

**Rival Empires: Islam and the Religions of Spirit Possession among the Oyo-Yoruba**



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## rival empires: Islam and the religions of spirit possession among the Ọ̀yọ̀-Yorùbá

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Since Lewis (1971), dozens of writers on spirit possession have explained it as women's strategy for taking on privileges denied them in the unpossessed state or for articulating subaltern positions on the established political order (for example, recently, Boddy 1989; Lambek 1980; Ong 1988). The literature on predominantly female possession rites is particularly rich in examples from the Muslim world. The following case study comes from a region that is well over 50 percent Muslim, and where Islam, on the one hand, and predominantly female possession religions, on the other, have interacted for centuries. This case contrasts in a number of ways with previous observations about the political role of women's spirit possession. First, women's spirit possession here has played an apical role in the state.<sup>1</sup> Second, subverting or expressing grievances about male dominance seems far from women's intention in performing these possession rites. In the contemporary Ọ̀yọ̀-Yorùbá case, possession religion has come to privilege women in the articulation of the shared interests of extended, rural-based, and centrally important communities of men and women, rich and poor.

The literature on "conversion" in Africa has variously predicted the demise of "local" religions (for example, Fisher 1973; Gbadamọ̀ṣi 1978; Levtzion 1968; Parrinder 1972[1953]; Trimmingham 1968) and documented their influence on the practice of the "world" religions (for example, Horton 1975; Mbiti 1970; Nadel 1954; Ray 1976; Ryan 1978; Sanneh 1983). Nearly a millennium after the advent of Islam in West Africa, the demise of local religions remains but a prediction. The case bears comparison to Afro-Catholic convergences in Latin America. While various writers have discussed local reconceptualizations of these possession religions as the worship of Catholic "saints" and Islamically conceived *jinn* (for example, Greenberg 1941;

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*Possession religions have frequently been treated as women's means to redress their subordination. Like many other religions so discussed, the Ọ̀yọ̀-Yorùbá worship of Šàngó and Yemoja endures in a predominantly Muslim region. The following discussion will illustrate that such religions, though highly gendered in their symbolism and personnel, need not redress the interests of women or of the deprived alone. For the weak and the strong, they may dramatize a rival construction of collective life. In order to grasp how they do so, we must understand (1) the history of Islam and such possession religions in the particular context and, therefore, (2) the way they constitute each other in that context. As they serve and structure material rivalries in the world, they take on each others' signs and criteria of power. The gendered religious pluralism of the Ọ̀yọ̀-Yorùbá illustrates a gestalt common across "the Muslim world" and bears implications for the study of possession religions practiced in conjunction with other "world religions" as well. [women's religion, gender, spirit possession, African Islam, religious conflict, symbolism, syncretism]*

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Herskovits 1966[1937]), others have discussed the influence of Islam on Yorùbá divination (for example, Abdul 1970; Abimbola 1973; Bascom 1969; Ryan 1978). However, the literature largely ignores the constructive impact of Islam on the local possession religions.

Yorùbá Islam and the possession religions impute rival meanings to the shared signs of Yorùbá social life. Hebdige, in a much-quoted phrase, referred to the subaltern invocation of signs shared by the oppressor and the oppressed as the “struggle for possession of the sign,” in which the oppressed intentionally *disrupt* hegemonic expectations (1979:17). In the context of Yorùbá religious pluralism, we will see that the point of signification, religious and political, is just as much to *send out* the sign—to make it and the meanings imputed to it *familiar* to other interlocutors, to demonstrate that even newly asserted meanings are really a common legacy. This process of *familiarization* involves the deliberate blurring of boundaries between divergent religious identities. Centuries of dialogue and familiarizing rhetoric have transformed not only the local practice of Islam, but also the symbols and practice of “traditional religion” (*èsin ibílẹ̀*). Hence, these and the ideological assertions of the Nigerian state must be studied as a shifting gestalt, within which the possession religions of Òyó North cast women as exemplars and leaders of a moral order credibly rivaling the national state.

This study of gender, religion, and politics unfolds both at the margins of the Nigerian state and at the center of the vividly remembered Òyó Empire—in the savanna town of Igbòho, Òyó State. Many details of religious practice and economic condition in this study bear general application to the towns surrounding the upper reaches of the Ògùn River, collectively known as Òyó North and one of the oldest strongholds of Islam in Yorùbáland.<sup>2</sup> We will explore below not only how Islam and “traditional religion” have constituted each other, but also how they have given form to consent, resistance, and conflict in a contemporary town.

## Islam and the making of “traditional religion”

The interaction between Islam and *èsin ibílẹ̀* (“traditional religion”) is not a face-off between primordial and discrete elements, but a mutually constituting dialogue well preceded in the Islamic world. A Yorùbá proverb represents their coexistence itself as primordial:

Ifá [the ranking divination priesthood] is as old as life  
Islam is as old as life  
It was at noon day that Christianity came in<sup>3</sup>

Since the farthest reaches of collective memory, the Òyó-Yorùbá have recognized the existence of a high god, Ọlórún, and numerous deities called *òrìṣà*, often considered ancient ancestors or heroes. Some of them possess, or “mount,” people. From the 10th to the 16th century, Islam spread southward from the Maghrib through a succession of Sahelian and savanna polities. Among them, Òyó’s northern neighbor Nupe had a Muslim ruler by the close of the 18th century. Non-Yorùbá Muslim clerics were probably present in Igbòho—the former Òyó capital and the focus of the present study—before the last decade of the 16th century. However, Yorùbá conversions were not documented until 1775 (Ryan 1978:105–108, 137n.; Smith 1965:74). Among the Yorùbá kingdoms, the Òyó Empire long hosted the largest concentration of Muslims—including Arabs and Hausa. Before 1840, the sizable town of Igbòho hosted a Muslim quarter called Mọlaba or Mọlawá, populated by approximately 350 persons, according to Gbadamọ̀si’s estimate. Relations between them and the *òrìṣà*-worshippers were at times antagonistic, particularly after Usman dan Fodio’s agents conquered the Yorùbá city of Ilorín (Gbadamọ̀si 1978:4–13; Greenberg 1941:52–55).<sup>4</sup>

Conventional narrations suggest that Islam swept away the local religions in its path—if not immediately, then in progressive stages. However, *òrìṣà*-worship has not disappeared. Indeed, it has expanded to other parts of Nigeria, the People’s Republic of Benin, and the New World

amid the simultaneous expansion of Islam and Christianity. However, a nominal identity conceals a phenomenal difference: the practice and meaning of òrìṣà-worship are not what they were four centuries ago. Similarly, despite local assumptions that they are non-Islamic or pre-Islamic, *bori* and *zār* possession rites have shown such hardness among Muslim peoples that Lewis and others suspect they are endogenous to Islam itself (Lewis 1986; Lewis et al. 1991). Whatever their indigenous precedents, *zār* and *bori* regularly celebrate Muslim holidays and denominate various spirits as Muslim. They adapt themselves to a sexual division of labor and a gendered dialogue, in which rival meanings are imputed to the shared signs of social life and cosmology.

The cases of *zār* and *bori* thus prompt the question of how Islam has helped to constitute modern *ẹ̀sìn ibilẹ̀*, or Yorùbá “traditional religion.” The indigenous missionary Moulero speculated long ago that the òrìṣà-worshipping Yorùbá (or Nàgò) acquired the concept of a high god from Muslims (1925:4, cited in Verger 1957:506). Even if the high-god concept predated the arrival of Islam, some of Verger’s mid-20th-century informants clearly understood their own worship of the òrìṣà *by contrast* to Muslims’ and missionaries’ worship of the high-god (Olórùn or Olódùmarè). “Traditionalists” had bounded their own devotion according to a local division of religious labor in which Islam and Christianity were among the defining elements.

Yet, some terms and concepts central to òrìṣà-worship derive from Arabic and Hausa—like “secret,” “spirit-being,” and “sacrifice.”<sup>5</sup> Most Arabic loan words in Yorùbá probably entered before the 19th century, only after which Islam itself became widespread (Gbadamoṣi 1978:208). Hence, they disclose a history of ideological and political interaction with the bearers of Islamic concepts from other ethnic groups.<sup>6</sup> Johnson’s *Ọ̀yọ̀* sources identify Ifá divination as a Nupe invention (Johnson 1921:32–33).<sup>7</sup> Yorùbá Ifá diviners (*babaláwo*) inscribe divinatory signatures in sawdust on sacred boards (*apón’fá*) similar to the writing boards used by Hausa teachers of Arabic and the *Qur’an*. Although the Ifá verse *Òtua méjì* has been interpreted as prescribing the client’s conversion to Islam, it encodes a profound antagonism toward that faith, representing Muslims as thieves and extravagant wastrels (Gbadamoṣi 1978:93; Ryan 1978:85–89; also Idowu 1963:100). As we shall see, these stereotypes foreshadow the horrific imagery of modern “village” mythology. Members of the possession priesthoods use the alternative cowry-shell divination, during which *Ẓàngó* and *Yemója* priests in *Ìgbòhò* are heard chanting the Arabic-derived *bárikà* (“Congratulations!”) and even *La illah illallah* (Arabic for “there is no god but the God”) when certain divinatory signatures appear.<sup>8</sup>

The convergence of Islamic and òrìṣà-worshippers’ calendars receives special attention in the possession religions’ ritual schedule. Because the Yorùbá week has four days and the Muslim week has seven, every 28 days, the day of the Yorùbá week consecrated to *Ẓàngó* coincides with the Muslim sabbath. On this day, *Ẓàngó* and *Yemója* worshippers conduct a special celebration called *Jímò Olóyìn*—“Sweet Friday.” Even the most central ritual practice in òrìṣà worship—the initiation of possession priests—shows the borrowing and reinvestment of Islamic signs. These I will detail below.

“Traditional” religion participates in a cosmopolitan dialogue on power and social order. By integrating various artifacts of Sudanic Islam, “traditional” religion encodes the history of an interregional political economy and taps what, in the òrìṣà priests’ view, are the sacred instrumentalities of their ethnic neighbors’ power. It recontextualizes the images, paraphernalia, ritual cycles, and concepts of Sudanic Islam amid distinctive canons of value and hierarchy. In southern metropolises and along the highways, *Ògún*, the god of war and iron, focused a cosmopolitan vision of Western technology and its appropriation during and after the oil boom of the 1970s (see Barnes 1980; *Şoyinka* 1976). Conversely, in the domain of *Ọ̀yọ̀*, *Ẓàngó* and the other gods identified as “Nupe” embody a vision of a cosmopolitan and orderly world, both imperial and supra-imperial.<sup>9</sup> Moreover, these gods that “mount” have become icons of an African world center among predominantly female and colored groups peripheralized in the

white-, male-, and Christian-dominated societies of the New World. Thus, many òrìṣà resist classification as “local” gods. Like various òrìṣà religions, zār and bori now embrace wider areas and populations than they once did. In contrast, zār and bori do not show the same capacity as, say, Ògún- and Ṣàngó-worship for making totalizing claims—that is, for placing themselves at the center of their discursive universe.<sup>10</sup> A specific configuration of material and ideological power has enabled Yorùbá possession priests to invoke such claims credibly, such that Islam never usurps the totalizing role in the shared worldview of the Òyó-Yorùbá possession religions and their sponsors.

## religion, ancestral cities, and the design of conflict

The conflict among Òyó-Yorùbá religions takes place in a local political and economic context in which gender is central. Much popular and scholarly lore masks the tensions in Yorùbá society, of which religious difference is richly emblematic. Many contemporary Yorùbá attribute the rarity of interreligious violence among themselves to the inherently tolerant nature of “traditional religion.”<sup>11</sup> Others note that most Yorùbá families include Muslim, Christian, and “traditionalist” members, ostensibly making ecumenism an inevitable element of home training. Following Laitin, I will argue that the local sense of ecumenical solidarity within families is partly a product of colonial history. I must add, though, that this history has structured new forms of separation and conflict.

David Laitin’s *Hegemony and Culture: Politics and Religious Change among the Yoruba* (1986) problematizes the absence of conflict, specifically *between Muslims and Christians*, in the politics of Yorùbáland, or southwestern Nigeria. Before the 19th century, Laitin argues, “ancestral cities” like Òyó, Ìwó, and Ìjẹ̀bú-Òde had rested on the myth of ethnic homogeneity as the basis of political unity. Although interethnic alliance and coresidence during the 19th-century wars had undermined that principle of political organization, the British restored the “ancestral city” as an important administrative unit and therefore the chief emblem of factionalism in the 20th century (Laitin 1986:109–120, for example).

The British made administrative agents of resurrected kings, who in turn also recovered their role as the royal foci of Yorùbá identity and political action. By the same token, the ancestral towns tributary to royal city-states, like Òyó’s tributaries in Òyó North, recovered the highly charged loyalty of their sons and daughters. Despite resident populations regularly reaching 40,000, such towns in Òyó North are sentimentally called “villages.” In this particular region, they attract far more sentiment than does the capital city of Òyó. Because the British refocused Yorùbá collective identity and action upon such shared ancestral hometowns, the argument goes, Islam and Christianity could not emerge as emblems of political division. Indeed, because they are competing for resources distributed from national and regional centers, townspeople of various religions present a united front in federal and state electoral politics.<sup>12</sup>

In representing religion and “ancestral city” as mutually exclusive types of collective identity in the context of competition between “ancestral cities,” Laitin neglects other contexts of competition in Yorùbáland and assumes too narrow a view of *what* Yorùbá groups compete for. For example, Yorùbá nationalism used to be verbalized as resistance against the domination of European and *Christian* colonizers. Preeminent nowadays is resistance to Northern *Muslims*.<sup>13</sup> For many Yorùbá, Islam now represents foreign domination. Although I agree with Laitin that the colonial reinvention of the “ancestral city” continues to act as a brake on a powerfully motivated Muslim/Christian discord, the “ancestral city” is invested with an *alternative* genre of religious hierarchy, division, and exclusion, claiming ancient precedents, to which some Muslims are highly antagonistic.

“Traditional religion” (èṣin ibílẹ̀) is a dynamic element of religious change in modern Nigeria, where it plays a key role in the renegotiation of authority and collective identity as well. Under the Ọ̀yọ̀ Empire at its late-18th-century height, not only possession priests of the royal god Ẓàngó but palace wives and *ilàrì* (messengers prepared by the Ẓàngó priesthood as if for possession by the king’s personal spirit) made up the majority of palace delegates and functionaries.<sup>14</sup> These personnel remained central figures at the juncture of British administration and Ọ̀yọ̀-Yorùbá communal identity. They delivered royal directives and crowned subordinate chiefs. Not only that, they advertised the gendered and religious constitution of the king’s authority and of communal integrity in the “ancestral city.” The political and religious agents of the palace, well into the 1960s, displayed the king’s power and legitimacy by magnifying the ideological structure of ordinary husband/wife relations. The king’s literal and metaphorical “wives” were public icons of their “husband’s” command. Thus, they were named literally as embodiments of the king’s insuperable will—like “Bring-Me-Money” and “Do-Not-Refuse.” These gendered and living signs became the focus of ideological resistance as well. In his critical retrospective on colonial Ọ̀yọ̀, Atanda records an Ọ̀yọ̀-North informant’s recollection:

[O]ne [male *ilàrì*] nicknamed *Majẹngbasan* (Don’t let me [leave] empty-handed) had the reputation of *dressing up as an ayaba* (queen, that is Alafin’s [the king of Ọ̀yọ̀’]s wife). He would then accuse any man in the town, where he and his followers visited, of either “proposing” to, or assaulting, “her”! His followers would then arrest the unfortunate victim and charge him for assaulting an *ayaba*. Only a handsome sum, sometimes up to £5, would save the victim from being taken to Ọ̀yọ̀. (1979 [1973]:203, emphasis added)

Thus, a complex of explicitly gendered signs shaped both consent and resistance to indirect rule. The health and security of the “ancestral city” and “village,” as such, are believed to depend on equally gendered signs of the king’s own subordination to superior forces. The Muslim king of Ọ̀yọ̀, for example, submitted to the same head preparation as the “brides,” or possession priests, of Ẓàngó (Adeyemi III, Alààfin of Ọ̀yọ̀, interview by author, October 17, 1988). Conversely, the nickname given by a plebeian audience to the royal agent “*Majẹngbasan*” subversively reinterpreted—or, to apply Gates’s (1988) vernacular usage, “signified on”—the royal directives, threats, and proposals of intention that normally make up the names of the *ilàrì* messengers. This satirical oral history, like the scholarly argument in which Atanda situates it, is a gender- and religion-coded assault on royal authority itself.

Throughout Yorùbáland, initiates of the òrìṣà priesthoods (*olòrìṣà*) have always been a small minority of the population. So, the fact that most contemporary Yorùbá identify themselves as Muslims and Christians is not the reversal of an earlier situation. Instead, it indicates the relatively recent emergence of a *new and distinct type* of religious identity, amid the enduring appeal of the òrìṣà in various key political projects. In the towns and quarters where labor and trade migrants predominate, one is unlikely to find òrìṣà shrines. However, òrìṣà-worship retains a central place in the towns and quarters that most Yorùbá Muslims and Christians consider their ancestral homes. That is not to affirm the standard, and often racist, claim that Christianity and Islam are but superficial elements of African culture and personal identity. On the contrary, the interaction among these religions is a constituting dynamic in Ọ̀yọ̀-Yorùbá culture, which resists being classified as a fixed and bounded thing.

The postcolonial kings and palaces play an ambiguous role in the administration of the Nigerian state. Some kings—regarded as the “heads of all priests”—receive a nominal salary from the government. As far as I know, no priests other than the kings receive such salaries. Nonetheless, along with the kings and chiefs, the òrìṣà and their servants remain variable foci of some of the most important sociopolitical groups in Nigerian civil society—ancestral towns and households. The state recognizes no òrìṣà-related holiday as it recognizes Christian and Muslim holidays. Yet, various òrìṣà in every “village,” chieftaincy, and lineage remain impor-

tant. Virtually every Christian and Muslim citizen can name them. Such knowledge is indeed one in a variable cluster of elements *defining* his or her citizenship, since the òrìṣà are regularly named in the history of such sociopolitical units. The òrìṣà historically associated with the main title in the capital town or village is particularly likely to have an annual festival (*òdún*), which in such a case becomes the focus of a “civil religion.”<sup>15</sup> In many cases, attendance is reclassified as a dimension of citizenship, rather than as a devotion rivaling Islam and Christianity.

Participation in òrìṣà rites can constitute a claim to associated privileges. Aspiring Muslim and Christian titleholders may patronize them. Yet, neither in every “village” nor in every case does such patronage carry an unambiguous effect. For example, female divorcees may participate in order to justify their unwelcome return to their natal house. Resistance to such claims can take the form of anti-“pagan” discourses. An Ìgbòhò man who felt his ancestral property was being usurped by his divorcee aunts (who had also come to act as priestesses of the family goddess) told me that the women are witches (*àjé*). Although his verbal attack was private, he was not the only man in the house with that opinion. Moreover, such suspicions of female òrìṣà devotees once, in recent times, reached dangerous dimensions, as I present below. Before I detail that situation, I will identify some of the contemporary mythic structures that sustain the royalist order of the “village” and the privileged place of women within it.

### myth and the moral authority of “traditional” government in modern Nigeria

Òrìṣà-worship is regularly studied in terms of archaic myths, as though it were a surviving fragment of a previous age. Let us understand it instead amid its modern political, economic, and ideological conditions. Most Yorùbá live their lives in the slow but cyclic commute between “village” home and metropolitan “market.” The political and economic conditions of “village” life in modern Nigeria are now what overdetermines the ideological role of the possession religions and their Islamic anti-type.

Despite their lack of coercive power and perhaps because of their marginal role in the Nigerian state, hereditary titles in the “village” are highly coveted. Like the village itself, titleholders benefit from a variety of mythic associations and their modern symbolic corollaries, which I will try to evoke in the present section. The titleholders dress a community’s very modern concerns in the royal clothing of “tradition.” They represent an orderly, African-controlled world of the past, as contrasted with the immoral and divided world of the postcolonial metropolis, best represented by Lagos. The “village” is also a world of agricultural production and lineal reproduction, as opposed to the urban fount of unproductive and laborless exchange, prostitution, and “corruption.”<sup>16</sup>

It is not that all Yorùbá at all times regard the city as morally bankrupt. Indeed, virtually every Yorùbá town represents the metropolis to a range of smaller, subordinate towns, urging a relativity of scale upon our reading of this moral template. The metropolis is, positively, a source of revenues crucial to the life of the “village.” Yet, to obtain those revenues, sons and daughters of the “village” sometimes engage in forms of corruption that they would be ashamed for their kinfolk and townspeople to know about.<sup>17</sup> The cumulative effects of urban freedom and anonymity inspire powerful suspicions about the metropolis, which in turn reinforce commitment to the “villages” that most urbanites see only once or twice a year.

Their occasional visits rehearse an *ultimate* commitment to the “village” and its social/moral order. For decades, people plan their retirement to and burial in the “village.” Hence, the money that people earn in the city is mobilized as the raw material from which the “village” and, literally, most of its architecture are built. The metropolis is not objectively chaotic, but the ritual occasions that define community in the “village” detail a moral order that the metropolis cannot and does not obey. Moreover, the city simply is *not home*; it is the market.

Villagers and urbanites alike describe the wealthy compradors of the city as *Alhajis* and *Alhajiyas*—men and women whose pilgrimages to Mecca epitomize their extreme wealth and extravagant consumption. In the urban press, men of this class attracted headlines during the 1980s, bearing prurient witness to their theft of ever-larger sums of money from government coffers. In small Ọyó-Yorùbá towns, the “*Alhajis*, *Alhajiyas* and ministers” are mythologized as mass murderers—as images of an urban and Islamic Other run amok—who allegedly use people’s heads in money-making magic (*lùkúdi* and *ẹ̀dà*).<sup>18</sup> As they are imagined, these rites exploit for illegitimate ends the vessel and head motifs of royalist spirit possession, which we shall see below.

By contrast, the just king of the “ancestral city” finds his mythic counterpart in Ẓàngó, god of thunder and lightning and, according to many, the god of justice. Nowadays, Ẓàngó is the greatest enemy of thieves and witches. An early king of the Ọyó Empire, he is worshiped in nearly every region formerly subject to the Empire—the largest and most renowned of the Yorùbá kingdoms. His initiates are called not only “brides” (*iyàwó*) but “horses” (*ẹ̀şin*) of the god. This vocabulary is historically redolent, for Ọyó’s imported cavalry enabled it to conquer the Yorùbá savannas and establish its empire in the first place. Through his initiation in the Ẓàngó priesthood, the king of Ọyó embodies the history and spirit of empire. He becomes “Ẓàngó himself” on earth (Adeyemi III, Aláàfin of Ọyó, interview by author, October 17, 1988). Ẓàngó is said to “mount” (*gùn*) his sacred horses when he descends to earth, evoking an integrated symbolic complex in which horsemanship, spirit possession, and sexual penetration are homologous. Mimicking the character of profane wives, even Ẓàngó’s male possession priests wear women’s clothing, coiffures, cosmetics, and jewelry. Hence, in the complex of modern Ọyó royalism, generally, women are the paradigmatic delegates of political and religious authority, or *àşẹ* (see Matory 1986, 1993).

Other òrişà religions, along with their own nexus of distaff symbols, define the character of *subject chiefs’* authority and the moral order of extended “village” communities. For example, the tutelary goddess of several chieftaincies in Ìgbòho is Yemọja, goddess of the river Ọgùn. Festivals of Yemọja and other female òrişà regularly index possession with another exclusively female sign—carrying loads, especially of water, on the head.<sup>19</sup> Hence, possession priestesses and supplicants of the river goddesses Ọşun and Yemọja, for example, make a ritual display of bearing calabashes or pots of water on their heads when they manifest the presence of the goddess, convey the goddesses’ sacred power to and from the palace, and regulate it on behalf of the royalist community (Apter 1987; see also Matory 1986). The priestesses’ action itself is a metaphor for *containing* the substance of divinity in their heads.<sup>20</sup> For their part, the possessed priests of Ẓàngó—god of not only empire but thunder, lightning, and fire—sometimes carry on their heads pots full of glowing coals. These rites link female and wifely duty to a potent nostalgia, to the memory of an indigenous empire, to an era when the Ọyó-Yorùbá were, politically as well as religiously, the center of their own world.

### myth and the moral authority of the bourgeoisie

Since the latter half of the colonial era, a rival ideological complex, with its own attendant myths and ritual practices, has progressively overshadowed and marginalized Ọyó royalism, often by recodifying royalist signs. Islam is one of its most prominent emblems and Muslims among its privileged spokesmen. Reversing the policy of the previous 30 years, the British began in the 1930s to scale back their commitment to royal supremacy in Ọyó Province. By 1951 they had made provisions for Western-educated and commercial indigenous elites to assume increasing power through elected town councils and regional legislatures (Dudley 1982:45). Independence signaled not only the displacement of the British government from command of the Nigerian state but also the definitive marginalization, at least in Yorùbáland, of kings and



chiefs at the hands of a disproportionately non-Ọyọ bourgeoisie. Its most prominent members originated from the less-centralized Ịjẹbú and Ẹgbá kingdoms.

Ọyọ royalist chauvinism, therefore, faced a variety of popular challenges. The claims of the non-Ọyọ bourgeoisie to authority in Yorùbáland and in the largely Yorùbá Western Region were based, naturally, not on the recollection of Ọyọ royal grandeur, but on the coexisting and rival understanding that the mythic father of all the “Yorùbá” and neighboring dynasties, Odùduà, had founded the world at Ịlé-Ịfẹ, a city-state that Ọyọ never ruled. Written by a forefather of the British-educated Yorùbá bourgeoisie, Johnson’s highly influential *History of the Yorubas* (1921) says that Odùduà was a princely immigrant from Mecca, a brother to Hausa royalty, and originally a Muslim.

By the dawn of independence, he would also become the bourgeois emblem of Yorùbá unity.<sup>21</sup> In 1948, the late Ịjẹbú-Yorùbá leader Ọbafeṣi Awolọwọ—one of modern Nigeria’s founding fathers and the most famous Yorùbá among them—named the precursor to the region’s preeminent political party *Ẹgbẹ Ọmọ Odùduà*—“the Association of Odùduà’s Children.” Though Awolọwọ appropriated a particular royalist myth to consolidate Western Region under his party’s authority, the Ọyọ king reigning at the time contemptuously dismissed Awolọwọ and his allies as “sons of commoners” (*omọ táláká*) and chose to ally himself instead with the committedly royalist political party of the Hausa North. The king had misjudged the mythic and material power of his enemy; in the end, Awolọwọ had him deposed (see Atanda 1970:226–227; Matory 1994:70–71).

Ọyọ North found itself triply alienated. First, the region was already distant from the federal and regional capitals. The decline of the Ọyọ royal capital as an administrative center had begun its isolation within the Nigerian state. Second, the alienation of Ọyọ hereditary authorities from the reigning political party in the 1960s closed a major conduit of popular influence and state largesse. Thus, only in the past few years has Ọyọ North known the benefits of paved feeder roads, and it still lacks telephones and piped water. Third, the investment of local people in the prestige of their royal institutions had been inversely proportional to their access to Western-style education. Because of the Ọyọ palace’s restrictions on mission influence and resentment of the emerging bourgeoisie, Ọyọ-Yorùbá had fallen far behind various southern Yorùbá groups in the educational, financial, and managerial qualifications needed to assume command of the postcolonial state and the economy.

These forms of exclusion have affected women more than men, marginalizing a sphere in which women are the foremost delegates of sacred and political power. Other late-colonial and postcolonial reforms alienated women even within the “village” polity. In an effort to formalize chieftaincy succession principles, the colonial “native courts” codified patrilineal ideological pronouncements that had previously been subject to more flexible negotiation. These newly rigid and codified principles carried great consequence in the town of Ịgbòho during the explosive dispute over succession to the Onígbòho sectional chieftaincy title in the 1950s. Formalized injunctions against matrilineal inheritance and succession yielded two consequences for the worshipers of the river goddess Yemoja in Ịgbòho and for òriṣà-worshipers generally.

Devotion to an òriṣà was often inherited matrilineally. So, first, the new rules undermined the legitimacy of the priesthood as a family-based social and political organization. Women who had remained with the patrilineage to care for the family òriṣà sometimes founded large matrilineal segments. Hence, secondly, priestesses found their sons and grandsons disfranchised, excluded not only from office but, by analogy, from the inheritance of material property. For example, in the 1952–54 dispute over succession to the Onígbòho throne, the Muslim grandson of a Yemoja priestess competed against a Christian candidate. The former had the support of the Ọyọ palace. The rhetoric opposing the candidacy of the former was explicitly and coterminously anti-matrilineal, anti-“pagan,” and against the will of the Ọyọ palace. Given

Laitin's observations, it will come as no surprise that the Muslim and Christian religious identities of the candidates were secondary in the immediate conflict. Yet, neither candidate was a self-identified òrìṣà-worshiper—hinting that an emergent anti-“paganism” had become a factor in both direct and indirect forms of exclusion. Indeed, opponents raised the issue of the Muslim's grandmother's religious commitments. This was a dispute, coded in religious terms, over the political rights of female agnates, priestesses, and their male children in the lineage (see Matory 1994:72–73).<sup>22</sup>

Although the postcolonial state bureaucracy is predominantly Christian, a Muslim-dominated military has dictated policy during most of the 34 years of independence. Regional and national governments make costly public gestures to forestall discontent among other Muslims. For example, the national government heavily subsidizes the *Hajj* for all Nigerian pilgrims. On the other hand, federal and regional governments conspicuously ignore òrìṣà-worshippers and other “traditionalists.” Though conditional upon the suppression of Òyó royalty and its feminine religious personnel, the bourgeois accession to the heights of the state entailed not only appropriations of royalist myths but transformations of royalist ritual. The Àtíngà witch-finding movement sponsored by members of this emergent bourgeoisie blended Muslim and “traditionalist” signs in a popular usurpation of both royalist and female authority in the “villages” of southwestern Nigeria.

### **crisis and the convergence of signs: the Àtíngà witch-finding movement**

It was 1951, soon after the foundation of Awolòwò's “Association of Odùduà's Children” in 1948 and soon before the Onígòhò chieftaincy dispute in 1952–54. A foreign movement entered Yorùbáland with the sponsorship of the new indigenous bourgeoisie and attracted vast popular support in its effort to eliminate “witchcraft” (àjé). By combining signs highly redolent of royalist ritual (like blood sacrifice and spirit possession) with signs of Islam, it *familiarized* itself across various religious boundaries. Like zār and bori elsewhere, it spread far beyond its origins and found resonances amid local politico-religious tensions. Àtíngà might be read as a ritual manifestation of the impending bourgeois revolution known as “Independence,” embedded with its leadership's sense of the religious constitution of colonial power.<sup>23</sup>

British restrictions on the ritual conduct of kings—especially their sponsorship of witch-controlling priesthoods like Orò—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 consequent tensions in corporate groups. Naturally, the solution came with the sponsorship of those ready to displace the royalist-colonialist alliance in the postcolonial hegemony—bourgeois Yorùbá men and particularly the Muslims among them.<sup>24</sup>

The Àtíngà witch-finding movement had originated in southern Gold Coast (now Ghana) in the 1940s under the name of Tigere, a spirit that possessed its devotees and enabled them to detect witches. Those who confessed upon accusation could be cured, whereas those who professed innocence underwent an ordeal (Morton-Williams 1956:315). The movement reached Dahomey (now the People's Republic of Benin) in 1947 and by 1950, with the permission of the Òyó king, had entered Ibadan and the other Òyó-Yorùbá towns of Ìgànná, Òkèihò, Ìsèyìn, and Ìjìó to detect witches. Àtíngà officials prepared an altar in the host town, using animal blood to consecrate it and to prepare protective kolanuts. Blood-fed altars were important in virtually all the òrìṣà religions, making Àtíngà's claims of efficacy locally convincing. Like òrìṣà possession priests, those possessed by the witch-detecting spirit were called its “wives.”

Although the movement originated outside the centers of West African Islam, Àtíngà's eastward permutations revealed important Hausa and Islamic influences. For example, Àtíngà's

name in Dahomey was the Hausa word for kolanut—*Goro*. The site of the ordeal was “a small square clearing made just outside the area of settlement, looking in position and form rather like a Mohammedan praying ground” (Morton-Williams 1956:316). While Morton-Williams did not pursue the emic grounds of his description, the badge of *Àtíngà*-protected persons—a disk-shaped chalk mark in the middle of the forehead—consonantly recalls another image of Muslim devotion. Pious Hausa and Yorùbá Muslims take pride in the appearance of dust and a circular lesion on their foreheads, which proves the regularity and intensity of their pressing their heads to the ground in prayer. Prohibitions against adultery, theft, murder, and witchcraft address the shared concerns of scriptural Islam and Yorùbá possession religions, while suggesting a petit-bourgeois Islamic solution—the absolute demobilization of women.

Under the hot sun, an accused woman had to sit still for hours on the “praying ground.” Her innocence could be proved only by means of an oracle, whereby a hen’s throat was slashed and the bird released to run until it died. Only if the bird died on its back—in the least mobile of positions—was the woman acquitted. This posture suggests a reversal of the excessive female mobility that many Yorùbá blamed on the liberal divorce laws instituted by the British and on the lapse of earlier royal controls over women and witches (see Matory 1994:73ff.).

*Àtíngà* is not to be dismissed as the non-Muslim conduct of *soi-disant* Muslims. It lies along a continuum of divinatory, “magical,” and astrological practices that have followed Islam throughout its expansion. No more or no less than any other local practice does the Yorùbá synthesis deserve to be studied in its peculiarity. The point is that the persuasiveness of *Àtíngà* lay in its blurring of the symbolic boundaries between Islam and “traditional religion,” in which it achieved such success partly by identifying itself as foreign and *beyond* entrenched local categories. It successfully *familiarized* antagonistic Muslim, male-hegemonic, and bourgeois assertions to audiences in the “village” and the “ancestral city.”

Most of its victims were individual women. All were ordered to bring forth their “calabashes” for destruction.<sup>25</sup> The calabash was assumed to contain the substance of the witch’s power. But calabashes are also the most common icons of the predominantly female *òrìṣà* priesthoods among the *Ọ̀yọ́*-Yorùbá—such as *Yemoja*, *Òrìṣà Oko*, and *Ọ̀bàtálá* (see Matory 1993). Indeed, in the cases that Morton-Williams details, what women brought forth were precisely their *òrìṣà* devotional objects, which the witch-detectors would then destroy (Morton-Williams 1956:322ff.). Shrines for women’s deceased twin offspring “were destroyed with particular zeal.” In attacks on collective shrines, none of the possession religions appears to have been exempt, whereas four priesthoods that are almost entirely male and non-possession-related were exempt—*Gẹ̀lẹ̀dẹ̀*, *Egúngún*, *Orò*, and *Ọ̀gún*.<sup>26</sup>

This movement was explicitly intent on suppressing female powers widely considered destructive (*àjẹ*), for which objective it enjoyed widespread approval. However, before they were stopped, *Àtíngà*’s agents had exploited this popular imprimatur to justify attacks on female *òrìṣà* worshipers, collective *òrìṣà* shrines, and an *Ọ̀gbóni* lodge, to the outrage of at least one king (Morton-Williams 1956:325).<sup>27</sup> The degree to which this bourgeois-sponsored movement might have become directly hostile to kingship itself will never be known. What is clear is that its *familiarizing* rhetoric concealed an adversarial posture toward witchcraft uncharacteristic of contemporary royal ideals and a posture directly hostile to the female capacities that long made women central icons and agents of *Ọ̀yọ́* royalism.

On the eve of *Àtíngà*’s penetration into *Ọ̀yọ́* town, the British enforced legislation outlawing it, suppressing the movement entirely by the mid-1950s. It never reached *Igbòho*. But the class of Muslim and Christian businessmen that, through *Àtíngà*, usurped and transformed royal responsibilities and challenged British policy in the 1950s has progressively taken over the thrones of the postcolonial era, never suppressing but sometimes neglecting the possession priesthoods. Despite the neglect of living kings, priestesses successfully justify their increasingly

autonomous ritual assertions in the name of a mythic king and an interested recollection of imperial grandeur.

### appropriating the signs of exclusion: a Muslim òrìṣà

The mediation of bourgeois and royal authority has re-ordered the administrative affiliations and the symbolic priorities of the possession religions in the late 20th century. Rather than ceding authority, the priestesses have consumed and exploited the signs of a Muslim and masculinist hegemony. Not only have some chiefs distanced themselves personally from òrìṣà worship, but the employment-related absence of so many husbands has left the sacred and administrative affairs of the rural household in women's hands. The possession religions locate their comparative advantage in the reproductive concerns of the women left behind. During festivals, not only the priestesses, but also hundreds of young women seeking to conceive, pursue the blessings of dancing gods. Despite their tolerance of òrìṣà-related coronation rites, staunch Muslims do condemn this populous sphere of pagan *and* female authority.

Şàngó is the exemplary possessing god. Both possession itself and the term "mounting" (*gígùn*) occur more in his priesthood than in any other. He remains the sacred sign of a twice-past and mighty Yorùbá Empire and of the nostalgia for an orderly world that, according to royalists, preceded the present age of malevolence and dissipation. The "past"-oriented royalist order is, prominently, a sexual order, characterized by gender-coded complementarity and obedience. The urban world, coded "present," is a sexual *disorder* in which witches run rampant and the wrong things "mount" people. An arrogant person might be asked derisively, "Is money *mounting* you?" or "Is your beauty *mounting* you?"<sup>28</sup> Hence, undeserved prerogatives become the characteristic instances of "mounting." Among these is adultery, which men of all religions seek to prevent with a "medicine" believed to kill the male perpetrator. It is called *mágùn*, meaning "don't mount." Thus, the sexual, marital, equestrian, and politico-religious vocabulary of "mounting" in the royalist empire and its modern "village" cognate are called upon to define and forestall the chaos of the urban world as well.

The children of Muslim and Christian migrants often visit, live with, and learn from their òrìṣà-worshipping grandparents in the "village," where the gorgeous and vibrant festivals of the òrìṣà impress lasting images of sacred power upon young minds. Şàngó, Ọṣun, Yemoja, and Ọya, to name a few, come into the world and "mount" (*gùn*) human beings, dancing, speaking, and healing through their human "horses" (*eşin*). Sometimes two or three generations away from their forebears' declared "conversion" to evangelical faiths, Yorùbá of all classes recognize the *power* of the òrìṣà to heal their afflictions. Whereas the Nigerian state and its religious allies have de-officialized the possession religions, they lie at the heart of many Ọyó-Yorùbá people's conception of "traditional government" and the "village" home. Virtually all members of the extended "village" community share the profound concerns about health, fertility, and safety from witchcraft that the òrìṣà priesthoods are "traditionally" responsible for managing on behalf of worldly and divine royalty. These concerns are the axis of a rival government with powerful precedents in two-hundred years of empire and thirty years of indirect rule.

Possession rituals in the "village" manifest and valorize an economically marginal but ideologically potent politico-religious order, one closely identified with a "past" Ọyó Empire and radically opposed to the symbolically "present" and chaotic space of Muslim hegemony. They fertilize through the historically charged metaphor of "mounting," which *displays and mobilizes* "wives," unlike an Islam that recommends veiling and seclusion as ideal. Not only that, the royalist possession religions represent women as the paradigmatic vessels of divinity, as exemplars of ritual political competence, as regulators of Ọyó-Yorùbá society's supreme value—childbearing. They confront the radically patrilineal ideology shared by world Islam

and the late-colonial formulation of Ọyọ-Yorùbá inheritance. In a predominantly Muslim town, in an ideally patrilineal society, and in a Muslim-ruled country, it would be difficult to think of a more provocative ritual statement than one in which women ritual experts presume to control not only their own and other priestesses' bodies but the polysemic process of fertilization and social reproduction itself.

It may come as a surprise, then, that Ẓàngó himself is a Muslim (see also Frobenius 1968[1913]:210; Idowu 1963:92, 100–101). In Yorùbá, even his main natural manifestation is known by an Arabic-derived word: *àrá*, or “thunder,” comes from the Arabic word *raʿd* (Gbadamoṣi 1978:208). The sense of irony is not lost to òrìṣà-worshippers, who alternately affirm through their panegyrics and deny with their reasoning that Ẓàngó is Muslim. Today, he embodies the irony of the modern Muslim or Christian king. However, manifest in the words and bodies of Ọyọ women, he also transforms that irony. Islam is recognized even in the most central and secretive rites of Ẓàngó-worship. Concluding portions of the initiation for his possession priests involve nude bathing in the river, a rite remarkably parallel to the Nupe celebration of the Islamic New Year, Muharram, in which nude and seminude ablutions occur at the river. The Nupe rite includes play with lit torches and bonfires (Nadel 1954:244–245). Fire is among Ẓàngó's most prominent emblems as well, further suggesting a Nupe and Islamic inspiration behind this ritual bricolage.

And Ẓàngó is not the only possessing god understood through such bricolage. Some tales say that Ẓàngó's mother Yemoja and the god of smallpox Ẓòpònnòṅ are Nupe and Muslim.<sup>29</sup> Like similar tales about the non-“mounting” Odùduà, these narratives reflect (1) the importance of trade relations with Islamic states to the north—Bornu, Kano, and Nupe—which created much of Ọyọ's wealth and supplied Ọyọ with the equestrian means to conquer southward; (2) the esteem in which the British held Islam; and (3) Muslim power in postcolonial government.

## gender and religion as tandem factional principles

The politics of religious alliance conceals a gendered cultural subtext. Not only have Christians and òrìṣà-worshippers developed similar organizations in response to the perception of a Muslim threat, but also the most popular Christian church in the town gives an important role to spirit possession.<sup>30</sup> Conversely, the discourse of women's exclusion conceals a religious subtext. As we shall see, the enemies of women's political participation *familiarize* their misogyny with reference to the tropes of wifely delegation in Ọyọ. Thus, the feminine signs of social integrity, hierarchy, and fertility can be mobilized as signs of disintegration and infertility as well. They are bound not to one but to various interested formulations of the “village” and “ancestral city” order. Yet, in all of these formulations, the disposition of women and their powers of containment are central determinants of political success for men and women.

Women are excluded from elected office and hereditary chieftaincy in Ìgbòho. Even less often in Ọyọ North than elsewhere in Yorùbáland do women run for office in local government. One woman who ran in Ìgbòho was warned by her pastor, “If you run, you will win, but you will die on the third day.” So, she withdrew her candidacy. There are no women on the council and none in the town-improvement society, which determines, as effectively as Tammany, who will run. Since the Onìgbòho House chieftaincy dispute of the early 1950s, women have lost their minor foothold among the chiefly offices of that house as well.<sup>31</sup>

Whereas the imperial order once delegated a central role to women in the state, the modern processes of exclusion are justified by perverse references to Ọyọ history—rendered richly in the leitmotifs of Ọyọ royal ritual.<sup>32</sup> The motifs this allegory showcases—calabashes, mortars, marriage, and women's heads—set off the character of the politico-religious processes from which no one, in truth, has succeeded at fully excluding women. Like the Àtíngà movement, the tale evokes men's unsuccessful aspirations to control women's powers of containment.

"Mounting" and its paradigmatically female objects remain key symbols in the constitution of socio-political order in Ìgbòho.

Religion is now nearly as prominent a principle as gender in group formation and factionalization at the local level. Like Òyó North at large, the town of Ìgbòho is predominantly Muslim with a large Christian minority. Division in the Muslim community prompted the building of two rival Friday mosques here—the "Central Mosque" and the "General Mosque." The Muslim communities of most Òyó-Yorùbá towns demonstrate their unity by sharing *one* Friday mosque. Churches are more numerous and constitutionally diverse.<sup>33</sup>

Yet, Muslim dominance in the national state has created a unity of interests among Òyó-Yorùbá Christians, òrìṣà-worshippers, and women generally. Northern predominance in the postcolonial military and in the national population of voters has given rise to a sense among Yorùbá that Hausas and, therefore, Muslims disproportionately control the distribution of national resources. Although colonial records document considerable antagonism between *Christians* and òrìṣà-worshippers, relations between them nowadays are remarkably congenial. Some Òyó-Yorùbá *Muslims* nowadays appear to draw encouragement from Muslims' national dominance to antagonize òrìṣà-worshippers. The Christian churches have one ecumenical council, in response to a perceived threat from the Muslim majority. The worshippers of diverse òrìṣà from all over Òyó North also have a union that meets regularly and is constitutionally headed by the Igiṣubú quarter chief. Like Ṣàngó, the present officeholder is Muslim. Typical of male chieftaincies in this region, his office authorizes women to act on its behalf, and his personal prerogatives are highly limited. Two of his Ṣàngó-worshipping kinswomen, who also maintain the palace Ṣàngó shrine, speak for him in the union.

No other institution in the "village," including the government clinic, possesses the authority of the possession religions to manage effective symbols in the joint fecundation of women and reproduction of the household. What gives the seemingly unambiguous appearance of a "sex-linked religious pluralism" (Lewis 1986:100) is not men's *disinterest* but women's *leadership* in the pursuit of these values. Muslim and Christian women form the majority of supplicants at public òrìṣà festivals. Their headlong involvement reflects the strong incentive behind their leadership—*anxiety*. Whereas their fertility is the material proof of community health, their barrenness is above all proof of their personal failure. Yet, where other means have failed, husbands and affines share an investment in the success of these women's "pagan" endeavor. Thus, women lead in a circumvention of Islamic dominance in the national state and challenge the very notion of mutually exclusive religious identities, while their sacred gestures of obeisance bring life to a rival politico-religious order.

### the poetics of interreligious dispute and incorporation

By the late 1980s, interreligious antagonism had become explicit in Ìgbòho. Ṣàngó- and Yemgja-worshippers in the town confided privately that they disliked the Muslims. Nonetheless, since public funds had been used in the construction of the General Mosque, the entire town of Ìgbòho was invited to its official opening in 1989. The Ṣàngó-worshippers attended as a group. A poet (*eléwí*) visiting from Ibadan prefaced his recitation of panegyrics for Allah with a plea for his audience not to attend òrìṣà festivals.<sup>34</sup> In the background, young local men chanted *Allāhu akhbār* (God is great)! This inhospitable plea for Muslim separation might have gone over better in metropolitan Ibadan than in royalist Ìgbòho, where the òrìṣà remain an *éminence grise* behind male chieftaincy and a public focus of Muslim and Christian women's pursuit of fertility. Not surprisingly, such antagonistic expressions came from someone with no aspirations to local hereditary office and were endorsed by young men, who were below the age of both access to chieftaincy titles and concern about the fertility of wives.

Òrìṣà-worshippers make their most vivid rejoinder through the public *ritual* display of female sacred capacity on the bodies of women and male transvestites. Yet, òrìṣà festivals are also the occasion of *verbal* articulations just as potent as the allegories and exhortations of Muslim and Christian men. Women follow the canons of their own art and a pan-Yorùbá tradition of women's collective self-expression. Òrìṣà possession priestesses have composed the critical and didactic songs that the mainly female supplicants and revelers repeat.<sup>35</sup>

On the occasion of the 1988 festival of the river goddess Yemoja in Òyó town, the Muslim and Christian women and children who made up the majority of the audience sang of women's main desideratum and, against the hegemonist aspirations of the exclusively male Muslim clergy, apportioned credit to a female òrìṣà:

Water is our religion;  
In our household, when we have successfully given birth,  
The Imam may not conduct the naming ceremony.<sup>36</sup>

Another song challenges the very grounds of Muslim and Christian identity.

We ourselves will practice Yemoja;  
The Owners of Faith [Christians] practice Faith;  
We ourselves will practice Yemoja.<sup>37</sup>

In the past, the "Owners of Yemoja" (*Oniyemoja*) were specifically the few priestly initiates, whereas the "Owners of Faith" are all those who profess to be Christians. Yet, this song draws a parallel between the two identities, submitting both to a transformation. On the one hand, it might suggest that, rather than *being* something, Christians are just people who *do or practice* something. Christianity, like the noninitiate's appeal to Yemoja, is a temporary conduct rather than a fixed identity. On the other hand, it might suggest that all who seek Yemoja's help assume the identity of the cult, just as Christians assume the identity of theirs. Such is the compromise involved in *sending out* the sign. The persuader too is transformed by her predication. In either case, Muslim, Christian, and "traditionalist" women have declared their unity under a single sacred purpose and identity.

The *oriki*, or panegyrics, of the gods that "mount" are assembled, revised, and sung almost exclusively by priestly women (see Barber 1990). Recorded in Ìgbòho in 1988, Şàngó's panegyrics specify his Muslim "practice."

When Şàngó was living in Saluu he was a Muslim,  
Who ate *dog's head* with pounded yam,  
And ate *pig's head* for breakfast during Ramadan. . . .  
One who "fasts" during Ramadan. . . .  
One who carries balls of pounded yam to eat under his clothes [during the Ramadan fast]. [Emphasis added]<sup>38</sup>

This image of Şàngó not only declares Şàngó a Muslim but ridicules Islamic practice. While many people ridicule their neighbors by reference to the latter's eating habits, this icon-ivorous meal draws contrary modes of symbolic production into Şàngó's imperial vortex. On one level, as Barber (1980) points out, òrìṣà-worshippers commonly attribute audacity and impunity to their gods. These panegyrics use Islam to signify qualities typically associated with the òrìṣà—including foreignness (see Matory 1986:30–33), brazenness, disregard for social rules, and disrespect for the priesthood's enemies. Şàngó is both crafty and fearsome enough to violate Islamic law, and no one dares challenge him.

This burlesque subjects Islamic rites scripturally intent on submission, abnegation, and spiritual cleanliness not only to mockery but, on a second level, to a culturally imperialist reinterpretation. The norms of sacrifice to Şàngó specifically require the presentation of the victim's *head* to the god. Images of both sexual penetration and its international homolog—eating—inform the meaning of spirit possession by Şàngó. Not only does he eat heads, but he "mounts" the female and feminized *heads* of his possession priests.

A further order of belief about the head informs the drama of sacrifice and possession alluded to in the *Ẓàngó's panegyrics*. When a god "mounts" a priest's feminized "outer head," the god displaces the priest's inherited identity and consciousness, known as the "inner head."<sup>39</sup> Before the ram sacrifice required to initiate a *Ẓàngó* possession priest, the ram's head is touched to the heads of the initiand and other possession priests, apparently identifying victim with sacrificer (Hubert and Mauss 1964). The subsequent decapitation appears to sever the possession priest's "head" by proxy; the proxy is then placed on *Ẓàngó's* altar for him—digestively and sexually—to eat. Much as worldly grooms purchase the "heads" of their brides with bridewealth (*owó ori iyàwó*—literally, "money for the head of the bride"), *Ẓàngó* demands the "head" of his new bride. The rite, like the richly polysemic poetry of his panegyrics, suggests *Ẓàngó's* audacious power to extract the personnel of the rigidified patrilineage, and of other religions, in order to recruit them into his own order of royal affinity. The followers of Islam are no less vulnerable than those of *Ògún*—the nonpossessing god of war and iron—whose favorite food, alluded to in *Ẓàngó's* panegyrics, is dog!

### conclusion: the center at the periphery

Possession rites are not necessarily just palliatives for suffering women. They can privilege priestesses in the articulation of concerns far beyond the personal—among female supplicants, the men who depend on their fertility, chiefs and kings, farmers, Christians, and "village"-centered communities generally, not to mention an expanding number of the alienated in the cities of the New World. In the present case, their rites are a privileged site of symbolic production, producing a key and perhaps hegemonic vocabulary of "village" consent and resistance to the major institutions of Yorùbá socio-political life.

There is religious conflict among the *Òyó-Yorùbá*, cognate with a tension between gendered leaderships, between residential spaces, and between communal orientations. It is not, however, a conflict between primordially discrete religions ("local" and "world"). Religions in the local context reformulate each other in often idiosyncratic ways, dependent on a history of political and economic factors. In *Òyó* North, the clearest sectarian battle lines are between the possession religions (of *Ẓàngó*, *Yemója*, *Òṣun*, *Ọya*, and, arguably, Independent [*Aládúrà*] Christianity) and the nonpossession religions (Islam, mission Christianity, *Ifá*, and, among the *Òyó-Yorùbá*, *Ògún*). Whereas women are symbolically central in the former, they are expressly marginalized in the latter. This contrast provides an obvious hypothesis in other societies, as well, for researchers concerned about women's action at religious, cultural, and historical junctures.

Although a negotiated peace between Yorùbá Christians and Muslims may be evident, contests over the control of lineage resources and the constitution of civic order are regularly articulated in other religious terms. They are ritualized in the opposed iconographies of female self-presentation in Islam and the possession religions: the veil versus the head-borne pot. While Muslim men and the beneficiaries of radical patriliney denounce it, rural women argue the virtue of female sacred authority in sacred songs and poetry.

Male migrants who retire to the "village," who seek moral validation through title-taking, who escape the violence and improper "mounting" of the metropolis, or who seek healing and fertility from the possessing *òriṣà*, affirm an *Òyó-Yorùbá* royalist construction from which the female link is difficult to remove. The great husband and lord *Ẓàngó* is a god of Empire with economic and political links reaching not only Mecca but also the heavenly origins of the human race. For his worshipers, he represents an experience no less cosmopolitan than Allah: *Ẓàngó* simply rules from a different capital, one much closer to the food producers and wives of *Òyó* North.



Amid divisions in the Muslim community and the generally shifting nature of Yorùbá religious identity, not only Šàngó-worshippers but Yemoja-worshippers possess the means to appropriate and send out signs, to assert a confidently totalizing vision of the locally centered world. Šàngó altars sit in the reception rooms of the head chief of Ìgbòho (*Alépatà*) and of the chiefly descendent of an Ọ̀yọ̀ ilàrì (*Ààrẹ̀*), although these men are respectively Christian and Muslim. Only under the auspices of that head chief does the divided Muslim community of the town gather together periodically as a whole. Once a year, Muslims allied with both Friday mosques leave the town and gather in a large clearing. While they face Mecca, they also face the Christian head chief, who has donated the ram they will sacrifice for 'Id El-Kabir. The irony is not lost to perspicacious òrìṣà-worshippers, who know that the ram is also Šàngó's sacred animal and food of choice. The panegyrics of the river goddess Yemoja appear to "signify" doubly on the Muslim rite. Giving the lie to female marginality and powerlessness, they assert the goddess's ability to master both Šàngó and Islam:

My mother kills people, [and] we call her a woman.  
Mighty water of endless expanse is the home of Yemoja, who eats two rams in the river.<sup>40</sup>

## notes

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1. Indeed, Lewis argues that possession religions that participate in the dominant moral order of the society are the domain of male possession priests (1989[1971]:28–29, 134–159).

2. These towns share a fairly homogeneous dialect with Ọ̀yọ̀ town (the present seat of the kingdom of Ọ̀yọ̀) and with the metropolis of Ìbàdàn. The religions of the Ọ̀yọ̀-speakers as a group can also be subjected to a variety of general statements, which this article offers on the basis of fieldwork in Ìgbòho, Kíṣí, Šakí, and Ìbàdàn. The argument benefits implicitly from fieldwork in contrasting areas outside the Ọ̀yọ̀- Yorùbá region—in Ìgèdè-Èkítì, Abẹ̀òkúta and Kétu.

3. *Ayé la bá 'Fá*

*Ayé la bá 'Màle*

*Ọ̀sán gangan ni 'Gbàgbó wolé dé.* [Babayemi 1979:67]

4. Christian missionaries reached the Ọ̀yọ̀-Yorùbá in the 1850s (Atanda 1988:xxxiv; W. Clarke 1972:xiv; Johnson 1921:39).

5. Consider, for example, *àṣírí* ("secret," from the Arabic *sirr*—Gbadamọ̀ṣi 1978:207); *àlùjónú* ("an evil spirit," from the Arabic *al-jinn*, which refers to good, evil, or morally neutral creatures of the netherworld), *sàràà* (a sacrificial offering to the òrìṣà, or a type of marriage free of bridewealth, apparently assimilating two Arabic terms—*ṣadaqaḥ*, meaning "alms," and *ṣadaq*, referring to bridewealth, or prestations from the husband to the wife upon marriage and divorce—Noha Aboul-Magd Forster, telephone interview by author, February 9, 1991 and Samira Sisson, telephone interview by author, February 9, 1991); *bàríkà* ("Congratulations!" from the Arabic *baraka*, meaning "grace"—see Gbadamọ̀ṣi 1978:207); *àdùrà* ("prayer," from the Arabic—*al-du'a*—Gbadamọ̀ṣi 1978:207). Although the paradigmatic referent of this term in modern Yorùbá is Christian prayer, the term derives from the Arabic (Gbadamọ̀ṣi 1978:207); *lùkùdì* ("money-making magic," from the Hausa word for cowry, *kud'i*—see Lovejoy 1974:566).

6. For example, *sàràà* ("sacrifice" for òrìṣà worshippers) apparently entered Yorùbá through the mediation of non-Muslim Hausa, who describe annual offerings to the ancestors with the Arabic-derived term *sadaka* (Gilliland 1986:38). Bašom's informants define *sàràà* by contrast to conventional sacrifice (*ẹ̀bò*), as the form of offering that "traditionalist" diviners prescribe for Muslim and Christian clients who wish to distinguish themselves from òrìṣà-worshippers (Bašom 1969:60–61).

7. On the other hand, Ifá verses recorded by Abimbòla identify the original Muslims as the sons or slaves of Ọ̀rúnmìlá, the god of Ifá divination (see Abimbòla 1973:57; Ryan 1978:85–87, 97n.).

8. A variety of specifically Yorùbá Muslim forms of divination have developed alongside "traditional" forms. Although they have much in common, Yorùbá Muslims are anxious to attribute distinct origins to these forms. Both the Yorùbá Muslim and the "traditional" Yorùbá forms are patronized by members of all religions (see Abdul 1970; Bašom 1969:8–10). Ryan even implies that "traditionalist" diviners are especially popular in predominately Muslim towns (Ryan 1978:s163).

9. A statue of Šàngó sculpted by an Igbo artist stands in front of the headquarters of the National Electric Power Authority at C.M.S. (Church Missionary Society) in Lagos.

10. For example, the bori has produced a considerably more deferential assessment of Islam in their shared world. The Hausa *íska* divinities have been assimilated to jinn and classified dualistically as “Muslim” and white or “pagan” and black. This division is said to rest on statements in the Qur’an that Muhammad converted some of the jinn to Islam, while others refused to hear his teachings and remained “pagan” or evil (Greenberg 1941:58). Some *òrìṣà* among the *Òyò-Yorùbá* are also described as Muslim, but neither scriptural nor doctrinal Islam defines their normative character among other *òrìṣà*.

11. Ironically, those who press this observation are usually professed Muslims and Christians, who, nonetheless, sense the influence of “tradition” upon them.

12. Laitin makes this unity seem more remarkable by questioning one of the most prominent explanations given locally for interreligious harmony—the religious heterogeneity of families. Laitin’s statistics prove that in the city of Ilé-Ifè most people take spouses of the same religion, leading the author to infer that “families” must be, in principle and in reality, religiously homogeneous. Since corporate family groups do not really unite diverse religions, the argument goes, only other factors could explain the local peace.

Such an inference rests on a highly inappropriate working definition of the Yorùbá “family.” In *Òyò* and Ifè, consanguineal relations with one’s parents, siblings, cousins, aunts, uncles, nieces, and nephews regularly cut across religious lines and are far more enduring than the nuptial bond. Indeed, some men and women describe wives as “strangers” (*àlẹ̀jò*) to the lineal group or house (*ilé* or *idilè*), expressing the fact that, in most Yorùbá subgroups, wives are expressly ineligible to inherit property and titles from their husbands and affines. The nuptial pair is not the focus of most Yorùbá families. Laitin’s statistics on marriage in Ilé-Ifè nonetheless foreshadow developments that are now seminal in many parts of Yorùbáland. In *Òyò* North, many people still marry across religious lines. However, because nowadays a child always assumes his or her father’s religious identity, lineal segmentation may eventually lead to the emergence of large and religiously homogeneous houses. In the meantime, certain *Òyò-Yorùbá* norms of inheritance, marriage, and social reproduction generally have continued to prevail over Islamic law and Christianity in ordering kin groups.

13. While the fact of their “Northernness” and foreignness is regularly emphasized, Islam is almost an inseparable metonym in such references by Christians and *òrìṣà*-worshippers. Yorùbá and southerners generally are quite conscious of (1) the hegemonic function of Islam in consolidating the North into a political bloc and (2) Nigeria’s various Hausa and Fulani rulers’ efforts to curry favor with the wealthy Muslim Arab states. While population data are always disputed in Nigerian national politics, Christians and Muslims seem to be of roughly equal numbers at present in Nigeria. Some sources even report that Christians outnumber their Muslim compatriots. See *World Christian Encyclopedia*, p. 527, table 1, reproduced in Gilliland 1986:172. Nevertheless, despite bitter complaints by Christians, Nigeria joined the Organisation of the Islamic Conference in mid-1980s.

14. The *ilàri* were ritually prepared royal messengers, servants, laborers, toll-collectors, and bodyguards. The senior palace priestess of Sàngó—the *Iyá Kéré*—prepared them in her apartment, much after the model of initiation for possession priests. Their heads were shaved, incised, and planted with powerful substances. So closely were they then identified with the king’s consciousness and will that they bore as names various attributes, prayers, intentions, and potential directives of the king. See Babayemi 1979:139; Johnson 1921:60–63; Oroge 1971:64. On the role of Sàngó priests as royal delegates in the *Òyò* Empire, see Babayemi 1982:6; Biobaku 1952:40; Clapperton 1829:21; Lander and Lander 1832:122.

15. I owe this insight to Dr. Jacob Kẹhinde Olupona (1983:491), who applied Bellah’s concept to the *òrìṣà* rites of the *Òndó-Yorùbá*. See also Olupona 1991.

16. For example, most locally resident men and some women raise cassava, yams, corn, guinea corn, and so forth, and women process them into consumable or salable forms. *Ìbàdàn* women buy the products of rural labor in order to sell them in urban centers—for profits that most Yorùbá, encouraged by the national broadcast media, assume are unreasonable.

17. Likewise, the metropolis does not objectively exclude women from financial power, at least not as marketwomen. Rather, the rural image of the metropolis suggests the antisocial nature of marketwomen’s power and distinguishes it from the moral leadership that priesthood and procreation confer upon women.

18. I paraphrase the 1988 report to me of a farmer in Igbòho:

In *Ìbàdàn* [the capital of modern *Òyò* State] they recently tore down some buildings. They discovered that most of the rich *Alhajis*, *Alhajiyas* and ministers had the dead bodies of people they had used to carry a calabash on their heads and thus make money. These people would die after carrying the calabash and their bodies would be kept. There are special things in the calabash. It is put on the person’s head. Incantations are said. The person’s name is called. Paper money pours out of the calabash. The victim cannot see where the money is coming from. The calabash is stuck to the victim’s head, even in death.

Like the victim, the villager cannot see where the money is coming from.

19. Yorùbá men are loath to carry loads on their heads. Among adults, only women carry water from the river or the well. The role of this act in wedding ceremonial recommends it as a defining responsibility in a wife’s relation to her husband’s house. In wedding rites described by Fadipe in the late 1930s, a new bride was required to fetch water for a wide circle of the husband’s kin soon after her entry into his compound (1970:85).

20. Indeed, myths compare the head to a pot, and the calabashes housing gods in shrines are compared to skulls. A heavenly potter known as *Àjàlà Amònkòkò* (*Àjàlà* the molder of pots), is said to make people’s heads before they are born. The word for “skull” (*akatarí*) in Yorùbá analogizes it to a calabash known as

*koto*, which contains Yemoja's power (*àṣẹ*) in *Ọ̀yọ́* North shrines. The filling of such a vessel and its juxtaposition with the head, then, implies metaphorically the *òriṣà*'s entry into the priestess's head. Because this action indexes and describes the sacred role, possession priestesses of the river *òriṣà* are called "Carriers of the Calabash" (*Arugbá*) or "Carriers of Water" (*Arumí*).

21. See Apter (1992:13–34) for a persuasive discussion of the precolonial precedents for the use of Ife-centric mythology in resistance to *Ọ̀yọ́* imperialism. See also Peel (1990:342).

22. See also Igboho Chiefs and District (n.d.) and "On Igboho Chiefs and Government"—in Oyo Prof 1, File No.1048/13; Oyo Prof 1, File No.1048-12; Oyo Prof 1, File 4162/2, Nigerian National Archives, Ibadan.

23. P. Clarke has discussed other West African instances in which Islam constituted forms of opposition to European colonial authority (1982:193ff.).

24. Morton-Williams (1956:333) describes the sponsors of the *Àtírigà* witch-finding movement as "wealthy and influential men. . . . Some of them, indeed, were chiefs whose offices had once commanded ritual sanctions, but had been made secular under the [British] Protectorate; others were secular office holders. . . . The rest were men who had achieved status through utilizing wealth obtained in commerce." Perhaps the only document written by the movement's Yorùbá supporters that appears in the colonial archives is a letter from two Muslim representatives of the Ilutoro Society of Isẹyin, *Ọ̀yọ́* North, which praises the witch-finders' success and begs the administration not to outlaw *Àtírigà* (Akanbi et al. 1952).

25. See Akanbi et al. 1952 and Morton-Williams 1956:319.

26. Although there are women and there is possession (*òriṣà gígùn*) in some non-*Ọ̀yọ́* *Ògún* priesthoods, sources in Kétu (which is near the setting of Morton-Williams's account) told me that, in this region, the *Ògún* belonging to the blacksmiths and hunters (the specific terms in which Morton-Williams describes *Ògún* in this case) never possesses people. Moreover, *Ògún*'s priesthood in the *Ọ̀yọ́* regions discussed in this article is entirely male.

27. *Ògbóni* is a secret society of male and female elders. In many communities, it actively counsels the king.

28. "Ṣé owó rí gùn é?"

"Ṣé ẹwà rí gùn é?"

29. Idowu records panegyrics that call *Ṣònpònnòn* "The Muslim, king of the Mosque" (1963:100).

30. The Cherubim and Seraphim Church, also attributes the power of healing to women mediums, in this case, of the Holy Spirit.

31. The single chiefly office reserved for a woman was among the king-makers at that time. However, it has now been vacant for several decades.

32. A particularly bitter Baptist and member of the *Ìfẹ̀lódùn* town-improvement society (whose wife had divorced him) explained to me the reasons why women have no place in *Ìfẹ̀lódùn* or in town's electoral politics:

Women are not allowed to attend *Ìfẹ̀lódùn* because their political understanding is not developed. Among the Yorùbá, whenever there is a discussion over the town or sacrifice for the town, consideration of a land dispute, or planning decision, women are never allowed to attend. They are unreliable. Here is a story: Once there was a war between Alááfin [king of *Ọ̀yọ́*] and Aláké [the senior king of Abẹ̀òkúta]. In those days, victory took months. Aláké had a commandant with a type of magic in a *koto* calabash [the same type of calabash used on Yemoja altars in Igboho] from which he would take water and bathe himself. Then he would get on his hands and knees on four *mortars*. [Mortars are also the vessels used to support *Sàngó*'s sacred stones on his altar.] That way he would become an elephant and go to the war front and fight invincibly. You know the elephant has supernatural power.

Alááfin made a deal with the commandant's wife that he would marry her if she would reveal the secret of the commandant's power. The commandant performed his magic. When he went to the war front his wife destroyed the *jùjú*. He realized that something had happened at home. He rushed back and found only a bit of water, which he used to change back into a human before, finally, he died.

The woman went to Alááfin to be married. He took her in, and, on the seventh day, Alááfin invited everyone in the town to *Àkẹ̀sán* market, in front of the palace, telling them he would marry her. Alááfin offered her fine food and courtesy but refused sex. He just told her every day how soon the important day would come. Alááfin sent the guards to bring her out. He said, "You married your husband, you bore children for him. All the good things he did for you, and you would have me marry you so that you can betray me the same way? Never!!!" Then he had his messenger cut off her head. [Emphasis added]

33. There are two Baptist churches, the founding branch of the Cherubim and Seraphim independent African church, a Celestial Church of Christ (another independent), and several smaller churches.

34. "A good Muslim cannot practice traditional religion (*ẹ̀ṣin ibilẹ̀*). One who does so cannot enter heaven. . . . [Muhammad] tells Muslims to stop attending *òriṣà* festivals. Those Muslims who attend the *Ọ̀ṣun Ọ̀ṣogbo* festival are wasting their time. . . . *Òkẹ̀bàdàn* and *Ògún* festivals too. Worshipers of *Oya*, *Egúngún*, *Ọ̀ṣun*, *Ṣàngó*, *Òriṣà Ọ̀giyàn*, *Ṣònpònnòn*, *Yemoja*, *Ifá*—a good Muslim should not follow them if he wants to enter eternal life" (Translation of remarks of visiting poet *Ọ̀larewaju Adepọju* in Igboho, March 6, 1989).

35. Certain ritual occasions in most Yorùbá towns—like *Irómò* in *Ìgèdè-Èkiti* and *Èfẹ̀* among the southwestern Yorùbá—license groups of women to compose and publicly sing songs of personal and social criticism.

36. I am deeply indebted to Karin Barber of the University of Birmingham for verifying and correcting these transcriptions and translations.

*Omi ni ẹsin wa;  
Nínú ilée wa bá a bímọ tọn 0000,  
Lèmọmù lè mà kóo.*

37. *Áwa náà yíò ẹ Yemọja;  
Àwọn Onígbàgbọ n se ígbàgbó  
Áwa náà yíò ẹ Yemọja.*

38. *Nígbàtí Ẹ̀ngó ríbẹ̀ ní Sálúú tí ní fí ní ẹ̀ Imàlẹ̀,  
Tó bá forí ajá ẹ̀ iyọ̀n,  
Àtí orí ẹ̀lẹ̀dẹ̀ ẹ̀ saàrì. . . .  
Àgbà "àwẹ̀". . . .  
akó iyọ̀n rúgúdú bọ̀ abẹ̀ aṣọ. . . .*

When these passages entered Ẹ̀ngó's local panegyrics is unclear. What is clear is that, in the late 1980s, they were sung publicly with a full knowledge that a religiously divided community was listening.

39. Yorùbá identify the physical head (*orí òdẹ*—literally, "outer head") as the vessel of an invisible head (*orí inú*—literally, "inner head") that constitutes a person's identity, character, intelligence, judgment, and potential for good fortune. Many Yorùbá believe the invisible head passes from a deceased grandparent into his or her grandchild during reincarnation. Alternatively, ancestors are said to assist the unborn in selecting a "head."

40. Recorded in May 1988, during a recitation to a multireligious gathering in the palace of the Onígbòhò, chief of Òkè-Ìgbòhò Quarter of Ìgbòhò. Traditionally, he derives his sanction to rule from the òrìṣà Yemọja, all of whose possession priests, unlike Ẹ̀ngó's, are real women. The Yorùbá text:

*Íyáà mi ní paní, a lóbinrin ní.  
Omi alagbalúbú omi òréré yèlú Yemọja tí í gbódò jẹ́jẹ́ àgbò.*

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