

SEEING THROUGH A WOMAN'S EYE

Yoruba Religious Tradition and Gender Relations

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The study of Yoruba religion has enjoyed a significant boost lately, especially since the discovery of the strong influence of this tradition in the Atlantic world. Also, the issue of gender and the dynamism that attends its existence in relation to power structures in religion have been the focus of scholarly works in recent years.¹ Notable among previous works on women's roles in religion in Africa are the significant works of Mercy Amba Oduyoye on the role of women in Christianity in Africa.² In this article I too will examine some aspects of women's roles in religion, based on my own research among the Yoruba people and will discuss what I regard as the state of gender relations in Yoruba religious traditions. This attempt is aligned with one important component of any feminist enterprise, which is to bring to the fore otherwise subsumed traditions regarding women's roles in society.³

In this article I will argue contrary to Oyèrónké Oyèwùmí's submission, in her book *The Invention of Women: Making an African Sense of Western Gen-*

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¹ For this work, *gender* refers to defined capacities and attributes assigned to persons on the basis of their alleged sexual characteristics. Gender, then, is a construct within a people's living experience, embedded in the base of their philosophy and manifested at the theoretical and pragmatic levels of their polity. Because gender is never independent of other social systems, it would be futile to consider it a fixed and immutable construct; rather, it is a process.

² See Amina Mama, "Women's Studies and Studies of Women in Africa during the 1990s," *Feminist Knowledge: Review Essays*, GWS Africa, <http://www.gwsafrica.org/knowledge/codesriabook.htm> (accessed January 29, 2004); and Niara Sudarkasa, "The Status of Women in Indigenous African Societies," in *Women in Africa and the African Diaspora*, ed. Rosalyn Terborg-Penn, Sharon Harley, and Andrea Benton Rushing (Washington, DC: Howard University Press, 1987). See also Mercy Amba Oduyoye, *Daughters of Anowa: African Women and Patriarchy* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1995).

³ See Jane Flax, "Postmodernism and Gender Relations in Feminist Theory," in *Feminist Theory in Practice and Process*, ed. Micheline R. Malson, Jean F. O'Barr, Sarah Westphal-Wihl, and Mary Weyer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 71.

der Discourses, that gender was a Western paradigm introduced to the Yoruba and that the Yoruba previously had no notion of gender.⁴ Her argument predicates on the absence of gender-specific terms in the Yoruba language, among other factors. I will argue that gender existed and played a significant role in Yoruba religious tradition but in ways quite different from its conception in Western cultures. The difference stems from the fact that, among the Yoruba, gender conceptions are not limited to sexual anatomy and are configured in a complex and fluid manner, as is explicated in the oral traditions I will consider in this article. Not only is gender an important social category in traditional Yoruba society, but it is also flexible. Consequently, a major contribution of this article will be to explicate the variability and complexity of Yoruba gender constructs from four significant areas of Yoruba religious traditions: cosmology, the goddess tradition, ancestral performance, and divination. In addition, I will demonstrate the presence of an alternative tradition of female leadership and participation preserved in the oral sources of Yoruba religion, a fact which has hitherto been subsumed under male-centered portrayals of Yoruba religion. I will support my arguments with examples from the people's religious, social, and cultural experiences as recorded in oral sources.

Gender among the Yoruba

Gender is a concept imbued with notions of difference—hierarchy, opposition, and, inevitably, power relations. Gender is informed by assumed capabilities for individuals based primarily on their sexual anatomy. A connection between sex and gender seems crucial to a people's conception of gender classification. Hence, whereas sex is regarded as natural, gender is regarded as a cultural construct that is variable and fluid, not rigid.

Conceptions of gender in Africa are often culture- and context-bound. Oyèwùmí's work exemplifies the contextualization of gender among the Yoruba. Biological anatomy is not a limitation to social status such as that of husbands, wives, mothers, or fathers among the Yoruba. In addition, the Yoruba language, unlike Western discourse, provides no pronoun for sexual distinction. The notion of gender among the Yoruba is complex and multidimensional; hence, Oyèwùmí states that the Yoruba world is not dichotomized into male and female.⁵

The existence of gender constructs among the Yoruba may be discerned from their mythology, which presents expectations for the female and male in the society at both the mythical and practical levels. These expectations are de-

⁴ Oyèrónké Oyèwùmí, *The Invention of Women: Making an African Sense of Western Gender Discourses* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997).

⁵ *Ibid.*

terminated by the people's living experiences. For example, female principles are generally regarded as symbols of coolness (*ero*), whereas male principles are construed as representing toughness (*lile*). This underlines the people's conception of female (*abo*) and male (*ako*). Hence, the people say, *K'odun yi y'abo fun wa o*, "May this year be female for us" or "Bring us all that the female principle stands for." The converse implication of this expression is the avoidance of a "male year," which might be tough and unpleasant. This perception is also reflected in the people's social expectations for male and female as recorded in wise sayings and proverbs. An example of this is the expectation that males will succeed their fathers as heirs and the need to offer an explanation when this is impracticable. The heir is known as *arole*, and the explanation for exceptions to the rule is recorded in sayings such as, *Bi o ni di obirin ki je ku molu*, "If there is no special reason, a woman would not be named Kumolu." In Yoruba cultural idiom and practice, Kumolu is a name signifying that the family of the female so named has no male heir apparent, because all the male children have died. Moreover, a woman who performs feats, especially physical ones, is described as *obinrin bi okunrin*, "a woman like a man." My point is that gender classifications have always existed among the Yoruba but may be transversely manipulated, as is the case in social structures and the ritual space in religion.

However, this gender construct does not translate to notions of oppression and the domination of women by men as happens in some cultures, because it is mediated by the philosophy of complementary gender relations, which is rooted in the people's cosmic experience. A complementary gender relation is entrenched at every level of the Yoruba socioreligious consciousness, as both male and female principles are crucial to a smooth living experience. Social, political, and religious structures reflect this perception in both their membership and their modes of operation. Further, neither of the genders can lay claim to a monopoly of the "private" or "public" domain as they may be able to do in other cultures.

Complementarity and duality in Yoruba parlance are notions different from the Western conception of these terms. It is therefore pertinent that a reconceptualization of paradigms for analyzing gender relations be obtained, because notions of equality and parity could be misleading in the Yoruba context. As Niara Sudarkasa notes, neutral complementarity describes more accurately than subordination the relationship between male and female roles in various precolonial African societies.⁶ This neutral complementarity is here taken to refer not to equality or parity but to cooperation and specified areas of control for the female as well as the male. The religious setting is an arena in which the dynamics attending these concepts are displayed extensively.

⁶ Sudarkasa, "Status of Women."

Therefore, among the Yoruba, the question to ask about the state of the sexes is not which sex is dominant but, rather, over which areas does each sex enjoy prominence. Further, the prominence that one sex enjoys in a particular area of human activity does not make the people in that sexual category independent of people in the other.

Previous Work on Yoruba Religion and Gender

Major pioneering works on Yoruba religion were not concerned about gender, because gender was not an important theoretical and conceptual paradigm for examining culture (at least in Africa) at the time they were written.⁷ These works, as a result, were male-centered. Nevertheless, some authors who have constructed such male-centered interpretations of Yoruba religion often emphasize the variability of Yoruba traditions and indeed show how certain deities assume different gender orientations in various parts of Yoruba religion. An example is J. Lorand Matory writing on the deity Sango among the Yoruba.⁸ Another intriguing example is E. Bolaji Idowu, who mentions that the deity Oduduwa (who is an ancestor as well as a divinity) in the eastern Yoruba region is seen as female but assumes a male persona in the western and central Yoruba regions.⁹ Such a discovery, at minimum, indicates the possibility of gender flexibility in Yoruba religious traditions. In some recent works, especially some by female scholars, there has been a significant focus on the role of women in Yoruba traditions. Interestingly, these works have also raised questions about not only what the nature of gender is but indeed whether gender constitutes an important analytical category in Yoruba culture and society. Efforts to foster this conversation may be discerned from an array of recent publications, to which I now turn.

One recent major work is Diedre Badejo's *Osun Seegesi: The Elegant Deity of Wealth, Power, and Femininity*, which focuses on the ritual drama and oratory of the goddess Osun in Oshogbo, Nigeria, the center of her worship.¹⁰ Badejo brings into the core of Yoruba religious life the role of the goddess, whose various capacities as diviner, medicine woman, ruler, *àjé* (a woman of deep spiritual power), and entrepreneur dominated Oshogbo city life. Badejo focuses on the enormous power and resources that traditional and modern Yoruba cosmology and ritual performance play in locating Osun squarely in the

⁷ See E. Bolaji Idowu, *Olódùmarè: God in Yoruba Belief* (London: Longmans, 1962); and Jonathan Olumide Lucas, *The Religion of the Yorubas* (Lagos, Nigeria: C. M. S. Bookshop, 1948).

⁸ J. Lorand Matory, *Sex and the Empire That Is No More: Gender and the Politics of Metaphor in Oyo Yoruba Religion* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994).

⁹ Idowu, *Olódùmarè*.

¹⁰ Diedre Badejo, *Osun Seegesi: The Elegant Deity of Wealth, Power, and Femininity* (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 1996).

center of African feminist theoretical discourse. The legend of Osun and her power elevate African womanhood as a source of empowerment for women globally. I will discuss the legend of Osun in more detail later in this article.

In *The Invention of Women*, Oyèrónké Oyèwùmí challenges previous studies of gender relations in Africa. She argues for an African-centered epistemology that privileges African sensibilities over Western gender paradigms. Oyèwùmí calls into question Western feminist notions that gender is a basic organizing principle and that women are universally subordinate to men in all human societies. Based on her field research among the Oyo Yoruba people of Nigeria, Oyèwùmí argues that woman, as an organizing social category, did not exist in precolonial traditional Yoruba society, because Yoruba society placed more emphasis on categories of seniority and age. Though she is not concerned with religion, her work has implications for the study of Yoruba religion and gender. Oyèwùmí rightly argues that the Western construction of gender may not be applicable to Yoruba society, but her thesis that gender was not an organizing principle prior to the colonial era in Yoruba lands is not correct.

J. D. Y. Peel published the essay "Gender in Yoruba Religious Change" in 2002 as a corrective to his recent major work, *Religious Encounter and the Making of the Yoruba*, and as a response to Oyèwùmí's *Invention of Women*.¹¹ Peel argues that the category of gender was indeed pertinent to traditional Yoruba religious life and, contrary to Oyèwùmí, that nineteenth-century Yoruba conversion to Christianity caused no major shifts in Yoruba society. Peel maintains that traditional Yoruba gender structures significantly affected the shape of Yoruba Christian beliefs and practices. His stance assumes that gender construction existed among the Yoruba.

In a critical contribution to the debate on gender and the status of women in Yoruba religious life, Jacob Olupona's well-publicized Princeton University lecture "Imagining the Power of the Goddess" argues that gender is definitely central to traditional Yoruba religious culture and society.¹² However, Yoruba gendering is complex, ambitious, and very flexible. Based on his analysis of the oratory and ritual performance of Ifa—the practice of divination among the Yoruba—Olupona is convinced that female aesthetics feature prominently in all domains of Yoruba religious life. Ifa poetics, symbolism, iconography, and indeed the *Odu* (the oral texts that constitute the Ifa corpus, which is the wisdom storehouse of the Yoruba and the core of the divination focus) are symbolized as female, often as the essential wives of Ifa. Olupona argues that although there are distinct masculine and feminine deities, their functions and

¹¹ See J. D. Y. Peel's "Gender in Yoruba Religious Change," *Journal of Religion in Africa* 32 (2002): 136–66; and *Religious Encounter and the Making of the Yoruba* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000).

¹² Jacob Olupona, "Imagining the Power of the Goddess: Gender in Yoruba Religious Traditions and Modernity" (lecture, Princeton University, Princeton, NJ, 2002).

cultural practices are not always expressed in gender-specific language. Olupona claims that, having power similar to the goddess Osun, the female deity Ajé, the goddess of wealth and fertility, dominated Yoruba political economy based on her invention of trade, commerce, money, and the banking system. Ajé, like Osun, constitutes an imposing figure and role model for Yoruba women, who dominate the Yoruba market economy. Finally, Olupona observes that in Yoruba society women's activities relate to both private and public spheres, contrary to the dominant scholarship that separates the two spheres, making the female private and domestic sphere subordinate to the male public sphere. The market sphere of women's activities is a public sphere par excellence. Clearly, the complexities that characterize Yoruba gender construction play out in a fluid rather than a fixed way.

Yoruba Theoretical Constructions of Gender

Next I will examine four significant areas of Yoruba religious tradition, highlighting the important roles that women play in their societies and how these are attended by gender dynamics among the people. I will examine some of the materials, especially oral texts, with which many scholars have constructed a male-centered analysis of Yoruba religion. I chose these four areas—cosmology, the goddess tradition, ancestral performance, and divination—because they are usually construed as the core elements of Yoruba tradition. My analysis reflects my own perspective as a woman and a feminist historian of Yoruba religious tradition. In addition, in examining these four categories I am guided by certain conceptual paradigms that are intricately linked to gender dynamics in African societies, namely, power, identity, and culture.

The notion of power (*agbara*) as I use it here assumes that power is not limited to coercive force alone but extends also to the ability to affect and effect change. Power is here construed as being both visible and invisible, formal and informal. Power among the Yoruba confers privileges as well as responsibilities. Power is not the exclusive preserve of any sex, age, or profession. Hence, the Yoruba say, *Owo omode o to pepe, ti agbalagba o wo keregbe*, "A child's hand cannot reach the high platform, but the hand of the elder cannot enter the gourd either." This shows the need for mutual cooperation in all endeavors.

Identity construction among the Yoruba comprises diverse elements, central to which is seniority. This is informed by the constant shifts of a person's social position in the society. Consequently, the social identity of the individual is relational in the society. Females and males are perceived as belonging to different strata, as is explicated in Yoruba sayings such as *Egbe eye l'eye nwo to*, "Birds of the same feather flock together."

Culture, in general, refers to the totality of a people's way of life and is usu-

ally manifested in norms and practices. The Yoruba adage *Bi a se nse nibiji eewo ibomi*, "Our conduct here is anathema to practices elsewhere," suggests the dynamic nature of culture as well as its variableness. Culture is that which bonds a people, and this affects gender construction significantly.

Embedded within the category of gender are notions of difference, opposition, and, inevitably, power relations. The assumption that all societies construct gender one way or another is often informed by the biological features of men and women, which are not only different but essential to procreation and, consequently, the preservation of humanity. Sex has been a framework for gender construction in Western cultures through so many centuries that on some occasion it has been asserted that sex and gender are the same; but this cannot be said of the Yoruba. The Yoruba concept of gender, as in some other cultures, is not unitary, monolithic, or rigid.¹³

Further, the perception of sex seems crucial to a people's conception of gender; for example, a different gender construct is to be expected of societies in which sex is perceived as a cultural construct, as opposed to one in which sex is perceived as natural. Nicole-Claude Mathieu argues that three main positions can be identified toward the relationship between sex and gender.¹⁴ The first position regards sex and gender as the same. The second position assumes that sex is natural and gender is a cultural construct; gender is constructed and may be changed or varied, according to this position. The third position asserts that neither sex nor gender is natural. This position posits that sex and gender are both culturally constructed; it rejects the use of biology as a tool for constructing gender in any way. This position is further reinforced by considerations of the different types of genes and chromosomes in the human body, which do not necessarily follow societal prescriptions of gender.

Some scholars have opined that perceiving a separation between sex and gender is futile, given that we are first known, seen, and recognized as beings with biological components; how do we know whether a baby is male or female at birth if not through the sex as expressed by biological components of the body, particularly the sexual anatomy? Gender neutrality is thus not an option. Others postulate that sex and gender are socially constructed each in relation to the other and that, far from being a given, sex is a category, the product of specific discursive practices.¹⁵ In this vein, gender construction among the Yoruba would suggest a negotiation that has been described as a "patriarchal bar-

¹³ See R. R. Warne, "Gender," in *Guide to the Study of Religion*, ed. Willi Braun and Russell T. McCutcheon (London: Cassell, 2000), 140–54.

¹⁴ Nicole-Claude Mathieu, "Sexual, Sexed, and Sex-Class Identities: Three Ways of Conceptualizing the Relationship between Sex and Gender," in *Sex in Question: French Materialist Feminism*, ed. Diana Leonard and Lisa Adkins (London: Taylor & Francis, 1996).

¹⁵ See Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, vol. 1, *An Introduction*, trans. Robert Hurley (Harmondsworth, UK: Penguin, 1984).

gain,” a “set of rules and scripts regulating gender relations to whom both genders accommodate and acquiesce, yet which may nonetheless be contested, redefined, and renegotiated.”¹⁶ Thus, gender is complex among the Yoruba both in conception and in practical terms.

My position is that gender is culturally constructed, whereas sex is biological. I take this position because of the dynamics in gender construction among the Yoruba, of which I am one. Specifically, I am a wife in some contexts, but at other times I am a husband to other women. Whereas my position as a wife is based on my biological anatomy (in relationship to one male) and marital affiliation (my relationship to male and female members of my husband’s extended family), my role as a husband is informed by my natal affiliation (my relationship to wives of male members of my natal family), which is independent of class or status.

Having examined gender discourses generally, I will now underscore the implication of this debate for the understanding of gender relations in Yoruba society. A basic implication of gender constructs in Yoruba religion is that they have a pervasive influence on all sectors of the people’s lives. This is underscored by the intrinsic religiosity of the Yoruba worldview.

Gender in Yoruba Sacred Oral Literature

The importance of sacred oral literature to the Yoruba worldview is momentous. Historical and social experiences are all recorded in sacred literature. Sacred texts cast these experiences into narratives, which are continuously performed in rituals. Oral sacred texts therefore constitute the starting point of any investigation into the Yoruba thought system. Cosmological accounts in these texts serve as a paradigm for social categorization, which makes them germane to gender construction among the Yoruba. Thus, in this section I will begin with a consideration of texts on cosmology. I will then examine some sacred texts on goddess traditions among the Yoruba and their implication for women’s roles and gender relations in the society.¹⁷

Cosmology

The Yoruba narrative of the origin of the world is presented in many versions, but the core of them all is the delegation of divine power and authority

¹⁶ Matory, *Sex and the Empire*, 76.

¹⁷ Although the largest portion of Yoruba sacred texts exist only in oral form, some have been written down, beginning around 1975. Wande Abimbola has done substantial work in this area; see her “Images of Women in the Ifa Literary Corpus,” in *Queens, Queen Mothers, Priestesses, and Power: Case Studies in African Gender*, ed. Flora Edouwaye S. Kaplan (New York: New York Academy of Sciences, 1997). See other references cited in these notes for further information on Yoruba culture.

to deities to control and rule the world. These accounts of the origin of the universe enumerate the composition of nature as well as humans at the instance of Olodumare (God, who is androgynous), who delegated some powers to the Irunmole (primordial divinities) in the process of making the earth habitable. Two of these accounts merit further attention.

One of the accounts states that Olodumare delegated the power to create the landscape and the physical figures of humans to Orisanla, the most senior divinity in the Yoruba pantheon. Olodumare gave Orisanla three elements to achieve these objectives: earthen mud in a snail shell, a bird, and a hen.¹⁸ Oduduwa was asked to accompany Orisanla on this important mission. Oduduwa is a figure in the Yoruba thought system with dual classifications as divinity and ancestor. On the way to the earth, Orisanla got drunk and was thus incapable of carrying out the mission; Oduduwa then took the items and created the earth. Sometime later, Orisanla came to himself and proceeded to create the physical figures of humans. The significance of the story for our analysis is that Oduduwa is presented in many versions as female (although the central Ile-Ife story sees Oduduwa as male).¹⁹ If Oduduwa was a female, how does this affect the analysis of Yoruba cosmological accounts? First, it means that the progenitor of the Yoruba people is female. Further, it points to the creation exercise as a joint venture between a male (Orisanla) and a female (Oduduwa): Oduduwa created the land, valleys, and mountains with the items Olodumare had supplied; Orisanla, after recovering from his drunken stupor, created the physical figures of humans. Orisanla is said to have created some of them beautiful and others ugly, some as albinos, and others with hunchbacks. Hence, disabled people are regarded as special and sacred among the worshippers of Orisanla in Yoruba land even today. That a female founded the earth and a male molded the physical figure of humans would tally with the Yoruba prescription for gender balance in all endeavors. This crucial principle is required at all levels of interaction in Yoruba polity and ethos. Hence, a Yoruba proverb says, *F'osi we otun, f'otun we osi l'owo fii mo*, "Washing the left and right hand each with the other ensures clean hands." Another proverb says, *Ajeje owo kan o gbe'ru d'ori, ohun a ba jo wo gigun ni gun*, "It is impossible to place a heavy load on your head with one hand; whatever we consider together is bound to be successful." The cooperation of the male and female in the Yoruba thought system thus reinforces notions that Oduduwa, a female, and Orisanla, a male, carried out Olodumare's injunctions to make the earth habitable and to mold human physical figures.

The second cosmological narrative relevant to my analysis is found in the

¹⁸ J. Omosade Awolalu and P. Adelumo Dopamu, *West African Traditional Religion* (Ibadan, Nigeria: Onibonjoje, 1979), 132.

¹⁹ See Isola Olomola, "Ife before Oduduwa," in *The Cradle of a Race: Ife from the Beginning to 1980*, ed. I. A. Akinjogbin (Port Harcourt, Nigeria: Sunray, 1992), 51–78.

oral Ifa divination corpus called *Odu Ose tura*, which states that Olodumare, the Supreme Being, sent seventeen primordial deities to occupy the earth, and only one of them, Osun, was female. When they arrived on earth, the sixteen male deities operated as a team but neglected the only female in all their functions; Osun was excluded from sacred knowledge, from covenants, and from decision making. When Osun could bear it no longer, she congregated the women on earth and formed the Iya Mi group, a society of powerful women. With their hitherto unusual *ase* (life force), they interfered with the plans of the male deities. Consequently, there was chaos with humans and nature. Nothing functioned as expected; famine, pestilence, and extreme discomfort characterized the whole earth. The sixteen male deities rushed to Olodumare for a solution to this problem. After they explained their situation, Olodumare inquired about the seventeenth deity. They replied that, because she was only a female, they had excluded her from all proceedings. Olodumare charged them to go back and make peace with Osun, because it was only then that normalcy could return. The sixteen deities went back to plead for Osun's forgiveness, which she granted after receiving the promise that no longer would she be excluded from all functions and proceedings on earth. Thereafter, peace and normalcy returned to the earth.

This account brings to the fore two important motifs. First, Olodumare recognized and, by implication, endorsed the complementary roles of male and female humans, commanding that the male deities go back and make peace with Osun, even though Olodumare could have intervened and helped the male deities without any reference to the authority of the Iya Mi group. This suggests Olodumare's strong preference for mutual respect between the female and the male. Second, Osun possesses the ability to affect and effect the power that activates the life force, as is true of the Iya Mi group in Yoruba land today.

The central reason for discussing these narratives is that they are part of an alternative tradition quite distinct from the normative narratives in Yoruba religious life, which is often not taken seriously or is even totally ignored. This is usually due to subjective reasons that serve purely male interests and seek to subsume the fact that women played positive and important roles in these accounts. There is no doubt that the cosmological myth that is regarded as the normative account falls short of the whole truth. This normative myth as presented by male scholars clearly asserts that the male deities Orisanla and Oduduwa carried out creation, but this is contrary to what obtains in Yoruba communities where Oduduwa is portrayed as female. This normative account exhibits a latent patriarchal coloring that does not tally with the Yoruba cosmic experience, which envisions males and females living side by side and sometimes vying with each other for power.

Our role as scholars of religion, both male and female, is to interrogate

these traditions and to highlight alternative traditions from which we can derive meanings that are more balanced and true to the Yoruba reality. I suggest that the Yoruba religious worldview implicitly espouses a dual, complementary structure. *Aye* (the cosmic and physical world) is replete with events, issues, and problems that reflect precisely this complementary structure. Ultimately, a key place is accorded women in the resolution of difficult issues in the Yoruba world, be they political, economic, or social. Hence, at the beginning of every New Year, a prayerful wish expressed by the Yoruba states, *Odun a ya abo*, "May this year be female for us," referring to femaleness as a symbol of coolness and peace (*ero*).

The Goddess Tradition

Each goddess and her worship are the product of a given culture. Among the Yoruba, the personhood and worship of a goddess are ultimately linked to the cosmological account of the people. Further, goddesses manifest two, or sometimes three, personalities at once. Goddesses have a human personality and a spiritual personality and sometimes are further personified in natural phenomena, especially rivers. The manifestation of goddesses in rivers is linked to the Yoruba notion about the therapeutic qualities of water. Though gods may manifest these tripartite qualities as well, they are seldom associated with healing qualities. Healing and physical well-being are of utmost importance to a Yoruba person. This is encapsulated in the people's saying *Ilera l'oo-gun oro*, "Good health is the guarantee of wealth." However, wellness among the people goes beyond the physical, as money, children, and peace (*owo, omo, alafia*) are also considered components of a good life. Goddesses in Yoruba land supply all these benefits. I will now very briefly discuss two Yoruba goddesses, with emphasis on their roles as sovereign rulers, warriors, and healers, and their gender implications for Yoruba polity.

Osun. Osun is the goddess of the Osun River in Yoruba land, and her most prominent worship is at Oshogbo, a town whose origin account attributes a significant position to the goddess. Osun, the most popular of the Yoruba goddesses, is regarded as the sovereign ruler of Oshogbo. She was the one who made it possible for the inhabitants to settle on the riverbank and promised to protect the city. The *ataoja* (ruler) of Oshogbo rules the city for and on behalf of Osun. The annual festival of Osun provides the occasion for the *ataoja* to acknowledge Osun's sovereignty and control over Oshogbo's space.

Osun as a goddess represents also the sacred dimension of waters; she is thus essential to the daily living of both humans and the deities. Just as water is necessary for sustaining human life, it is rare to find any shrine of a divinity in Yoruba land where there is no water. Such water represents Osun because *Omi gbogbo l'osun*, "All waters represent Osun," as a Yoruba adage goes. Osun

is the creative spirit and the spiritual dimension of pregnancy, childbirth, and child rearing. Her fertility qualities are manifested in her ability to guarantee people's continuity through procreation; hence, she is known as *olomo yoyo* (one with lots of children). The importance of this singular quality cannot be overemphasized in a culture in which the utmost significance is accorded to procreation.

Osun possesses sacred knowledge through her leadership of the Iya Mi group and through her access to the *eerindinlogun* divination system (both of which I will address later in the article). She utilizes these qualities to protect, defend, and bless her adherents, who are both males and females. One Osun *oriki* (praise poem) tells how, once upon a time, both Osun and Osanyin (god of medicinal plants) were plucking medicinal leaves, but before Osanyin could turn around Osun had removed Osanyin's medicinal leaves from the grinding stone (*olota*). The implication of this tale is that Osun's cool water is medicinal and more efficacious for healing purposes than herbs and roots. In addition to possessing these qualities, Osun is also a warrior, described thus:

Obinrin gbadamu gbadamu
Ti o see gba legbee mu
Obinrin gbona, okunrin n sa

[A strong and powerful woman with a heart of steel
 One who is indefatigable (cannot be captured)
 A woman whose rage causes men to flee in panic]

Oya. My second example is *Oya*, the goddess of wind and storms, who possesses a human personality as well as a spiritual existence. As a human her full name is *Oya Akanbi*, and she is an indigene of *Ira*, a town in *Kwara* state, *Nigeria*. As a goddess she can be benevolent or malevolent, for she is highly unpredictable. *Oya* gives children and wealth to her adherents and also protects them from danger. Her qualities and attributes are contrary to those assumed for females. She is a fierce fighter, who is manifested in strong winds and storms. She fights with thunderbolts, just like her earthly husband, *Sango*. Rituals for her worship occur at a sacred bush (*igbo Oya*), unlike the worship of other goddesses, which takes place in the townships. *Oya's* characteristics point to the fluidity of the Yoruba gender construct and confirm that multiplicity is a feature of Yoruba gender relations, reflected here in religion but permeating every other sector of the people's lives as well.

The two goddesses discussed here demonstrate that the Yoruba traditions show the prevalence and significant functions of the female as being crucial to any meaningful enterprise among the people; and, further, that gender classification among the Yoruba is attended by constant reconfigurations and fluidity. There is no clear-cut and unitary gender categorization among the people; rather, the gender construct is culture- and, to some extent, context-bound.

Gender and Ritual in Yoruba Land

Ritual in a broad sense is interlocked with knowledge acquisition and use among the Yoruba. Indeed, the performance of rituals in Yoruba religion is informed by knowledge. However, knowledge and its acquisition are not limited to cognitive functions among the Yoruba. Consequently, there are different types of knowledge. Some are available to everyone, whereas others are restricted and available only to certain people. Usually access to restricted knowledge translates to power. Hence, the Yoruba classify some people as *awo* and others as *ogberi*. The *awo* are the initiates into the sacred knowledge of a deity or a religious society; the *ogberi* are the novices and uninitiated people. It is important to state, however, that this classification is not rigid, as an *awo* in one setting may be an *ogberi* in another setting.

The restricted knowledge of the *awo* is, more often than not, esoteric and associated with the darkness of the night. Indeed, the Yoruba cosmic perception regards daytime as the time for humans and nighttime as belonging to the spirits and the *awo*. Powerful women rule the night because of their access to restricted knowledge and thus power. The importance of the *awo* as a group is best appreciated within the framework of the underlying principle of Yoruba philosophy, which is that the seen reflects and rests on the unseen. The Yoruba, according to Wande Abimbola, divide the universe (*aye*) into two broad domains, inhabited by two groups of people and forces. These domains are the invisible (*airi*) and the visible (*riri*), the spiritual (*emi*) and the physical (*ara*), the good (*daradara*) and the bad (*buburu*), heaven (*orun*) and earth (*aye*), and negative forces (*ajogun*) and positive forces (*orisa*).²⁰ Each group in this classification is always dependent on the other and sometimes confrontational to the other, depending on the setting. The need for accommodation and diplomacy between the groups is what guarantees peace in the universe. The Yoruba worldview is rooted in holistic harmony; hence, the principle of relatedness is the sine qua non of the people's social and religious reality. This principle is manifested in the human community and between the human and spirit communities. Members of the *awo*, both male and female, are privileged to sacred knowledge, which they utilize to regulate the social well-being of the people. A major preoccupation of their secret societies is to police and regulate people's conduct as well as to adjudicate disputes.

Ancestral Performance

A clear expression of this principle of relatedness is seen in the link between the ancestors and the humans among the Yoruba. Ancestors are deceased elders who after death relocate from the world of the living to the space of the deceased but still maintain close relationship with the living. According

²⁰ Abimbola, "Images of Women."

to the Yoruba belief system, ancestors usually visit the realm of humans as masqueraders, especially during the annual ancestral ceremonies referred to as *odun egungun*. During this festival, the masqueraders visit people in their homes and pray for them in order to ensure a prosperous year ahead. The festival is usually marked by feasting and rich music.

The Ifa corpus provides us with information to the effect that, at some point in the ancient past, women were in control of the ancestral *egungun* cult. I argue that, just as women are the custodians of the Iya Mi group and the *àjé* power in Yoruba land (as I will discuss presently), the *egungun* ancestral practice derives its origin and meaning from women's religious experience. Furthermore, for a long time women sustained the *egungun* practice. According to *Odu Irantegbe*, a chapter in the Ifa corpus,²¹ women were custodians of the *egungun* practice but were tricked by men who took the powers from them:

Ha! An elder who misbehaves has to be disgraced
 Ifa was divined for Odu
 When she arrived on earth
 She was advised to control her passion
 Odu did not heed the advice
 She was asked to sacrifice she refused
 She sacrificed to appeal to Olodumare to grant
 Her power instead
 She wished to use the power for a long time
 But did not sacrifice to prevent people from
 Knowing her secret
 She entered the sacred grove of *eegun* one day and
 Came out as a masquerader
 Ha! So it is to Odu that Olodumare gave the power
 Over all the world said Obarisa [the archdivinity]
 Obarisa went to Orunmila [Osun's husband, the god of divination] to consult Ifa
 Orunmila asked him to sacrifice and he obeyed
 Orunmila gave the necessary remedy
 But warned that he had to be patient
 To become the ruler of the world
 One day Odu invited Obarisa to a discussion
 She said, as colleagues, they should be more
 Familiar with each other
 Odu and Obarisa then moved closer, living together
 Obarisa gave Odu the snail fluid that was
 Part of his diet
 And Odu liked it and promised to always drink it

²¹ *Chapter*, in the context of my work, refers not to written documents but to divisions of oral texts to which the Yoruba ascribe different names.

Odu then invited Obarisa to come along
 And he followed her to the sacred grove of *eegun*
 She put on her *eku* [costume] and came out a masquerader
 They came out from the grove together
 When they returned to the grove
 And Odu removed the *eku*
 Obarisa moved closer and inspected the *eku*
 He renovated it by putting on a net to cover his face
 Any masquerader's outfit without a net is an ordinary costume
 After reaching home
 Obarisa entered the *eegun* shrine and turned
 Into a masquerader
 He held a whip
 He changed his voice to that of an *eegun*
 To disguise himself
 When Odu saw the *eegun* in the new guise she was afraid
 This was how men cunningly overpowered women.²²

The gender-complementary roles implicit in Yoruba life notwithstanding, a tension is apparent here between the female and male in a power struggle. As a liberating narrative, the story challenges men's desire to tame women's powers. In the face of this female power, men felt threatened and advised submission, which Odu refused to give. Another important issue arising in this narrative is the power of concealment, symbolized in the net that Obarisa introduced into the *egungun* custom to hide the identity of the men wearing it.

The basic assumption has always been that *egungun* belongs to men, but this Ifa chapter indicates otherwise. The submission that *egungun* is predominantly a concern for males may therefore be misleading, as women originally had custody of the society and still play some roles in the *egungun* society today. Again, that Olodumare bestowed on women the control of this society at the beginning of time shows that Olodumare set no rules of discrimination in the Yoruba cosmic perception concerning the female or the male. Moreover, that women were the custodians of the ancestral society tallies with their role as people who maintain continuity, especially through procreation. Ancestors are reincarnated through women into lineages, bearing names such as Babatunde (Father returns) and Iyabode (Mother returns). The fact that the *egungun* society is today a male society should not obliterate the fact that the *egungun* belonged to women originally, a strong indication of the significance of the female principle in Yoruba cosmic perception.

²² Biodun Adediran, ed., *Cultural Studies in Ife: Selections from the 1993–94 Seminar Papers of the Institute of Cultural Studies, Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife, Nigeria* (Ile-Ife, Nigeria: Institute of Cultural Studies, Obafemi Awolowo University, 1995), 123.

The Iya Mi Group

Another group with significant roles in Yoruba ritual is the society of powerful women, the Iya Mi group. Out of frustration at being excluded from the business of regulating the affairs of the created world, Osun gathered women together and formed the Iya Mi group. The same power that Osun used to destabilize everything on earth at the beginning of time is the power still utilized by the Iya Mi group. The Yoruba believe that the Iya Mi group comprises powerful women who use their innate power to favor their own agenda. Let me state here that whatever is submitted concerning the Iya Mi and their practices is purely theory, for the group operates at the level of the spiritual, as opposed to the physical; yet their existence is indisputable, at least to the Yoruba person. It is assumed that members attend meetings as birds, cats, or bats and that the meetings occur on treetops, at crossroads, and in groves. The group exhibits a close affinity with motherhood and fertility, as reflected in the very title Iya Mi (My Mother). Members are therefore regarded as mothers to children and to the community as a whole.

The name Iya Mi, often expressed as *àjé* (witches or the art of witchcraft), suggests a power that may be dangerous, destructive, and antisocial as well as extraordinary, developmentally focused, and employed for good purposes. As a consequence, *àjé* cannot be equated with notions of witchcraft as it is conceived in some other cultural milieus, where it is completely malevolent, evil, and destructive. *Àjé* is an art of the wise, utilized by women endowed with inherent psychic powers that may be employed for positive or negative purposes. These women wield tremendous power in Yoruba communities, because the political, social, and economic sectors of each community rest on the religious sector. Moreover, *àjé* power is from Olodumare, the Creator; its efficacy is therefore beyond challenge. It is doubtful whether any ruler in Yoruba land could succeed without the support of the Iya Mi. Diviners and medicine men and women pay homage to the Iya Mi to appease and placate them in order that rituals performed by these individuals may be efficacious. The influence of the Iya Mi is also reflected at the level of individuals in the community.

I am of the opinion that this belief in the Iya Mi has a strong moral implication for the Yoruba people. Not only does it explain the presence of evil, especially in difficult circumstances, but also it introduces an attitude of balance into Yoruba life. People are enjoined to display their good fortunes with discretion, because excessive display may attract the ill will of the Iya Mi group. Hence, the Yoruba say, *Bi isu eni ba jina, a a fowo bo je ni*, "If your yam is cooked and ready for eating, you should eat it with covered mouth [i.e., with discretion]." It seems clear in the Yoruba community that these powerful women constitute the final court of appeal on any issue; neither the ruled nor the ruler could succeed in any venture except with the support of the Iya Mi.

The society of powerful women provides a significant paradigm for social

categorization in Yoruba land. Their roles also confirm the unrestrictive tendencies of Yoruba gender construction, especially in regard to power relations. Such a negotiation is perceivable between the rulers of Yoruba communities and the Iya Mi group. Although the rulers need the support of the Iya Mi to govern successfully, the Iya Mi cannot rule the community physically, because their operation is mainly mystical. Yet, again, this group illustrates that women are not excluded from positions of power in the various sectors of the people's lives.

Ifa Divination

Scholars have done tremendous work on Ifa divination among the Yoruba over the years. Examples include the works of Wande Abimbola, William Bascom, Fatunbi Verger, and Ifayemi Elebuibon, to mention just a few.²³ My concern here is specifically the role of women in Ifa divination. Females who practice Ifa divination are known as Iyanifa (mothers who own Ifa), as opposed to male practitioners, who are called Babalawo (fathers of the secret).

The mythical basis of women's involvement in Ifa divination is located in yet another chapter of the oral Ifa corpus, the *Eji-Ogbe* text:

It is Agbagiwo who is the chief priest of divination
 In the heavenly abode
 Ifa said, "look" at Orunmila
 The day he was coming to the earth from heaven
 They told him he would marry a woman
 They said the woman would deliver children
 Two children in a day
 Just as the Ifa predicted
 Orunmila had a wife
 She was pregnant and delivered twins
 One was male while the other was female
 From the tender age, they both
 Watched their father in the act of divination
 Just as the male could divine
 So could the female
 When human beings go to the earth
 To live with the diviners
 One individual said, you Awawonlaseri [a human character]
 Your child does not practice Ifa
 Awawonlaseri answered, she is female
 They told him that is not taboo

²³ See Wande Abimbola, *Sixteen Great Poems of Ifá* (UNESCO, 1975); William Bascom, *The Yoruba of Southwestern Nigeria* (Prospect Heights, IL: Waveland, 1969); Fatunbi Verger, "The Yoruba High God," *Odu* (University of Ife Press, Ile-Ife, Nigeria) 2, no. 2 (1966); and Ifayemi Elebuibon, *Apetebi: The Wife of Orunmila* (New York: Athelia Henrietta Press, 1994).

So long as Orunmila's firstborn child
 Who is female studied Ifa.
 From then on, women
 Have studied Ifa
 Women also prescribe sacrifice
 And women are initiated into Ifa tradition.²⁴

According to these Ifa verses, the first of the Iyanifa was Orunmila's daughter. Iyanifa are not as numerous as Babalawo, for few women could afford to combine their domestic duties with the rigorous training required of Ifa practitioners. This explains why a large number of Iyanifa are wives and/or daughters of Babalawo. They often practice in conjunction with their husbands, given that adult females are usually married in Yoruba land. It is rare to find one of the Iyanifa married to anyone but one of the Babalawo. The explanation proffered for this is that the Iyanifa are custodians of tradition and that only men with an equal knowledge and the power that such knowledge bestows could marry them (*oloogun ni se oko abiku or aje*). Today there are Iyanifa in the cities of Ile-Ife, Oyo, Ogbomoso, Abeokuta, Ijebu-Ode, Iwo, Sagamu, and Egbado.

Some Ifa paraphernalia symbolize and are described as females; for example, each of the 264 chapters (*Odu*) of the Ifa corpus is female. When one of the Babalawo is initiated into Ifa divination practice, he graduates into the final and ultimate stage of owning and seeing Odu, as if he becomes married to Odu and, by implication, the corpus.

Eerindinlogun

A second type of divination practice is the *eerindinlogun*, which was given to Osun by Orunmila, her husband and the god of divination. It is the most popular form of divination among *orisa* devotees today in Yoruba land, the use of sixteen cowrie shells being its main feature. *Eerindinlogun* is practiced in another form in the Americas and Brazil, where it is known as *dilogun ifa*. The *eerindinlogun* divination system is based on an oral corpus composed of sixteen main chapters, like the Ifa corpus, but practitioners are encouraged to limit their consultation process to the first twelve chapters except in extreme situations, when they may proceed to the sixteenth chapter. Female adherents of Osun, Sango, and Obatala (another name for Obarisa, the Yoruba archdivinity) are adept in the use of *eerindinlogun*. These females are, more often than not, senior members of their cults; they are referred to as Iya Oosa. (Male members are called Baba Oosa.) Because Osun is assumed to be the owner of the divination system and provides for them materially and spiritually, practition-

²⁴ Interview with Mrs. Doyin Faniyi of Ibokun Street, Oshogbo, Osun State, Nigeria, on March 16, 2000.

ers of *eerindinlogun*, both male and female, are considered wives of Osun. This assumption is not peculiar to Osun worshippers, as priests and priestesses of other deities, such as Sango and Otin, are also regarded as wives of the deities. This privileged position provides them easy access to curative herbs and the assurance of the support of the Iya Mi group, of which Osun is the leader. Each Baba or Iya Oosa regularly cares for his or her cowries ritually. Iya Oosa are often available for consultations on health issues, especially those concerning children and gynecological matters. They prescribe herbal mixtures (*agbo*) for mothers, to alleviate illnesses, as well as sacrifices (*ebo*) when occasion demands. Their prescriptions may also include ritual baths taken with Osun water at designated spots and at specified hours of the day. A recommendation may include a bath at a crossroads at midnight, for example.

Embedded within the divination practices I have just reviewed is the notion of gender-complementary roles, rather than competition between the male and the female. Divination is one of the links to the supersensible world available to the Yoruba person and should thus conform to the prevailing philosophy of the people, which is complementarity in gender roles. Seniority is also extolled, because age among the people assumes experience and, consequently, wisdom. Women's membership in these groups, which provides them with sacred knowledge, is of great importance for any consideration of power and gender relations among the Yoruba. Methods of operation in these groups reinforce principles of complementary gender and power relations. Cooperation and harmony are elevated above competition, oppression, and domination, because the individual's welfare is dependent on and embedded within the communal well-being.

Conclusion

In this article I have attempted to present an alternative perspective and interpretation, informed by feminist concerns, of the role of women and gender dynamics in Yoruba religious tradition. I submit that gender as a social category exists among the Yoruba but is informed by flexibility and complex configurations. I have illustrated this in a consideration of four areas of Yoruba tradition: cosmology, the goddess tradition, ancestral performance, and divination. Embedded within Yoruba gender constructs are certain assumed features for the male and female, such as the assumption that males exhibit aggressive tendencies (*lile*) while females manifest coolness and a malleable disposition (*ero*). In spite of these assumptions, however, gender construction among the Yoruba is marked by fluidity. My investigation reveals that women play important roles in the Yoruba religious tradition, but this fact has often been subsumed under male-focused interpretations. There is, in addition, an emphasis in the society on the interdependence of male and female, a recognition of

which is necessary for any meaningful evaluation of Yoruba religious tradition. As a panacea for the gap in scholarship, I propose that women scholars be encouraged to interrogate received normative claims of any religious tradition. To see African religious traditions through a woman's eye is a crucial step in recovering the role and place of women in African religious experience. Moreover, the need to acknowledge and appreciate women's religious experiences is pertinent to a balanced perspective of religion in general.

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