers.¹⁴¹⁷

Masks and music combine to form social commentary. Drums can approximate the tonal patterns of the Yoruba language, specifically the *dundun* drum. Therefore, text can be drummed. In Gelede this rhythmic text of proverbs and praise poems is called *eka*, and it “dictates the rhythm of the dance steps.”¹⁴¹⁸

The heart of the Gẹlẹdẹ dance is in synchronizing the jingling of the metal anklets with the *ẹkà*, anticipating the sequences and the stops, and ending the phrasing at the same time as the drums.¹⁴¹⁹

¹⁴¹⁶ Ibid., 157

¹⁴¹⁷ H. J. Drewal and Drewal, *Gẹlẹdẹ*, 14.

¹⁴¹⁸ Ibid., 112.

¹⁴¹⁹ Lawal, *Gẹlẹdẹ Spectacle*, 149.

Importantly, “*ẹka* comment on many aspects of social behavior: competition, social matters, dance, and life in general.”¹⁴²⁰

Audience participation is a key component of Yoruba festivals. During breaks in the masquerade performances, the audience takes to the performance space in joyous celebration “singing prayerful songs” that beseech spirit “to bless them with good health, long life, wealth, fertility, and, above all, happiness.”¹⁴²¹

Gelede masks are commissioned by Gelede society members and their families, with some masks being generations old. The extraordinary array of imagery in Gelede headdresses is representative of the fact that “*Ìyá Nlá*, the focus of *Gẹ̀lẹ̀dẹ̀*, is the Mother of All Things.”¹⁴²² Gelede honors *iyami àjẹ*, “the gods of society.” Thus, every aspect of society is displayed. Masks can be relatively simple or be elaborate multi-tiered displays of a carver’s artistry and mastery—a “display of sculpting virtuosity.”¹⁴²³

All Gelede masks “present some sort of social or spiritual commentary—praise, criticism, or simply a documentation of an aspect of Yoruba life and thought.”¹⁴²⁴ This complexity is in contrast to the relatively simple motifs of the

¹⁴²⁰ H. J. Drewal and Drewal, *Gẹ̀lẹ̀dẹ̀*, 114.

¹⁴²¹ Lawal, *Gẹ̀lẹ̀dẹ̀ Spectacle*, 152.

¹⁴²² *Ibid.*, xxi.

¹⁴²³ H. J. Drewal and Drewal, *Gẹ̀lẹ̀dẹ̀*, 159.

¹⁴²⁴ *Ibid.*, 162.

Efe mask. “What the Èfẹ masker communicates *orally*, the Gẹlẹdẹ masker does *visually*, on its headdress.”¹⁴²⁵

Social functions are a common theme. Headdresses are designed that honor vocations, artists, and craftspeople—market women, carvers, hunters, tailors, blacksmiths, weavers, drummers, bead makers, for example. Religious function is also honored. “Devotees of all the principal faiths of Yorubaland are represented: *oriṣa* worshippers, priests and priestesses, Muslims and their clerics, and Christians and their clergy.”¹⁴²⁶ It goes without saying that the Yoruba pantheon is represented. For example, “the arched python motif is very popular on Gẹlẹdẹ headdresses because it signifies Òṣùmàrè, the rainbow deity, associated with fertility, regeneration, and prosperity.”¹⁴²⁷

Evidenced is that within Gelede one sees a mix of many cultural influences. The primary reason given for this diversity is that at the time of Gelede’s genesis, its birthplace of western Yorubaland enjoyed “an extensive trade network leading from the coast far north to Hausaland and Borgu, as well as eastward to Ijẹbu and Benin and westward to Abomey and Asante.”¹⁴²⁸

Owing to the trade route, it is thought that Muslim presence in western Yorubaland dates from the latter part of the seventeenth century and has been dated to the second half of the eighteenth century at Ketu.

¹⁴²⁵ Lawal, *Gẹlẹdẹ Spectacle*, 159.

¹⁴²⁶ H. J. Drewal and Drewal, *Gẹlẹdẹ*, 183.

¹⁴²⁷ Lawal, *Gẹlẹdẹ Spectacle*, 247.

¹⁴²⁸ H. J. Drewal and Drewal, *Gẹlẹdẹ*, 224.

The introduction of Islam is a key factor in assessing Gelede history, for there are many references to Muslims in Gelede oral traditions and in the performance and, what is perhaps more significant, in the style and form of certain costumes.¹⁴²⁹

Historic and mythic events and characters are also depicted in Gelede headdresses.

Social expectations are reflected in Gelede performance. Not all masks are complimentary. “Some satirize and criticize antisocial elements or enemies.” Lewd portrayals of couples engaged in intercourse are meant to impugn those who engage in improper sexual conduct. Masks showing women with disheveled head-ties are used to condemn prostitutes. As the state of one’s outer head is a metaphor for the inner head, or one’s essence, the untidy head is a scathing attack on the prostitute’s character.¹⁴³⁰

Behavior deemed detrimental to the community is likewise parodied and condemned. In an example of the combined force of mask and music, a “headdress of a plump porcupine eating corn relates thematically to a drummed text in which a porcupine is criticized for selfishness and gluttony.”¹⁴³¹

Another mask depicts a porcupine being devoured by snakes—a statement of the treatment one receives for engaging in antisocial behavior.

Additionally:

¹⁴²⁹ Ibid., 223.

¹⁴³⁰ H. J. Drewal and Drewal, *Gelede*, 197.

¹⁴³¹ Ibid., 110.

The snake-porcupine motif recalls an Ifá divination verse (Odù Ìdi méji) on the limitations placed on the power of “the mothers,” resulting in the caveat: “Nobody eats a porcupine along with the spines.”¹⁴³²

A third category of Gelede masks speak to cosmological forces.

Somewhat surprising at first glance, this theme is captured in the portrayal of innovations introduced into Yoruba society such as bicycles, sewing machines, automobiles, and airplanes. There is the obvious correlation between the mother’s ability to transform themselves into birds, and airplanes as a modern metaphor for this ability. But moreover:

Some Yorùbá believe that these inventions are the result of certain spiritual powers, possessed by their creators, which have been channeled in a positive direction....[Further,] the visualization of innovations perceived to be the result of “positive *aṣẹ*” constitutes a direct and explicit appeal to the mothers to use their powers in constructive rather than destructive ways.¹⁴³³

The motif of animals locked in combat suggests competing forces in the Yoruba cosmos. Headdresses also depict the concept of competing social or spiritual forces, the ambivalence of these forces, and their balancing. Thus, one finds a mask of a bird devouring a fish, while shielding her chicks under her wings, which also serves as metaphor for the mothers’ destructive and protective aspects.

Gelede is enacted to encourage the mothers’ more beneficent attributes. Performers appear by age, from young novices to more adept teenagers and finally, the master dancers. Youngsters delight the audience and are encouraged by spectators. Teenagers are viewed with a more critical eye to the details of their

¹⁴³² Lawal, *Gẹ̀lẹ̀dẹ̀ Spectacle*, xxiii.

¹⁴³³ H. J. Drewal and Drewal, *Gẹ̀lẹ̀dẹ̀*, 203.

performance. Master dancers are spurred on to “greater choreographic heights” by the crowd and by enthusiastic Gelede cult elders who might rush in to perform with the dancer of their family’s mask.¹⁴³⁴

Master dancers perform Gelede in identical pairs, and dance steps must be perfectly in sync with drum rhythms. In Ketu and surrounding towns, the dancers enter backwards “in the same way a priest enters a very sacred shrine.” The performance area is considered an extension of Iya’Nla’s shrine. Though this manner of entry was the general rule in the past, this is no longer the case, “the change being blamed on modernization.”¹⁴³⁵

What holds as a general rule, however, is the entry in pairs. This aspect is an example of the “doubling” that pervades Gelede. In addition to the master dancers, the theme of doubling is present in the structure of Gelede—the pairing of night and day masquerades—and in the necessity that Oro Efe be preceded by a partner. Additionally, Oro Efe carries a small protective replica of himself during performance.¹⁴³⁶

This doubling could have association with several factors. As detailed above, according to myth, Gelede originated as a result of a dispute between twins over rulership of the kingdom of Ketu. There are many references to twins in Gelede. For example:

¹⁴³⁴ Ibid., 34.

¹⁴³⁵ Lawal, *Gèlèdè Spectacle*, 148, 149.

¹⁴³⁶ Ibid., 149

Among the Ọhọrí, there are special Gẹ̀lẹ̀dẹ́ headdresses called Àgàṣa ̀bejì which have two faces representing twins...At ̀bòdò such masks are associated with Eyinni, the local goddess of twins, in whose honor the annual Gẹ̀lẹ̀dẹ́ festival is celebrated.¹⁴³⁷

Twins are thought to be imbued with supernatural abilities such as mutual telepathy, and it is commonly held that one soul is shared by both or that one twin is the spirit double of the other.¹⁴³⁸

No condition is invested with an air of greater importance, or has a halo of deeper mystery about it, than that of twin-births; the influence is felt even upon children that may be born after them.¹⁴³⁹

These children are given names to signify that they were born after the birth of twins.

At one time in Yoruba history, multiple births were thought of as a bad omen. The offspring were killed and the mother exiled.¹⁴⁴⁰ However, within Gelede twins are revered. Speculation is that the cessation of twin killings among the Yoruba could have been a result of close contact between the Yoruba and neighboring groups who did not practice twin infanticide such as the Ègùn.¹⁴⁴¹

“There is strong evidence that the Ègùn and Yoruba had substantial cultural exchanges before the fifteenth century A.D.”¹⁴⁴² This fact and that

¹⁴³⁷ Ibid., 257.

¹⁴³⁸ H. J. Drewal and Drewal, *Gẹ̀lẹ̀dẹ́*.

¹⁴³⁹ S. Johnson, *History of the Yorubas*, 80.

¹⁴⁴⁰ S. Johnson, *History of the Yorubas*.

¹⁴⁴¹ Lawal, *Gẹ̀lẹ̀dẹ́ Spectacle*.

¹⁴⁴² Ibid., 69.

“Yoruba historian Samuel Johnson identifies Aláàfin Àjaká, who reigned before the sixteenth century, as the Ọyọ king who abolished twin infanticide,”¹⁴⁴³ likely puts an earlier than eighteenth century timeframe on Gelede origin.

In addition to the allusion to twins, doubling could represent the Yoruba ontological orientation of reciprocity and balance between dual elements such as male/female, material realm/spiritual realm. As well, it could signify the dual nature of the mothers themselves. As noted a praise name for *iyami* is “one with two bodies” (*aláàwọ mejì*). *Iyami* is the “mother who kills her husband to gain a title” and “mother who brings peace to the world.” Within the context of Gelede, it is stated that “doubling seems to imply increased spiritual force and transcendency.”¹⁴⁴⁴

Appearing at dusk, the last Gelede to perform is “a special masquerader representing the deified ancestress of the community. Her appearance reassures the crowd of the mother’s blessings.”¹⁴⁴⁵ Here one returns to the origin of Gelede being associated with fertility because it is due to the fecundity of the deified ancestress that the people flourish.

On the last day, a special mask visits the dance venue to formally close the festival. This task is performed in many communities by a female mask dressed in an all-white attire... The mask is said to represent Ìyáláşẹ̀. In other towns, the Ìyáláşẹ̀ appears in person to perform the same task, praying for the well-being of the community. In Imẹkọ, the appearance of Şàkínní, a mask with a carved python head, marks the end of the festival.

¹⁴⁴³ Ibid.

¹⁴⁴⁴ H. J. Drewal and Drewal, *Gelede*, 13, 136.

¹⁴⁴⁵ Ibid., 37.

Stated simply by Lawal: “It is difficult to find any other festival in Yorubaland that rivals Gẹ̀lẹ̀dẹ̀’^s.”¹⁴⁴⁶

Summary

An intriguing e-mail circulated in mid-2007 that announced “The Gelede Campaign in the US.” The e-mail’s original author, who cannot be definitively traced, unspecified originator indicated that through divination it was revealed that:

The lack of respect for the energy of women and the lack of respect for the Great Mother...is why we are seeing our youth die too early, increasing violence in our communities, increased early parenthood and the host of problematic situations that permeate our [African American] communities.¹⁴⁴⁷

The same divination revealed that Gelede needed to be enacted throughout the United States and appeased with offerings.

The Gelede was to be constructed by priests within the Republic of Benin specifically for use within the United States for the benefit of Black-American communities. It was to be first performed in conjunction with the African Festival of the Arts in Chicago.¹⁴⁴⁸ The creation of Gelede and the performance of Gelede

¹⁴⁴⁶ Lawal, *Gẹ̀lẹ̀dẹ̀ Spectacle*, 161, 159.

¹⁴⁴⁷ Falola, “Gelede Campaign,” par. 4. Arisika Razak reforwarded this e-mail message to me on July 12, 2007. The message was traced to the Google Group “Yoruba Affairs” and appears to have been forwarded to the list by Toyin Falola, distinguished professor of history at the University of Texas at Austin.

¹⁴⁴⁸ Ibid.

is art. “Art is sacrifice, and artistic displays carry the sacred power to bring things into existence.”¹⁴⁴⁹

Ebo or sacrifice is reciprocal. The spirit of the deity is nurtured and in turn, devotees receive the deity’s protection and blessing. Thus, by honoring The Great Mother and pleasing her daughters, *iyami àjé*, by presentation of the Gelede spectacle, the community hopes to receive the mothers’ blessings of fertility and longevity of humans, animals, and crops as well as communal well-being.

Gelede pays homage to the “gods of society” by reinforcing social roles and expectations for the good functioning of the community. The Great Mother, Iya’Nla, blesses the proceedings with her brief appearance, after which Oro Efe appears imbued with her authority. He exposes and admonishes individuals and behaviors deemed anti-social and detrimental to community harmony.

Oro Efe also praises and reinforces good character in the community often in “the call-and-response style that commits the audience to the need for good behavior.” In short, it is the intention of Oro Efe “to shape the moral conscience of the community and its rulers, and to influence public opinion on social, religious, cultural, economic, and political matters.”¹⁴⁵⁰

The day masquerade portrays every possible element of society, again reflecting that *iyami àjé* are the “gods of society” and that Iya’Nla is “The Mother of All.” As with Oro Efe’s costume, the costumes of the day masqueraders is

¹⁴⁴⁹ H. J. Drewal and Drewal, *Gelede*, 6.

¹⁴⁵⁰ Lawal, *Gelede Spectacle*, 137, 132.

comprised of women's head ties and baby sashes. These not only highlight Gelede's theme of honoring women, but also point to the probable origin of Gelede as an appeal for fertility.

Through myth and contemporary ritual, this "fertility dance" is connected with the *oriṣa* Yemoja, generally considered mother of the *oriṣa*. An aspect of Iya'Nla "as Yemoja or Yewajòbí is popularly known as Ìya Ọlómọ Wẹ̀wẹ̀, that is "The Great Mother of Small Children."¹⁴⁵¹

Gelede functions to honor The Great Mother and appease the "powerful mothers" so that they are amenable to using their power for the benefit of the community and its inhabitants. The Gelede spectacle is a sacred ritual of propitiation. It is a display of community generosity and cooperation.

It is the energy of Gelede, comprising the participation of actors and audience, master dancers and drummers along with novices, coupled with poetic recitations, choir, extraordinary masks and colorful costumes that give rise to "the popular saying: *Ojú t'ówo Gẹ̀lẹ̀dẹ̀ ti d'Íran* (The eyes that have seen Gẹ̀lẹ̀dẹ̀ have seen the ultimate spectacle)."¹⁴⁵²

¹⁴⁵¹ Ibid., 256.

¹⁴⁵² Ibid., 159.

CHAPTER 10: MECHANISMS OF CONTROL

“Accused witches were subject to torture, humiliation and sometimes execution.”¹⁴⁵³

“Culture is never separate from economics.”¹⁴⁵⁴

A verse of *Odu Ifa Oyeku Meji* quoted partially by Karenga and more fully by Bascom contains a passage that is explained by Bascom’s informant as meaning that a king “will not let us attack a town composed only of women, or take the women of our own town as slaves.”¹⁴⁵⁵ Karenga, in a contemporary interpretation of the verse, states:

The text suggests that the example of the coward posing as a courageous person is found in men who would “make war on” or attack women in various ways to have access to and control of them.¹⁴⁵⁶

Both make it clear that it is the coward who would attack women.

Providing examples from Abeokuta, Ado Ekiti, and Ibadan, McIntosh states that “women were frequently accused during the early twentieth century of having used juju to harm men.” At the same time, women were lauded in (*oriki*) praise poetry:

for their bravery and the contributions they made to the standing of their husbands and children. When they were called witches in such contexts, their supernatural strength was respected as beneficial to their

¹⁴⁵³ McIntosh, *Yoruba Women*, 195.

¹⁴⁵⁴ Birnbaum, *Ancient Heart*, 79.

¹⁴⁵⁵ Bascom, *Ifa Divination*, 247.

¹⁴⁵⁶ Karenga, *Odù Ifá*, 20.

communities and families. More commonly, however, people feared that witches would employ their abilities in destructive ways.¹⁴⁵⁷

Accusations of witchcraft were made for a variety of reasons. During times of general strife, destructive attributes of deities (daughters of Iya'Nla, the *òríṣà ọ̀lómọ̀wẹ̀wẹ̀*)¹⁴⁵⁸ can be projected onto human women as *iyami àjẹ* who can be punished. Remember that Oṣun in her anger at the male *oríṣà*'s disregard caused "famine, drought and epidemic; barren women remained without children."¹⁴⁵⁹ Thus, sanctioning gives a sense of control over the inexplicable and a sense of having some control over spirit forces.

Sons are considered more desirable than daughters among the patrilineal Yoruba. Giving birth to only female offspring makes a woman suspected of "deliberately conceiving daughters so that she can transfer her witchcraft to them."

The following Yoruba proverb speaks to this belief:

Kàkà kó sà̀n lára àjẹ ó nbí ọ̀mọ ọ̀bìnrin jọ ẹ̀yẹ wá nyí lu ẹ̀yẹ. (Instead of the *àjẹ* changing for the better, she continues to have more daughters, producing more and more "birds.")¹⁴⁶⁰

Women perceived as a threat to patriarchal prerogative were also in danger. Women's spiritual potency, ability to bring forth life, and market prowess represented a triple threat to the notion of patriarchal dominance. Therefore,

¹⁴⁵⁷ McIntosh, *Yoruba Women*, 194.

¹⁴⁵⁸ Lawal, *Gẹ̀lẹ̀dẹ̀ Spectacle*.

¹⁴⁵⁹ Elebuibon, *Invisible Powers*, 110.

¹⁴⁶⁰ Lawal, *Gẹ̀lẹ̀dẹ̀ Spectacle*, 34.

mechanisms of control came into play. Accusations of witchcraft and death often awaited women perceived as overstepping their bounds, or transgressive women.

Such was the fate of Oyo royal wives thought to be “too powerful,”¹⁴⁶¹ and such was the case with *Iyalode* Efunsetan spoken of in the chapter on Oyo historiography. The forthcoming investigation of the Atinga witch-finding cult also bears this out.

Anti-Witchcraft Oriṣa

Some anti-witchcraft *oriṣa* are fairly well-known others are regional. In “Ondo State and among the Ẹjẹbú in Ogun state, Ayélála is an òrìṣà that exposes the witch.” Elebuibon also identifies two among several “masquerade groups that wage war against the witches...Gbajero (hang witch) and Pàjépolabi (kill the witch and her kolanut provider).”¹⁴⁶²

More widely known, “Òrìṣàoko is another òrìṣà that is anti-witchcraft.”¹⁴⁶³ Interestingly, there is a myth wherein Oriṣa Oko is a woman who became deified after teaching her community the art of farming.¹⁴⁶⁴ Oriṣa Oko is referred to as a goddess in the northern Yoruba town of Irawo in Igboho, and her “priestesses are said to be former witches.”¹⁴⁶⁵

¹⁴⁶¹ Matory, *Sex and the Empire*, 10.

¹⁴⁶² Elebuibon, *Invisible Powers*, 83, 34.

¹⁴⁶³ *Ibid.*, 83.

¹⁴⁶⁴ Biobaku, “Use and Interpretations of Myth.”

¹⁴⁶⁵ Matory, *Sex and the Empire*, 78.

Egungun (or Egun) and Oro are the most well-known and oft-cited anti-witchcraft societies. In Old Oyo the fourth ranking member of the Oyo Mesi, the Alapini, oversaw the Egungun. As such he was in charge of “the famous Jenju, who is the head Egùgun of the country, and who executes witches.” Another Egungun known as “the Agan” is also reportedly “the executioner of women accused of witchcraft.”¹⁴⁶⁶

Oro is the enforcement arm of the Ogboni Society and “the ancestral spirits used in executing women convicted of witchcraft.”¹⁴⁶⁷ Reference to Oro as female is found in two *odu* of the Sixteen Cowries divination system—Osa and Owonrin.¹⁴⁶⁸ In *Odu Ifa* Obara Meji a long narrative speaks of Oro as Orunmila’s wife.¹⁴⁶⁹ Oro’s general function was to maintain order and enforce societal laws. “*Orò* societies used the authority of that powerful *òrìṣà* to announce and administer judicial proceedings.”¹⁴⁷⁰

At the time when patriarchy was overtaking matriarchy, when “what was once life-enhancing nature magic became witchcraft,” Finch speaks of a custom within Egypt that is so similar to twentieth century Oro society practice that it belies mere coincidence:

¹⁴⁶⁶ S. Johnson, *History of the Yorubas*, 72, 29.

¹⁴⁶⁷ Lawal, *Gẹ̀lẹ̀dẹ̀ Spectacle*, 34.

¹⁴⁶⁸ Bascom, *Sixteen Cowries*.

¹⁴⁶⁹ Olademo, *Gender in Yoruba Oral Traditions*.

¹⁴⁷⁰ McIntosh, *Yoruba Women*, 205.

During the performance of the new masculine mysteries, a bull-roarer would warn all females to stay locked up while male initiates were being summoned to secret rites. A woman indiscreet enough to be found outside when the bull-roarer sounded risked forfeiture of her life.¹⁴⁷¹

In addition to similar draconian curtailment of women's movement, as a further note of concordance, Lucas claims that "the Yoruba god Oro is a survival of the Egyptian god Orion."¹⁴⁷²

Importantly, it is said that "Oro and Egun cannot kill without the mothers." The *Iyalaṣe* is the head of the Gelede cult and a powerful embodiment of *iyami*. "Even the dreaded Oro Society must ask permission from her before they can come out to perform their ceremonies, or before they can proceed to execute a death sentence."¹⁴⁷³

Therefore, neither Society can kill a supposed witch without the approval of the mothers or the governing body of *iyami àjé*, the Iyami Society (Egbé ̀mùlẹ̀).¹⁴⁷⁴ Ostensibly such approval would be given for abuse of power, for behavior harmful to the community that it is the duty of the mothers to protect and uphold "as guardians of society."¹⁴⁷⁵ Authorization of the mothers is evident from the following found in *Odu Ifa Osa Meji*:

Odù brought out and blessed the Egungun mask,
She founded and blessed the Orò society,

¹⁴⁷¹ Finch, *Echoes of the Old Darkland*, 104.

¹⁴⁷² Lucas, *Religion of the Yorubas*, 125.

¹⁴⁷³ Beier, "Gelede Masks," 7.

¹⁴⁷⁴ Elebuibon, *Invisible Powers*, 63.

¹⁴⁷⁵ H. J. Drewal and Drewal, *Gelede*, 9.

She blessed all the Òrìsà shrines,
Offer respect to women,
It was a woman who brought us to this world,
The secrets of the world belong to women,
Show respect for women.¹⁴⁷⁶

Iwi are the chants or oral poetry connected with Egungun. Salutations to “sacred power”¹⁴⁷⁷ are a component of *Iwi*, included among the sacred powers thus honored are witches. As seen in the chapter on Yoruba cosmology, with the improved attitude of the male *oriṣa*, and after the birth of her son, OṣeTaura, Oṣun proclaimed Oro and Egungun a male preserve, taboo for women.

However, owing to their dealings with Oṣun, men are aware of the necessity of women to the success of any undertaking. “Realizing that there is nothing they can do successfully without the women... men allow some females to become privileged members of otherwise exclusively male associations such as Orò and Egúngún.”¹⁴⁷⁸

Within the Oro societies there was, “a female elder called *Ìyá Orò* who had to sanction the group’s actions.”¹⁴⁷⁹ Every Egungun society has an *Iyagan*. “The ‘*agan*’ is the cloth that contains the spiritual essence of a collective ancestor.”¹⁴⁸⁰ With reference to Egungun, Abiodun states that “women especially as ato ‘female

¹⁴⁷⁶ Alcamo, *Ìyá Nlá*, 21.

¹⁴⁷⁷ Olupona, “Yoruba Religious Tradition,” 248.

¹⁴⁷⁸ Lawal, *Gẹ̀lẹ̀dẹ̀ Spectacle*, 34.

¹⁴⁷⁹ McIntosh, *Yoruba Women*, 286 n. 66.

¹⁴⁸⁰ Olomo, “Our Esteemed Elders,” par. 8.

triplet' hold very important positions in this otherwise male cult."¹⁴⁸¹ These women are privileged to all the secrets of Egungun.¹⁴⁸² Additionally, these "female office-holders make the sacred objects of the male-dominated Egungun cult."¹⁴⁸³

The same regard for women cannot be said of the twentieth century witch-finding movements that swept into Yorubaland. Olomo states that because of the witch-finding movements that proliferated in West Africa after World War II, "the spiritual work of the women who belong to the societies that retain the traditions of the mothers has gone underground."¹⁴⁸⁴

Though outlawed by colonial authorities, with ordinances still in place, witch-hunters currently operate in Nigeria. "Seraphim sects of Yoruba Christians are still very active as 'witch'-hunters. The need to destroy powerful women is supported by prominent and wealthy Muslims and Christians."¹⁴⁸⁵ The following section examines in detail the dynamics within Yorubaland of the Atinga cult, a witch-finding movement of the mid-twentieth century.

¹⁴⁸¹ Abiodun, "Woman in Yoruba Religious Images," 10.

¹⁴⁸² W. Abimbola, "Bag of Wisdom."

¹⁴⁸³ Witte, "Invisible Mothers," 303-304.

¹⁴⁸⁴ Olomo, "Iyami Osorongu," 283,

¹⁴⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 284.

The Atinga Witch-Finding Cult

At the dawn of the 1950s, a witch-finding movement swept into Yorubaland from neighboring Dahomey,¹⁴⁸⁶ having originated about 1928 in the Sudanian Savanna or “grassland area, of the northern Ivory Coast.” At the heart of the movement is a belief in Tigari. Tigari is considered to be either mystical power or deity whose chief supernatural endowment is its ability to identify those who practice evil magic, specifically, witches.¹⁴⁸⁷

As the movement moved across and down through Ghana and eastward into Togo, Benin and southwestern Nigeria, the name and various cult elements were modified reflecting cultural specifics. In Togo and Benin it was known as Atingali or Goro, and among the Yoruba, it was Atinga.¹⁴⁸⁸

Background on the witch-finding movement is taken from the work of James Christensen among the Fanti of Ghana because the coastal region of Ghana was an area of early Tigari incursion, being well established there in the 1940s. It is interesting to note that the nature or essence of Tigari was uncertain.

There is no agreement among devotees on whether Tigari is a deity or an impersonal power...With one exception, the Tigari priests whom I consulted described it as an obosom, or deity.¹⁴⁸⁹

¹⁴⁸⁶ Dahomey is present-day Republic of Benin. Throughout this discussion, the country will be referred to as Benin.

¹⁴⁸⁷ Christensen, “The Tigari Cult,” 389.

¹⁴⁸⁸ Ibid.

¹⁴⁸⁹ Ibid., 390.

The religious and ritual elements of Tigari combine the practices of Ghana's Northern Region with coastal customs. "Ceremonies lasting about three days are held every six weeks... Offerings of food and animal sacrifices, usually of a dog or a sheep, are made at this time."¹⁴⁹⁰ Lively drumming and dancing by devotees is a customary part of ritual.

Given the presence of Islam and Christianity in West Africa, it is not surprising to find elements of these religions incorporated into the rituals associated with Tigari. Among the Fanti are examples of inclusions from Islam such as the practice of removing one's shoes before approaching the Tigari shrine and a taboo on eating pork. "The outstanding Christian component is a series of 'thou-shalt-not' rules, not unlike the Ten Commandments."¹⁴⁹¹ Christensen lists 17 such rules obtained from the notebook of a devotee and priest's assistant.

A round chalk mark is often placed on the forehead of the person who has eaten sanctified kola nut, taken the oaths and is thereby protected. This chalk mark, it is suggested, is imitation of the dust and scarring worn by devout Muslims with pride that is obtained from pressing their foreheads to the ground in regular and fervent prayer.¹⁴⁹²

Both Moslems and Christians are adherents of Tigari. "They do not think in terms of mutually exclusive gods, for their culture has required that they be cognizant of, and propitiate, several deities simultaneously." An integral

¹⁴⁹⁰ Ibid.

¹⁴⁹¹ Ibid.

¹⁴⁹² Matory, *Sex and the Empire*, 80.

component of Fanti traditional religion is confession to the use of “evil magic” if one has been so accused, or confession of one’s sins if it is deemed that illness has befallen a person or household due to an affront to deity. Confession is done “in the hope [belief] that this will result in a return to normalcy.” Confession, as will be seen, is central to the witch-finding cult.¹⁴⁹³

To become a member of Tigari, one simply goes to the priest and states a desire to join. If the person agrees to abide by the “thou-shalt-not” rules, he pays a fee to the priest and in turn eats a specially sanctified kola nut that binds him to Tigari for life. If any of the rules are broken, Tigari will reportedly inflict ill fortune, even death, upon the individual. Protection against witches and finding witches are the deity’s forte. However, people petition Tigari for all manner of assistance—good health, success in various endeavors, safe travel, children, and marriage.¹⁴⁹⁴

A unique aspect of Tigari is that one offers the deity payment *after* the petitioner’s request has been granted, and the payment is in the form of cash to the priest as opposed to the more common sacrificial animal. The priest is paid for his services at the time the request is made. Ceremonial eating of a kola nut by the petitioner signifies his supplication of Tigari. If the petitioner’s request is granted, then the cash payment to deity is made “commensurate with the request, and the ability of the applicant to pay.”¹⁴⁹⁵

¹⁴⁹³ Christensen, “The Tigari Cult,” 398, 395.

¹⁴⁹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁴⁹⁵ Ibid., 394.

“Mercenary” is a word and criticism leveled at Tigari for its exorbitant fees and fines as well as the great cost of becoming a full Tigari priest. To become a priest of Tigari one neither has to be called by possession nor be born into the lineage, as was common. The only requirement is that one be male.¹⁴⁹⁶

Also, training is very brief when compared to the training required to become a male or female priest within the traditional Fanti religious system—three to six months as compared with three to five years. The average price paid for this lengthy training was 10 pounds. By contrast, one Tigari priest reported paying 300 pounds for his training, “and some are reported to have paid as much as 600 pounds.”¹⁴⁹⁷

Other excesses have been ascribed to Tigari priests. It is not unheard of for Tigari priests to extract confessions from sick individuals through beatings. If the individual or “patient” dies while being treated by Tigari, “it is reported that some priests...have forced the family of the deceased to pay large sums for the return of the corpse for proper burial.” Because of its excesses, and the financial strain caused to practitioners, Tigari was outlawed in several areas by colonial authorities. However, ceremonies were still widely held and popularly attended.¹⁴⁹⁸

In “The Tigari Cult of West Africa,” Christensen attributes the popularity and rapid spread of Tigari to several factors having in common displacements

¹⁴⁹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁴⁹⁷ Ibid., 395.

¹⁴⁹⁸ Ibid.

caused by the spread of Western culture. The popularity of the traditional priests/herbalists diminished due to the availability of Western medicine and due to the fact that Christianity disparaged traditional religion. With this, the celebratory public ceremonies for the deities also decreased. Tigari filled this void with its regular public ceremonies.

Traditional Akan culture is matrilineal. Like many African cultures, the individual was imbedded in the clan and found psychological and material support in this corporate identity. Here there are two significant impacts. Structural economic shifts, such as export farming and wage labor, placed emphasis on individual earning capacity.¹⁴⁹⁹

Furthermore, the matrilineal clan system came under stress. "With the spread of Christianity and, to a lesser degree, of Mohammedanism, both of which accentuate patrilineal descent, there is growing dissatisfaction with the avunculate." Under this system, the mother's brother assumes much of the responsibility for his nephew in a father/son relationship.¹⁵⁰⁰

Some individuals blamed the colonialists and the government for their economic and social stress. "Others, however, blame evil magic, and maintain that jealous relatives who have this power are responsible for their failure or ill fortune."¹⁵⁰¹ Belief in evil magic and those with the ability to wield this power is widespread among the Akan and many groups in Africa, even to this day. Tigari

¹⁴⁹⁹ Ibid.

¹⁵⁰⁰ Ibid., 397.

¹⁵⁰¹ Ibid.

sold protection against evil magic. More importantly, Tigari sold itself as being efficacious in identifying the practitioners of evil magic and significantly, with being able to neutralize their power.

Tigari Summary

This summary draws exclusively on the article, "The Tigari Cult of West Africa" by James Christensen. Tigari is native to the Sudanian Savanna of the Ivory Coast, entering southern Ghana approximately 1928. The cult of Tigari is centered on a supernatural being that is thought of as a deity by some and an impersonal power or energy by others. Although Tigari can be supplicated for all manner of assistance, it is most known for being able to catch practitioners of evil magic and neutralize their power. The cult is a corporate ritual system combining indigenous practices with Islam and Christianity.

There are two major criticisms leveled against Tigari's all-male priesthood. First, is the frequent use of brutal methods, including physical violence, to extract confessions. Second, mercenary is a term associated with Tigari because of the inflated fees charged to petitioners, the exorbitant cost of becoming a full Tigari priest, and the excessive fines levied for breaching Tigari taboos. These criticisms follow Tigari into Yorubaland.

Although outlawed by colonial authorities in several regions, the practice nonetheless, continued to flourish. The reasons for this are rooted in colonial cultural displacement of indigenous traditional priests and priestesses and the social and economic tensions wrought by the new values and wage labor brought in with European colonialism. Before following the cult's progression into Yorubaland, where it was known as Atinga, the story of how it came to the world is recounted.

Origin Myth

Myths of origin are often used to affirm the legitimacy of a group, and the witch-finding cult has its own origin myth. Although said to have no affiliation with any church or mosque, the religious overlays have been noted above. Here, one sees Judeo-Christian elements in the following myth of how Atinga came to the world as told by an Asanti informant to Bascom and recorded on page 82 of field notes dated November 20, 1950.

Atinga is from heaven, as they learned it from Accra. In heaven there lives the mother of the witches (Iya aje) and her child. In heaven God received too many dead people; more than he expected. When he asked them the cause of their early death, they said they were killed by witches. So many of these that God asked how can I ruin the witches in the world. He called all the Angels, and Atinga was one of them. He said that the Witches' mother had a red iron coat which covered her all over so that if a man fires a gun it never hurts her. She wears the coat night and day. Takes it off only once a year. When he asked the Angels if any of them could kill the mother of the witches and the child so that they would not do evil in the world again, Atinga stood up and said, "I can kill her." Then the blacksmith in heaven said he would help Atinga. God asked him, "What help will you do." "I shall make him an osho which will fight with Iya aje." God said, "You are going to kill her, but she never takes off her iron coat; how can you kill her?" Blacksmith said that he was a hunter and he had medicine which he used in the bush. If he puts the medicine in his mouth, no one sees him when he enters a man's house. Said he would use this medicine to watch this woman every night and day, so that he would not miss the day when she took off her coat. Blacksmith made osho and gave it to Atinga, who left. They (all angels) went to the house of Iya aje and watched every day and every night. On the day that she took off her coat, the blacksmith was there with invisible medicine, and he called Atinga to come and kill her. Atinga came and struck the Iya aje with the osho. Pulled it out and killed the child. When both died the blacksmith took his sword and cut off their heads and gave them to God as proof. God said, "Alright. If you can do this, I'll give you more power. That is, you should go down into the world and ruin the rest of the witches in the world."

Yorubaland

By the time Tigari arrived in Nigeria in 1950, it had passed into Togo and Benin and had morphed into a uniquely witch-finding enterprise. "In 1947, *Tigere*, under the name of *Goro*—the Hausa word for kola—was established at Parahoué

in Dahomey.”¹⁵⁰² The individual who brought it into Yorubaland from Benin referred to the cult as Tingare and spoke of its annual festival in his home town of Dassa-Zoumé.

Although the cult claimed to seek out all practitioners of evil, post-menopausal women were primarily targeted. The cult “persecuted thousands of women in many Egba and Egbado Yoruba towns”¹⁵⁰³ as well as towns outside of these two areas. Matory states succinctly: “A foreign movement to eliminate ‘witchcraft’ (*àjé*) entered Yorubaland.”¹⁵⁰⁴

Presumably part of its mission to eliminate witchcraft, the movement hacked down sacred trees as well as destroying shrines of the predominately female led and subscribed *oriṣa* cults. Apter pointedly asserts that “the fate of the traditional cults represents a direct assault on female power.”¹⁵⁰⁵ Interestingly, Atinga was most active in the areas that propitiate and honor “our mothers,” *awon iya wa* or *àjé* with the Gelede spectacle discussed in Chapter 9.

The Yoruba referred to the witch-catching deity as Atinga and to those who were agents of the deity as Alatinga. During less than a six-month period, the movement swept primarily through the southwestern edge of Yorubaland. Atinga came into Meko at the invitation of Meko’s king, the *oba* or *Onimeko*, early in November 1950. Meko is a Ketu town on the border with Benin. Because of the

¹⁵⁰² Morton-Williams, “The Atinga Cult,” 315.

¹⁵⁰³ Apter, “Atinga Revisited,” 111.

¹⁵⁰⁴ Matory, *Sex and the Empire*, 79.

¹⁵⁰⁵ Apter, “Atinga Revisited,” 121.

politically driven setting of boundaries begun with the scramble for Africa and the 1884 Conference of Berlin, the Ketu Yoruba actually straddle Benin and Nigeria.

The town of Meko is in Nigeria.¹⁵⁰⁶

After leaving Meko this Alatinga group went to the town of Aiyetoro in Egbado by invitation of their *oba*. Morton-Williams conducted research there, reporting that “483 women were recorded by the *oba*’s scribe as proven witches in the first week that the Alatinga were there.” In one week, 5% of Aiyetoro’s population of approximately 10,000 were identified as witches. The more women identified as witches, the more lucrative would be the Alatinga’s time in a location.¹⁵⁰⁷

Though the Alatinga in Meko were ostensibly the first, several Atinga groups from Benin were in operation in southwestern Yorubaland at about the same time. Also, numerous Yoruba Atinga groups were subsequently formed though not as successful as their Benin counterparts. Bascom’s field notes dated November 20, 1950, page 81, indicate that the head Atinga priest is the Olori Atinga; his chief assistant is the Igbakeji Atinga.

At the time of Atinga’s arrival in Meko, William Bascom was in residence there. His personal observations and interviews with native Yoruba, obtained through the William Bascom Collection housed in the University of California at Berkeley Bancroft Library, provide a wealth of information and insight into that

¹⁵⁰⁶ Bascom, Field Notes—Atinga, November 1950 – January 1951.

¹⁵⁰⁷ Morton-Williams, “The Atinga Cult,” 320.

time. Bascom's field notes on Atinga are dated between November 8, 1950 and January 14, 1951.

When Atinga enters a location, it sets about clearing a space and building an altar at the base of a tree near the outskirts of town.¹⁵⁰⁸ William Bascom described the Meko altar in some detail. The following is from page 53 of his field notes dated November 8, 1950:

Under the tree nearest to the rest house, a mud platform about 3 feet by 1-1/2 feet oval had been made in which were set two round smooth stones of different sizes. On it were two blackened hoe handles and a small wooden club with a knob in the end also black, which has been used in dancing before. There was also a small conical bell...and two black small calabashes joined with a chain. Nearby 2 iron rods with the top ends flattened into well-made spear points were stuck in the ground, point upwards, with colanut impaled on the point.

Another shrine was kept in a room of the house where the Atinga priest and Alatinga were staying. A sacrificial knife, bags of kola, chalk, a hoe handle and club were among the items on this shrine. Individuals who thought they were the victims of witchcraft would consult with the Atinga priest in the shrine-room.¹⁵⁰⁹ Bascom also describes young men seated near the shrine sorting bags of kola nuts and cutting only the red kola into pieces.

Kola is an integral part of Atinga ritual and is consecrated by mixing it in the blood of animals that were ritually sacrificed. Morton-Williams describes that while drums were beaten and Atinga youth danced in a circle around the altar, "older men killed one each of every Yoruba domestic animal and bird, cutting their

¹⁵⁰⁸ Morton-Williams, "The Atinga Cult."

¹⁵⁰⁹ Ibid.

throats.” Some of the blood was fed to the altar, with the remainder collected in a large water-containing vessel.¹⁵¹⁰

The pot was “taken out of sight into the bushes behind the altar for the secret preparation of anti-witchcraft medicine.” Kola pieces were added to the blood mixture. Once ready the kola pieces were dried in the sun. This consecrated kola was kept in small bags possibly representative of the containers Bascom saw on the altar. This consecrated kola was sold as a prophylaxis against witchcraft, promising shielding to the person who ate it provided he did not break four taboos.¹⁵¹¹

The taboos were against thievery, adultery, murder, and thinking evil against another person. This number of four taboos is much reduced from the number found in Christensen’s account of Tigari among the Fanti. Most significantly, however, “*Atinga*, the spirit, would kill anyone who attempted to practice witchcraft or sorcery after eating the kola.”¹⁵¹²

The followers of *Atinga* were primarily youth. Young men and women accompanied the *Atinga* elders from community to community as invited. These were young people who had apparently become entranced by *Atinga*, which according to an *Alatinga*, indicated that “*Atinga* has called you to be his wife.”¹⁵¹³

¹⁵¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 316.

¹⁵¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹⁵¹² *Ibid.*, 317.

¹⁵¹³ *Ibid.*, 318.

This aspect is also a hook into Yoruba *oriṣa* worship, where initiates are said to be brides of the *oriṣa*.

The Atinga group also imitated structural elements of Yoruba ritual with inclusion of drummers, a female chorus, and male and female dancers. During the drumming, singing and dancing, trance would be induced in members.

Some youths go regularly into a dissociated state in which they were said to be possessed by *Atinga*, thereby being empowered to recognize witches, and to know where witches lived, and where sorcerers kept their evil properties...The dancers always pointed out women, and usually old women, as witches.¹⁵¹⁴

Morton-Williams specifies that young men who went into such a witch-detecting trance were referred to as *Komfo*, the females as *Aberewa*. When coming before a woman singled-out as a witch, the Atinga would put their wrists up to their foreheads with fingers spread upward to mimic a bird. As recorded on page 65 of Bascom's field notes dated November 10, 1950 and told to him by his informant, Tijani, this hand gesture was used because "when Atinga sees a witch, they see a bird sitting on her head."

Once identified as a witch or of "having witchcraft," a woman was obliged to confess and reveal how many people she had killed using witchcraft. Her name and confession were carefully recorded by the king's scribe. She was also required to relinquish her calabash housing her "witch bird." She would then pay a fee to be cleansed and given the kola to eat, thereby, neutralizing her powers as a witch.¹⁵¹⁵

¹⁵¹⁴ Ibid., 317-318.

¹⁵¹⁵ Ibid., 319.

If she did not confess, her innocence was tested. “Each was required to bring a hen, a half-bottle of gin, and fifteen shillings.”¹⁵¹⁶ The hen was used as an oracle for the spirit of Atinga. The hen’s throat was cut and it was cast on the ground.

While in its death throes, the diviner tapped the altar with one of the altar stones while reciting various praise names of Atinga, such as: “Slayer of witches as a man kills an animal.” If the hen died on its back with its feet pointing to heaven, this proved the woman’s innocence. If not, she was declared a witch and forced to sit in the hot sun on the bare ground every day until a confession was extracted.¹⁵¹⁷

Many women confessed to being witches, most stating that Atinga was the first to accuse them of being a witch and that they did not know how they had become a witch. They nonetheless were ordered to bring their witch-bird containing calabash to the Alatinga. To satisfy this request items from personal *oriṣa* shrines were surrendered—a covered calabash being an integral part of most *oriṣa* shrines.¹⁵¹⁸

Payment of 30 shillings was also extracted from each woman, and she was washed in the blood mixture used for consecrating the kola. The confessed

¹⁵¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁵¹⁷ Ibid., 320.

¹⁵¹⁸ Ibid.

witches were made to eat the ritually prepared kola “so that if they attempted to practice witchcraft again, *Atinga* would kill them.”¹⁵¹⁹

If the accused witch insisted on her innocence, she could be threatened or worse. “Some women who refused to confess were tortured until they yielded; and it was said that at least two were beaten to death.”¹⁵²⁰ The following is an account from page 64 of the Meko notes of William Bascom dated November 10, 1950:

Last evening, the Atinga’s master (Olori Atinga) came to the market and asked Oba that before night witches themselves should dance... Asked drummers to change the rhythm into the voice of the witches. When they began to dance, told them to stand up and dance; this drumming is for you; many of them didn’t want to dance. Master and one of the Atinga men each held one of the iron spears, and gave the black hoe-handles to others, and they danced among the witches, threatening to hit and kill them.

Witches, in their bird form, were said to congregate in baobab and iroko trees. Thus, when dancers possessed by Atinga identified such a tree as a witch haven, that tree was destroyed. First, however, volleys of consecrated kola would be shot into the tree and a dead bird brought forth from the tree and proclaimed a witch. Deceitfulness and myopia are revealed in the following recounted by Morton-Williams:

I once saw an *Alatinga* holding a dead fowl while a tree was being felled, and pointed it out to a man standing beside me, saying we should soon see the *Alatinga* shoot at it and claim that it was a witch from the tree. He

¹⁵¹⁹ Ibid.

¹⁵²⁰ Ibid.

was so enthralled by the *Alatinga*...he then denied that he had seen the fowl being held in readiness.¹⁵²¹

The colonial administration criminalized the activities of Atinga for several reasons, not all having to do with altruism. There was also concern that the high fees charged by Atinga would impinge upon tax collection. This being as it may, “Accusation of Witchcraft” became a prosecutable offense. Although Atinga witch-finding activities continued, a new target emerged—*oriṣa* shrines.

A crowd of youths, headed by supposedly entranced dancers, blowing whistles in time to their steps, would run into houses and destroy domestic shrines, drag out images, fire volleys of magic kola into *oriṣa* houses, knock down the walls, carry off the symbols of the *oriṣa* and heap them all together... Shrines that women had made to commemorate twins they had borne and lost were destroyed with particular zeal.¹⁵²²

It is important to note that the shrines of the predominantly male ancestor cults of Oro and Egungun were spared, however. Prior to the colonial period, these cults were employed by the king to carry out executions of capital offenders, political enemies, sorcerers, and witches.¹⁵²³ The Gelede cult was also spared. One could speculate that because only men danced Gelede, it was mistaken for a male cult by the foreign Alatinga.

Conventionally, accusations of witchcraft were fairly narrow in scope. Accusations were often made within family compounds—at the seemingly mysterious deaths of children, as explanation for barrenness or impotence, and

¹⁵²¹ Ibid., 325.

¹⁵²² Ibid., 325-326.

¹⁵²³ Morton-Williams, “The Atinga Cult.”

among co-wives in competition for the resources and affection of their husband.¹⁵²⁴

Morton-Williams describes a woman's precarious position within the patrilineal clan compound. Much of her security and well-being depends upon the birth of children, especially sons. Not only do sons ensure continuance of the patrilineal line, they also assure their mother's old age because she "is very likely to live with her eldest son, unless she has made a private fortune in trade."¹⁵²⁵

The belief that witchcraft is primarily inter-familial is reflected among the Akan and the Yoruba. "Among the Akan an anyenyi (practitioner of evil magic; male or female; young or old) is effective only in his or her own *abusua*, or matrilineal clan."¹⁵²⁶

This same Yoruba attitude is encapsulated in the following saying: "If death cannot strike one from within the home, death cannot strike one from without." In speaking of the Gelede ritual:

The witches, people explain, "are our wives and mothers, therefore, we want to keep them well disposed towards us, not to kill them or drive them away; we dance *Gelede* to please them."¹⁵²⁷

Here is seen men's ambivalence towards women, or women's power. Men dance Gelede to please the witches, to placate them and thank them for their

¹⁵²⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵²⁵ Ibid., 329.

¹⁵²⁶ Christensen, "The Tigari Cult," 396.

¹⁵²⁷ Morton-Williams, "The Atinga Cult," 326, 331.

support of the community. On the other hand, the all-male Oro society sequestered women while they:

performed rites that were believed to call the collective male ancestors in their paternal and militant aspect to protect the community against dangers from outside—disease and pestilence—and to drive out witches from within it.¹⁵²⁸

Much of this seeming contradiction could be the result of differing conceptions of reality between the Western and Yoruba mind sets or worldviews. Because the Yoruba world is fluid without the sharp black or white, either/or distinctions of the Western worldview, holding *àjé* as simultaneously positive and negative is not contradictory.

Therefore, Gelede is danced to make them happy and keep women positively disposed to their communities. Oro, conversely, is ritual enacted to remove those *àjé* who are afflicting the community. It would not make sense that all *àjé* would be driven away. If so, the community would be left virtually devoid of women.

Atinga First-Hand Reports

Because William Bascom was in Meko at the time of Atinga's arrival, his field notes paint a vivid picture of the witch-finding cult's activities. Below are four excerpts from these field notes. In each instance, it is William Bascom's informant, Tijani, who bears witness and recounts events.

Excerpt 1—Bascom Field Notes Dated November 9, 1950, Page 58.

The following excerpt demonstrates the belief that cats are used as the instrument of witches.

¹⁵²⁸ *Ibid.*

He (an Alatinga) looked into the cat's eyes; very wild. Signaled again for people to follow him, went to a woman's house, passing 20 or more houses. Entered the house and asked "Who owns this cat?" That woman said, "I don't know." He said... "This cat is yours and you sent him to watch me and to see what power I could do and tell what I could do. But now I caught it. You are a witch and you have this cat for your use when you want to go out at night to kill a man or a woman." He killed the cat previously by throwing it against the ground. Then, threw the cat at the woman. He said, "take it up and follow me." The woman didn't want to. He said, "I will hit you (with fist) if you don't."

During my 2009 research trip to Nigeria, I remarked the noticeable absence of cats from the streets of towns visited. The subject was broached during an interview with an Ifá priest in Lagos, who offered the following information when speaking of witches (*iyami*):

Ifá Priest: They can turn into anything they want. They can turn into rats. They can turn into birds. They can turn into anything they like. They can turn into cats, mainly black cats.

Annette Williams: Is that why there aren't many cats around? I was wondering about that. There are not many cats. I was wondering if people kill cats. Are people afraid of cats?¹⁵²⁹

Ifá Priest: Because cats can easily adjust to be the instrument of iyami...if you see the black cats, ooooooh, you know it is witches cat.

Annette Williams: It's interesting how that crosses cultures. Because in the West, also, the cat is a symbol of—they call them familiar, the animal of the witch.

Ifá Priest: They used to fly at midnight. Or at midnight, you can hear them crying like a baby, like a small baby. Or we hear the sound in the midnight when the cats are crying. Cats' cry is like a baby; that is a sign that the witches they are around, that they are also holding a meeting around. That is it.

¹⁵²⁹ The Yoruba word *Yanhun* is translated as "cat," and also "to threaten, promise hostility" (Crowther, *Vocabulary of the Yoruba Language*, 284).

Excerpt 2—Bascom Field Notes Dated November 11, 1950, Page 68.

If an accused woman is cleared of having witchcraft, to retain the cult's credibility, a viable explanation of why she was singled out is offered by the Atinga priest. The following account is related to three women who had been cleared of witchcraft because their hens died feet up. The Olori Atinga (head priest) had the women follow him back to Ile Atinga, the house in which the Alatinga were lodged and in which he had his consultation shrine-room.

When they arrived he told the first woman that a witch had given her human flesh (turned into animal meat) to eat; but she hadn't known. That is why they caught her. He told the second woman the same thing. He said that when the third woman slept, there was a witch in her compound who took her soul and used it for her work. This was while she slept and she knew nothing about it. That is why Atinga caught her.

Excerpt 3—Bascom Field Notes dated November 10, 1950, Page 63.

Below are two examples of confessions obtained by Atinga and related to William Bascom by his informant.

One witch confessed that there were four sections of witches, according to the four quarters of town... They all hold a meeting... There was only one woman, whom she named, who could not attend always. Ask why she could not attend meetings; because she was too young and the witch said she was also Alalufa's wife (head of Mohammedans). They asked where this woman (A's wife) kept her calabash. Witch answered that such young women could only keep their calabashes in their stomachs. Sent for A's wife and asked her to vomit out her calabash; denied. Confessor faced her "You remember you brought one woman's soul to us that you wanted us witches to kill, and we asked you why? You explained to us that she was the first wife of your husband, and the one your husband loves most. And at the same time you know that if she dies, the husband and the property will belong to you." Immediately, everyone knew it was true, because there was such a matter between the women when the first wife died; the witches killed her.

Excerpt 4—Bascom Field Notes Dated November 11, 1950, Page 68.

One woman who has confessed to being a witch speaks of being haunted by the soul of the man she has killed:

Sometimes the spirit or soul of human being fights with them in dreams. Then wake up and go to the pot,¹⁵³⁰ open it, and cast obi.¹⁵³¹ If he wants something (they ask) so that he may go away and let them sleep. Witch was asked: "Who among those you have killed, has anyone troubled you in your dreams." Yes. One Jimo. The first man she had killed; he troubled her much in her dreams. She had to sacrifice [a] cock to the dead man. "How do you make the sacrifice?" When she casts kola, it said that she must tell people near her house that she is going to make sacrifice, and invite them; especially the family of Jimo. When she kills the cock, she must do it in the room with the pot. She must call Jimo's spirit to the pot, before killing. "How do you call the ghost?" "Jimo, you whose death I have caused. You say that you want me to kill a cock for you. This is the cock I bring for you. Please accept it and go away. Never come to me anymore." She cuts its neck and puts small blood on side of pot. Takes cock, cooks it and agidi,¹⁵³² and has friends and Jimo's relatives come and eat. After this, no more trouble; never saw Jimo again. Asked how many she had killed. She said ten children of her own daughter [i.e., ten of her own grandchildren].

One could easily speculate that the obvious reason a woman would confess to being a witches or having witchcraft was to spare herself the physical ordeals of sitting under the hot sun and of physical violence. However, Morton-Williams believes that confessing to witchcraft was, in essence, honoring a social contract. Generally, the women believed the oracle's determination and confessed to causing death and other social ills.

Is part of the accused witch's social contract that corporate angst be expiated at her expense? If so, then one could say that she is serving as a self-sacrificing mother to the community, and could explain Morton-Williams' observation.

¹⁵³⁰ Pot where a small amount of the fat from her victim is stored.

¹⁵³¹ A form of divination using a four-lobed kola nut.

¹⁵³² Cornmeal.

The Yoruba themselves behaved as if they were ultimately aware of the unreality of witchcraft, and of the self-releasing projective function of the accusations; for their reaction was disproportionate to the supposed facts. One cannot believe that if the Yoruba were convinced that these women had each committed a series of murders, they would have been content merely to 'cleanses' them of their witchcraft.¹⁵³³

Morton-Williams also maintains that because postmenopausal women can no longer fulfill their predominant cultural role of childbearing, the role for which they were trained in childhood and which they spend all their adult lives fulfilling, these women were likely to be replaced in their husband's affections by a younger co-wife. "Finding themselves increasingly insecure and unloved as they grow older...they accepted the explanation that it was their witchcraft that had caused their rejection."¹⁵³⁴

Reasons for Atinga's Appeal and Proliferation

It is not an overstatement to say that Atinga enjoyed immense popularity and support. It was usually by demand of the townsfolk that the Alatinga were invited into a community. "There was a riot in Ilaro before the chiefs acquiesced and summoned the *Alatinga*." When the colonial administration outlawed the cult's witch-finding activities in 1951:

The *Olobi* of Ilobi, an educated monarch, protested in the Divisional Council that the *Alatinga* were very useful...He suggested that the *Alatinga* should be registered as "native medical practitioners."¹⁵³⁵

As in Benin, the witch-finding cult charged a great deal for their services in Yorubaland. Every step in the ritual process had a fee associated with it. There

¹⁵³³ Morton-Williams, "The Atinga Cult," 331.

¹⁵³⁴ Ibid., 330.

¹⁵³⁵ Ibid., 333 n. 1, 325.

were fees for membership and for the kola given as prophylaxis; accused women paid for their hen divination and being cleansed of witchcraft had a fee. Large crowds were attracted by Atinga. On page 56 of his field notes dated November 8, 1950, Bascom reports:

Have no population figures yet for Meko, except estimates of 2000 and 5000; must have been 5000 present at various times this afternoon. If average charge is 5/-, then 10,000 shillings or 500 pounds collected for the ceremony.

Substantial financial gifts would be sent as inducement for Atinga to visit a community, and the Alatinga visited numerous communities. On page 177 of his field notes dated December 11, 1950 Bascom mentions: Meko, Aiyetoro, Idesa, Ilori, Oshogbo, Ilaro, Ado, Iseyin, Afon, and Imala. Matory adds Ibadan, Okeiho, Ijio, and Igana.¹⁵³⁶

Thousands of women in these communities were accused of witchcraft, not to mention the individuals who bought the consecrated kola as prophylaxis against witchcraft. In the same December 11th field notes, Bascom indicates that “1900 pounds was collected in Aiyetoro.” Using a historic inflation calculator, it is estimated that 1900 pounds in 1950 is the 2013 equivalent of 56,582 pounds.¹⁵³⁷

Bascom relates, on page 269 of field notes dated January 8, 1951, that his informant’s “brother recently wrote that some 20 Atinga groups had entered Nigeria to get money after they had heard of the success and wealth of the first group.” Many from these groups had been arrested and according to the same January 8th field notes, the “DO (District Officer) set fines of 25 pounds.”

¹⁵³⁶ Matory, *Sex and the Empire*.

¹⁵³⁷ Browning, “Historic Inflation Calculator.”

There were also additional expenses incurred on behalf of Atinga. Travel expenses were paid, and lodging and food were provided for the entire troupe. The amount of money being spent disturbed colonial officials. As previously noted, they were concerned that local residents would not have money to pay their taxes. The costs associated with Atinga's visit to an area, Atinga's fees, and inflated prices caused by high demand for the chickens and half-bottles of gin required of the accused, were straining finances.¹⁵³⁸

Atinga was not welcome by the District Officers nor higher echelon colonial officials, who attempted to limit Alatinga witch finding activities by fines and decree, making witchcraft accusation illegal. When the Meko Atinga were invited to Aiyetoro, the Onimeko (Meko's king) and the Olori Atinga went to William Bascom for advice. The following is from page 85 of field notes dated November 20, 1950.

I suggested that they send word to Aiyetoro that they would come when finished in Meko, and when Aiyetoro had finished paying tax; that the government would like this and it would remove what seems to be a major objection.

The Onimeko was also concerned about his town's imminent tax collection.

Bascom continues that the Onimeko realized that "if they say that government may stop witch catching if people don't pay their taxes, people will rush to pay it."

In spite of the objections and legal roadblocks erected by the colonial administration, and in spite of the high financial cost to individuals and the community associated with Atinga, the cult's popularity was legion.¹⁵³⁹ Below are

¹⁵³⁸ Bascom, Field Notes—Atinga, November 1950 – January 1951.

¹⁵³⁹ Morton-Williams, "The Atinga Cult."

examined theories offered by two scholars for the immense success of the Alatinga in Yorubaland.

A central component of critical theory is examining the interplay of power relationships within a society or entity in question. Both Morton-Williams in “The Atinga Cult” and Apter in “Atinga Revisited” look at the complex power dynamics within Yoruba society that likely contributed to Atinga’s mass support. However, they do so from very different perspectives.

While both consider colonial policy and its political impacts significant, Morton-Williams focuses on sociological factors—especially familial and interpersonal dynamics that come to bear in accusations of witchcraft. Apter primarily speaks to structural shifts within the society resulting from colonial policy and the invisible vagaries of world markets.

Morton-Williams

Morton-Williams ascribes the belief in witchcraft and attacks against it to “symbolic cultural expressions of hidden anxieties, of psychic stress.”¹⁵⁴⁰ Most particularly, to tension and anxiety caused by women’s precarious position within the patrilineal polygamous household.

According to Patricia Hill Collins there are two ways to view power. Power can be understood as a dialectic between competing groups or “as an intangible entity that circulates within a particular matrix of domination and to which individuals stand in varying relationships.”¹⁵⁴¹ This conception of power echoes

¹⁵⁴⁰ Morton-Williams, “The Atinga Cult,” 327.

¹⁵⁴¹ Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*, 274.

the situation of women within the patrilineal Yoruba compound. Those who are favored contribute to sustaining this matrix. Those who threaten the matrix are negatively sanctioned, including being accused as witches.

However, this social pattern of marriage has existed for centuries.

Therefore, it cannot explain the sudden surge in witchcraft fear. Morton-Williams himself states that:

Traditionally, the Yoruba did not, it seems, bring accusations of witchcraft against more than a very small proportion of women, and then only when there was some precipitating cause to suppose them to be peculiarly malign.¹⁵⁴²

The elder within a compound would be apprised of any accusations of witchcraft against an individual, which would often be brought to a *babalawo* (Ifá divination priest) for confirmation and if need be, taken to the Ogboni. Witchcraft accusations would not be subject to the Atinga's summary process.¹⁵⁴³

Another reason cited for Atinga's popularity is decrease in the agency and power of the ancestor cults resulting from the influence of Christianity, Islam, and Western education. Their important symbolic and ritual function of maintaining social and psychological balance had been eclipsed. In fact, Morton-Williams asserts that the "Atinga cult was accepted so readily because it was specific against witchcraft, with no reference to the Yoruba gods, and so Christians and Muslims could share in its activities."¹⁵⁴⁴

¹⁵⁴² Morton-Williams, "The Atinga Cult," 331.

¹⁵⁴³ McIntosh, *Yoruba Women*; Prince, "Yoruba Image of the Witch."

¹⁵⁴⁴ Morton-Williams, "The Atinga Cult," 332.

Atinga also appealed to the adherents of Yoruba traditional religion not only because of its promise to catch and neutralize witches but also because it borrowed many elements of traditional Yoruba worship—possession by deity, drumming, dancing, song, shrine, and blood sacrifice, for example. “To pagans, *Atinga* was a god, to most Christians and Muslims, an angel sent to help them.”¹⁵⁴⁵

Western education brought with it introduction of an alternate worldview into the culture. Within this alternate worldview, humans exert dominion over nature. Therefore, the *oriṣa* as personifications of nature and the natural world lost much of their power in the eyes of Yoruba youth. Though feared, the *oriṣa* no longer inspired awe and respect. On the contrary, attacks on *oriṣa* shines “appear to have been primarily an assertion by youth that their world was triumphant over that of [a] backward-looking age.”¹⁵⁴⁶

Connection with the supernatural power of *oriṣa* was seen as potentiated in elders, particularly, postmenopausal women. Respect for one’s elders is a keystone of Yoruba society; a young man’s traditional greeting of his elders was full prostration. Also, young people are obligated to the support of their elders—“economically less secure but with traditional claims on their descendants’ support.”¹⁵⁴⁷

¹⁵⁴⁵ Ibid., 317.

¹⁵⁴⁶ Ibid., 332.

¹⁵⁴⁷ Ibid., 333.

In this alternate worldview, however, individualism is lauded. Young people, it is argued, were beginning to feel resentful of claims on their resources. So the fact that it was youth who were the primary Atinga adherents, identifying witches and attacking shrines, was in essence young people thumbing their noses both at the traditional sacredness of *oriṣa* and traditional social values.¹⁵⁴⁸

Youth, however, was not generally censured for its conduct because there was political advantage to be gained in squelching *oriṣa* cults. Under the British colonial policy of Indirect Rule, native-headed administrative offices were created and male chiefs gained secular power. The following statement by Matory accents this policy and its untoward consequences:

In an effort to formalize chieftaincy succession principles, British agents assembled elders to make 'chieftaincy declarations,' codifying patrilineal ideological pronouncements that had previously been subject to more flexible negotiation. Matrilineal succession had not previously been so rigidly excluded.¹⁵⁴⁹

With the *oriṣa* cults destroyed or severely weakened, even more power would accrue in the hands of male native administrators and male chiefs. Women's influence in area politics was effected through the female heads of *oriṣa* cults. This influence would be essentially extinguished.

Andrew Apter

Andrew Apter focuses on the economic factors at play that paralleled the surge in demand for Atinga's services and the convulsive clash between the traditional and modern worlds. The individuals that sponsored Atinga were

¹⁵⁴⁸ Ibid.

¹⁵⁴⁹ Matory, *Sex and the Empire*, 76-77.

characterized as the “new indigenous bourgeoisie.” This new elite was predominantly male, colonial educated and thus steeped in the male hegemonic ideology of the colonizer. Many of these new elite were the progeny of chiefs who owed their installation and power to the policies of colonial rule.¹⁵⁵⁰

Critical of an ethnographic tradition that treated indigenous populations as victims without agency and an ethnographic vision that was blurred by the “colonial gaze,” Apter’s “thesis is that the Atinga antiwitchcraft movement responded with alarming vitality to contradictions generated by the cocoa economy.” The cocoa economy with its plantation farming, use of modern machinery, and wage labor was instrumental in effecting changes to political and social relationships. These in turn, according to Apter, “intensified the contradictions of everyday Yoruba life.”¹⁵⁵¹

These contradictions are keenly seen as operating between the sexes in their social organization. Morton-Williams spoke of the vulnerability of a wife, especially a childless wife, in the polygamous household. Such childlessness is viewed as a curse of witchcraft and accusations against co-wives was not uncommon. Inheritance patterns spark jealousy and competition between wives and offspring, with children often warned not to eat food prepared or offered by a co-wife for fear of poisoning.

If a woman comes from a powerful family in her own right, there is fear that she could drain or weaken her husband’s patrilineal line by “optation,” in a sense

¹⁵⁵⁰ Ibid., 79.

¹⁵⁵¹ Apter, “Atinga Revisited,” 112, 115-116.

enticing “sons away from the father’s patrilineage and into the mother’s patrilineage.”¹⁵⁵² Infertility, killing of children, and weakening of male potency are tropes of Yoruba witchcraft.

Economically speaking, Yoruba women engaged in market commerce primarily through sale of the produce cultivated on their husbands’ farms. This market activity could carry them to many towns far from home. Women organized themselves in trading associations for mutual benefit that not only oversaw market activities, but also saw to their wider joint interests within the community.

Represented by a formal female head, the *iyálòde*, who aggrandized considerable political clout, market women controlled the exchange of goods, set collective guidelines, fixed minimum prices, accumulated merchant capital of their own, and maximized personal profits.¹⁵⁵³

Thus, women enjoyed economic and political power in conflict with their domestic roles and responsibilities as wives, mothers, and caretakers of the home. This conflict was seen as “undermining the domestic values of fertility and procreation” and as potentially undermining the husband’s authority, as well.¹⁵⁵⁴

With the backing of the market women’s association, a wealthy wife could gain power and independence. She was then in a position to drain the patrilineage of its potency and progeny by optation and other means. Matory

¹⁵⁵² *Ibid.*, 116.

¹⁵⁵³ *Ibid.*, 117.

¹⁵⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

states pointedly that “women’s financial and social independence from the husbandly patrilineage evoked popular fears of witchcraft.”¹⁵⁵⁵

According to Apter, “the impact of Islam, Christianity, the colonial state, and the cash economy on precolonial productive activities and ideologies was complex and profound.” One effect of Islam and Christianity was expanded commercial activity across ethnic lines, trading with fellow Muslims and Christians and the establishment of “regional and transethnic networks and associations.”¹⁵⁵⁶

Formal colonization did not occur with one proclamation or begin with the 1884 Berlin Conference and the “scramble for Africa.” Lagos became a British colony in 1862 and the amalgamation of territory under the Crown occurred in stages. However, with the 1914 establishment of the Nigerian Protectorate, unifying northern and southern areas and overseen by Sir Frederick Lugard, the modern contours of Nigeria were in place. The Protectorate was administered under the system of “Indirect Rule,” which relied on native authority.¹⁵⁵⁷

In Apter’s estimation, “tribes, chiefdoms, lineage heads, and elders represented the ‘patterns of authority’ that were officially sanctioned—even as they were revised—by the British Crown.”¹⁵⁵⁸ Women were excluded from

¹⁵⁵⁵ Matory, *Sex and the Empire*, 56.

¹⁵⁵⁶ Apter, “Atinga Revisited,” 119.

¹⁵⁵⁷ Biobaku, *Origin of the Yorubas*; Falola and Heaton, *A History of Nigeria*; S. Johnson, *History of the Yorubas*.

¹⁵⁵⁸ Apter, “Atinga Revisited,” 111.

positions of authority. There was scant recognition of the political role played by the female *oriṣa* heads neither was there acknowledgment of the important advisory roles of women in the palace structure.¹⁵⁵⁹

Certain rights and privileges of kings were eradicated by the British. And though it is often stated that chiefs lost power, they also gained a measure of power they did not previously enjoy because their precolonial power was subject to the checks and balances of women of high rank, such as head priestesses.

Yoruba kings lost certain powers of prosecution (e.g., they could no longer authorize the death penalty) and decision-making, but gained the Crown's protection against traditional mechanisms of disaffection and deposition.¹⁵⁶⁰ What subordinate chiefs gained in status as government civil servants, they lost in real power, being subject to administrative demands and directives—such as tax collection—from above.¹⁵⁶¹

With the king's inability to order capital punishment, an important function of the Ogboni Society and the Oro cult was eradicated.

Along with this political transformation, the introduction of cocoa farming for export in Yorubaland had far-reaching social and economic consequences. In the article "Atinga Revisited," Apter cites several examples: the patrilineal compound structure broke down as small family units moved onto cocoa farms; as cocoa farmers became increasingly prosperous, they married more women and

¹⁵⁵⁹ McIntosh, *Yoruba Women*.

¹⁵⁶⁰ As discussed in preceding chapters, the king who had lost favor was presented with a blue parrot's egg, signifying the expectation that the king would commit suicide. The head Ṣango priestess or Iyakere at the Oyo palace could prevent the king from exercising his duties by withholding the paraphernalia of office.

¹⁵⁶¹ Apter, "Atinga Revisited," 119-120.

their wives served as farm managers; and as the profitability of the agricultural sector grew, significantly more women entered trade.

The latter was particularly destabilizing to established norms as it fed “an increase in the provision of petty trading capital by mothers for daughters, contravening the ‘customary’ pattern of husbands providing it for their wives.”¹⁵⁶² Divorce was also a problematic and destabilizing force to patriarchal control and patrilineal cohesion. With some caveats, such as dowry repayment, during the early 1900s, “divorce became a legal option for Yoruba people who were dissatisfied with their marriages...tens of thousands of women seized upon this opportunity.”¹⁵⁶³

Cocoa farming’s increasing profitability also enriched the distributive sector of middlemen. As they prospered, individuals invested in the education of their children to prepare them for what was considered elite occupations in the colonial administration. This education in turn contributed to “the formation of a new educated elite that sought greater participation in local affairs.”¹⁵⁶⁴ This new elite, as brought forth by Morton-Williams, also wanted to distance itself from what it perceived as “backward” old ways.

Apter argues that it is within this context that Atinga should be viewed. “Development of a cocoa economy *intensified* the existing etiology of witchcraft...most important, the tug of war between women’s economic autonomy

¹⁵⁶² Ibid., 120.

¹⁵⁶³ McIntosh, *Yoruba Women*, 60.

¹⁵⁶⁴ Apter, “Atinga Revisited,” 120.

in the marketplace and subordination at home.” He also argues that “the rising commercial elite,” the financiers of Atinga’s activities, had in mind the political and economic strategic advantage they would gain by supporting Atinga.

These ‘new men’ could (*a*) bypass the traditional authority of elders to force an alliance with ‘traditional’ chiefs, who became indebted to them for anti-witchcraft protection; and (*b*) persecute women traders, either directly as witches, or indirectly through general intimidation, into whose traditional sphere of commercial activity the ‘new men’ were intruding... Clearly, a gendered opposition was taking shape, asserting the ascendancy of male over female power in ritual, social, and economic spheres.¹⁵⁶⁵

Apter forms an early link between witchcraft and the state that is revisited in discussions of contemporary witch hunts in Akwa Ibom state occurring in the wake of the 1970s oil boom. Marketing Boards, established by the colonial government, effectively controlled the price that farmers and distribution intermediaries received for cocoa. “The Marketing Boards...if cost-effective for the state, siphoned profits away from farmers and appropriated the surplus value of their labor.”¹⁵⁶⁶

The government also extended credit to cocoa farmers in return for a purchase price below that set by the marketing board. The government worked through local intermediaries, the result being that “kinsmen and affines turned debtors and creditors on an unprecedented scale.” Although the price of cocoa on world markets spiked dramatically during the second half of the 1940s, farmers saw their wealth diminishing.

The ‘witchcraft’ of the cocoa economy meant different things to different people. For farmers, it meant the extraction of surplus value...by the

¹⁵⁶⁵ Ibid., 120, 121.

¹⁵⁶⁶ Ibid., 121.

invisible appetites of an encroaching state, and the inflation of exchange values by unlicensed and licensed buying agents. Within lineages, it meant increased competition for wealth and merchant capital, intensifying segmentation, fission, and nucleation of households, while bolstering the power and autonomy of market women.¹⁵⁶⁷

The frustrations and dissatisfactions with the cocoa economy were encapsulated in the metaphor of the witch and therefore in women's bodies. The reality that the cocoa economy enriched market women while taking them further afield of home, also gave vent in witchcraft. "The Atinga movement objectified the contradictions of cocoa production in the nefarious forces of female power."¹⁵⁶⁸

Atinga Summary

Although Yoruba women's market activities are centuries old and commonplace, problematizing occurs when the balance of wealth tips in favor of women, leading to their greater autonomy and perceived threat to the patrilineage. At this point countermeasures are taken to reinforce male hegemony and subvert women's power. The tipping point in 1950 came with the extraordinary confluence of and rapid change in socioeconomic factors engendered by the sharp rise in the price and profitability of cocoa that coupled with the impact of colonial policies on Yoruba society.¹⁵⁶⁹

British colonialism brought with it significant alteration to the Yoruba religious and political landscapes. In addition to the infiltration of Christianity, colonial policy broke asunder the Yoruba religio-political union and with that,

¹⁵⁶⁷ Ibid., 122.

¹⁵⁶⁸ Ibid.

¹⁵⁶⁹ Ibid.

abrogated a large portion of women's power and influence in the Yoruba political sphere that some might say women are still struggling to reclaim.¹⁵⁷⁰

Yoruba monarchs lost much of their power and the hierarchical chieftaincy system initiated and overseen by the British—paramount, district, and village chiefs—essentially turned traditional chieftaincy into an arm of the civil service. More significant to the present discussion, however, were the divorce laws introduced under colonialism that made it easier for women to leave unsatisfactory marriages.

British restrictions on the ritual conduct of monarchs—especially their sponsorship of witch-controlling cults like Oro—reinforced the sense in the 1950s that uncontrolled witchcraft had proliferated. This sense dovetailed with increasing divorce rates, as well as the growth of capitalist-derived economic inequalities and the consequent tensions in the patrilineal house.¹⁵⁷¹

Atinga was an early release response to the mounting pressures on Yoruba society. Traditional structures and values were being challenged from within and without—from youth educated along Western lines and from colonial challenges to indigenous rule and religion, as well as from market forces. Colonial divorce laws, coupled with increased market trade afforded to women by cocoa, gave women greater autonomy and men the sense that they were losing their patrilineal potency and power. Therefore, it seemed, witchcraft had run amok.¹⁵⁷²

¹⁵⁷⁰ McIntosh, *Yoruba Women*.

¹⁵⁷¹ Matory, *Sex and the Empire*, 79.

¹⁵⁷² Apter, "Atinga Revisited"; Matory, *Sex and the Empire*; McIntosh, *Yoruba Women*; Morton-Williams, "The Atinga Cult."

Women not committed to their roles of bearing children and caring for the home were thought of as consuming their own young and attacking men's potency by compromising patrilineal succession.¹⁵⁷³ The Yoruba bird symbolism can be seen as a dual metaphor for the witch and for independence, representing women's ability to fly away from the home not only in the astral travel of night but also in a very literal sense. Atinga was used to clip the wings of women.

Combining elements of Islam, Christianity and Yoruba traditional religion, Atinga "*familiarized* itself across various religious boundaries." One thing that these religions have in common is fear and abhorrence of witches as malevolent forces. Atinga was a countermeasure that emerged in part to fill the gap created by the diminished prerogative of kings to utilize Oro and Egungun cults to control witches.¹⁵⁷⁴

Sponsored by the new male elites, who owed the preponderance of their success to colonial policies and a burgeoning cocoa economy, Atinga enabled them to wrench control of market share away from women traders. More significantly to Apter, however, both Atinga and the emergent commodity economy "were of foreign provenance, the former establishing a medium in which the contradictions wrought by the latter might be addressed."¹⁵⁷⁵

¹⁵⁷³ Matory, *Sex and the Empire*.

¹⁵⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 79 .

¹⁵⁷⁵ Apter, "Atinga Revisited," 121.

Apter summarizes Atinga as response to “complex dramaturgy of resistance and opportunism, of competing agendas and emerging interests”—colonially educated youth and commercial elites vs. traditional elders and witches.

We must understand how they [women] came to embody the contradictions of a larger world in the southwestern corner of Yorubaland. From this dialectical perspective, both internally derived and externally informed, we can see the Atinga movement for what it was—a complicitous assault on female power in its social, economic, and ritual domains.¹⁵⁷⁶

General Summary

The witch-finding cult of Tigari spread from the grasslands of northern Ivory Coast through northern Ghana, down to the coastal areas and eastward, becoming established in present-day Republic of Benin before entering Nigeria in 1950. Among the Yoruba the cult was known as Atinga. Even as it altered from a cult whose primary, but not only, purpose was the identification and cleansing of practitioners of evil to a cult whose *raison d'être* was catching supposed witches and neutralizing their power, key identifying features of the cult remained.¹⁵⁷⁷

Indigenous spiritual practices were infused with elements of Islam and Christianity. Ritually prepared kola nut remained the “medicine” used as prophylaxis against witchcraft. Confessions were extracted from accused witches under duress, often using violence. “Mercenary” was a term associated with the

¹⁵⁷⁶ Ibid., 122, 113.

¹⁵⁷⁷ Christensen, “The Tigari Cult.”

cult because the financial cost was high to the individual and the community for the cult's services.¹⁵⁷⁸

The cult had a decided male bias that extended beyond its all-male priesthood. Morton-Williams states that he witnessed a woman being identified as a witch by the Alatinga. "I saw her son tell them that she was not a witch...that they would have to fight him first before laying hands on her. They apologised and withdrew the charge."¹⁵⁷⁹ A daughter advocating for her mother would have received no such deference.

Tigari and Atinga both enjoyed wide-spread popularity and support, for similar reasons. These reasons are principally grounded in the preponderance and convulsiveness of system shocks sparked by the impact of colonialism and exacerbated by world economic markets. Existing cultural tensions and schisms were accentuated and new conflicts made manifest.¹⁵⁸⁰

Colonial policy had mixed and often conflictual impacts. Monarchs enjoyed the protection of the British while being stripped of much of their sovereign power. Women, generally, attained more independence while simultaneously losing political influence. Social and economic opportunities and stressors challenged traditional familial structures. Women's greater

¹⁵⁷⁸ Ibid., 394.

¹⁵⁷⁹ Morton-Williams, "The Atinga Cult," 329-330.

¹⁵⁸⁰ Ibid. and Apter, "Atinga Revisited."

independence was especially perceived as a threat to the Yoruba patrilineage.¹⁵⁸¹

The witch devouring her own children and robbing men of their potency is the persona given to women who move too far afield from their primary duty of bearing children and caring for the home. This being as it may, Apter sees nefarious forces in play among the new elite who sponsored Atinga in Yorubaland. Apter maintains that their primary reason for doing so was to remove women from their role as traders in order to take over their lucrative commerce.

Wande Abimbola asserts that Yoruba men have an ambivalent attitude towards Yoruba women and their power.¹⁵⁸² According to Morton-Williams this ambivalence is both enacted and mollified through the rituals of the ancestor cults of Gelede, Oro, and Egungun. Danced by men as a sign of respect, the purpose of Gelede is essentially to keep the witches well disposed towards the community.

On the other hand, Oro is a show of male bravado. Women are forced to remain indoors, under penalty of death, while Oro rites are performed for seven days. This ritual:

creates a male world and feelings of male power adequate to overcome the fear that women might, by giving way to ill-will arising from their social roles, imperil the continuity of the descent groups.¹⁵⁸³

Among other things, the Egungun masquerade is a call for communal unity.

¹⁵⁸¹ Ibid. and McIntosh, *Yoruba Women*.

¹⁵⁸² W. Abimbola, "Images of Women."

¹⁵⁸³ Morton-Williams, "The Atinga Cult," 332.

Nonetheless, the ambivalence is clearly demonstrated in Atinga popularity and success in Yorubaland. Women are both revered and feared. Tradition, ceremony, and ritual maintain the balance of power between men and women. Upsets to this homeostasis, where men feel threatened by apparent demonstrations of female power, result in indigenous checks on this power.

Women's power is traditionally ascribed to them being innately *àjé*. As long as their power as *àjé* is perceived as being used for the betterment of their families and society, it is welcome. I interviewed Professor Akin Alao of Obafemi Awolowo University in Ile-Ife, Nigeria, in 2009. He spoke to this issue.

Annette Williams: So it seems that if a woman became too powerful or had more than her husband, she was easily accused of being a witch.

Professor Alao: Nobody would take any husband seriously for accusing his wife of being a witch. It's normal for a woman to be a witch in a traditional Yoruba setting. What they will ask you to do is to use your *àjé* to improve the quality of life in your family, in your home. We know that they contributed to development of the home. But when they begin to add so many other things to *àjé* like: killing their children, making their families poor, disease.... That is on the negative side. And that could be as a result of so many things, not mystical.

Professor Alao also maintains that the type of witch-hunts seen with Atinga increased at the end of the colonial era. Continuing the above conversation:

Annette Williams: So that this means there is a woman or a group of women chosen as scapegoats, under the banner of being *àjé*...

Professor Alao: I think that started later on. No, I think that started after colonial rule, when people's expectation of a new life was no longer possible. It was like blaming other people for your woes.

When balance is disturbed and men feel threatened by women's power as happened at certain times during colonialism—such as increasing divorce rates and greater autonomy, increased trading success due to the cocoa economy, mothers establishing their daughters in business and the foregoing resulting in

women being less focused on their home-making roles and responsibilities and caring for their husbands¹⁵⁸⁴—men attempt to curtail this power. The scale of Atinga is a direct reflection of the perceived wide scale disruption in this balance of power.

Atinga was of relatively short duration in Yorubaland. The cult was outlawed not only because of its harsh methods but in large measure because its high fees threatened the ability of the colonial administration to collect taxes. Substantial fines were imposed upon anyone making accusations of witchcraft. However, the cult's demise in Yorubaland was more of a whimper as compared with the anticipation surrounding its entry.

In March [1951], the populace began to lose interest and, to some extent, confidence, in the work of *Alatinga*, and to give their time to the heavy farm labor necessary at that time of year.¹⁵⁸⁵

Part of the loss of confidence might have been due to overreach on the part of Atinga. In "The Atinga Cult" Morton-Williams reports that in the Egbado town of Ilaro, the Ogboni lodge was desecrated and the sacred drums were shot through with kola nut. Ogboni is a religio-political institution of elders, who worship the Earth as Ilé and who act as counselors to the king and as adjudicators. This act by the Alatinga, turned the opinion of many chiefs against them, who then decided not to have Atinga visit their towns.

In terms of the modern world and the current global witch-scare phenomenon, it is plausible to assume that this occurrence is indicative of social

¹⁵⁸⁴ Apter, "Atinga Revisited"; McIntosh, *Yoruba Women*.

¹⁵⁸⁵ Morton-Williams, "The Atinga Cult," 326.

stressors and larger issues. In the case of the Atinga witch-hunts in Yorubaland, global market factors were a primary trigger. Likewise, it is possible that current global witch-scares are more than isolated incidents within isolated contexts but are symptomatic of deeper issues, some of which might be associated with current global market interdependencies and inequalities.

CHAPTER 11: CONTEMPORARY EXPERIENCES OF ÀJÉ

“Learning about oral cultures requires meeting with members of the cultures, for oral information comes out of mouths.”¹⁵⁸⁶

Contained in this chapter are the personal perceptions, stories and anecdotes of individuals interviewed for the dissertation. As detailed in the chapter on methodology, conversations and interviews were held with a cross-section of individuals conversant with Yoruba cultural experience. This cross-section included academics, priests, priestesses, and practitioners of Yoruba traditional religion.

Each exchange was opened by issuing the same invitation: “Tell me about your experience of àjé.” The invitation was left purposely vague allowing the interviewees maximum range of interpretation and expression. In asking interviewees to tell me their experiences of àjé, the door is opened to them sharing their perceptions, stories, beliefs, and knowledge.

The purpose for conducting the qualitative interviews was twofold. One was to receive insight on àjé from individuals with knowledge of the subject and expertise in the domain of Yoruba traditional religion. Second, was to hear how individuals experience àjé in the twenty first century.

However, interviewees are not viewed “as treasure chests of knowledge that need to be cracked open but as co-constructors of the treasures themselves.”¹⁵⁸⁷ The treasures shared are a result of the unique interaction of interviewer and interviewee in a particular time and space. Treasures shared are

¹⁵⁸⁶ Hallen and Sodipo, *Knowledge, Belief, and Witchcraft*, 121.

¹⁵⁸⁷ Borer and Fontana, “Postmodern Trends,” 48.

dependent upon the context of each person's subjective truths and objective matters such as location and relationship discussed in Chapter 2.

Much of the general knowledge that was so kindly imparted has been included in the prior chapters. Here, personal perceptions, anecdotes and intimate stories are shared. Because of the private nature of many of the details so open-heartedly provided, no attributions are made. Anonymity is employed.

Parallels and Personal Portrayals

In addition to underscoring areas of convergence between individuals' experiences of *àjé* and the literature, the stories and anecdotes shared in this section highlight individuals' personal experiences of and relationship to *àjé*. As transcripts of the conversations and interviews were read, themes found in the literature and myths of *àjé* became manifest and distinctly reflected in the perceptions and stories of those with whom I spoke.

Though based on the themes of *àjé* presented in the literature and in Yoruba myths, what one reads below is my selective inclusion. In this regard, extensive use is made of the interview participants' own words so that their voices are clearly evident. Using the words of the interviewees also demonstrates the feminist value of assuming a non-expert stance in relation to the meaning of an individual's experience.

As reflected throughout the dissertation, *àjé* is a complex concept encompassing deities, metaphysical beings, and mortals. The conversation of interviewees spanned this complexity and is reflected in Table 1. Yoruba women and the women in general emphasized *àjé* as metaphysical beings, as cosmic energies with which one can interact. While men also spoke to this aspect of *àjé*, every male interviewed spoke to *àjé* as mortals.

Table 1

Àjé Breadth in Interviews.

| | Yoruba males (<i>n</i> = 5) | Yoruba females (<i>n</i> = 4) | Non-Yoruba males (<i>n</i> = 2) | Non-Yoruba females (<i>n</i> = 4) |
|---------------------|------------------------------------|--------------------------------------|--|--|
| Deities | 2 | 1 | – | 2 |
| Metaphysical beings | 4 | 4 | 1 | 3 |
| Mortals | 5 | 1 | 2 | 2 |

Note: Author's table.

Among the literature and myth-given themes presented in the dissertation are the power of *àjé*, the dual nature of *àjé*, their role as arbiters of justice and “guardians of society,” and the important issue of respect. Individual interviews are testimonies that speak to these themes.

Table 2 is a breakdown of the themes found in the literature that were referenced by the individuals interviewed. Men and women generally spoke to

Table 2

Àjé Themes in Interviews

| | Yoruba males (<i>n</i> = 5) | Yoruba females (<i>n</i> = 4) | Non-Yoruba males (<i>n</i> = 2) | Non-Yoruba females (<i>n</i> = 4) |
|--|------------------------------------|--------------------------------------|--|--|
| Dual nature/Positive | 4 | 2 | 2 | 4 |
| Dual nature/Negative | 1 | – | – | – |
| Uniquely positive | – | 2 | – | – |
| Uniquely negative | – | – | – | – |
| Arbiters of justice/Guardians of society | 3 | 2 | – | 3 |
| Importance of respect | 5 | 4 | 1 | 4 |

Note: Author's table.

these themes with the same frequency. Virtually all interviewees (93%) spoke to the issue of respect, and the vast majority (80%) view *àjé* in a positively nuanced light. No one saw *àjé* as unequivocally malevolent beings.

Two Yoruba women interviewed had only positive things to say about *iyami àjé*, and one Yoruba male chose to emphasize *àjé*'s negative characteristics. Approximately the same percentage of Yoruba and non-Yoruba individuals spoke to *àjé* as arbiters of justice/guardians of society.

Àjé Power

A current that ran through all the interviews was the way in which individuals spoke of *iyami àjé* in terms of their awesomeness, their power. Interviewees referred to the source of *àjé*'s endowment, manifestations of their abilities, as well as women as the inheritors of *àjé* and attendant significance.

This reference to *àjé*'s awesomeness was also directly evident in statements such as the following: Their existence "is something of infinity." "They have a lot of power." "They, *àjé*, *àjé*, *àjé*; they are powerful. They are really powerful. They are really powerful." "They are spirit...they are all around." *Àjé* is "something you cannot really fathom." "We will not dominate men. We will be their equals. But if they don't allow us to be equal, we can chastise them."

The power of *iyami àjé* to transmogrify is found in the following story of what the interviewee referred to as "witch birds."

I remember the first time I saw a gathering of witch birds. They covered my backyard. It was just amazing. I looked out my window and I saw all of them and I went: *Oh, what's going on?* And the Western mind and the African-American mind said: *Oh, this is not a good sign—all these blackbirds.* Then I thought: *Wait a minute; look the other way.* And it was just an honor to have them have a meeting in my grove.

This individual continued, imparting the lesson of looking for deeper meaning in such a gathering:

What is it that it is telling you that this many birds [pause]. What are you physically and metaphysically able to feed them and sustained them [with] that they would come to you? And what is it that you are working on now that they are coming to help you work on?...It was like somebody sending you a text message. *Like hey, what are you working on? Talk to us right now because we are in convention.* Yep, it's a big prayer circle.

With regard to women being *àjé*, an interviewee in Yorubaland specified that women's power is "something that you cannot resist" and refers to this power as "spiritual leverage." He shares a colleague's comment: "Look, let us first bear the realities of life. Women are in control. We are just carrying out their bidding."

In terms of women being accused as *àjé*, an individual stated:

Nobody would take any husband seriously for accusing his wife of being a witch. It's normal for a woman to be a witch in a traditional Yoruba setting. What they will ask you to do is to use your *àjé* to improve the quality of life in your family, in your home.

Another interviewee gave the following succinct explanation and summation of witchcraft accusations: "Women are born with Odù between our legs. That is the power men want to control."

Interestingly, all interviewees referred to *àjé* as beings as opposed to defining *àjé* in the abstract as *power*. Also, none referred to men as *àjé*. A primary area spoken to in individual interviews addressed the character of *àjé*, which goes back to a critical distinction between the witch and *àjé*. Whereas the witch is thought of as unequivocally evil, *àjé* is not.

Character of Àjé

While most individuals spoke about the duality of *àjé*, one or the other side of the duality was often emphasized. There was also some unilateral reckoning of *àjé*.

Positive or Nuanced

One interviewee speaks of his experience of *àjé* as “a good one; a very positive one.” He credits this with the fact that he has spent a great deal of time with “people who have a very holistic view of the notion of spiritual power and the *àṣe* of our mothers...and how it needs to be honored; it needs to be respected.” Another individual simply and emphatically states: “Our *iyami* is good, is good, is good, is good, is good, is good.” While a young Yoruba man says: “My experience about *àjé*, which is our mother, is a great experience.”

The following is a particularly poignant story that shows *àjé*'s power and kindness but that also demonstrates that there are strict guidelines to which one must adhere.

The most benevolent thing that I have ever asked the *àjé* to help me with was preserving my mother's life. And when they did that for me, they said you can only do this so many times; don't come again. If you come again to fight death, you have to come for yourself. Don't come again.

Many of the *odu* reviewed detailing interaction between *iyami àjé* and Orunmila demonstrate how Orunmila calms the anger of *iyami àjé*. With reference to the *àjé*'s mercurial dual nature is the following statement that also reiterates how one stays in *àjé*'s good graces:

You can't just say “*oh, they're cool with me.*” They are hot spirits, and they can wreak havoc. But they also can bring peace out of confusion...They give safe passage when appeased. They can also block your road when you forget what you said you would bring them or when you completely ignore them.

It has been seen that Hallen and Sodipo characterize *àjé* as superior intelligence and ability. This portrayal is echoed by an interviewee who stated:

The concept of witches to me means people who have supernatural powers...people who have supernatural intelligence that can work it. And if you can work it bad, then you have knowledge of working it good....So that's the embodiment of both energies.”

Popular Perception and Fear

The following quote, used in Chapter 6, is repeated here because it summarily describes the image of *àjé* as malevolent beings:

A witch's malignancy may be turned upon a man for almost any reason—for some slight impoliteness, or because he accuses her of being a witch, or because he is just getting too high in the world or often for no reason "just because they are evil women."¹⁵⁸⁸

In making mention of this general fear that people have of *àjé*, one interviewee stated that "they are afraid because they think that our *iyami* have a powerful something that will kill them."

While acknowledging *àjé*'s dual nature, another individual spoke in detail of the negative attributes and behaviors of *àjé*. He also spoke of a negative personal experience.

They can attack a *babalawo* in a spiritual way....It's when you sleep, you will see marks on your body....By the time [*sic*] you wake up, you might see marks on your body. I used to have marks before [*checking his body to see if any are still visible*].

The following dialogue is included in detail because it's so closely parallels and exemplifies the above quote from the Prince article.

There are people who were born with characters that are bad. People are bad minded....Maybe they see you, and you are driving a new car. Maybe they see you, and you are moving to a good house...That's the beginning of problems.

So, the witches can say: "Oh, this guy he is passing this place over and over, and he didn't greet. Who is he?" That's how they are going to start. Or, you play music in your house. Your loud music, it disturbs her.

When you're living together in the compound, you're able to prepare food. Your food is smelling nicely. They are unable to prepare food. They don't even have money to buy even *gaari*.¹⁵⁸⁹ They will say:

¹⁵⁸⁸ Prince, "Yoruba Image of the Witch," 797.

¹⁵⁸⁹ Grated dry cassava.

“Oh, because you have money that’s why you can make a fried egg or prepare soup that is nice smelling.”

Annette: Envy and jealousy and things like that?

Yes. And secondly, even if you give them something, they will still hurt [you] badly.

Yes. If you buy the old building for them, if you give this building to a witch who was already wicked, she will take it from you [*feigning tinkering, ingratiating laughter of, apparently, grateful, iyami*]...“Because you buy this for me, does not make me less likely to kill you. I will still kill you.”

Yes. They will still do that. They will tell you that by the time [*sic*] [because] you bought this, and build this house for her, this means you are proud. You are proud to buy this for her. You are proud; we call this the bragger. You are proud.

Or maybe you also bought a car for her. You give her the car with some money. She will say: “Oh, this guy bought a car for me and with money. The money he has given and the car he has bought for me, I know he would surely buy more than this car for a mother, and he would surely give more than this money to a mother. Oh!” So that’s where it is started.

Annette: There is a lot of negative thinking.

Exactly. They are just wicked. They are just wicked. So once you have your something with you, Ifá will protect you. Ifá is protecting us. That’s why witches cannot attack us or undo us. But my prayer is that I am going to see their goodness. They also have goodness, I swear. But their very bad something is more than their goodness.

Arbiters of Justice and Guardians of Society

The role of *iyami àjé* in the domain of justice and as guardians of society was concretely established in connection with their role in Ogboni and as celebrated in Gelede. One interviewee describes *àjé* as protective mothers “who don’t like their children to suffer, who take good care of their children. Whatever evil is coming their way, they try to protect them.”

In contrast to the popular belief of *àjé* using their powers for ill, another interviewee states that when calling upon the energy of *iyami àjé* “it’s usually to right a wrong rather than to do wrong.” An example of this perspective is given in the story of a woman who avows that *iyami* helped her extricate herself from a

problematic marriage. It is also a rarely touted example of conversion to Yoruba traditional religion.

Our *iyami* is good. Anything I want, they do it for me. When the time [*sic*] I came here, I have problems, some problems. I am [from] a good family, good Muslim, family [is] Muslim. Before I join this place when I have so many problems....In 2004 our *iyami* tell me that some problems I have when I started to do sacrifice, our *iyami* tell me that I will conquer my problems. When is 2005, since then, the problem is solved for me....Is family, is husband....I'm not a Muslim no more....I am Iya'loriṣa!

In our conversation about *àjé*, justice, and fear, an interviewee spoke about an ongoing cycle in association with this that I have taken the liberty to summarize. Out of a sense of justice, *àjé* would attack people using drugs and herbs and, therefore, gained a dangerous reputation. People responded negatively and fearfully to them. The more people responded adversely and fearfully, the more they would be attacked.

Because the reality of life is different now with fewer people understanding traditional religion and its values, people don't understand that there is a reason associated with a sense of justice and clear values that prompted attack by *àjé*. Ignorance leads to an ongoing cycle of fear/disrespect and reprisal. She states: "They [*àjé*] have their values, but people they don't understand. They just talk about all these negatives about them, which it is not [*sic*]."

Àjé and Respect

The literature, myths, and interviews revealed that *àjé* are considered "a hot spirit," as articulated above by an interviewee. As such, one must approach them and treat them with deference and care, for *àjé* can be quick to take offense. Demonstrated abundantly in the mythology, disrespect is the primary infraction one can commit against *iyami àjé*. The cautionary tale of the hunter, Idi, found in *Odu Ifa* Idi Owonrin and discussed in Chapter 7 is but one example.

A *babalawo* interviewed said: “We *babalawo* and witches, we are not working together, or with each other. But at the same time, we have to make sure we create a space for them out of respect.” A priestess stated: “You have to give them their own honor... If you have appeased them and you respect them, you know that they assist [you].”

Another individual speaks of the respect accorded to *iyami àjé* and gives the lesson of respect through her actions:

They are sisters; we know, and we respect it. Yes. We don't disrespect them or disregard. We know they exist. We treat them with due respect that they put positive side to us.

Annette: That they may show us their positive side?

Yes. Because they have this positive and negative. At times the [negative] reaction may come, but it is the ethics of Yoruba religion to be humble with them.

She continues with the following story:

And with my experience—You know, one time I traveled with my child of about six months. I went to a wedding in Abeokuta. But when I got there, the couple had just left for Lagos. It was about to rain, and then they said I should wait... And there were three women—and I think a fourth—and they were older women. And when I was ready to sleep, they put down the mats. You know, it is done one, two, three. Then I put my child here, and then I slept here [*indicating placement*]. That's how I slept all through [the night]. And you know, the next day one of them just told me that I did well. Because if it had been somebody else, this person would have put the child away from them.

Yes. You know, because it was like here [at that moment] they were really showing me who they are. But I didn't say [*makes a sound of surprise*].

Yes. I just put my child and then I slept. The child is in between and with that they didn't put this [*sid*], and then they prayed [They didn't react negatively; instead, they gave a blessing]. But if I would say: “Okay, these are these people [*àjé*]” and then put this [*indicating a barrier/being protective of her child*], it could have been another thing.

Working with *Àjé*

Though only one individual self-identified as *àjé*, two women on either side of the Atlantic shared how they work with the energy of *àjé*. For these women it seems especially true that the research topic “is part of their ongoing self-story and represents a manifestation of their psychological world.”¹⁵⁹⁰

“Oh grace, powerful friend descend on me.” This invocation is recited seven times by the first woman. “This is how I get the power...in the name of our *iyami*. I praise that name.” This woman speaks of prayer, sacrifice, ritual cleansing, and anointing when working with *iyami àjé*.

“When we call on *iyami*, use kola. Kola will tell us that she is around.” The interviewee is referring to the opening and throwing of a four-valved kolanut used in *obi* divination. Once supplication has been made in prayer, the kolanut is used to confirm if the energy of *iyami àjé* has responded.

“Sacrifice you do it in the night...at about 9 o’clock.” The primary offerings made are bean cakes (*akara*) and kolanuts. She then went on to speak about the soap with which one washes and the cream that is used on the body. “There is soap...black soap with leaves, bitter leaves...ground bitter leaf. And we use in the night before you sleep on Saturday.” She explained that Saturday is *ose iyami*, *iyami*'s day.

“After you don’t want to go out [no longer need to go out for the night], wash with that black soap and go and sleep. You will see our *iyami*...They come to you when you are sleeping.” A cream mixed with herbs can also be used on the

¹⁵⁹⁰ J. A. Smith, “Semi-Structured Interviewing,” 10.

body for the same purpose of enabling one to see *iyami* in one's sleep. "There is a cream; you use the cream.... They will come to see you, to show you."

Some of the particulars of working with *iyami àjé* were explained by a second interviewee. This individual received her training in Ibadan, Nigeria under the tutelage of renowned practitioners of Yoruba traditional religion. She spoke to the guidelines of working with *iyami àjé* as well as its metaphysics.

Guidelines

When I am looking for a space where *àjé* live, I'm looking for something that's in between the living and the dead.... They're just waiting there in the doorway, in the between.

[There are] strict rules and guidelines.... You would not call your *àjé* sisters on a whim, and their responsibility is such that they won't come and respond to that frivolity. Like, *oh my boyfriend made me mad*. Oh, please! No.

There is a respectful petition.... You have to ask several times.

They often work on a seven in terms of, I need seven of these or I need seven of that; drop it at seven crossroads or seven cemeteries.

The second guideline calls to mind the admonition that *àjé* should not be joked with, which was given by Orunmila to his *babalawos* in *Odu Ifa*

IreteOgbe.¹⁵⁹¹ One does not invoke *àjé* lightly. In the number seven, is an interesting point of convergence between the two women working with *àjé* energy.

As noted above, the first calls power to her by a repeating an invocation or preamble to prayer seven times.

Metaphysics

A coven of witches can move anybody's destiny, but that requires some deep, deep oaths that you are bound to keep.

¹⁵⁹¹ Verger, "Ìyàmi Òṣòròngà."

Working with *àjé* is magic. It is the earth magic; this is not mind freak magic. It is understanding herbs and energy and planet alignments and your own power and the power of breath and spoken word.

They hang out in places where we don't, and can see things that we can't in the metaphysical realm. And as people who have been graced with the ability to understand that energy as *àjé*—the responsibilities and the abilities really require you to stay open and clear about energy and how energy moves because there are times when you have to be open to what the spiritual *àjé* are saying to you so that you know the medicine that you need to use...because there is no book on *àjé* that says, *ok, use this or that*. There is no Book of Shadows to work with *àjé*.

This individual states that the *àjé* "are available to all of us. When we run from them, they just laugh. They're like: *Silly one.*"

Summary

In all likelihood because each individual interviewed had a deeper than average knowledge of the subject and understood its intricacies, discussion content was consistent across groups. There was little discernible difference between native Yoruba and non-Yoruba interviewees or between males and females in commentary regarding *àjé*.

Themes present in the literature were reflected in the words of the individuals interviewed, illustrating the centrality of these themes to discussion of *àjé*. References to *àjé* as deity, metaphysical beings, and mortals reflected the breadth of *àjé* as found in the literature. An overarching or interconnecting element was recognition of *àjé*'s power. Respect for the power of *àjé* was reflected by the way in which *àjé* was spoken of and in direct reference to their power.

Individuals spoke to the character of *àjé*, *àjé* as arbiters of justice and guardians of society, as well as the issue of respect with regards to *àjé*. Because the interviewees are all intimately familiar with Yoruba traditional religion, it was

not surprising to find that the vast majority had a nuanced view of *àjé*, acknowledging *àjé*'s dual nature. This view is as opposed to the negatively skewed or popular conception of *àjé*.

It is highly conceivable that among the *àjé*'s primary roles is the avenging of sexual violence against women. Sexual crimes against women, the abuse of women by husbands or mates are areas reported to me more than once in which *àjé* have acted. The request for redress is brought to the committee by an *àjé* or the supplications and sacrifice of a victim is heard and answered.

The energy of *àjé* is here in the twenty first century. Contemporary stories of *àjé*, such as the “witch birds” recounted above by an interviewee add to the literature. That contemporary *itan* is a tale from the African Diaspora that adds to the understanding of *àjé* and appreciation of that power.

The energy of *àjé* that is here in the twenty first century is energy associated with creation and the beginnings of time. Ostensibly from the universe's inception almost 14 billion years ago, some form of this primordial feminine energy has infused our cosmos. Though this energy came to be feared and disparaged, it is time for reclamation of and reconnection to the primordial feminine so needed to realign the world and bring it into balance.

CHAPTER 12: CONCLUSION AND THEORY BUILDING

Iyami àjé are feared, honored and venerated as the “gods of society.”... They safeguard the moral and material good of society exactly through their life-giving as well as potentially destructive qualities.... It is the ambiguity of witchcraft which maintains the social order and the growth of society.¹⁵⁹²

Thesis and Finding

Yoruba ontological orientation is one in which the feminine is esteemed and viewed as a central component in the balance of the universe as well as in maintaining social order and functioning.¹⁵⁹³ *Àjé* is the power of the primordial mothers most directly embodied in and expressed by their earthly daughters. However, the word *àjé* is translated as witch and witchcraft with the connotations of that translation.

Women who wield *àjé* are said to contain within themselves the seeming polarities of spirit and matter, of dark and light. The lore surrounding *àjé* and their powers engendered the attitude of fearful respect.¹⁵⁹⁴ The factors that exacerbated their fearsome aspects to the virtual abnegation of their positive dimensions as “guardians of society”¹⁵⁹⁵ in whose care and keeping were entrusted “all good things”¹⁵⁹⁶ called for investigation.

¹⁵⁹² Drews, “Guardians of the Society,” 22.

¹⁵⁹³ Olajubu, *Women in the Yoruba Religious Sphere*.

¹⁵⁹⁴ W. Abimbola, “Images of Women.”

¹⁵⁹⁵ H. J. Drewal and Drewal, *Gelede*, 9.

¹⁵⁹⁶ Abiodun, “Hidden Power,” 16.

The working hypothesis contemplated patriarchal structures within and influences upon Yoruba society as catalysts to the vilification of *àjé*, the latter most notably in the form of religious influences and colonialism. The research uncovered that patriarchal evolution within Yoruba society buttressed and augmented by the patriarchy of British imperialism as well as the economic and social transformations wrought by colonialism coalesced to undermine *àjé* power and function.

Discussion

A major point of this undertaking was to gain greater understanding of *àjé* and the interrelationship of *àjé* with women in Yoruba society. Women's power and the exercise of that power in sacred and secular domains extend into Yoruba antiquity. Tremendous respect was accorded women's spiritual power. Considered mysterious and ineffable, it is little wonder that Yoruba men are said to have an ambivalent relationship to Yoruba women and their power.¹⁵⁹⁷

The dissertation was designed to assess the factors involved in perception and treatment of *àjé*. As such, *àjé* was situated and defined within Yoruba sociocultural context. In this regard, Yoruba oral tradition as contained within *Odu Ifa* was central to the undertaking. Yoruba history, cosmology, and ontology are held within the mythistory of its oral tradition.

Historical claims and archaeological evidence paint a picture of women in prominent positions early in Yoruba history. These women, by definition of their roles and functions, were *àjé*. However, it is readily apparent that the Yoruba

¹⁵⁹⁷ W. Abimbola, "Images of Women."

relationship to *àjé* is complex. *Àjé* is multifaceted. As revealed in *Odu Ifa*, perception of *àjé* is complex and paradoxical. The term *àjé* is used to describe beings who are simultaneously the bane of humanity and the protectors of society, ensuring fertility and well-being.

A line of inquiry was ascertaining if and how Yoruba perceptions of *àjé* changed over time. This facet was considered especially in light of the Christian and colonial incursion into Yorubaland. Accurately gauging Yoruba perceptions of *àjé* prior to the mid-nineteenth century is difficult. Early writers on Yoruba culture were invariably from the West or Christian educated. Western cultural filters inextricably influenced interpretation and transmittal, often being at odds with Yoruba cultural values.¹⁵⁹⁸

Defining Àjé

Àjé is multi-representational. *Àjé* is spiritual power, and it is simultaneously the primordial beings said to own this power, as well as earthly women endowed with this power. *Àjé* is also used within a wider context as the superior intelligence, talents and the abilities of individuals, male or female. *Àjé*, as power, is the quintessential definition of female power and is closely related to the blood mysteries of menstruation and childbearing.

Olodumare, whose mother is Python and whose father is Wind, engendered the universe. Unfortunately this Yoruba “Supreme Creator Essence,”¹⁵⁹⁹ is generally conflated with the Judeo-Christian God. Olodumare, is

¹⁵⁹⁸ Hallen and Sodipo, *Knowledge, Belief, and Witchcraft*.

¹⁵⁹⁹ Badejo, *Ọṣun Ẹ̀g̀g̀sí*, 56.

credited with bestowing *àjé* upon the primordial female deity. The fact that Olodumare gave women the gift of *àjé* is recounted more than once within the *Odu Ifa*. Arguably the most important *odu* with respect to *iyami àjé* is Osa Meji. It speaks of *àjé* being bestowed upon the “first woman,” Odù. In *odu OṣeTaura* it is Oṣun who is gifted with *àjé*.

It has been seen that it is within Iya’Nla, the Great Mother, that *àjé* lies. Also, *àjé* is housed within the deities of great antiquity such as, Onile and Odù, which are considered equal or senior to Olodumare.¹⁶⁰⁰ *Àjé* was present at the very beginning of time, at the inception of the universe when matter, energy, space, and time are said to have been created as were universal laws such as gravity. Aina Olomo underscores that “although Orunmila was the witness to the creation, the Mothers were also there.”¹⁶⁰¹

Lawal characterizes Iya’Nla as “Mother Nature”¹⁶⁰² and gives the title “grand matron of the *àjé*”¹⁶⁰³ to both Iya’Nla and Odù. Iya’Nla is honored with praise names also used for *iyami àjé*. “Some include: “*Ìyàmi Òsòròngà (the Great and Mysterious Mother)*, *Ìyá Agbè (Mother of the Closed Calabash)*...[and] *Ìyàmi Wa (Our Primordial Mother)*.”¹⁶⁰⁴ Iya’Nla, the Great Mother from whose womb all emerged, is honored in *Gelede*. As a corporate being “Our Mother is a complex

¹⁶⁰⁰ Lawal, “Ejiwapo.”

¹⁶⁰¹ Olomo, *Core of Fire*, 131.

¹⁶⁰² Lawal, *Gẹ̀lẹ̀dẹ̀ Spectacle*, 71.

¹⁶⁰³ *Ibid.*, 73.

¹⁶⁰⁴ Alcamo, *Ìyá Nlá*, 19.

primal force of the creation and the universe.”¹⁶⁰⁵ Figure 3 lists the main attributes ascribed to *àjé*.

| Beneficial Attributes | Fearsome Attributes |
|---|---|
| Fertility of land and people | Anti-fertility: stopping menstruation, miscarriage, impotence |
| Health and well-being | Striking/afflicting silently and invisibly |
| Prosperity | Sucking one’s blood |
| Moral justice | Vengeful |
| Counterforce to male hegemony and mistreatment of women | Eating one’s entrails |
| Maintenance of natural law | Inscrutable |
| Social cohesion | Wreaking havoc |

Figure 3. Primary *àjé* attributes.

Sources: Data from Abiodun (2001); Alcamo (2006); Elebuibon (2008); Hallen and Sodipo, (1997); Olomo (2011); Prince (1961); Verger (2007); Washington (2005).

Note: Author’s figure.

Àjé is more powerful than the *oriṣa*, and as seen in *odu IreteOgbe*, more powerful than Orunmila.

They say, Odù whom you wish to take as a wife,
They say, a power is in her hands...
They say (so that) she would not kill and eat him with her power,
because the power of this woman was greater than that of Ọ̀rúnmìlà.¹⁶⁰⁶

Odu Ifa IreteOgbe also speaks of Odù offering cooperation and protection to Orunmila and “his children” the *Ifá* priests or *babalawos*. Significantly, Odù is the wisdom of Orunmila’s priests. Orunmila admonishes the need to placate, mollify,

¹⁶⁰⁵ Olomo, “Our Esteemed Elders,” par. 23.

¹⁶⁰⁶ Verger, “Ìyàmi Ọ̀ṣòròngà,” 169.

and soothe the ruffled feathers of *iyami àjé* because no one has the ability to fight them successfully.

Others can possess *àjé* but only women can be *àjé*.¹⁶⁰⁷ Although *iyami* and *àjé* are often used interchangeably, distinctions are made. Olomo speaks of *iyami* as a “female collective entity”¹⁶⁰⁸ and as “a manifestation of a collective primordial soul.”¹⁶⁰⁹ As women *iyami* are those whose *àjé* is of exceptional potency and who are members of the highly shielded Iyami Society. Every *iyami* is *àjé*, however, not every woman who wields *àjé* is an *iyami*. “Not all females embody Iyami.”¹⁶¹⁰

Odu Ifa Oyeku Okanran speaks of humans and *iyami* coming to earth together; humans (*ogbori*) had 10 children while *iyami* only had one. This *itan* (story) leads one to wonder if the proportion of incarnated individuals who embody *iyami* is in the order of 10%, those females who are born as mystics, who have psychic and other spiritual abilities.

Olomo refers to *àjé* as “one of the manifestations of Iyaami.”¹⁶¹¹ Badejo and Washington speak of these exceptional *àjé*. Women as *àjé* “are an embodiment of power and an expression of the matrix of potentiality from which

¹⁶⁰⁷ W. Abimbola, “Images of Women.”

¹⁶⁰⁸ Olomo, “Iyaami Osorongá,” par. 15.

¹⁶⁰⁹ Olomo, *Core of Fire*, 124.

¹⁶¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 127.

¹⁶¹¹ Olomo, “Iyaami Osorongá,” par. 43.

that power emanates.”¹⁶¹² Mortal women who comprise the *àjé* “are the actual living embodiments of *Ìyàmi*; they are *Àjé*.”¹⁶¹³ These women are extensions of the Great Mother.

All elderly women...priestesses of the deities, wealthy market women, and female title-holders in prestigious organizations...are affectionately called “our mothers” (*awon iya wa*). The positions they have attained, it is felt, are evidence of their power.¹⁶¹⁴

Though there is opinion that one can become *àjé* by initiation into the *Iyami Society*,¹⁶¹⁵ there is countering belief that only *àjé* demonstrating exceptional ability are chosen for initiation into the *Iyami Society*.¹⁶¹⁶

Hallen takes *àjé* out of the primarily metaphysical realm, focusing on them as human beings and the powers of *àjé* as reflective of “superior intelligence and ability.”¹⁶¹⁷ Figure 4 is a listing of several key power associated with *àjé*. As exceptional humans, Olomo states that *àjé* have “psychic powers or spiritual powers and abilities that are not common...They have access to portions of their brain that other people don’t have.”¹⁶¹⁸ By far the most widely spoken of power in

¹⁶¹² Badejo, *Ọṣun Ẹ̀gègèsí*, 76.

¹⁶¹³ Washington, *Our Mothers*, 20-21.

¹⁶¹⁴ M. T. Drewal, *Yoruba Ritual*, 177-78.

¹⁶¹⁵ Elebuibon, *Invisible Powers*.

¹⁶¹⁶ Olomo, “*Iyaami Osorongá*.”

¹⁶¹⁷ Hallen, *Good, Bad, Beautiful*, 92.

¹⁶¹⁸ Olomo, “*Iyaami Osorongá*,” par. 43.

connection to *àjé* is the ability to transmogrify, particularly into birds that could be an allusion to astral travel.

| List of Powers Associated with Àjé | |
|--|--|
| Transmogrification | Flight (astral travel) |
| Conduit of spirit | Unbound from linear time |
| Primary use of will/mind vs. substances to achieve ends | Straddles the realms of spirit and matter |
| Psychic abilities: clairvoyance, clairaudience, clairsentience | Ofo aṣe (command aṣe): power of manifestation from the spoken word |
| “Witches arrow”: projecting malevolence from a distance | Awopa Àjé: ability to see one’s internal organs |
| Omusu Àjé: power of a woman’s vagina contained in the cervix | Power to enhance or nullify medicinal preparations |

Figure 4. Key *àjé* powers.

Sources: Data from Abiodun (2001); Alcamo (2006); Elebuibon (2008); Hallen and Sodipo, (1997); Olomo (2011); Prince (1961); Verger (2007); Washington (2005).

Note: Author’s figure.

There is varied opinion on who possesses *àjé* and how *àjé* is acquired. Defined as mystical power by Opeola, he states that anybody can be *àjé*. It is just a matter of training. While some, for instance the onisegun interviewed by Hallen and Sodipo, say that *àjé* cannot be taught; it is innate—a person brings it into incarnation as part of their destiny. This power can be manifested in several ways—by individuals who actively tap into, develop and use this innate power; by individuals who are naturally gifted in its use; by individuals who express it passively, who use it whether or not they are aware of that fact.

Àjé is most commonly believed an endowment of women and that it is strongest in postmenopausal women. However, men and even children are said

capable of possessing àjé. Men are thought to need the assistance to *iyami àjé* to use their àjé because male àjé “flows from the mothers.”¹⁶¹⁹ This belief adds an interesting dimension to the expression *behind every successful man there is a great woman*.

Àjé is said to be transmitted through the womb. Alternately, one chooses àjé before birth. Àjé can be exchanged—granted as a gift or legacy, or purchased as a commodity from the *Iyalode*. It is also thought that transferal of àjé can be done through ingestion of the saliva-tainted food of an àjé or through other substances. This transmittal is said to be done surreptitiously by malicious àjé looking to swell their ranks. Once ingested and upon going to sleep, the individual finds herself at a meeting of *iyami àjé* at which time she is initiated.

In spite of or because of *iyami àjé*'s connection to primordial divinity and their endowment of great power, àjé are feared. Humans and àjé have a contentious relationship that myth lays at the feet of human mistreatment of àjé and human betrayal of oaths taken with àjé. These tales are found in *Odu Ifa* Oyeku Okanran and “Oba àràngo.”¹⁶²⁰

Àjé perception and treatment in society as contrasted with àjé's spiritual placement is a conundrum. While àjé is spiritual power embodied in individuals, àjé as spirit or as a spirit collective is treated differently than the woman who is known to be àjé. There is a distinction to be made in the Yoruba socio-cultural

¹⁶¹⁹ Olomo, *Core of Fire*, 124.

¹⁶²⁰ Elebuibon, *Invisible Powers*, 18.

attitude towards the spiritual power as contrasted with the woman who possesses this power.

Eṣu and *àjé* both straddle two sides of the universe—“good” and “evil.” While, among other things, Eṣu is known as the divine trickster and divine enforcer, he is not reviled. *Àjé*'s connection with justice also would make it appropriate to use the appellation, divine enforcer, in their case. Eṣu is an *oriṣa*, manifest in nature and through possession of his devotees, but nonetheless immaterial spirit. *Àjé* straddle the metaphysical and physical realms.

Àjé is embodied in flesh and blood women. “They inhabit the world and live in virtually every Yorùbá household.”¹⁶²¹ As such, blame and projection can easily be attached to them. Negative social traits are ascribed to them. *Àjé* become the scapegoats against who fear and anger can be directed. *Àjé* are flesh and blood that can be punished for perceived inexplicable personal and social distress. According to Lawal:

It is easy to suspect that the men might have fabricated the *àjé* phenomenon to make a scapegoat of women for most of the misfortunes in a male-dominated society such as that of the Yoruba... Certainly fabricated by the men is the notion that women are secretive, deceitful, and vindictive.”¹⁶²²

Figure 5 is a visual summary that reflects my understanding of the many ways in which *àjé* is perceived. Whether latent, active, innate, or acquired, the power of *àjé* is envisioned as emanating from Our Mothers as metaphysical beings.

¹⁶²¹ H. J. Drewal and Drewal, *Gẹ̀lẹ̀dẹ̀*, 276 n. 1.

¹⁶²² Lawal, *Gẹ̀lẹ̀dẹ̀ Spectacle.*, 33-34.

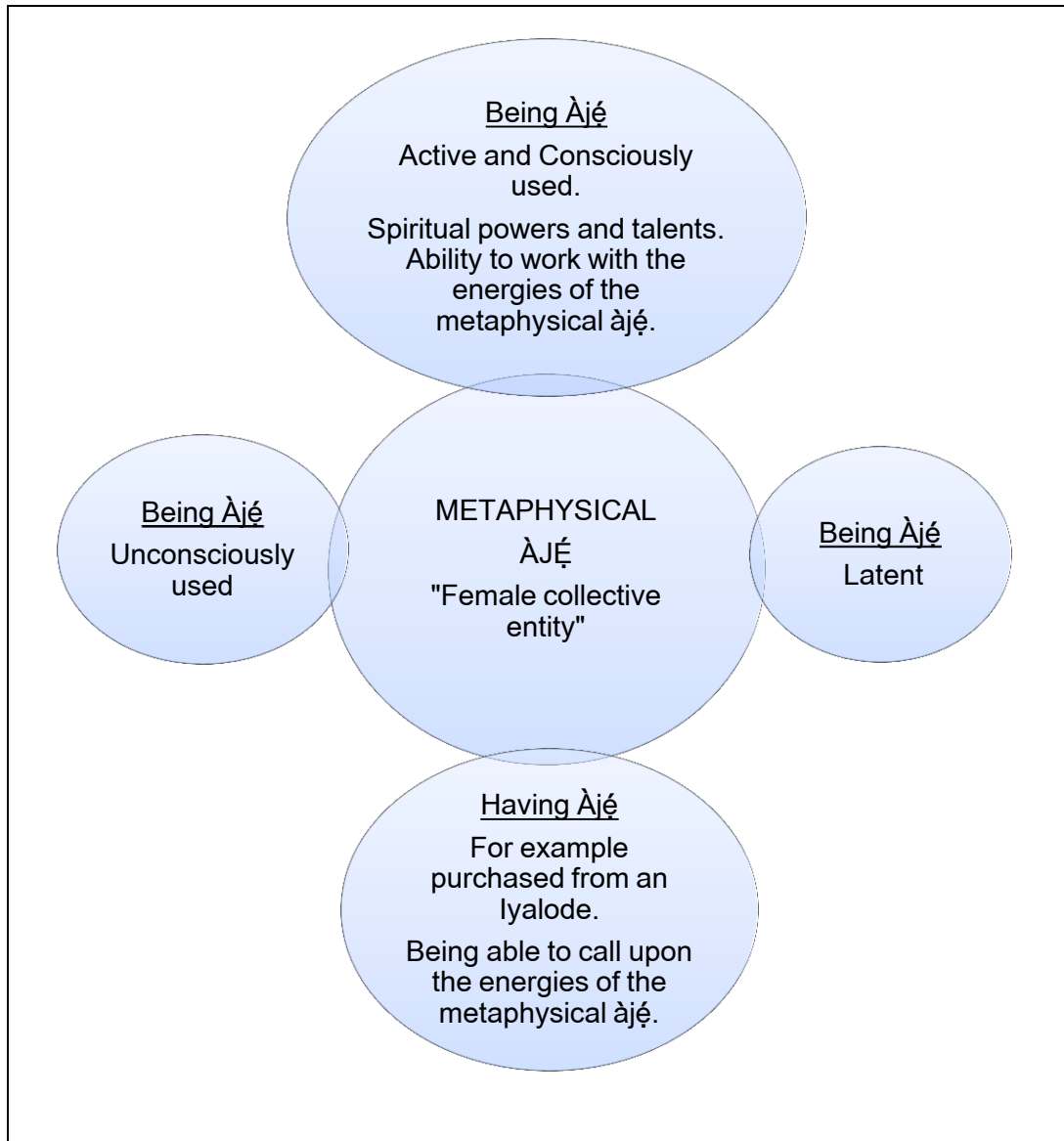


Figure 5. Àjé distinctions.

Sources: Data from Abiodun (2001); Alcamo (2006); Elebuibon (2008); Hallen and Sodipo, (1997); Olomo (2011); Prince (1961); Verger (2007); Washington (2005).

Note: Author's figure.

Women's power is explicitly acknowledged within Yoruba cultural tradition. It is represented in and supported by Yoruba cosmology and mythological lore as *àjé*. Historically women's power has operated in the political, sacred, civic, and economic arenas. Founding mothers of kingdoms, rulers, regents, palace

administrators, priestesses who link rulers with the sacred power of divinity and sanction their rulership, guardians of the society seated upon judicial councils, and powerful market women—these are some of their historic roles.

The fear of *àjé* is based on their “awesome powers” as exemplified by *àjé* characteristics and praise names. The following are a few lines from two *àjé oriki*.

My mother òṣòròngà
The immaculate bird...
She who renders charms and spells impotent...
The famous dweller of the night...
She who eats the head via the arm; the liver via the voice box; the
intestines via the gallbladder...
The fighter who fights one invisibly¹⁶²³

Homage,
To whom do I pay homage?
To whom do I first pay my homage?
I pay homage to you Òṣòròngà, my mothers.
You Alágo esúró (“one whose beak is for esúró yam”)
O birds Alajogun.
My mothers, you start your feast with the liver and end with the heart.
Opé pé, the broad back.
You who stretched all hands for red palm oil,
I pray you help me to succeed.¹⁶²⁴

Figure 6 is a flowchart of various representations and manifestations of *àjé*. In keeping with Aina Olomo’s characterization, *iyami* is seen to be the collective primordial female entity from which *àjé* emanates.¹⁶²⁵

¹⁶²³ Adewale-Somadhi, *Yorùbá Religion*, 167.

¹⁶²⁴ Lawal, *Gẹ̀lẹ̀dẹ̀ Spectacle*, 122 (part of Gelede Oro Efe incantation).

¹⁶²⁵ Olomo, “Iyaami Osorongá.”

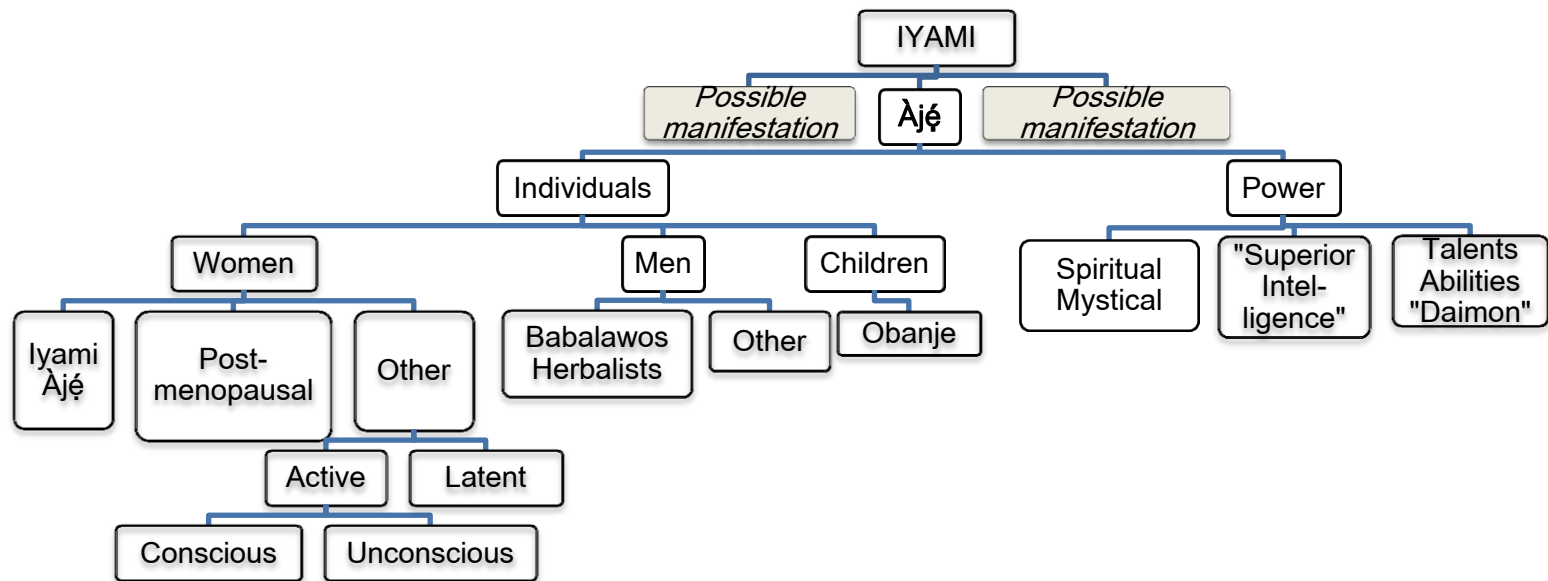


Figure 6. Flow chart of àjé representations.

Sources: Data from Abiodun (2001); Alcamo (2006); Elebuibon (2008); Hallen and Sodipo, (1997); Olomo (2011); Prince (1961); Verger (2007); Washington (2005).

Note: Author's figure.

This force by its nature is dominant. It is not difficult to fathom the images and force of *àjé* engendering fear, especially as sacred knowledge became arcane or was lost. The average Yoruba individual did not learn about the esoteric aspect of *àjé*. While being aware that *àjé* could be both malevolent and beneficial, for most the dominant paradigm was the former. *Àjé* instilled fear.

Within *àjé* are two countervailing images. Within *àjé* the mystical realm meets social reality in both the negative and positive manifestations of *àjé* and interpretations of female behavior. Women who transgress social bounds are branded with *àjé*'s negative sting and women of power such as priestesses who fill needed social roles are *àjé* as “mothers.”

Bottom line is that any woman can be perceived as *àjé cum* witch whether she is cool and composed or quarrelsome, whether she is smiling and friendly or cantankerous, whether she is industrious, wealthy and generous or an impoverished old woman living on the margins. These are all characterizations of women who are *àjé* or witches.

Prevailing popular notions of *iyami àjé* were strengthened by the Western (Christian) conception of the witch and of woman as the source of sin and the cause of humanity's fall from grace. The position of taking reprisal against women was strengthened by colonialism—the Victorian image of women as the “weaker sex,” whose role is one of obedient domestication to male subjugation.

Perceptions of *àjé* became predominantly negative as women lost prestige and their powers became debased.

Colonialism and Christianity conferred upon *àjé* the lopsided and distasteful translation of “witch” thereby relegating its meaning accordingly. *Àjé*

came to be associated and conflated with a popular stereotype of the witch—evil female, malicious misanthrope with no redeeming qualities bent on social disruption.

As noted, this characterization is far from accurate. It is a characterization that reflects Western discomfiture with women's power as encapsulated in the Christian engineered and decreed notion of the witch. In the West the original witch is associated with wisdom and herbal expertise. It was for usurpation of their power, whether as healers or land owners, that women were branded and persecuted as witches.

A problem is that *àjé* is a singular term used to define multiple and conflicting agents and actions. There does not seem to be a very clear way to differentiate between *àjé* accused of antisocial acts, as opposed to the concept of *àjé* that encompasses the duality of dark and light. Nor is there a delineating term to speak of *àjé* in their role as “guardians of society.” The English word *witch* is not nuanced enough in its common usage to hold the multiple realities encompassed within the Yoruba term *àjé*.

On the one hand the witch is regarded as a force of malevolence and disruption. On the other...witchcraft [is] regarded as a positive force underlying Yoruba conceptions of the universe.¹⁶²⁶

As seen in their article, “A Comparison of the Western ‘Witch’ With the Yoruba ‘Àjé,’” Hallen and Sodipo regard the former as popular or exoteric understanding while the latter is an esoteric or deeper understanding, for within it one learns that the *iyami* are tasked with ensuring fertility and social harmony.

¹⁶²⁶ Rea, “Prevalence of Witches,” par. 8.

However, as generally rendered, the term *àjé* is associated with negative, destructive forces. In general Yoruba consciousness, *àjé* is considered negative.

It seems the positive gifts or attributes of *àjé* are taken for granted and not commonly spoken of. When the word *àjé* is used, when it is spoken, it is generally understood to be referring to negative, antisocial, destructive women and their behaviors. One almost needs to read between the lines of the *Odu Ifa* as transmitted and transcribed to awaken to the positive power of *àjé*.

Although the research of Hallen and Sodiopo presented in their article, “Comparison of the Western ‘Witch’ with the Yoruba *Àjé*” and book, *Knowledge, Belief and Witchcraft*, disproves the equivalence of witch and *àjé*, the overwhelming majority of references to *àjé* uncovered in *Odu Ifa* either directly or euphemistically cast *àjé* in a negative light. The term *àjé* and its euphemisms were routinely translated as witch.

Granted, many of the divinatory verses are essentially cautionary tales that prescribe treatment for affliction or threat of affliction and renders the sad fate of those who did not heed counsel. However, it was nonetheless surprising that verses were not found in which requests for blessings were made directly to *iyami àjé* with the exception of *Odu Ifa Ofun Meji* as rendered by Epega and Neimark in which requests for financial prosperity can be taken to *àjé*.¹⁶²⁷

Nonetheless, it is important to bear in mind is that the power of *àjé* can be used both constructively and destructively, for benefit or for bane. Though activities of *àjé* can be “aimed at ensuring progress, happiness and well-being of

¹⁶²⁷ Epega and Neimark, *Sacred Ifa Oracle*.

human beings...and can bring about peace and prosperity to individuals and the community,"¹⁶²⁸ *iyami àjé* can use their power for harm. However, action cannot be taken against an individual indiscriminately or wantonly. Approval of the Iyami Society is needed and the offense must warrant negative sanction. *Odu Ifa* delineates disrespect as an act that *iyami àjé* finds dangerously egregious.

Àjé are gifted with the ability to tap into and transmit and utilize numinous force and neutral energy. How this energy is used depends on the individual—for good or ill, for self-gain or in the service of justice. Therefore, among those known as *àjé*, the general temperaments of humans, in their full range, are evidenced. *Àjé* are, therefore, neither universally evil nor universally good. Their *modus operandi* does elicit fear because of its mysterious, unseen nature.

As humans we are capable of dark and light, also the deities and also *àjé*. The truth is that energy is energy; *aṣe* is *aṣe*. If the soul of the practitioner is dark, then spiritual power will be used for harm or selfish gain. Ideally, however, this spiritual power will be used for communal good. One will be blessed with *àjé* in their manifestation as “our mothers” and the “guardians of society.”

Historiography

Historiography provided an orientation to the Yoruba, established the importance and use of oral tradition, situated *àjé* within Yoruba historical and socio-cultural context, and revealed the antiquity of powerful women in Yoruba society, women who one would consider as being or possessing *àjé*. As discussion of Yoruba cosmology and ontology frames the worldview and

¹⁶²⁸ Elebuibon, *Invisible Powers*, 35.

philosophical orientation within which one finds *iyami àjé*, colonial imperialism is discussed to demonstrate its impact on Yoruba ontology and women.¹⁶²⁹

The importance of *Odu Ifa* is reflected in its use as a historical record in addition to housing the cosmology and evidencing the ontological orientation of the Yoruba. Use was made of oral tradition and myth to gain a fuller perspective of *àjé*, at the same time keeping in mind the caveats with respect to oral tradition. One such caveat is the political use of oral tradition that changes a story to further a political agenda.¹⁶³⁰

Oral tradition also highlights historical changes within Yoruba society. Stories of origin and creation myths for example reflect the subjugation of an indigenous population by the invading Yoruba, with Ile-Ife being the center of power. The same category of myths then reflects the rise of Oyo hegemony.¹⁶³¹

Women as founders of kingdoms, rulers and regents, and women in high chieftaincy positions as counselors and administrators were revealed through Yoruba oral history and archaeological evidence uncovered near Ile-Ife. For Oyo, historical records disclosed the important place of women within the Oyo palace

¹⁶²⁹ Apter, *Black Critics and Kings*; Blier, "Kings, Crowns and Rights"; Law, "The Oyo Empire"; Matory, *Sex and the Empire*; McIntosh, *Yoruba Women*; Obayemi, "Ancient Ile-Ife."

¹⁶³⁰ Bascom, *Ifa Divination*; Beier, "Historical and Psychological Significance"; Beier, *Yoruba Myths*; Biobaku, "Use and Interpretation of Myths"; Epega and Neimark, *Sacred Ifa Oracle*; Vansina, *Oral Tradition as History*.

¹⁶³¹ Apter, *Black Critics and Kings*; Beier, "Before Oduduwa"; Biobaku, "Use and Interpretation of Myths"; Idowu, *Olódùmarè*; Lawal, "Ejiwapo"; Matory, *Sex and the Empire*.

structure, and the power of many nineteenth century *Iyalodes* is well documented.¹⁶³²

The historical role of priestesses in the installation of monarchs and in kingship rituals is also documented. This melding of secular and spiritual function was also manifest in the key roles played by women in the administration of justice, namely through Ogboni.¹⁶³³ By evidence of power, position, and prestige all the women spoken of above are *àjé*.

Myth revealed legends of influential women and tales of *àjé* as primordial female divinities of great power able to thwart or bless the endeavors of human and deity alike.¹⁶³⁴ Demonstrated within myth is the central place of female divinity, of female spiritual power, to the oracular priests of Ifá. Odù is the wisdom of *Ifa*. Additionally, in order for an Ifá priest to perform initiations, he must possess the calabash of Odù.

Women are also said to have possibly contributed *Ifa* and Egungun to Yoruba culture. *Ifa* is said has been brought to the first Oyo kingdom by a woman from Ota who was the mother of *Alafin* Onigbogi.¹⁶³⁵ There is a mythistorical tale

¹⁶³² Abiodun, "Women in Yoruba Religious Images"; Afolabi and Olasupo, "Female Gender in Traditional Leadership"; Denzer, "Yoruba Women"; S. Johnson, *History of the Yorubas*; Law, "The Oyo Empire"; Oyewumi, *Invention of Women*.

¹⁶³³ Apter, *Black Critics and Kings*; Lawal, "Edan Ogboni"; S. Johnson, *History of the Yorubas*; McIntosh, *Yoruba Women*; Olajabu, *Women in the Yoruba Religious Sphere*; Olupona, "Women's Rituals, Kingship and Power."

¹⁶³⁴ W. Abimbola, "Bag of Wisdom"; Abiodun, "Hidden Power"; S. Johnson, *History of the Yorubas*; Verger, "Ìyàmi Òṣòròngà."

¹⁶³⁵ Law, *The Oyo Empire*.

of the Egungun cult being brought into Yorubaland by Oya,¹⁶³⁶ wife of the early Oyo ruler, Şango. Along with her husband, Oya became a prominent deified ancestor in the *orişa* pantheon. As female deity, she is *àjé*.

Patriarchal Shift

While not the original intention of the research, it was intriguing to find the evolution of patriarchy traced in Yoruba mythology. In the chapter on Yoruba cosmology, two creation myths were encountered that place the primordial male and female deities on equal footing. Subsequent myths tell of usurpation of earth's domain and position by male deity.¹⁶³⁷

Osa Meji as transmitted by Verger in "Iyami Osorongá" appears to highlight three periods—patriarchy, in which Odù had no power; matriarchy, in which Olodumare bestowed upon Odù power greater than the male *orişa*; and a sharing of power between Odù and Obatala. OşeTaura, a minor and ostensibly later odu, speaks of male hegemony and disparagement of the feminine. This attitude of the male *orişa* is challenged by Oşun.

As *àjé*, Oşun was able to stymie the endeavors of the male *orişa*, and she is reported to have organized the earthly *iyami*. The indispensability of the feminine to the success of any undertaking was acknowledged.¹⁶³⁸ This shift from a matrifocal or matriarchal orientation is evident within Yoruba oral tradition.

¹⁶³⁶ Kerr, *African Popular Theatre*.

¹⁶³⁷ W. Abimbola, "Bag of Wisdom"; Abiodun, "Hidden Power"; Elebuibon, *Invisible Powers*; Epega and Neimark, *Sacred Ifa Oracle*; Lawal, "Ejiwapo."

¹⁶³⁸ W. Abimbola, "Bag of Wisdom"; Abiodun, "Hidden Power."

As seen in the chapter on Yoruba cosmology and ontology, the shift is clearly represented in *Odu Ifa* Ogundalrete.¹⁶³⁹ The establishment of male hegemony is also evident from *Odu Ifa* ObaraOkanran spoken of in Chapter 6.¹⁶⁴⁰ It is possible to speculate that at this juncture the fearsome aspects of *àjé* become preponderant as the debasement of women's power became politically advantageous.

In "Iyami Osoronga" Verger maintains that the myth of the descent to earth of Ogun, Obatala, and Odù found in *Odu Ifa* Osa Meji illustrates that patriarchy was the early gender paradigm in Yorubaland. It was after Odù received the endowment of *àjé* from Olodumare that the dominant gender paradigm became matriarchy. Subsequently, Odù lost some of her power to Obatala through misuse, and a reconciliation is recorded, in what Verger characterizes as a sharing of power.

According to Yoruba mythistory, the principal deity of the indigenous population was the male Obatala. The Yoruba brought with them their worship of a female divinity, Oduduwa. Although with Yoruba encroachment the autochthonous population and their deity were subsumed, it appears that Ile-Ife *oni* Obalufon I—who predates Oranmiyan—reintroduced the worship of Obatala due in some measure to civil unrest.¹⁶⁴¹ This act can be said to represent a

¹⁶³⁹ Epega and Neimark, *Sacred Ifa Oracle*.

¹⁶⁴⁰ Elebuibon, *Invisible Powers*.

¹⁶⁴¹ Blier, "Kings, Crowns, and Rights."

sharing of power between the principal deities of the Yoruba and indigenous populations.

However, several minor odu—possibly reflecting later origin—speak of the establishment or reestablishment of patriarchy or speak of patriarchy as the norm. The former includes ObaraOkanran and Ogundalrete.¹⁶⁴² The latter is reflected in OṣeTaura in which Oṣun, as *àjé*, effectively challenges the male hegemony.

While the tale of Odù is a cautionary tale to women, that of Oṣun is a cautionary tale to men. Both speak of the dangers associated with unbalanced use of power, where there is lack of balance between the male and female principles. Nonetheless, both Osa Meji¹⁶⁴³ and OṣeTaura¹⁶⁴⁴ end by advising that the utmost respect should be granted women because they birth humanity.

Borrowing from Lerner,¹⁶⁴⁵ one of the indicators of such a shift is the usurpation of the powers of female deity by male deity. This usurpation is most famously represented in the myth that recounts Odù's loss of the Egungun masking tradition to Obarisa (Obatala). The same myth found in *odu* Osa Meji also speaks of men's use of violence in the subjugation of women.

Olodumare first gave wisdom and the power of *ẹlẹiyẹ* to the woman.
But with intelligence and cunning the man takes it from the hands of woman.
When Odù saw that this Eégún had a whip in his hand,
She also fled, she also became a frightened thing.

¹⁶⁴² Elebuibon, *Invisible Powers*; Epega and Neimark, *Sacred Ifa Oracle*.

¹⁶⁴³ Verger, "Ìyàmi Òṣòròngà."

¹⁶⁴⁴ W. Abimbola, "Bag of Wisdom."

¹⁶⁴⁵ Lerner, *Creation of Patriarchy*.

Ha! When she became a frightened thing,
Ọ̀bàrìṣà leads this Eégún around the entire town.¹⁶⁴⁶

It was beyond the scope of the present work to ascertain when in Yoruba history such a patriarchal shift might have occurred. However, Johnson indicates that the egungun masking tradition was adopted by the Yoruba from the Nupe after the Nupe vanquished the first Oyo kingdom and retained with the circa sixteenth century establishment of the Oyo Empire. “The first Alapíni with the other Egúgun priests...emigrated from the Tapa [Nupe] country to Yoruba, joining the remnants returning from the Bariba country.”¹⁶⁴⁷

In ancient Ile-Ife, at the time of legendary Moremi and archeological evidence pointing to women as rulers and founders of kingdom, is there evidence of Oro or other cults as witch-finders and executioners of witches? Or does that function begin with the Oyo Empire? Does Oyo proximity to, interaction with, and probable influence from the Islamic north come into play? These are questions for subsequent research.

In *The Creation of Patriarchy* Lerner asserts that an aspect of a shift to patriarchy is male divinity being attributed with female endowments of power. An example of male divinity being endowed with female power is Zeus giving birth to Athena. On the question of male *àjé*: Is this an example of male usurpation of female power? The original myths all specify *àjé* as an endowment of women.

Although males can be endowed with *àjé*, it has been asserted that their power of *àjé* is derived from the mothers. However, the *onisegun* with whom

¹⁶⁴⁶ Verger, “Ìyàmi Ọ̀ṣòròngà,” 144.

¹⁶⁴⁷ S. Johnson, *History of the Yorubas*, 160.

Hallen and Sodipo¹⁶⁴⁸ conferred did not speak of the mothers as contributing to the efficacy of male *àjé*. The inference was that their *àjé* functioned independently.

The patriarchal shift evident in myth can be traced in Yoruba historical developments. This shift, Christianity, and the consequences of colonialism and colonial policies on women's lives and leadership roles are summarized next. Their impact on *àjé* is reviewed.

Colonial Imperialism

The problematic translation of *àjé* as witch/witchcraft was discussed at length, including the Christian perspective towards the witch that contributed unfavorably to the position of *àjé*. Colonialism brought with it loss of power for women in their traditional power-sharing roles with men, and colonial policies exacerbated structural tensions between the genders.¹⁶⁴⁹

Behaviors changed and actions taken against *àjé* appeared to escalate. Along with colonial impact, this change can be ascribed in large measure to displacements of war. War and the virtual dismantling of the traditional Oyo palace structure, saw with it diminution of women's roles and positions of sacred and secular authority.¹⁶⁵⁰

¹⁶⁴⁸ Hallen and Sodipo, *Knowledge, Belief, and Witchcraft*.

¹⁶⁴⁹ Denzer, "Yoruba Women"; Dove, "African Womanism"; McIntosh, *Yoruba Women*; Okome, "What Women, Whose Development?"

¹⁶⁵⁰ S. Johnson, *History of the Yorubas*; Matory, *Sex and the Empire*.

Though the Ibadan period saw the rise of the *Iyalode*, her power was not based on ritual or sacred authority. The extent of her power was also diluted by patriarchal forces as was demonstrated in the cases of Madame Efunsetan and Madame Tinubu, the former murdered by an Ibadan general, the latter exiled by British colonial forces.¹⁶⁵¹

Futhermore, the subsequent colonial period saw a decline in the authority of the *Iyalode* and women's political authority in general.¹⁶⁵² The uprooting of communities as a result of the nineteenth centuries wars, of course, entailed disruption of sacred rituals and priestess functions. The wars were particularly pitched in the Egbado and Ketu areas, home to Gelede.¹⁶⁵³ Therefore, it is reasonable to assume that the custom of honoring *àjé* was severely impacted. Christianity had by this time entered the hinterland.

Yoruba traditional religion is inherently pragmatic, based on exchange. Propitiation and sacrifices are offered to the deities in exchange for, in general terms, a good life. The nineteenth century war-driven upheaval and displacement of thousands upon thousands of individuals must have shaken faith considerably. It is little wonder that Christian missions first became implanted in Abeokuta, a city founded by refugees fleeing wars and slave raids.¹⁶⁵⁴

¹⁶⁵¹ Denzer, "Yoruba Women"; S. Johnson, *History of the Yorubas*.

¹⁶⁵² McIntosh, *Yoruba Women*.

¹⁶⁵³ S. Johnson, *History of the Yorubas*.

¹⁶⁵⁴ Payne, *Events in Yoruba History*.

As late as 1850 “Dahomans killed and captured about 20,000 people at Okeodan,”¹⁶⁵⁵ in southern Egbado. At that juncture it is probably safe to say that the *àjé* sacred trust of overseeing the community was felt to be ruptured particularly in the Gelede regions of Egbado and Ketu.

Already adversely affected by war, under the doctrines, influence, and lure of Christianity—with its promise of salvation, education, and facilitation of trade with the British—the place of the *oriṣa* cults in Yoruba society waned.¹⁶⁵⁶ *Pagan* worship was disdained. *Oriṣa* Eṣu was equated with the devil. *Àjé* became equated with the Western witch.¹⁶⁵⁷ No longer nuanced, *àjé*'s fearsome attributes were magnified to the exclusion of *àjé*'s socially positive functions.

With the diminution of *oriṣa* cults and the institution of the systems of colonial rule—male chiefs given augmented power—the authority of the priestess in the political functioning of communities was negated. Virtually eliminated was the mitigating influence of the priestess and female chiefs on male prerogatives of power. Women's voices and concerns as represented by the priestesses, female chiefs, and women in authority such as *Iyalode* were severely weakened to near silence.¹⁶⁵⁸

¹⁶⁵⁵ Ibid., 50.

¹⁶⁵⁶ Beier, “Historical and Psychological Significance”; M. Oduyoye, *Christianity in Yorubaland*; Washington, *Our Mothers*.

¹⁶⁵⁷ M. Drewal, *Yoruba Ritual*; S. Johnson, *History of the Yorubas*; Lawal, *Gèlèdédé Spectacle*; Mair, *Witchcraft*.

¹⁶⁵⁸ Apter, *Black Critics and Kings*; McIntosh, *Yoruba Women*.

Colonial export crops—palm oil and cocoa—led to greater wealth for many women. This relative wealth, coupled with divorce laws, saw the increased independence of women. Perceived as threatening to patrilineal and patriarchal hegemony, anti-fertility attributes were ascribed to powerful women. Witch accusations served to keep women in line. Atinga was an example of this tactic on a wide-scale.¹⁶⁵⁹

Summary

In looking at the story of *àjé*, one can see the evolution of patriarchy within Yorubaland. According to Akin Alao, former head of the Obafemi Awolowo University department of history, during the era of Ile-Ife dominance there is more mention of women rulers. Archaeological evidence supports the reality of powerful women during this early period in Yoruba history.

Moving into the period of Oyo hegemony, women hold sacred and secular roles of power and importance within the palace. However, one does not frequently hear of female rulers. The functions of *àjé* are still highly prized, particularly in terms of priestesses in religious and political roles.¹⁶⁶⁰

Coming to the time of Ibadan and virulent male hegemony, there was virtually no mention of women as rulers. Warlords were the rulers, taking power by force. With the imposition of colonialism, are the British who did not even fathom Yoruba women holding roles of power. Therefore, when the British chose their administrators and their chiefs, they chose from among Yoruba men. In the

¹⁶⁵⁹ Apter, "Atinga Revisited"; Apter, *Black Critics and Kings*; Falola and Heaton, *A History of Nigeria*; McIntosh, *Yoruba Women*.

¹⁶⁶⁰ S. Johnson, *History of the Yorubas*.

establishment of colonial laws women's voices were not acknowledged. With Christianity *àjé* truly became disparaged, and the power of *àjé* truly became disparaged.¹⁶⁶¹

There is no doubt that *iyami àjé* can be fearsome and fierce. "They are the female energy that hunts, stalks, and kills. They have immense power and few boundaries. This is how they are."¹⁶⁶² However, it is the emphasis on the fearsome aspects that is problematic. As noted the vast majority of *odu* verses found portrayed *iyami àjé* in a negative light. There are scholars who believe that the positive representations of *iyami àjé* are not being made available.¹⁶⁶³

Carrying on with established patriarchal custom, it serves the purposes of a political elite descended from a colonial administration and Christian religious leaders to maintain a male-oriented status quo by disseminating or maintaining the fearful image of female power, or worse, not acknowledging female power at all. Olomo states that "due to many historical and cultural reasons, verses of *Ifa* that contain the stories, taboos, and powers of the primordial mothers are not widely published."¹⁶⁶⁴

¹⁶⁶¹ Apter, *Black Critics and Kings*; Matory, *Sex and the Empire*; McIntosh, *Yoruba Women*; Washington, *Our Mothers*.

¹⁶⁶² Olomo, *Core of Fire*, 127.

¹⁶⁶³ Alcamo, *Ìyá Nlá*; Fatunmise, *Iyami Osorongá*; Olomo, "Iyami Osorongá."

¹⁶⁶⁴ Olomo, "Iyami Osorongá," 279.

Theory Building

A theory of multiple causation is encapsulated in the finding stated at the beginning of this chapter. No one aspect explains the treatment of *àjé* or the inception of a wide scale twentieth century witch-finding movement. Taken individually neither the historical progression of patriarchy within Yorubaland, nor the impact of Christianity, nor the social and economic impacts of colonialism account for the phenomenon.

Each contributed to sullyng the image of *àjé* and each weakened *àjé*'s purview. However, it is the convergence of these three influences that led to a widespread vilification of women and entry into Yorubaland of the Atinga witch-finding cult.

Atinga grew out of and reflected many of the consequences of colonialism. However, the political power of women within Yorubaland had been gradually eclipsed from the time of Ile-Ife, through the Oyo Empire, and into Ibadan's ascendancy. Women's spiritual agency and political power were closely linked.

Priestesses invested rulers with their power, served as advisors on administrative and judicial councils, and were key figures in ensuring the health and well-being of their communities. The displacements of the nineteenth century Yoruba internal wars and the rise of the militaristic Ibadan state, eroded many of the structures within which women exercised power.

The dissertation employed "multiple paradigms...to collect and analyze data and to cultivate varied representations of a complex phenomenon."¹⁶⁶⁵

¹⁶⁶⁵ Lewis and Grimes, "Metatriangulation," 675.

Transdisciplinarity is the methodology within which these multiple paradigms are held. Data consisted of literature giving varied perspectives on Yoruba history and culture, with special consideration given to oral texts and ritual. Interviews were also used as data, employed to hear first-hand how individuals experience *àjé*.

Metatriangulation is the process of the rebuilding across paradigms. “With metatriangulation scholars strive not to find *the* truth but to discover comprehensiveness stemming from diverse and partial worldviews.”¹⁶⁶⁶ Along with comprehensiveness, creativity and relevance are the other criteria involved.

The dissertation’s broad scope aims at a comprehensive appraisal of *àjé* among the Yoruba. Consideration begins with Yoruba origins and continues into modern times. Internal and external historical determinants are also factored. Archaeology, oral tradition, and cultural history are consulted as are Yoruba cosmology and ontology.

“A creative theory contributes thought-provoking means of considering divergent perspectives.”¹⁶⁶⁷ The speculations derived from myth concerning hegemonic gender shifts and the evolution of patriarchy in Yorubaland are thought provoking. One wonders at the ability of myth to chronicle social reality even when myth might be amended to buttress emergent hegemonic claims.

Examination of the power dynamics between multiple actors can be a provocative exercise. Power dynamics between genders can be charged. Critical

¹⁶⁶⁶ Ibid., 685.

¹⁶⁶⁷ Ibid.

theory, by calling into question assumed or dominant realities, is by its nature thought provoking. The power dynamics within Yoruba society became overlaid by a larger grid of power—colonial imperialism. Enmeshed within the Christian/colonial matrix, the Yoruba socio-cultural terrain became increasingly rocky for *iyami àjé*.

“Relevance depends upon its potential to encourage interparadigm discourse.”¹⁶⁶⁸ There are many questions yet to be answered regarding *àjé* and the closely associated issue of women’s power. Some of these questions have been phrased within the dissertation, and others are addressed in discussion of future research.

In order for satisfactory answers to be broached, multiple perspectives need to be entertained. The need for multiple lenses is especially relevant in considering the effects of colonialism. Colonialism upends existing structures; it impacts a people’s social, religious, cultural, and economic realities.

This dissertation is one voice in the conversation of women’s power and women’s agency. Of his book, *Invisible Powers of the Metaphysical World*, Elebuibon states:

It is my sincere hope that the book will help to deepen people’s understanding of a mysterious phenomenon that is witchcraft...I also hope it will promote harmonious gender relations in the contemporary world as it seeks to dispel some of the negative notions of women.¹⁶⁶⁹

Elebuibon’s words echo the hope for this dissertation.

¹⁶⁶⁸ Ibid.

¹⁶⁶⁹ Elebuibon, *Invisible Powers*, ix.

Spiritual Activism

In *Transforming Feminist Practice* Leela Fernandes characterizes the dissemination or giving away of knowledge as a form of spiritual activism particularly as it serves to open the self and others in a process of transformation. The questions for myself and others reading this dissertation are: In looking at *àjé* can a nuanced concept now be seen more clearly? Can the power of *àjé*, and with it women's spiritual power, be seen in its quantic¹⁶⁷⁰ complexity—beyond fearsome stereotypes and dualistic either/or constructs? Has understanding been enhanced with respect to the multi-textured, dynamic nature of the Yoruba relationship to the polyvalence of *àjé*?

As the *Odu Ifa* and attendant verses are being written down and transcribed for modern times, it is hoped that the references to *àjé* or witches will not be omitted or politically redacted because of convention that such beliefs are the stuff of superstition having no place in a modern society.

If that were to occur, then much of the richness of *Odu Ifa* would be lost along with many references to women's power and the great span of women's power. Already on tenuous ground within *Odu Ifa* is the association of the *àjé* with justice and their mandate from the "Infinite Mystery"¹⁶⁷¹ that is Olodumare to help maintain balance in the world.

¹⁶⁷⁰ Used in relation to the simultaneity of phenomena postulated by quantum physics.

¹⁶⁷¹ Olomo, *Core of Fire*, 125.

This concern has been expressed by others¹⁶⁷² and is a reflection of the need for minds to become *decolonized*.

When it comes to our spirituality, we have not done the internal work that is necessary to remove the language and symbolism imposed on our psyche during times of oppression and mental subjugation from other cultures... These unexamined spiritual beliefs invade our values and philosophies, and are creeping into the body of our sacred oracles through the unconscious language of our mentors and priests.¹⁶⁷³

Spiritual activism entails the process of spiritual transformation, including sensitization to our own indwelling spirits and the power therein. Spiritual activism calls us to wake up to and awaken our *àjé*—our “mysterious power”—that translates into every facet of life. Our divinely inherited endowment, within *àjé* is our responsibility to express ourselves as “powerful women” and advocates for social justice. As spiritual activists, we are called to use our *àjé* in the cause of ethically enacted social, political, and economic transformation.

The justice of *oriṣa* and *iyami àjé* has been characterized by Lawal as “retributive justice.”¹⁶⁷⁴ There is cosmic justice, the justice of karma that resembles retribution for misdeeds. As mortal women exercising the power of *àjé* in the world, however, there are several reasons for which it behooves us to embrace the non-violent approach of spiritual activism.

¹⁶⁷² For example, Alcamo, *Ìyá Nlá*; Fatunmise, *Iyami Osorongá*.

¹⁶⁷³ Olomo, *Core of Fire*, 115-116.

¹⁶⁷⁴ Lawal, *Gẹ̀lẹ̀dẹ̀ Spectacle*, 26.

As Fernandes articulates, “any act that harms another in a material sense is also spiritually damaging to the person engaging in the act.”¹⁶⁷⁵ Also, resorting to violence in the name of social justice “only ends up mirroring the spiritual and material violence of the oppressor and ultimately cannot lead to a deeper transformative justice.”¹⁶⁷⁶

Though I cannot make the following statement with conviction, the view of *àjé* as reflective of “superior intelligence” or conceived of as special talents and abilities¹⁶⁷⁷ appears to be a modern adaptation and interpretation of *àjé*. Nonetheless, this view of *àjé* as each individual’s unique set of attributes that can be used to uplift society is a positive call to spiritual activism.

The following thoughts are inspired by Teresa Washington’s delineation of *àjé* within the characters of Africana literature¹⁶⁷⁸ and the research knowledge gained that every woman is a potential *àjé*. Just as the deities have their particular *àjé*—their gifts and special powers—so too every person has to find, hone, and honor their *àjé*. Their gift might grow out of pain and in this respect be similar to Hillman’s use of the Greek/Jungian *daimon*.¹⁶⁷⁹ The particular genius or

¹⁶⁷⁵ Fernandes, *Transforming Feminist Practice*, 63-64.

¹⁶⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 64.

¹⁶⁷⁷ Hallen, *Good, Bad, Beautiful*, 92.

¹⁶⁷⁸ Washington, *Our Mothers*.

¹⁶⁷⁹ Hillman, *The Soul’s Code*.

gift of each individual is indispensable in the process of Sankofa¹⁶⁸⁰ needed to heal our planet.

A frequent question posed is why Black women seem so strong. It is because our ancestral legacy as Black women is the gift of *àjé*—connection to the numinous, connection to spirit that nurtures, emboldens, and makes it that we generally won't take but so much crap. This legacy confers relative facility with the liminal—the ability to stand with a foot in pain, suffering, and struggle while getting about the business of life.

Just as Olatubosun Oladapo in his social poetry¹⁶⁸¹ encourages each individual to use their *àjé* for the betterment of Nigerian society, one can encourage individuals to use their *àjé* for the betterment of their communities and the social good. The latter is particularly with regard to those within society who are treated unjustly, especially women and children who are abused.

Àjé “exhibits well-honed defense responses for her children.”¹⁶⁸² Alcamo states that the *àjé* “grand matron,”¹⁶⁸³ Iya’Nla:

endowed her daughters with...attributes [that] include working with...Eleye (*the force that gives power and mystical abilities*) in order to intensify cause and effect changes. With these gifts, an Iyálájà is able to meld terrestrial and astral power to cure, curse or to cause retributive justice on anyone who disrespects woman and motherhood.¹⁶⁸⁴

¹⁶⁸⁰ Reclamation of ancient wisdom and sound practices.

¹⁶⁸¹ Ajibade, “Endogenous and Exogenous Factors.”

¹⁶⁸² Olomo, “Iyami Osorongu,” 282.

¹⁶⁸³ Lawal, *Gẹ̀lẹ̀dẹ̀ Spectacle*, 71.

¹⁶⁸⁴ Alcamo, *Iyá Nlá*, 44.

There is no unilateral perspective on *àjé*. Rather, one finds divergence of opinion. Some speak of the powers of *àjé* as they benefit society; others speak of the *àjé* as essentially a malevolent witch. Opeola takes exception with the appellation Oşoronga, a name used in association with *àjé*, saying it is a derogatory accenting of a negative stereotype—the angry, vengeful witch.¹⁶⁸⁵ However, *Iyami Oşoronga* represents the mothers' anger stemming from disrespect and betrayal.

Iyami collected the feminine rage of the ages...*Iyami* is always angry when there is injustice; she does not hesitate to use her destructive powers to restore balance...The tears a woman sheds from the pains of abuse and neglect have all been stored in this defined feminine consciousness, to be periodically unleashed on those who perpetrate horrors against women and break her laws."¹⁶⁸⁶

Iyami and *iyami àjé* in the totality of their manifestation might be envisaged as sword wielding avenging mothers who exact justice when secular and religious institutions fall short of protecting women and championing their right to safety on the streets and in their homes. This protection is from attacks aimed disproportionately at women such as rape and domestic abuse. In operating for the good of society, they are perceived as punishing those that would go unpunished due to wealth, social position, and political rank. Here is a very literal meeting point of social justice and spiritual activism.

Much sexual violence goes unpunished because of its scope or association with political violence. One does not have to look far for examples of

¹⁶⁸⁵ Samuel Opeola, interview with the author, September 27, 2009, Ile-Ife, Nigeria.

¹⁶⁸⁶ Olomo, "Iyami Osorongá," 280.

such sexual atrocities. Rapes were reported against women as they struggled in dire circumstances. Fleeing from drought and famine, seeking relief in the refugee camps of Kenya, Somali women were raped.¹⁶⁸⁷

Rapes were also reported in the refugee camps established for the survivors of the 2010 Haitian earthquake.¹⁶⁸⁸ For years news of Congolese women being raped by that country's militia has been reported.¹⁶⁸⁹ In South Africa the belief that sex with a virgin is a cure for AIDS has led to the unimaginable rape of infants and toddlers.¹⁶⁹⁰

The perpetration of barbarities against females is legion. Across time and cultures "women have paid a price for real or suspected power; so the pantheon of Iyami no longer has to have an immediate provocation"¹⁶⁹¹ to unleash its anger. This aspect is the face of the metaphysical *àjé* as retributive mother justice.

Contemporary Examples of *Àjé*

Commanding use of *àjé* can be seen in women who are trailblazers for the rights of women and humanity, such as Rosa Parks, Susan B. Anthony and the suffragettes, birth control and abortion rights advocates such as Margaret Sanger, glass ceiling and racial barrier breakers, such as Oprah Winfrey or Ursula Burns,

¹⁶⁸⁷ Muhumed and Straziuso, "Somalia Famine Refugees."

¹⁶⁸⁸ CBS/AP, "Rape Rampant."

¹⁶⁸⁹ Elbagir, "Raped Women."

¹⁶⁹⁰ Flanagan, "South African Men."

¹⁶⁹¹ Olomo, "Iyami Osorongá," 281.

president of Xerox,¹⁶⁹² Shirley Chisholm, the first Black congresswoman and first woman to seek the democratic nomination to the presidency.¹⁶⁹³ As well, it can be witnessed in organizations such as the Global Fund for Women, which defend the rights of women and children.

African examples of the contemporary use of *à/jé* are seen in Wangari Maathai, 2004 Nobel Peace Prize recipient and in the three African women who shared the 2011 Nobel Peace Prize: Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, Leymah Gbowee, and Tawakkol Karman. Ellen Johnson Sirleaf is the president of Liberia and the first woman elected president in Africa. She has had the struggle of reconstructing a country ravaged by a bloody 14-year civil war.¹⁶⁹⁴

Leymah Gbowee, a social worker who after working with the deeply traumatized child-soldiers used in the Liberian civil war, mobilized women across religious and ethnic lines in Liberia to the cause of peace. Tawakkol Karman, an activist for freedom of expression and human rights in Yemen, is credited with being the instigator of the movement for democracy in Yemen. Tawakkol is the first Arab woman to receive a Nobel Peace Prize.¹⁶⁹⁵

The president of the Nobel committee stated that these women were chosen “pour leur lutte non violente en faveur de la sécurité des femmes et de

¹⁶⁹² Howard et al. “World’s 100 Most Powerful Women.”

¹⁶⁹³ Foerstel, *Biographical Dictionary of Congressional Women*.

¹⁶⁹⁴ Kiessel, “Le Nobel de la paix.”

¹⁶⁹⁵ Ibid.

leurs droits à participer aux processus de paix”¹⁶⁹⁶ (Author’s translation: for their non-violent struggle championing the safety of women and of their right to participate in the peace process).

The Secretary General of the United Nations, Ban Ki-moon stated that the awarding of the Nobel Peace Prize to these women “c’est un symbole du pouvoir des femmes: il traduit le rôle vital que les femmes jouent dans l’avancement de la paix et de la sécurité et des droits humains”¹⁶⁹⁷ (Author’s translation: is a symbol of the power of women: it transmits the vital role that women play in the advancement of peace, security and human rights).

Future Research

The current research project has unleashed a plethora of questions and speculations that await future exploration. Some have been voiced above. Seven areas are specified below.

Regional Variants of Àjẹ́ in Odu Ifa

It would be of interest to compare targeted portions of *Odu Ifa* within areas that venerate Oduduwa as a goddess and among the Oṣun revering Ijesa as contrasted with regions of Yorubaland that are more centered around male deity such as Ṣango among the Oyo Yoruba. It would be particularly enriching to find verses pertaining to àjẹ́ from Ota, the town in Awori (Ogun State) known for its sizeable population of àjẹ́ and according to *Odu Ifa*, where àjẹ́ came into the world. While doing research in Nigeria, I heard during casual conversation that

¹⁶⁹⁶ Ibid., 15.

¹⁶⁹⁷ Ibid.

the University of Ibadan has reportedly been collecting verses of *Odu Ifa* from throughout Nigeria. Being granted access to review this material for references to *àjé* would be invaluable.

Àjé and Cultural Borrowing

The Nupe in particular share a long history with the Yoruba. As noted in the dissertation, mythistory demonstrates that the Oyo Yoruba and Nupe once had intimate cultural ties.¹⁶⁹⁸ Nadel has conducted research on Nupe witch beliefs and similarities are apparent. The *Lelu* is the head of the market women, similar to the Yoruba *Iyalode*, and supposed head of the witches.¹⁶⁹⁹

Verger notes that “the head of the *gélédé* group bears the title of *erelú*, which is remarkably close to that of the *lelu*, of the Nupe.”¹⁷⁰⁰ Are there comparable misrepresentations of the “witch” within Nupe and other African cultures? If so, how are they convergent with and divergent from misrepresentations of *àjé*?

Àjé in Diaspora

In Bahia, Brazil, African descendants from the Ketu region of Yorubaland continue to practice their ancestral religion.

Each time a sacrifice is made of a four-footed animal a special ceremony takes place before the public dances. On these frequent occasions, prayers are successively addressed to Èṣù...to the Èṣà, former Africans

¹⁶⁹⁸ Law, *The Oyo Empire*.

¹⁶⁹⁹ Nadel, “Witchcraft and Anti-Witchcraft.”

¹⁷⁰⁰ Verger, “Ìyàmi Òṣòròngà,” 57.

who instituted the Yorùbá cults in Bahia, to the various Òrìṣà of the cults in question, and finally Ìyámí Ọ̀ṣòròṅgà is saluted.¹⁷⁰¹

The two books found that outline a practical manner for working with the energy of *àjé* came out of the Afro-Brazilian Candomble tradition.

Is acknowledgment of *iyami àjé* evidenced in other diaspora communities that practice Yoruba-based African traditional religion? Individuals interviewed within the United States for the dissertation shared their personal experiences of *àjé*. However, after speaking with priestess and scholar Marta Morena Vega,¹⁷⁰² the impression obtained is that *iyami àjé* is less present within Santeria. Can the reasons for this be traced to the associations of Santeria and Catholicism?

Women's Perception of Their Power

Talbot's assertion that the areas in southwestern Nigeria with the highest concentration of witchcraft belief are those areas with a legacy of matriarchy¹⁷⁰³ begs several questions. For instance, was the rule of women so severe (thus the stereotypical witchcraft legacy) that men rose against them?

Or is it that men simply felt limited and constrained from exercising or unleashing the testosterone driven violence and arrogance evidenced in the world today? If as in *Odu Ifa Osa Meji* recounted by Olajubu,¹⁷⁰⁴ women were endowed

¹⁷⁰¹ Ibid., 71.

¹⁷⁰² Marta Morena Vega, interview with the author, February 15, 2011, New York City.

¹⁷⁰³ Talbot, *Peoples of Southern Nigeria*.

¹⁷⁰⁴ Olajubu, *Women in the Yoruba Religious Sphere*.

with *àjé* to counter mistreatment by men, then it is clear that *àjé* were needed upon the earth because men had forgotten the value of women.

The key contribution of women was not necessarily material. As opposed to the temporal and physical power of men, women's power was primarily spiritual. "The base of power and authority in any Yoruba community resides in them. This potent power of the *Iya Mi* is essentially invisible."¹⁷⁰⁵ Men seemed to forget the import of the "interdependency between the visible and the invisible."¹⁷⁰⁶ As men's memory of the value of this spiritual power faded, their fear of the spiritual unknown grew. As fear grew, persecution of the vehicles of spirit spread.

When I look at the Congo, and the repeated reports of the rape of females (from children to the very elderly) by militia, I have to wonder at the disrespect and hate of women evidenced in such violence. It also leaves one to wonder at the mandate of keeping order and balance in the world that was entrusted to *àjé* at the dawn of creation.

John Mason made the tantalizingly provocative suggestion that the term *àjé* carries the implication of "those people that are compliant or get along."¹⁷⁰⁷ Is it that the earthly *àjé* have been so cowed, so intimidated, so subjugated that they have forgotten the breadth of their power to effect change and impact society? If the metaphysical collective entity that is *iyami* works through mortal women, then

¹⁷⁰⁵ Olademo, *Gender in Yoruba Oral Traditions*, 42.

¹⁷⁰⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷⁰⁷ John Mason, interview with the author, February 16, 2011, New York City.

the power of that entity has been stymied. Women's perception of their own power, of their *àjé*, is an area that calls for exploration. Fagbemileke Fatunmise writes:

The Ultimate Quest of The Mothers is to teach us, nurture us, and consecrate us so that we will reclaim our innate inherited origin in the Universe. Our ultimate quest as females is to get in proper alignment with The Mothers.¹⁷⁰⁸

Woman as *Àjé*—A Narrative Inquiry

Hopefully, as the negative pall cast over *àjé* begins to be lifted, it will be easier for women to self-identify as *àjé*. As revealed in the dissertation, *àjé* is defined and perceived in multiple ways. To self-identify as *àjé* can signify recognition that *àjé* is an innate force within females. It can also be the acknowledgment of working with energies associated with *àjé* or of working within the supernatural or spiritual dimensions.

Because the definition of *àjé* is varied and because of the books published in the diaspora on working with the *àjé*, it might be possible to find women in the African diaspora who self-identify as *àjé* or who admit to working with the energy of *àjé*. Finding women in Africa (Nigeria) who identify as *àjé* would likely be more problematic because of the persistent negative light in which *àjé* is popularly cast, the translation of *àjé* as witch/witchcraft, and the witch hysteria that is evident in parts of Nigeria and is being fanned by evangelicals such as Helen Ukpabio.

Nonetheless, it would be a welcome contribution to find women in Africa and in the African diaspora who self-identify as *àjé*, to discover from them the meaning of *àjé* within their lives and to learn how their identities are defined in

¹⁷⁰⁸ Fatunmise, *Iyami Osorongu*, 109.

relation to *àjé*. Proud, positive embodiments of the *àjé* can be empowering. Women who openly embrace their power and role as *àjé* can serve as role models and guides.

Witchcraft in Post-Independence Nigeria

As reported in the November 22, 2000 edition of the *Nigerian Vanguard*, 23 individuals were lynched on suspicion of being witches and wizards “in Eket Local Government Area of the oil-rich Akwa Ibom State in Nigeria.”¹⁷⁰⁹ Similar killings had recently occurred in the villages of Esit Ura and Effri.

Children in Akwa Ibom State are also targeted as witches. They are the most vulnerable according to a 2010 CNN report that paints a grim picture. Although Akwa Ibom State is in Nigeria’s oil-rich delta region, it is severely impoverished. The attendant health and social problems are blamed on child witches, who are generally “either killed, abandoned by the parents, tortured in the church or trafficked out of the city.”¹⁷¹⁰

Evangelical pastors, promising “deliverance” of these children from witchcraft, charge between \$300 and \$2,000 for their services. Anti-witchcraft commodification is as lucrative as it is sinister. As example, a five year old boy was fed starvation rations and for three weeks was forced to remain nightly in a room with the corpse of his mother.¹⁷¹¹

¹⁷⁰⁹ Orubu, “Witchcraft in African Religion,” 116-117.

¹⁷¹⁰ Purefoy, “Children Abused,” par. 16.

¹⁷¹¹ *Ibid.*, par. 29 and par. 14.

The phenomenon of child-witch accusations and associated child abuse is of fairly recent inception, beginning in about 2000 according to Sam Ikpe-Itauma, who runs Child's Rights and Rehabilitation Network (CRARN). The Child's Rights and Rehabilitation Network is an orphanage that rescues stigmatized, abused, and traumatized children accused as witches.¹⁷¹²

Spoken to in the preface, the aberration of children being accused and tortured as witches at camps in the Congo offering exorcism ignited the dissertation research. With regard to future research, there are many questions to address. Among them: How widespread is this phenomenon? What are the dynamics fueling its apparent growth? How can victimized children be helped? By what means can child-witch accusations be curtailed?

Genital Cutting

Women's great mystery and power lay in the ability to bleed every month without death and to bring forth life from our bodies. This great mystery and the reverence paid to it are critical elements of the Yoruba ontological perspective as evidenced by the homage paid to the Great Mother, Iya Nla, her daughters of spirit, the *oriṣa* (olomowewe), and her daughters of flesh, the incarnate *iyami àjé*.

The mystery of a woman's body, is an awe inspiring secret. During the Gelede spectacle, Oro Efe states in tribute: "Mother whose vagina causes fear to all."¹⁷¹³ Women's private parts "symbolize the secrets that women will never

¹⁷¹² Ibid., par. 19.

¹⁷¹³ H. J. Drewal and Drewal, *Gelede*, 42.

reveal to men.”¹⁷¹⁴ Science has explained the mechanics of conception, gestation, and delivery. But the fact of woman nurturing life within her body and bringing forth that life is no less miraculous. It echoes a mythic act of female divinity. Even the highest deity of the Yoruba pantheon, the “Supreme Creator Essence,”¹⁷¹⁵ has a mother. Olodumare is the child of Python, her name being Ere.¹⁷¹⁶

“The clitoris in particular is traditionally regarded as possessing ‘concealed power’ which women can use to accomplish whatever they desire.”¹⁷¹⁷ The Yoruba earthmother Onile (owner of the earth) is also known as Iya’Nla (the Great Mother). As Onile she is venerated by the Ogboni Society. There are brass statues said to represent Onile that portray:

a naked woman with aggressive sexual characteristics, such as wide open labia and what seems a clitoris in erection. This last detail would indicate, I was told, that the woman is “as strong as a man.”¹⁷¹⁸

Proposed areas of inquiry would address the following questions: Do other African cultures have a similar iconic representation of the powerful female? Could this association of the clitoris with female power be a contributing factor to or reason for genital cutting among various African societies? Is female genital cutting (especially the more radical clitoradectomy) viewed as symbolically

¹⁷¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁷¹⁵ Badejo, *Ọṣun Ẹ̀g̀g̀g̀s̀í*, 56.

¹⁷¹⁶ Bascom, *Ifa Divination, Odu Ifa* Edi-Okanran.

¹⁷¹⁷ Abiodun, “Hidden Power,” 24.

¹⁷¹⁸ Witte, “Invisible Mothers,” 305.

removing or reducing women's connection to and exercise of innate spiritual force?

Final Word

Writing the dissertation has been a transformative journey. This work is gift and supplication to *iyami àjé*. It is a gift of respect given in gratitude for their energy in the world. It is supplication that their power awakens in the souls of women who will assume their place as “guardians of society.”¹⁷¹⁹ Guardianship does not mean maintenance of a status quo that denigrates their power; rather, it entails spiritual activism for social justice and a balanced world. *Àjé*, “our mothers,” call on us to bring our talents and abilities into the world as creators, arbiters, and guardians of a just society.

¹⁷¹⁹ H. J. Drewal and Drewal, *Gẹ̀lẹ̀dẹ̀*, 9.

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APPENDIX A: WITCH CAMPS IN CONTEMPORARY GHANA

“I don’t plan to leave until God calls me...
The day of my death is when
I’ll leave this place.”¹⁷²⁰

“Fear Woman to Save Your Life”¹⁷²¹
“Fear Women”¹⁷²²

In Ghana women accused of witchcraft, if not killed, are exiled to “witch camps.”¹⁷²³ Two movies are examined that document this phenomenon and speak to the cultural complexity of the issue. *Witches in Exile*, released in 2005, focuses on Kukuo Witches Home. *The Witches of Gambaga* is a 2010 documentary that centers on the witch camp of the same name.¹⁷²⁴

Witches in Exile reports that in 1998, an estimated 5,000 women were housed in Ghana’s witch camps.¹⁷²⁵ The lower number of 3,000 is reported for 2008 in *The Witches of Gambaga* although this was a substantial increase from

¹⁷²⁰ *Witches in Exile*, Wumbei, Chapter 11.

¹⁷²¹ Words painted on passenger transport—archival footage of 1950’s Ghana from *Witches in Exile*.

¹⁷²² Words painted on passenger transport circa 2004–2008 from *The Witches of Gambaga*.

¹⁷²³ Whitaker, “Ghana Witch Camps.”

¹⁷²⁴ These documentaries will be discussed in detail. Therefore, citations are limited to those relating to numeric evidence or direct quotes.

¹⁷²⁵ *Witches in Exile*, Chapter 3.

the 2005 number of 1,000.¹⁷²⁶ The six reported camps are Gushiegu, Gambaga, Gnani, Kpatinga, Kukuo, and Naabuli.

All the camps are situated in Ghana's remote Northern Region. With Tamale the regional capital, the Northern Region is the largest geographic area in the country. It is an impoverished region in comparison to the more developed south, where the country's capital of Accra is located.¹⁷²⁷

Witches in Exile

Kukuo Witches Home is located in the eastern Northern Region in Dagomba territory. The Dagombas are the dominant ethnic group of the Northern Region. Kukuo is the largest witch camp. In 2005 there were approximately 600 women in exile there. Emile Short, Commissioner for Human Rights and Administrative Justice, says that the camps have been in existence for over two centuries. However, he claims they were only brought to national attention in a 1997 Ghanaian newspaper report. Commissioner Short states that it is Ghana's 1992-1993:

transition to constitutional democracy and democratic rule, which has brought to the fore the existence of a lot of customary and cultural practices which we find inconsistent with international human rights norms.¹⁷²⁸

¹⁷²⁶ *The Witches of Gambaga*, Chapters 18, 2.

¹⁷²⁷ Al-Hassan and Diao, "Regional Disparities in Ghana."

¹⁷²⁸ *Witches in Exile*, Chapter 2.

Lawyer Victoria Addy said that Ghana has “laws against defamation, harm, murder.”¹⁷²⁹ However, the narrator informs the viewer that “Salifu Imoro is the first and only man in Ghana convicted of murdering a suspected witch.”¹⁷³⁰ At the time *Witches in Exile* was filmed, he was a death-row inmate at Nsawam Prison.

Once accused of being a witch, a woman is often subject to mob violence—beaten, stoned, hacked to death, or lynched. The only trial she is ever given is a trial by ordeal, wherein she is subjected to extreme pain until she confesses to witchcraft. If a woman is married or has a son, uncle or other male relative to serve as her protector, she might get away with her life.

Samata, an elderly woman living at Kukuo, says that if she did not have a son “they [the villagers] would have killed me and thrown away the body.”¹⁷³¹ If a person has a “strong family” with political or economic clout, they are not touched according to Wumbei, another of the women residing at Kukuo. In fact, one telling feature is that the powerful or politically connected are seldom accused.

Once a woman is suspected of being a witch, she is not welcome to remain in her community. If she is married, the marriage becomes nullified. Meimunatu, one of the women featured in the film, says that when accused of witchcraft, a woman can no longer be with her husband.

¹⁷²⁹ Ibid., Chapter 9.

¹⁷³⁰ Ibid.

¹⁷³¹ Ibid., Chapter 11.

Upon arrival at the witch camp, a woman must face the traditional priest. Her guilt or innocence is determined by the position in which a fowl dies once its throat has been slit—face down means guilt, feet up means innocence. However, as will be shown below, innocence does not mean reacceptance into one's village. Once this ritual is complete, the woman is given a concoction to drink that is designed to strip her of her power as a witch.

Though brought to the witch camp to be exiled from their communities, most of the women have their children or other young relatives with them. Sadly, once thus branded, the children of witches fare poorly in their communities. Though the children suffer many hardships at the witch camps, it may be the lesser evil to keep their children with them in the witch camp as opposed to leaving them in their villages. There, the children of accused witches are "traumatized and stigmatized even more than people living with HIV/AIDS."¹⁷³²

The age range of women in the witch camps is 35 to 90 with most being elderly. The elderly women need assistance with living and will request that a grandchild or other relative come to the camp to attend them. The plight of the children at the camps is another cause for concern. They generally do not go to school, lack adequate medical care, and are ostracized.

Women's Stories

A central focus of the *Witches in Exile* is the story of each of four women at Kukuo witch camp, Pona, Meimunatu Samata, and Wumbei. At first meeting, the length of time the women have been at the camp varies from two weeks to several

¹⁷³² Abagali, "Child Abuse in Witches Camps."

years. Sometimes the women have tears in their eyes as they recount the events leading to their exile and assess their lot. Sometimes the women are steely realists giving commentary on the issues underlying their exile. In all cases the stories arouse anger at the injustice of their plight.

Pona is an old woman who was accused of causing the death of her grandson. Of the nine children she gave birth to, only two survive. She soberly states that given that reality, it makes no sense that she would want to kill her grandchild. Nonetheless, a group of men from her village beat her unconscious with clubs, and her house and belongings were burned.

Her brother brought her to Kukuo Witches Home. Pona lives alone at the camp with no one to assist her. Each day she makes the long, arduous trek to get water from the river with only a walking stick to help her maneuver terrain that is sometimes steep and rocky. The footage of her making this trek is poignant. The viewer feels relief when she finally reaches the river only to be confronted with the harsh reality that she has to retrace her journey balancing on her head a large, heavy plastic bucket full of water.

Pona has been at Kukuo for five years. After her son, Ajass, accused her of killing her grandchild, she says that she cursed him and swore on her dead parents that she never wanted to see him again. Shortly after she arrived at Kukuo, Ajass visited her accompanied by elders from their home village. Prayers and rituals were performed and an apology extended to Pona after which she spoke to her son. Recounting the meeting, Pona tells how Ajass apologized to her saying that others had convinced him to wrongly accuse her of killing his son.

Pona accompanied the film crew of *Witches in Exile* to her son's village. When the interviewer asked what should be done if it is discovered that a person has been wrongly accused of witchcraft and is in fact innocent, the village men assembled in the hut with Pona and Ajass were clearly uncomfortable with the question. Speaking to the interpreter, one of the men retorted: "You're a Dagomba woman; you should know better than asking questions like that."¹⁷³³

The only concession was that an apology should be forthcoming. The clear implication was that once suspected or accused of witchcraft, a woman was no longer welcome to reside in the village. Pona has not been invited back to her home though her son declared she was wrongly accused of witchcraft. Innocence is no guarantee of community acceptance. In fact during the five years Pona has been at Kukuo, Ajass has visited her only three times. Her son who lives in Accra has never visited or been in contact with his mother since her exile at Kukuo.

Meimunatu is a middle-aged woman suspected of witchcraft in the death of her brother-in-law. Both she and her husband, Osman, were accused of his death and beaten. The villagers did not understand the "sickness" from which the brother-in-law died. However, Osman states that his brother was bitten on the finger by a snake while working his farm. Nonetheless, Meimunatu was exiled to Kukuo, brought there by her uncle.

Meimunatu had other strikes against her, including the fact that two of her six children had died and she was an outsider, not a local woman. In addition, she was a very industrious and successful farmer and trader. She gave her husband

¹⁷³³ *Witches in Exile*, Chapter 10.

money to hire workers during farming season and says that her husband gave her money from the harvest, something that his family did not like. It was her husband's aunt who accused her of witchcraft.

The husband of Meimunatu is still residing in good standing within his village. He states: "As for me, no one can cast me out except God. But for a woman, if that happens [suspected of witchcraft], she'll be cast away."¹⁷³⁴ When further questioned, another man in the group admitted: "If the woman is young and the husband still likes her, she could be taken to Kukuo to drink the concoction and come back."¹⁷³⁵

Though not old, Meimunatu was not brought back to the village by her husband. When asked why, her husband only smiled sheepishly. However, the same man who spoke above bluntly and unapologetically stated the reason: "Because she can't have any more children. That's why she isn't back at this place."¹⁷³⁶

Samata is a very aged woman who was living with her brother and his son at the time of the brother's death. She was accused of causing the death. Her nephew stoned her, breaking her ankle. She asked her son to bring her to Kukuo for safe haven. Her sister came to stay with her at the camp because Samata is too old to carry firewood from the bush or to make the long journey for river water.

¹⁷³⁴ Ibid., Chapter 7.

¹⁷³⁵ Ibid.

¹⁷³⁶ Ibid.

Samata's son left her at Kukuo, promising to retrieve her in about a year's time once he had built his own home. True to his word, he returned to Kukuo to bring his mother to his home. Before leaving the camp permission has to be obtained from the chief and the appropriate rituals for leaving have to be performed. Samata was one of the fortunate women of Kukuo who had a loving son able to bring her into an accepting home environment.

Wumbei has been at Kukuo witch camp long enough to have raised a "girl" who has gone on to marry and bear two children. Whether this girl was a daughter, grand-daughter, or other relative is not clear. At present, her grand-daughter, Rafia, is with her. Rafia appears to be about 12 or 13 years old and says she has been at the camp with her grandmother for about five years.

As with the vast majority of children living at the witch camps, Rafia does not attend school. She is the household income earner, engaging in trade at village markets. She buys bananas on credit, selling them at Kukuo. She and her grandmother use the profit to buy food and for her grandmother, tobacco. When asked how she came to be at Kukuo, Wumbei explained:

In the Northern Region, after you have your children, you're of no use to the men, so they say you have witchcraft. So they bring you here to drink the concoction, and you stay here for the rest of your life. If you have witchcraft they will bring you, and if you don't, they'll still bring you.¹⁷³⁷

With a small, cynical laugh, Wumbei goes on to say that sometimes the accuser will come back and admit that no witchcraft was evidenced. Admission

¹⁷³⁷ Ibid., Chapter 4.

will be made that false testimony was given against the accused witch because “I just didn’t like her.”¹⁷³⁸

“Witches Refuse to Go Home”

While witch camps are designed to be safe havens for women accused of witchcraft, the women live in conditions of extreme poverty and relative social isolation away from their extended families. This being as it may, however, most women prefer to remain in the camps. In a Ghanaian government report entitled “Witches Refuse to Go Home,” one reads the simple statement made by Asana, a resident of Gambaga witch camp for over 30 years: “We are safe here.”¹⁷³⁹

Women at the camps wanted clothing and improved conditions. However, the exiled women did not want the camps closed because they could not return to their families. Grace Coleman, a member of the Ghanaian parliament, reports hearing stories from the women of others who had returned to their families and communities, only to be lynched. Often women are only taken back so they can be killed, thereby, removing the blemish of witchcraft from the family.

Because the community rises up in concert against the suspected witch, if she is killed, “no one will talk.”¹⁷⁴⁰ If not immediately killed, many women are also afraid of going back to their villages because they are vulnerable to fresh accusations of witchcraft for any negative occurrence. They might not be as fortunate to get away with their lives a second time.

¹⁷³⁸ Ibid.

¹⁷³⁹ Ibid., Chapter 9.

¹⁷⁴⁰ Ibid.

Although it is difficult to get women accepted back into their villages, sometimes families take women back. However, their lives are restricted, their movements limited, and activities monitored. They live in fear. The problem is that the family and community don't really believe that the woman has been "dewitched."

Within the witch camps, the women exiled there find acceptance and relative freedom. The camps truly become sanctuary. As stated by Breda Atta-Quayson, Northern Regional Editor of Ghana's *Daily Graphic* newspaper, "People don't see them as witches anymore."¹⁷⁴¹ They become part of a community and even intermarry within the community. Meimunatu, discarded by her husband because she was past childbearing age, married a man who came to Kukuo to be with his sister.

The issue of poverty in relation to witchcraft accusations is an important one. Women who are no longer considered productive either because they cannot or can no longer bear children or because they are very aged are most frequently accused of witchcraft.

To underscore the economic aspect, a group of Northern Region Ghanaian women spoke of the general ill treatment of women in the marital home. One of the women commented: "It [abuse] is normally due to hunger. When there is food, there is peace in the home. If someone is sick in the family, then a witch is suspected."¹⁷⁴²

¹⁷⁴¹ Ibid.

¹⁷⁴² Ibid., Chapter 2.

A portion of the document “Ghana’s Human Rights Body Condemn Treatment of Witches” was shown in the film. In it can be read that accusations of witchcraft increased following an outbreak of cerebro-spinal meningitis. Poor health conditions and attendant high mortality rates that accompany poverty foster witch accusations as people seek reasons for disease and death.

Belief in Witchcraft

Although these camps are situated in the more remote and impoverished region of northern Ghana, belief in witchcraft cuts across every strata of society. Ghana’s Minister of Employment and Social Welfare, Alhadj Mohammed Mummuni, states that “the belief in witchcraft is deep-seated and wide spread. It cuts across the entire social fabric.”¹⁷⁴³

Unsurprisingly, not all of the women at Kukuo believe in witchcraft. Meimunatu does not believe that witchcraft exists. She says that she has never seen any evidence of it. Pona states simply that “a witch is someone you don’t like.”¹⁷⁴⁴ When asked what should happen to those accused of witchcraft, however, she states that they should be killed because she herself would have preferred death to her present state. Meimunatu also said that when accused, if she could have, she would have taken her own life.

Didjia Iddrisu, Northern Regional Director for the Commission on Human Rights, asserts that the belief in witchcraft in Ghana stretches back thousands of years. He himself believes in witchcraft and attributes this fact mainly to his own

¹⁷⁴³ Ibid. Chapter 1.

¹⁷⁴⁴ Ibid. Chapter 4.

upbringing in a rural community steeped in witch-lore. More importantly, however, it is the confessions of accused witches that convince him of its reality. *Witches in Exile* shows a toothless old woman at Kukuo emphatically stating that she is a witch. That she has killed.

However, Mr. Iddrisu believes that witchcraft will die a “natural death” as development brings increased education and prosperity and with the aid of public education campaigns. One cannot prescribe belief. However, the problem with witchcraft is that it is a social evil. Mr. Iddrisu states that the objective is not to tell people they cannot believe in witchcraft or that witchcraft does not exist because it is too deeply rooted within consciousness. However, the message to be delivered is that “you cannot hold a belief that is dangerous to society.”¹⁷⁴⁵

Father John Kirby is an American cleric and founder of the Tamale Cross-Cultural Institute, who has resided in Ghana for 30 years. He explains his coming to understand that witchcraft serves as a representative of or scapegoat for social evil—poverty, inequality, hunger, inexplicable death, epidemic, and so on. Witchcraft itself becomes the social evil against which the population rallies. By attacking witchcraft the belief/myth is that these social evils are being attacked at the root and, thereby, expunged.

He notes that witchcraft accusations spike in times of social crisis and insecurity, noting three examples—in the 1920’s during the British colonial occupation, during the 1950’s at the time of the struggle for independence and British response, and today. Father Kirby states that the predominant factor today

¹⁷⁴⁵ Ibid. Chapter 8.

is economic—financial insecurity. The disparity between expectations created by the promise of development and reality generates individual and social tension.

The Witches of Gambaga

Gambaga is another of the witch camps located in the Northern Region of Ghana. Filming was primarily done in 2004 with follow-up in 2008. Director Yaba Badoe was born in Tamale in Northern Ghana and educated in Britain. In a country like Ghana that is proud of its human rights record, she finds it untenable that “traditional beliefs that demonize women are still so strongly held that they can unleash violence.”¹⁷⁴⁶

Gambaga is the oldest sanctuary for witches in Ghana’s Northern Region. Gambaga’s place as a refuge for witches came about towards the end of the nineteenth century before the British colonized the “Gold Coast.” It was established by the first imam of Gambaga when he intervened in the planned execution of a woman accused as a witch. The town of Gambaga is said to be protected from witchcraft because it neutralizes the power of witches.

Women accused of witchcraft, driven from their homes, abandoned, and left indigent receive sanctuary here. However, the women must pay for their refuge, and they must pay to leave. Women, who arrive at the camp destitute, pay with their labor. Generally, the women are obliged to work in the chief’s fields, cultivating his crops in exchange for food. In 2008 the cost to leave the camp was \$100, a fortune for the families of these women.

¹⁷⁴⁶ *The Witches of Gambaga*, Chapter 1.

The most senior woman in the camp is installed by the chief (*Gambarrana*) as spokeswoman for the witches. Part of her function is to keep harmony among the women. Badoe states that the chief's power is absolute. Though he provides sanctuary and protection to women accused as witches, they cannot leave without his consent and requisite payment.

If a woman is lucky, as at Kukuo, a daughter or other family member will accompany her in her exile. The women of Gambaga receive support from a team of volunteers, affiliated with the Presbyterian Church. The church's "Go Home" project endeavors to reintegrate women within their families and communities. The organization also arranges for and finances the education of women's children who are with them at the camp.

Women's Stories

The lives and stories of several women are portrayed in this documentary. Similar to the stories heard from the women at Kukuo Witches Home, the women arrive at Gambaga witch camp fearing for their lives. Amina Wumbala was beaten and left for dead after being accused in the death of her brother. Initially rescued by her eldest son, she was subsequently dumped on the far side of the river from her village. She lay on the river bank for over 24 hours before she had regained enough strength to begin her walk to Gambaga.

Amina's plight began when she confronted her sister-in-law over the apparent theft of preserved rainwater. Though told by her brother to ask his wife about the missing rainwater, Amina's brother interceded on behalf of his wife, striking Amina and ordering her to leave the house. The next morning the brother was found dead. Amina was accused of using witchcraft to cause his death.

Amina's case is an example of the precariousness of family dynamics when joined to poverty. Amina was a widow living with her brothers and their families. Although the house had belonged to their father, by inheritance, the house now belonged to the brothers. The precious resource of rainwater was missing from Amina's receptacle.

Poverty and the struggle to simply survive can manifest in a *survival of the fittest* mentality. The sister-in-law might very likely have stolen Amina's water, knowing that Amina was the underdog in the household, holding the weak position as a widow living off her brothers' good graces.

Most of the women are traumatized by the events that drove them to Gambaga. For instance, Asana, was tortured by her brother who threatened to gouge out her eyes if she didn't confess to being a witch. Another woman was beaten for several days and arrived at Gambaga near death.

Another woman, Ma Hawa, had been at the camp for over 20 years. In her village she was caretaker to the children of a co-wife after the co-wife's death. Her stepson accused her of bewitching him because he suffered sleep disturbance. Ma Hawa avows that she is a witch. But also says that if she had not confessed to being a witch, she would have been killed.

Men in northern Ghana are also believed to use witchcraft. However, the general belief is that men use it "responsibly" in positive ways, such as protecting their homes or as herbalists. This use stands in contrast to the predominant belief

that women use witchcraft maliciously “to destroy life,” according to Simon Ngota, Team Leader of the “Go Home” project.¹⁷⁴⁷

Here as in Kuku, determination of witchcraft is undertaken using a chicken. The way in which the chicken dies—wings up or wings down—seals a woman’s fate. Wings up: innocence. Wings down: guilt. Before women can leave the camp, they must also pass this test to make sure that they have been cleansed of witchcraft.

However, this film also presents the sad fact that women are sometimes brought home and killed to wash clean the stain of witchcraft from the family. Once at home life is not easy for these women, who are often forced to live severely restricted lives. Always under the veil of suspicion, many women find themselves back at Gambaga.

Belief in Witchcraft

Badoe states that “witchcraft belief permeates Ghanaian culture. It’s a part of the ether we breathe here.”¹⁷⁴⁸ Badoe faults post-independence economic upheavals for cementing traditional beliefs and with them the ubiquitous belief in witchcraft as the source of one’s misfortunes. Spoken to briefly is the fact that Christian charismatic or evangelical churches also feed on and profit from the belief in witchcraft.

¹⁷⁴⁷ Ibid., Chapter 4.

¹⁷⁴⁸ Ibid., Chapter 9.

According to Badoe the Ghanaian witch is usually an elderly widow or a strong-minded woman. Rose Mensah-Kutin, an advocate for women accused as witches, states that in the belief system:

Women can never do anything right. A woman is poor, that's a reason for her being branded a witch. The woman can be very rich, and that can be a reason for her being branded a witch.¹⁷⁴⁹

Asara, an occupant of Gambaga for 8 years, was a prosperous businesswoman accused, with two other successful women, of causing an outbreak of meningitis in their community. Asara stated that the evidence against her and the co-accused was a young man's claim to have dreamed them as the culprits. Asara was a trader who owned her own home and a restaurant. She believes that it was people's resentment of her independence and jealousy of her success that brought her to Gambaga.

Summary

Being accused as a witch and being forced to live in exile represents "tremendous upheaval" to quote Badoe, in the lives of women.¹⁷⁵⁰ Under the threat of death women are forced to leave their children, their husbands, their homes, their possessions, their livelihoods, and their communities. Living in "grinding poverty," most women pray for the day when they will be allowed to return home. After spending almost 25 years at Gambaga, Ma Hawa returned to her family. Asara was among those women who die while in exile.

¹⁷⁴⁹ Ibid., Chapter 10.

¹⁷⁵⁰ Ibid., Chapter 13.

Shifting entrenched beliefs seems a Herculean task. However, slow progress is being made. Women are speaking out about the injustice being done to them by accusations of witchcraft, and social activists are working on their behalf. Many are pressuring the government to step in proactively. For example, asking that the Ghanaian government sponsor education initiatives.

There is the hope and belief that with education and time the practice of witchcraft accusation and attendant stigmatization and mistreatment of these women will dissipate as attitudes gradually shift. An encouraging indication is the relatively young chief of rural Parigu, who sees witchcraft as an indication of family dysfunction. He takes the revolutionary step of using an accusation of witchcraft against a woman as an opportunity for family counseling.

APPENDIX B: GLOSSARY

What follow is a selective and very abridged glossary of Yoruba terms.

Focus is on pertinence to *iyami àjẹ* such as their euphemisms and praise names.

Deities integral to the lore and mythology of *iyami àjẹ* are also highlighted.

| | |
|--|---|
| <p>Àjẹ (the àjẹ) (“witches”)</p> | <p>Powerful beings (conventionally female) considered endowed with superior intelligence and intuitive ability and/or supernatural, mystical abilities.</p> |
| | <p>Many of the euphemisms are used “to promote a mother-and-child relationship with them and thereby reduce the chances of incurring their wrath.”¹⁷⁵¹</p> |
| <p>Àjẹ (“witchcraft”)</p> | <p>Power; ability. Superior intellectual and intuitive ability. The innate power, attribute, or essential essence of flora and fauna. For example, the àjẹ of the herb valerian is its action as an antispasmodic and relaxant.</p> |
| <p><i>Àjẹ Euphemisms and Praise Names</i>¹⁷⁵²</p> | |
| <p>Abara meji</p> | <p>“One with two bodies.” / “Owners of two bodies.”</p> |
| <p>Adananlojuomi</p> | <p>“She whose heart is the open sea.”¹⁷⁵³</p> |
| <p>Àgbà / Àgbàlàgbà (plural)</p> | <p>“The elder, the elderly one.”</p> |
| <p>Alawọ meji</p> | <p>“One of two colors”</p> |
| <p>Apọkọdọsu</p> | <p>“One who kills her husband in order to take a title.”¹⁷⁵⁴</p> |
| <p>Aráyébinrin</p> | <p>“Powerful women collectively referred to as àjẹ or iyami.”¹⁷⁵⁵</p> |
| <p>Àwọn ẹnítí ó ni ayé</p> | <p>“The owners of the physical world.”</p> |

¹⁷⁵¹ Lawal, *Gẹlẹdẹ Spectacle*, 32.

¹⁷⁵² Sources include: Alcamo, *Ìyá Nlá*, 19, 27; H. J. Drewal and Drewal, *Gẹlẹdẹ*, 11, 74-75; Elebuibon, *Invisible Powers*, xii, 39, 44; Lawal, *Gẹlẹdẹ Spectacle*, 32; Olomo, “Iyami Osoronga,” 278; Prince, “Yoruba Image of the Witch,” 797, 801.

¹⁷⁵³ Ibitokun, *Dance as a Ritual Drama*, 37.

¹⁷⁵⁴ H. J. Drewal and Drewal, *Gẹlẹdẹ*, 79.

¹⁷⁵⁵ Elebuibon, *Invisible Powers*, xii.

| | |
|--------------------------------------|---|
| Awon eni toni aiyé | “The mysterious ones who rule the world.” |
| Àwọn ìyami | “The powerful mothers.” / “The mysterious mothers.” |
| Àwọn ìyá wa | “Our mothers;” Our Mother of all. |
| Ayé | These terms “refer to the ‘powerful mothers’ as well as the evil that lurks in the physical world.” ¹⁷⁵⁶ |
| Ayé àkámara | |
| Ayé un | |
| Eleiye / Eléye / Ẹlẹ̀iyẹ / Ẹlẹ̀ye | “Mother of birds,” “Bird masters,” “Bird keepers,” “Owners of birds” and holders of those mysteries. |
| Ẹyẹ ọ̀rò | Spirit bird. |
| Ẹyẹ oru | Nocturnal bird. Bird of the night. |
| Ìyá àgbà / Ìyágbà | “Elderly and venerable mother.” “Old and wise one.” |
| Ìyá agbè | Mother of the closed calabash (a name also associated with Oduduwa). |
| Iya Aiye | “Mother who controls the world.” |
| Ìyá àwọn ọ̀mọ̀dé | “The mother of children.” |
| Ìyàmì (also ìyàun) | “My mother.” Often used interchangeably with àjẹ but more correctly denoting only those àjẹ who are members of the Council of Witches or Iyami Society. |
| Ìyàmi Ọ̀sòròngà | The Great and Mysterious Mother; My Mother the Sorceress. Owner of knives. |
| Ìyàmi Wa | Our Primordial Mother. |
| Iya’Mole / Iya Imole | Mother of the divinities. |
| Ìyá, ọ̀mọ̀ atún aiyé şe | “Mother, child who brings peace into the world.” ¹⁷⁵⁷ |
| Òbò tó dorí kodò tí ò sẹ̀jẹ | “The one with the vagina that faces the earth without dripping blood.” ¹⁷⁵⁸ |
| Oloju meji | “One with two faces.” |
| Oluaiyé / Oní l’oní aiyé | “Owners-of-the-world.” This praise name is also associated with Sonpona, the deity of small-pox and infectious disease. |
| Ọ̀mọ̀ aráyé | “Children or people of the world.” Euphemism for individuals with evil intent (witches). |

¹⁷⁵⁶ Lawal, *Gẹ̀lẹ̀dẹ̀ Spectacle*, 31 n. 18.

¹⁷⁵⁷ H. J. Drewal and Drewal, *Gẹ̀lẹ̀dẹ̀*, 24.

¹⁷⁵⁸ Elebuibon, *Invisible Powers*, 45.

| | |
|--|--|
| Orisha egbe | "Gods of society" ¹⁷⁵⁹ |
| n/a | Elders / Owners / Guardians of the night. |
| n/a | Woman of the Bird. |
| <i>Select Deities</i> | |
| Ile / Onile | Primordial earth deity (owner of the earth). Venerated by the Ogboni Society. A "grand matron" of àjẹ |
| Iyá'Nlá | Great Mother. Mother Nature. Àjẹ is her natural endowment. Mother of All Things, including the deities. The focus of Gẹ̀lẹ̀dẹ̀. |
| Obatala = Oriṣanla = Oṣala = Obarissa | Deity of the white cloth; molder of human beings; associated with indigenous inhabitants of Yorubaland. |
| Odù | Primordial female divinity, equated with Iya'Nla. The "founder of witchcraft" and "grand matron" of àjẹ. Central to Ifá divination and Ifá priests. |
| Odùà = Odúdùà = Odùdúwà = Oòdùà | Name renderings for the Primordial Great Mother. The Nago Yoruba call her "the orisha who turns blood into children." ¹⁷⁶⁰ First king of the Yoruba people or the titular goddess of the people who migrated into Yorubaland. |
| Olodumare = Olorun | Yoruba "creator essence;" owner of the sky. "Supreme Being." "The Infinite Mystery." Endowed primordial mothers with àjẹ / or àjẹ is an innate endowment of the Mothers. |
| Orunmila = Ifá | Deity of wisdom and divination. |
| Òṣun | Deity associated with generativity, abundance, and love. "Leader of the àjẹ." |
| Yemoja | Deity associated with motherhood and Gelede. "Mother of the witches." |
| <i>Limited General Terms</i> ¹⁷⁶¹ | |
| Aiyé | Realm of material existence. |
| Ajo | Meetings of the witches' secret society |

¹⁷⁵⁹ Drews, "Guardians of the Society," 18.

¹⁷⁶⁰ Beier, "Gelede Masks," 8.

¹⁷⁶¹ For excellent glossaries of Yoruba terminology see Lawal, *Gẹ̀lẹ̀dẹ̀ Spectacle* and Washington, *Our Mothers*.

| | |
|-----------------------------|--|
| Aragamago | Name of the bird, representing the power of àjé, given to Odù by Olodumare |
| Àṣẹ; Aṣẹ | Life force. The animating principle of flora and fauna. The power to bring things into existence. |
| Babaláwo | “Father of the secrets.” Ifa priest and diviner. |
| Éníyán | Witch |
| Ènìyàn | Human being |
| Ẹṣẹ | Verses or subchapters of the Odu Ifa. |
| Ètùtù | A propitiatory offering designed to cool or assuage. |
| Gèlèdédé; Gẹlẹdẹ; Gẹlẹdẹ | Ritual in honor of and propitiation to the iyàmi. |
| Ile-Ifé | Site of Yoruba tales of genesis. Sacred city and religious center of Yorubaland. |
| Iroju | “Patience and perseverance. It connotes the control of self.” ¹⁷⁶² This is an attribute of iyàmi. |
| Itàn | History/myths/stories. |
| Ìtánkálè | The lands to which Africans were taken once kidnapped from their continent and sold as slaves. |
| Iyalaṣẹ | Female head of the Gẹlẹdẹ cult. |
| Ìyálóde | “Mother of the outside.” Woman who is chief of the marketplace. High chieftaincy title. |
| Iyánifa | “Mother of mysteries.” Ifa priestess and diviner. |
| Obìnrin | Female |
| Odù Ifá | Oral tradition and sacred text of the Yoruba containing religious philosophy, historical myths, and divination system. The 16 major <i>odu</i> as commonly ordered and noted by Epega and Neimark are: Ogbe, Oyeku, Iwori, Idi, Irosun, Owronrin (aka Olota), Obara, Okanran, Ogunda (aka Yonu), Osa, Ika, Oturupon, Otura, Irete, Ose, Ofun. |
| Ofo aṣẹ | The power of the spoken word to affect reality / bring forth manifestation. |
| Ogboni Society | Traditional Yoruba adjudicating body. |
| Ọkùnrin | Male |
| Olórìṣà | Orìṣa priest or priestess. |

¹⁷⁶² H. J. Drewal and Drewal, *Gẹlẹdẹ*, 73.

| | |
|----------|---|
| Onísègun | Herbalist. |
| Ori ode | One's physical head. |
| Ori inu | One's inner or spiritual head—the mind, consciousness. |
| Oríkì | Praise-poetry. |
| Oriṣa | Yoruba deities. Personifications of the forces of nature. |
| Òrun | Realm of spirit; Sky. |
| Oso | Wizard; sorcerer. |

Figure B1. Glossary of Yoruba terms.

Note: Author's figure.

APPENDIX C: HRRC APPROVAL

California Institute of Integral Studies Human Research Review
Committee

September 11, 2008

Dear Annette Williams,

Congratulations, the Human Research Review Committee (HRRC) has approved your research proposal.

This approval is in effect for one year from the date of this letter. Any changes to your proposal from this point forward must be approved by the Committee in advance. It is understood that HRRC approval of your research does not imply endorsement by CIIS of any treatments, products, or theories associated with your research.

If you need more than one year to complete your research, you will need to apply for an extension to the HRRC before your one year expiration date. If this is needed, please submit in writing a statement of your request for extension and the reasons. You must also include a statement that no changes to your research have been made since this initial approval.

We wish you success with your research.

Sincerely,

[Signature Withheld for Privacy]

Robert Duchman
HRRC Member

cc: L. Birnbaum

APPENDIX D: CONSENT FORMS

WRITTEN CONSENT TO BE INTERVIEWED

This document contains the written agreement to be interviewed by Annette Williams, a doctoral candidate at the California Institute of Integral Studies for her dissertation tentatively entitled: The Power of Àjé in Yorùbá Cosmology and Reality.

Description:

The narrative component of this research project focuses on hearing women who wield àjé in the world tell their stories. The reason for the narrative component in the dissertation is to hear the stories of àjé, or people who are familiar with àjé, in their own words, to focus on their experience in the revelatory process of understanding their reality. The main invitation becomes: Tell me about your experience.

Your participation in this research project is entirely voluntary. If you agree to be interviewed, you may be invited to participate in follow-up interviews. You are free to say no and end participation in the study at any time. You may end an interview at any time if you feel uncomfortable. While participating in this study will not benefit you personally in any material way, it may give you the opportunity to reflect on experiences that are meaningful to you, and to contribute your knowledge to this field of research.

This interview will be audiotaped, or videotaped and the recording maintained in my safekeeping. With permission photographs will be taken. The things you tell me, or have written to me, within the context of this research will be included in my notes. I will use your name and personal information only as agreed upon. The information you have given may be used in research presentations, and in my dissertation, where no names or identifying information will be used unless agreed upon.

If you cannot obtain satisfactory answers to your questions, or have comments or complaints about your treatment in this study, please contact: the Chair of the Human Research Review Committee, California Institute of Integral Studies, 1453 Mission Street, San Francisco, CA 94103 or by telephone at 415-575-6114 or via email to [withheld for privacy]

Do you have any questions?

I certify that I have been given satisfactory answers to my inquiries concerning the project procedures and other matters, and that I have been advised that I am free to withdraw my consent and to discontinue participation in the project or activity at any time without prejudice.

I _____ give my written consent to participate in this project with the understanding that such consent does not waive

any of my legal rights; nor does it release the researcher or agent thereof from liability for negligence.

Signature

Date

ORAL CONSENT TO BE INTERVIEWED

This document contains the oral agreement to be interviewed by Annette Williams, a doctoral candidate at the California Institute of Integral Studies for her dissertation tentatively entitled: The Power of Àjé in Yorùbá Cosmology and Reality.

Oral Briefing:

The narrative component of this research project focuses on hearing women who wield àjé in the world tell their stories. The reason for the narrative component in the dissertation is to hear the stories of *àjé*, or people who are familiar with *àjé*, in their own words, to focus on their experience in the revelatory process of understanding their reality. The main invitation becomes: Tell me about your experience.

Your participation in this research project is entirely voluntary. If you agree to be interviewed, you may be invited to participate in follow-up interviews. You are free to say no and end participation in the study at any time. You may end an interview at any time if you feel uncomfortable. While participating in this study will not benefit you personally in any material way, it may give you the opportunity to reflect on experiences that are meaningful to you, and to contribute your knowledge to this field of research.

This interview will be audiotaped, or videotaped and the recording maintained in my safekeeping. With permission photographs will be taken. The things you tell me, or have written to me, within the context of this research will be included in my notes. I will use your name and personal information only as agreed upon. The information you have given may be used in research presentations, and in my dissertation, where no names or identifying information will be used unless agreed upon.

Do you have any questions?

I certify that I have been given satisfactory answers to my inquiries concerning the project procedures and other matters, and that I have been advised that I am free to withdraw my consent and to discontinue participation in the project or activity at any time without prejudice.

In answering the next question, I give my oral consent to participate in this project with the understanding that such consent does not waive any of my legal rights; nor does it release the researcher or agent thereof from liability for negligence.

DO YOU AGREE TO BE PART OF THIS STUDY?

_____ YES _____ NO

Name: _____

Continued Oral Briefing:

[If you cannot obtain satisfactory answers to your questions, or have comments or complaints about your treatment in this study, please contact: the Chair of the Human Research Review Committee, California Institute of Integral Studies, 1453 Mission Street, San Francisco, CA 94103 or by telephone at 415-575-6114 or via email to [withheld for privacy]