

**WOMEN  
IN THE  
YORUBA  
RELIGIOUS  
SPHERE**

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**OYERONKE  
OLAJUBU**

*Foreword by Jacob K. Olupona*

# Women in the Yoruba Religious Sphere

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*Oyeronke Olajubu*

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# Foreword



It is quite gratifying to witness the beginning and ending of this project by a young, up-coming Nigerian scholar of comparative history of religion. We are at a very critical time in the history of religions and gender studies in Africa. African nations, and particularly African universities, are obscuring the call from several quarters, both national and international, to recognize the tremendous role of women in the society. Most importantly, Africans are obscuring the call to provide space in the academy for women to tell their own stories, rather than for men to pontificate on their perceptions of women's religious experiences.

Oyeronke Olajubu's own response to this call is to engage Yoruba religious traditions—especially Christianity and indigenous religions—in critical dialogue. Olajubu provides not only historical phenomenological and ethnographic interpretation of the status and role of women in these two traditions, but also gender issues paramount in traditional and contemporary Yoruba society. Olajubu's work points to new vistas of meaning, intrinsic values, and function of oral and written traditions in creating and producing Yoruba indigenous and Christian identities and gender relations.

Yoruba indigenous religion, the first subject of her analysis, shows a complex array of sources for understanding the status of women in traditional and contemporary society. Take, for example, the often-cited cosmological myth of world creation in Ile-Ife, Nigeria, and the descent of the primary deities into the created

world. In this narrative, the figure of Goddess Osun reminds us that women were critical to the founding of the world. Moreover, contrary to the biblical story of Genesis, the Osun narrative challenges the hegemony of male deities and their neglect and discrimination against female agency. I mention Genesis because, while most Yoruba know the story of Adam and Eve, ironically very few are familiar with the Osun narratives. At the end of the narrative, Osun conquered and prevailed on the gods to disclose and revert to the pacts they had revised in secret. The power of the myth lies precisely in making the male principles retrace their steps and communicate with female principles for the overall good of the world. It is not surprising that womanist and feminist scholars in Africa and the African diasporas find in the Yoruba tradition enduring and liberating agency for women today.

Traditional Yoruba myth resounds with practical daily life experiences of women in our contemporary society. Women generally play central roles in the religious and social lives of their communities. Women function as priestesses in ritual ceremonial lineage groups. Female patronage of Yoruba Orisa traditions is exalted, as it is in many other world religions. Take, for example, the myth of origin of the Nigerian Ondo, Yoruba people who indicate that a ruling female, Pupupu, founded this crowned city (Ilu Alade). She reigned until her demise in a palace coup whereby men replaced her with her first son, the Aiho (substitute). Today, Ondo indigenous political organizations exist as a dual parallel system of male and female chieftaincy, each gender complimenting itself in governing Ondo society. Ondo city, a city in which women ruled as leaders and entrepreneurs, still lives up to its heritage, even today. Thus, the mythic history and political ideology based in traditional Ondo reflects the city's contemporary life.

Oyeronke Olajubu's work details gender relations in Yoruba Christianity. Christianity is experiencing a phenomenal growth among the Yoruba and indeed in Africa today. The mission-founded churches—Anglican, Catholic, Baptist, Methodist, the independent African churches (Aladura), and the new Pentecostal Charismatic—are buoyant. These Christian churches have wrestled with issues of gender because women constitute the larger segment of membership. Although their leadership remains predominantly male, women have invented creative ways of overcoming marginalization. Women encounter and at times confront male chauvinism and the church power structure, making waves and headlines in Nigerian

newspapers. Some stories have entered the annals of Nigerian church history.

Two particular cases deserve our attention here. In the first case, as a young girl, Mama Abiodun (Emmanuel) helped to found the Cherubim and Seraphim church. Recognized throughout most of her life as a church leader, she struggled against the hierarchy that pitted her against Yoruba Oba (kings) and rulers, who tried to cajole her into surrendering her right to lead the church. Eventually, she was declared the Olori (leader) of the largest Aladura independent church in West Africa and abroad. Today, Abiodun Emmanuel will be remembered in African church history as the spiritual woman who struggled and conquered. In the second case, the Nigerian Anglican church disapproved of the ordination of women. (Nonetheless, in the Diocese of Ilorin “rebel” Bishop Haruna [retired] had ordained three women. A few years later, after Haruna retired, the Anglican Church disrobed them.) The unexamined trauma and the frustration this event created for these women are yet to be analyzed. As, Olajubu notes, many Pentecostal churches were founded and controlled by women. Her point becomes even more significant given that a number of the Pentecostal churches are now making appearances in Europe, America, and Asia. This is an era of the “reverse mission” in which African missionaries are convinced that “the great commission” (Matthew 28:19) enjoins them to bring Christ to the “pagan” West.

Regarding gender relations and the status of women, three types of Yoruba Christianity maintain different doctrinal, cultural, and social scenarios. Historically, mission Christianity targeted for the conversion of male agents and heads of households. This focus on males, along with the mission ideology of marriage, ultimately resulted in large numbers of women abandoning their indigenous Orisa religion for the new faith. However, it also created extensive problems because monogamy—the prescribed, mandatory Christian marriage arrangement—upset the traditional structure of polygamy. New male converts were forced to choose one from many wives and to abandon others. Otherwise, they were doomed to remain only partial Christians. Paradoxically, single sex Christian schools were established to train boys and girls to advance Christ’s kingdom, as well as to promote habits of obedience and discipline among male and female youths. Ultimately, the goal was to fashion devoted Christian spinsters as would-be “brides” for educated Christian males. The rise of the independent African churches

produced the first opportunity for women's mass movement in church life. Acting as visionaries, choir members, and prophetesses, the vibrant spiritual life of Aladura churches was caused to some extent by women who were actively involved in a church whose power base is still predominantly a male minority.

In southwestern Nigeria, the explosion of the Pentecostal movement cultivates a new scenario for the status of women in modern Yoruba Christianity. Apart from the fact that a number of these churches were founded by women, several still maintain a strict traditional leadership of male priests, although many now ordain women as deacons. But the new Pentecostal church also derives part of its appeal from music and praise songs, largely fashioned and controlled by women. By democratizing certain roles and responsibilities, women have been incorporated into church administrative and liturgical structures in ways that mission and Aladura churches before them failed to do. While these are signs of healthier gender relations, Pentecostal churches basically espouse conservative theology that falls short of favoring women. Carefully selected scriptural readings and interpretations that apparently privilege the status quo are still commonly used in these churches, notwithstanding that women form the majority in all these churches.

While documenting the roles of women and images of gender in Yoruba religious experience and expression, Olajubu's work opens a vista for in-depth study of gender relations in Yoruba religious traditions. One such urgent area of interest is the role of women in Yoruba Islam, a study that is bound, when undertaken, to make significant contributions to the local and global understanding of Islam in our contemporary societies.

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This work is a revision and enlargement of my Ph.D. thesis at the University of Ilorin, Nigeria. The journey from its conception to the various stages of writing has been an interesting and dynamic one; marked by challenges. The work has neither lacked critics nor admirers at every step of the way. It is therefore delightful to have a good and publishable work to which many people have contributed at the end of the day. Some of the people who contributed to this work did so consciously while others did unconsciously; to them all, I am grateful.

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CHAPTER  
ONE



# Concepts and Theories on Women in Yoruba Religious Sphere

## Introduction

My concern in this work is to analyze the interplay of gender and power relations in the Yoruba religious sphere. The work examines the status and role of women in Yoruba religion, social structures, liturgical practices, and rituals. In addition, it attempts an appraisal of the place of women in Yoruba Christian tradition, especially as this concerns gender and power relations. My aim is to pursue a number of related theses. First, contrary to the conventional and familiar submission that women's role is limited in Yoruba religion, I will argue that not only do women play central and vital roles in both indigenous Yoruba religion and Yoruba Christianity; indeed, women are the repository of these traditions and have contributed to the formation and growth of the religions under consideration. Second, I will examine gender relations in indigenous and Christian religious traditions in Yorubaland, emphasizing that gender plays a role in the way Yoruba beliefs and practices are conceptualized.

In undertaking this research, I was concerned with the centrality of gender in Yoruba religion, and I began with the assumption that analyzing gender dynamics and women's roles in Yoruba religion is complex. On one hand, I intended to establish the historical legacy of women, as critical actors in the religious sphere and to show that women play major roles in the spiritual life of their people, roles that are often unrecognized in previous works on religion in Nigeria. On the other hand, I recognize that women have been marginalized in the very traditions within which they have also played significant roles. In addition, I will demonstrate

the role religion plays in the economic, political, and socio-cultural empowerment of the Yoruba woman.

Now, to a brief outline of the Yoruba religious traditions that engaged my attention in this work. Yoruba indigenous religion is the traditional belief system of the Yoruba people of Nigeria and the Diaspora. Yoruba culture and religion are closely intertwined; indeed, culture is a means of expressing religion, whereas religion is a part of culture in Yorubaland; any attempt to separate culture and religion among the Yoruba will therefore be futile. Though culture continues to have widely different connotations, it is used in this study as referring to beliefs and attitudes, the sum of a people's lives mediated by individuals' experiences (Wuthnow 1987). Culture is deeply influential, and its embedded values enrich other areas of human endeavor in the Yoruba experience. In fact, religious influence in the Yoruba cosmic sphere is total as nothing lies outside the scope of religion. Religion permeates every aspect of Yoruba living, be it governance, economics, or medicine.

The Yoruba divide the universe (*aye or agbaye*) into two broad groups. Both groups are interconnected and interdependent. These groups are the invisible (*airi*) and the visible (*riri*), the spiritual (*emi*) and the physical (*ara*), the good (*daradara*) and the bad (*buburu*), the heaven (*orun*) and the earth (*aye*), the negative forces (*ajogun*) and the positive forces (*orisa*) (Abimbola 1997). Each group in this classification is always dependent on the other and/or in confrontational with another, depending on the setting. Whichever the case, the need for accommodation and diplomacy between the groups 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 (Sofola 1993: 8). The Yoruba recognize a Supreme Being, Olorun or Olodumare (who is without gender), and a host of divinities (male and female) who administer cosmic principles to ensure harmony between the seen and unseen forces. These divinities operate on authority derived from Olorun. Their function and capabilities to meet the needs of worshippers are intrinsically linked to their survival and continuous relevance. Belief in spirits, the ancestors (both male and female), and mysterious powers also constitute components of Yoruba religion. The holistic paradigms of Yoruba religion provide avenues of power for both male and female alike. Practices within Yoruba religion include sacrifices, offerings, prayers, songs, and invocations. A prime place is accorded ritual in Yoruba

religion, for it is the venue for contact and interaction between the living, the dead, and the yet unborn.

Unlike the indigenous religion, Yoruba Christianity is an offshoot of early Christianity introduced by missionaries around 1842. By the early 1900s, the first indigenous form of Christianity had emerged, to fulfill certain unmet needs of the Yoruba Christian. Central to these needs was the need for participation and leadership. To some extent, nationalistic considerations also played a role in the establishment of indigenous Christian churches. By the 1930s, churches founded by Africans for Africans with liturgies and practices reflecting African cultures had come to stay. Examples of these are the Celestial Church of Christ and the Cherubim and Seraphim Church. Women contributed significantly to the founding of some of these churches (Crumbley 1992: 510). Women founded many of the Pentecostal churches, which represent the latest phase in Yoruba Christianity, and this trend is on the increase.

As a study in the comparative history of religions, utilizing the approach of cultural analysis, this work would show how the two traditions, Yoruba indigenous and Christian religions, when broadly viewed illustrate the historical, cultural, and social tensions among the Yoruba people. In this regard, the complex role of culture as a tool for change, adaptation, and resistance to change both in Christianity and in indigenous religions among the Yoruba is critically evaluated. Our preference for cultural analysis in this quest stems from its emphasis on interpretation, irrespective of whether culture is perceived as subjective beliefs or as symbolic acts (Wuthnow 1987). The work begins with a historical and ethnographical background of women's life within Yoruba culture and society. Next, it examines the role of women in myth of origin, family, and lineage traditions, and in oral literature. To achieve this, the work attempts to retrieve oral traditions that have hitherto been subsumed in the patriarchal analysis of religion. Further, it engages in a reappraisal of existing traditions from a feminist perspective. Then, the work examines the status of women in Yoruba indigenous religion interpreting such themes and motifs as goddesses, cosmology, divination, ancestral veneration, healing practices, and ritual performance.

The next section deals with roles played by women in Yoruba Christian traditions. These traditions are the Mission churches, African Independent churches, and the new Charismatic/Pentecostal churches. A descriptive analysis of specific case studies plus an

overview of the place of women in both religious traditions will also be investigated. Chapter 1 of the work introduces these themes; chapter 2 examines the Yoruba society and culture using ethnographic tools. Chapter 3 explores the dynamics of gender in Yoruba Christian tradition, paying particular attention to the interplay of gender and power relations. Chapter 4 reviews the role of myths as tools for women's identity construction in Yoruba indigenous religion. Chapter 5 examines women in the ritual dimension of Yoruba religion and the importance of this for women's roles in the social setting. The conclusion is a summary of the work in which we find highlights of some concepts that come to fore during the discourse. Overall, the work intends to explore the interplay of gender, culture, and power relations in these Yoruba religious traditions.

### Engendering the Study of Yoruba Religious Traditions

This work belongs to the general genre and tradition of feminist gendered study. It does not pretend to pursue the realization of a prepatriarchal hypothesis neither does it subscribe to the theory of a "feminist utopia" (Gross 2000: 73). Rather it is an attempt to retrieve through the historical and mythic sources that shape the daily living of Yoruba women, the pragmatic dealings of women in the Yoruba indigenous and Christian traditions. Consequently, this work is an ethnographic and historical analysis of the status and role of women and gender relations in these traditions as constructed through the prism of Yoruba women themselves. The approach is a phenomenological and experiential one, which is informed by research fieldwork conducted between 1985 and 2001 among the Yoruba of Nigeria. Interviews and a participant observation approach were utilized in the course of this fieldwork, which began with research for my doctoral dissertation and continued years after I got my first university teaching appointment.

To an extent, this work can be regarded as an exploration within the precinct of cultural feminism, which seeks to reappropriate the female essence in an effort to revalidate undervalued female attributes (Malson et al. 1989: 298). In other words, cultural feminism seeks to highlight the feminine perspective on a given issue and to utilize the same for feminine agenda. This is of special import since the identity of a woman is often the product of her

own interpretation and reconstruction of her history as mediated through the cultural context to which she has access (Malson et al. 1989: 324). The positioning of Yoruba women, whose religious lives are analyzed here, makes the ethnographic and experiential approach imperative to this work.

The rationale for comparing Christianity and Yoruba traditional religion emanates from the polemic relationship of these traditions. Gender roles in Christianity were, until recently, fixed and rigid but are fluid in Yoruba religion. These gender classifications, however, are in themselves susceptible to flexibility and modulations. Gender roles in Yoruba Christian tradition has, for example, been strongly influenced by gender construct as construed in Yoruba indigenous religion. I intend to explore these interactions to arrive at an interpretation of gender and power relations in Yoruba religious experience. Toward this end, the process of gender construction among the Yoruba becomes essential to our investigation of the transfer of cultural paradigms into Yoruba Christianity and the import of this for gender and power relations in both religious traditions. I should also add that significant as the role and position of Yoruba Muslim women might be in the society, I have not covered them in this work because of my desire to confine my scope to the two traditions I have experienced and within which I have had my scholarly training. In addition, recent developments in the scholarship of religion demand the study of women in Islam be left to scholars trained in the study of Islam.

Acknowledging one's position as a researcher in any given project facilitates the understanding of the project at hand because through it, the researcher's personal dispositions are supplied. This state of the researcher's positioning, including previously ignored influences on scholarly inquiry, such as the emotional aspects between the researched and the researcher, becomes a source of information on the project at hand and reasons for the use of certain methodologies in the process of inquiry. Moreover, all researchers, regardless of discipline, but especially in women's studies, are translators in one way or another, because issues are translated from the feminine perspective. This affects the process of research and the evaluation of research findings significantly. I am a Yoruba Christian woman born and educated in the geographical area of my research. I should also add that as a child born into an extended royal family I grew up observing and living Yoruba indigenous traditions. This bestows on me multiple religious identities, which would be familiar to keen observers of identity construction in

Africa. Embedded in these multiple identities are aspects related to my place of birth, natal and affiliate relations, and social interactions, all of which may be operative in an individual's life at once. There is therefore no indication of contradiction in these multiple identities, for they are relational and interdependent.

Certain theoretical assumptions inform this work. First, that religion is a cultural construct, which makes it imperative to examine its involvement in power relations and how power sustains it. Religion, though concerned with the supernatural and eternal, exhibits immanent tendencies upon which its validation depends. As a cultural construct, its methodologies and expressions are informed by guidelines dictated and interpreted by practitioners. These guidelines are in turn shaped by a people's collective, historical, and sociological experience. In this regard, there exists between religion and culture a polemic relation since both phenomena are in constant conversation one with another; culture and religion thus affect each other continuously. Seen together, religion and culture enable us to arrive at an educated hypothesis about women's energies and activities (Atkinson et al. 1985: 1). The eternal and supernatural are thus displayed through the mortal and mundane, but their effects are not limited to those spheres. This correlative relationship between culture and religion manifests further in the involvement of religion in the configuration of power and power relations in the society. This relationship could occur either explicitly or implicitly, especially in societies where religion wields considerable influence, as is true of African societies. A notable tendency of this influence is a replication of power formulae from the religious space to the secular space of power. Conceptions of power as visible and invisible, formal and informal, and an alternative space of power may be dividends of such classifications. These power structures could function independently in religion or culture but may also overlap intermittently. This explains why it is pertinent to deal with both phenomena (culture and religion) when investigating issues in one or the other.

The second theoretical assumption is that there is a need to integrate women's roles in religious systems and religion's role in configuring power relationships, especially in terms of how these relationships are gendered. Religion, at least in Yoruba tradition, could not be studied without giving women a prime position, for they are the sustainers and transmitters of religious traditions. The need to assess women's positions in relation to power structures at the theoretical and practical levels promises profound implications for religion and culture. The prevalent model in culture and religion

everywhere until recent times has been the domination of women by men. This prevalence of andocentric tendencies in religion and the need to develop mutual gender respect have engaged feminists and womanists continually in recent years. This quest is fueled by the awareness that a vast majority of women throughout history have derived crucial parts of their identity from their religious culture (Carmody 1989: 3). The need to appreciate these assumptions becomes significant because feminist critique of religions to a large extent holds that religious traditions are predominantly andocentric. The marginality of women is particularly evident in the historiography of religious studies, a consequence of conscious efforts on the part of male interpreters of religion to politicize every source of information about the female in order to entrench patriarchy (King 1995: 221).

This quest informs the third theoretical assumption for this work, which is the necessity for a hermeneutics of suspicion (Ricoeur 1981: 113) about information supplied in traditional scholarly sources on women's role and status in the religious traditions. Such information should be consistent with other cultural information known about the society. Where people extol complementary gender relations, but accounts of the people's culture and religious traditions present the male as the active participant and the female as docile and passive, there is a valid reason for the hermeneutics of suspicion. This is very true of Yoruba religious tradition, which is the focus of this work. There is a need to retrieve, reinterpret, and reevaluate previous assumptions about women in religious traditions to arrive at the center point where all voices are heard and respected.

## Gender in Yoruba Culture and Society

Gender has been variously defined in diverse contexts. For this work, however, gender may be defined as 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 manifesting 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 as a fixed and immutable construct; rather it is a process. Further, gender classifications permeate a people's cosmic perception and may be discernible in their language, wisdom storehouse, and philosophy. It thus presents itself in every sector of a people's

experience and philosophy of life. It could be evident in their perceptions of the ecosystem and of the supernatural forces. Gender roles are often based on sex and certain assumed characteristics of the sex. Women, for example, are sometimes seen as being physically weak in contrast to men, who are regarded as being physically strong. This perception is then transferred to the sphere of intelligence and integrity. Where it is informed by biological classifications, gender purports static roles based on sex distinctions. Men are expected to fit into specified roles, as are expected of women. The versatility of some cultures, however, renders a rigid gender construct impracticable and unrealistic. In some religions, strict gender construction is viable; in others, it is not.

This work, which investigates the place of women in Yoruba religious expressions, relies on oral traditions compiled during my fieldwork. Though references will be made to published materials by scholars of oral literature such as Abimbola (1975, 1997), Olajubu (1987), and Yemitan (1988), oral traditions nonetheless constitute the primary source of any information on Yoruba religion and culture. Proverbs, rituals, recitations, and religious ceremonies serve as indispensable sources of information in this regard. Suggestions arising from these sources reflect definite gender classification among the Yoruba throughout their historical experience. Worthy of mention, however, is the fact that gender as construed by the Yoruba is essentially culture bound and should be differentiated from notions of gender in some other cultures. It is a gender classification that is not equivalent to or a consequence of anatomy at all times. Yoruba gender construction is fluid and is modulated by other factors such as seniority (age) and personal achievements (wealth and knowledge acquisition). Its boundaries are constantly shifting, and reconfigurations attend its expressions constantly. For instance, just as the Yoruba construct gender, they also deconstruct it through ritual (Drewal 1992: 188). Moreover, the flexibility of Yoruba gender constructs is vividly displayed in the assumption that the occupant of any gender role need not absorb the prevalent attitude of the sex for whom such gender roles was delineated. For example, female "husbands" in Yorubaland do not have to display aggressiveness and strong physical features to fulfill their roles as husbands to wives in the lineage (Strathern 1988).

It is an agreeable fact that sources of oral traditions are not immune to changes as the interrelationships between cultures and religions occur; however, "although many things can change, some things must remain the same" (Oyewumi 1999: 81). Hence, al-

though these sources may be interpreted in various ways, these changes are best seen as being superficial results of the researcher's methodology whereas the core of the tradition is resilient based as it is on oral traditions, which contain the essence of Yoruba philosophy. The core of any culture would be the people's approach to the "meaning" and "meaningfulness" of life. The Yoruba philosophy of life is far from static, however. The point being made here is that the core of a people's philosophy of life remains intact, for all other indexes of the people's identity derive from it. Among the Yoruba, core distinctive qualities are recorded in oral literatures. The fact that Yoruba worldview assigns certain features exclusively to one gender or the other, and seeks to offer explanations for any breach of these classifications points to the existence of gender construct among the people. Some scholars have argued that the existence of hierarchical structures among a people may also confirm the presence of gender construct in such a society (Sered 1999: 8).

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" meaning "may this year be female for us" (bring us all that the female principle stands for). The converse implication of this is the avoidance of a male year, which by all indications may be tough and unpleasant. This perception also reflects in the people's social expectations for male and female, as recorded in wise sayings and proverbs. An example of this is the expectation for males to succeed their fathers as heirs and the need to offer explanations 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" meaning, "if there is no special reason, a woman would not be named Kumolu."<sup>1</sup> In Yoruba cultural idiom and practice, this is a name signifying that the family of the female so named has no male heir apparent because all their male children have died. Women who perform feats, especially physical ones are described as *obinrin bi okunrin* meaning "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.

The existence of gender construct among the Yoruba does not translate to notions of oppression and the domination of women by men, 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 socio-religious 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. It is therefore pertinent that a reconceptualization of paradigms for interrelations be obtained because notions of equality and parity could be at best misleading in the Yoruba context. As noted by Sudarkasa, a neutral complementarity rather than subordination more accurately describes the relationship between male and female roles in various precolonial African societies (Terborg-Penn et al. 1996: 82). 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. Therefore, among the Yoruba, the question to ask about the state of sexes is not which sex is dominant, but rather, over which areas do the sexes enjoy prominence. Further, it should be noted that the prominence that one sex enjoys in a particular area of human activity does not make the people of that sexual category independent of those of the other (Babatunde 1998).

## Women, Gender, and Religion

Women, gender, and religion are central to any investigation on a given society. A cross-cultural examination of the place of women in any culture is predicated on the relationship between women and men, and this has very deep normative cultural values. I will examine some of the socio-cultural and ethical norms that continue to influence the interpretation of women's religious experiences. The private domain, i.e., domesticity and motherhood, seems to be the space of women in most cultures. Private and public space are however linked. Women, for instance, shape the lives of those who occupy the public space in their capacity as mothers and people who nurture. Limitations on women's functions in the public space are usually manifestations of local gender constructs. Despite this, however, certain common parameters do manifest in any consideration of women in religion cross-culturally.

Restrictions and prohibitions based on the woman's physiological makeup are a common denominator to women's roles in religion. Menstrual blood associated as it is with notions of mystery, awe, and pollution has been a bone of contention limiting women's roles in religion across cultures in history. Tools for

managing this paradox differ from one religion to another, and successes from such attempts remain suspect to date. The inter-connection of this stance to gender construct in religion cannot be denied. Tools and methods employed in any consideration of menstrual blood always exhibit some connection with a people's conception of purity and the sacred. They could also provide implications for a people's conception of "power" in the religious space. Most importantly, however, is the requirement to treat any investigation of menstrual blood in religion as a component of the total structures of the cultural context within which the religion operates. This is because while notions of menstrual blood could be mediated by concepts of the auspicious in some cultures this is not so in others (Marglin 1985: 45). Moreover, whereas in some cultures menstrual blood is barred from the sacred space due to the assumption that it defiles, in other cultures, the ban is predicated on the belief that menstrual blood is powerful as the carrier of potential life. It would therefore be necessary to probe tags placed on menstrual blood within each cultural context for a correct interpretation of such prescriptions.

One of the effects of the negative tag placed on menstrual blood in the religious space is the prohibition of women from power structures either permanently or temporarily. Menstruating women are barred from the sacred space for fear of contamination or in order to avoid a "power" clash.<sup>2</sup> This is one of the unspoken arguments for denying women ordination into leadership roles in some religions. Since it is impossible for women to eradicate menstruation, alternative sources of power are sought and developed to express their potentials. Men may claim the right to define and determine "canonical" wisdom and adjudicate issues accordingly, but women tend to develop their own complementary traditions (Carmody 1989). Investigations of women's roles and status in religion that are limited to portraits presented in the canonical corpus may therefore be misleading. This explains why some have concluded that rather than enhancing women's access to power, religion actually undermines it.

This situation is further compounded by the limited visible roles played by women in the leadership cadre of most religions. The official pictures of women in any given religion are not always complete. Granted, a cross-cultural look at gender construct in religion reveals the prominence of men in the leadership space of religion and of women as the majority of the followers. It should be noted, however, that crucial to any religious discourse is the

invisible reality, the existence of which cannot be proven by the intellect. Such a reality can be identified in all religions; indeed religion itself is a reaction to this reality. A Supreme force, along with some human mystical agents, occupies this invisible plane of power. More often than not, the agents of this force are women or female principles, possibly because of the link between this Supreme force and women in the enterprise of creation, bringing forth, sustenance, and protection. Thus we see a dialectical encounter between the obvious and hidden spaces of religion. An appreciation of this stance challenges a people's conception of power, as reflected in social structures that sustain gender constructs in that society. Ritual activities, for example, often reflect a people's conception of power and how this features in gender relations. The dynamics of gender change during ritual, then, could be taken as a reference to gender complementarity among a people rather than an indication of rigid hierarchical structures.

Ritual, an important component of religion and culture, is guided by gender construct and symbolism. It is a means by which humanity controls, constructs, orders, fashions, and creates a way to be fully human. Its components include prayer, song, dance, sacrifice, and invocative language. Symbols are central to understanding rituals, as ritual meanings derive from multiple sources. The importance of symbols in understanding ritual is further buttressed by the fact that ritual is context bound. Women feature prominently in ritual, and feminine principles are prevalent as well, usually coded in symbols. A manifestation of such female principles in ritual is the theory of gender change. James G. Frazer (1914), for instance postulates that the gender of male ritual leaders stems from the worship of goddesses by matrilineal kin. G. Bleibtreu-Ehrenberg (1970) submits that gender change is commonly found in cultures with possessed shamans who are inherently predisposed to identify with a female deity. As a group, R. L. Munroe, J. W. M. Whiting and D. J. Halley (1969) propose that societies with minimal sex distinctions tolerate institutionalized male transvestitism more than societies with maximal sex distinctions. We note that situations in some religious traditions may differ from these standpoints, as is the case among the Yoruba. Manifestations of gender change could be seen to include trans-sexual dressing and behaviors usually accounted for through a supernatural calling in visions and dreams (possessions). Sacred art also reflects the role of gender change in rituals in certain cultures.

## Perspectives on Women and Religion in Africa

It is important to examine some of the previous works on women and religion in Africa with the purpose of showing where my work fits into the genre. Many works on African religion, though not primarily centered on gender, have alluded to the roles of women in different aspects of life. Omoyajowo (1982), Peel (1968), Shorter (1980), and Tunner (1990), for example, have examined the roles of women in African Christianity from various methodological perspectives. Central to the thesis of these works is the submission that African Christianity has enhanced the position of women in Christianity, a position accounted for by the influence of African cultures. In a more direct way, Mercy Amba Oduyoye's (1992, 1995) primary concern has been the role of women in African Christianity. As the first feminist scholar and theologian of note, she devoted a substantial space to elucidating how women play out their roles in an apparently male-dominated African religious universe. The role of women in Yoruba indigenous religion has engaged the attention of a good number of scholars like Idowu (1962), Awolalu (1979), Ibitokun (1993), Olupona (1991, 2000), Matory (1994), Barber (1993), Badejo (1996), Gleason (1994, 2000), Hoch-Smith (1978), Oyewumi (1999), Laitin (1986), Ogundipe-Leslie (1994), Awe (1992, 1999), Abimbola (1997), and Fadipe (1970). A few of these works will be mentioned here to reflect their relevance to my study.

David Laitin's work discusses religion and culture from a Gramscian perspective and makes two relevant observations that are germane to this work. He identifies two faces of culture. The first face of culture is deeply influential, and cultural identities are primordial and self-reinforcing, providing ideological guidelines for collective action. The second face of culture reveals individuals who manipulate their cultural identities to enhance their access to power and wealth. Of special interest to this work is the first face of culture as identified by Laitin. He submits further that the effect of cultural meanings could be perceived in people's behavior. Based on Laitin's evaluation of Muslim and Christian women in Ile-Ife, Nigeria, he concludes that Islam appears to be a man's religion and Christianity a women's religion run by men. Sequel to this discourse on culture, Omolara Ogundipe-Leslie (1994) emphasizes the import of taking class seriously in any consideration of women's role in Africa, and asserts that gender was balanced in the past in Africa. She also argues that sex is used to create gender roles and

problems, which leads to conceptions that aid manipulations of gender roles in patriarchal societies. She recognizes indigenous patterns for addressing oppression and injustices within African societies and disagrees that the African attitude toward menstrual blood stems from contempt or hatred. Her preferred explanation is that a mystic power is attached to it. This mystic power is the focus of Judith Hoch-Smith's work. She asserts correctly that among the Yoruba, all women are potential members of the *Iya mi* cult (witches),<sup>3</sup> since all women are mystically linked through the menstrual blood. Hoch-Smith perceives witchcraft as symbolizing the eternal struggles of the sexes over control of life forces. Karin Barber (1991) identifies with Judith's submission on "witches" in Yoruba religion, as she asserts that witchcraft is something innate and connected with the woman's femaleness. Her careful observation on the scarcity of women with personal *oriki* despite their high economic and social status has interesting implications for the construction of gender construct in Yorubaland. She demonstrates how *oriki* could go beyond performance and function as a resource for cultural and religious construction.

Benedict Ibitokun (1993) and Roland Matory (1994) are concerned about the role of women in rituals. Central to this enterprise for them is the role played by symbolism. Matory identifies cross-dressing as a manifestation of the fluid gender construct among the Yoruba. In the cult of *sango*, the priest plaits his hair and dresses up like a woman. Indeed, he is perceived as the wife of *Sango* (*iyawo orisa*) during the ritual. He contrasts the role of kings and priests as husbands and fathers on the one hand to their roles as wives to the *orisa*. As significant as this observation is, this dynamic gender relation does not necessarily translate into homosexual relationships. Abimbola (1997) presents the position of women in the *ifa* literary corpus as powerful and assertive beings whereas Gleason (1987) and Badejo (1996) discuss the personhood, worship, and relevance of two Yoruba goddesses, *Oya* and *Osun* respectively. Ibitokun focuses on the *gelede* cult among the Yoruba. He identifies links between the *gelede* cult and fertility in women and explains the influence of the *Iya un* (*Iya mi*) group on the practice. *Gelede*, according to this author, is the property of the *Iya un*, which translates to women's powers in the religious space. He submits that it is erroneous to equate the powers of the *Iya mi* to that of evil witches; rather this class of women should be seen as possessing awesome powers, which may either be benevolent or malevolent. Ibitokun (1993), however, seems to avoid recognizing

the key roles played by men in the performance of *gelede*, which could be an indication that curiosity, fear, and the control of female power by men is an important issue for consideration in theorizing about Yoruba gender relations.

Jacob Olupona (1991) explores the implication of gender roles in Yoruba religion for political and social power constructs, which he links to the goddess tradition and sacred kingship among the Ondo-Yoruba. The Ondo ancestral myth submits that a woman king founded the kingdom. His discourses present Yoruba women as making great contributions to the well-being of the communities as physical beings and as female principles of sanctity. Oyeronke Oyewumi (1999) offers the most challenging ideas about gender relations. She provides glimpses into women's roles in both Yoruba religion and Christianity in Yorubaland. Worthy of note is her insistence on the nonexistence of gender constructs in precolonial Yoruba societies. The Yoruba do not view gender with the negative connotations of subordination and powerlessness; rather there is an interplay of male and female at the physical and metaphysical planes. The interaction of Yoruba culture and religion with other world religions, however, makes it difficult to ignore the apparent prominence of gender categorizations and their attending implications for the study of religion in Yorubaland.

Works enumerated above serve as useful precedents to this work because they elucidate issues pertinent to any consideration of women's roles in religion among the Yoruba people. The works also supply a guiding framework for this project as it situates itself among this cluster of academic pursuits. However, the orientation of my work will be concerned with theoretical, methodological, and practical concerns within the history of religion and feminist theology, and an active involvement in Yoruba women's socio-cultural lives. Theoretically, I will be guided by the three tasks of any feminist theology. One is the need to expose the male-centered partiality that had been taken as universal. Second is a search for alternative wisdom and suppressed history, and third is the need to risk new interpretations in conjunction with women's lives (Malson et al. 1989: 298). This I hope to do within the framework of African feminism, which is humanistic. Concerned and developed from a perspective of the human as a holistic as opposed to a dichotomous view of relations, African feminism seeks to incorporate all participants in the enterprise of living, both the physical and the spiritual. It is a humanistic feminism that is rooted in the life experiences of women in traditional societies, not so much in terms of geography

as in terms of philosophy. The traditional Yoruba woman then would be a person who upholds the underlining principles of the people's philosophy, including mutual gender and power relations and harmonious relations. She may reside in the rural areas or the city; the crucial aspect to humanistic feminism would be the attitude and not the location of residence. The various branches of African feminisms begin with the social as opposed to the atomistic individual (Pearce 2001, Steady 1981). Cultural feminism will also aid my exploration as far as it is taken to represent the "effort to revalidate undervalued female attributes" (Malson et al. 1989: 298). The focus of this work is at variance with the submission of some cultural feminists that the enemy of women is not "a social system or economic institution but masculinity itself and in some cases male biology" (Malson et al. 1989: 298). Integrated into this work also is the theory of an alternative space of power which is not the result of compensatory action but rather of an intent to empower.

Conceptually, motherhood is considered a position of power in this work. Motherhood as a biological function is symmetrical with the "motherhood cult" (*iya mi*) in Yoruba religion. Among the Yoruba, then, motherhood manifests meanings at two different but interrelated levels. These levels of meanings could be perceived in the images and actions of processes in Yoruba religion. Images of kneeling and breastfeeding figures (*ikunle abiyamo and omu iya*) in the visual arts, for example, reinforce the motif of motherhood as an avenue of power. The two concepts and ideas refer to the ontological dimension of women's power. The first (*ikunle Abiyamo*) is derived from the position of kneeling during childbirth, signifying that women's experiences of pain and labor could be invoked as a potent force for action. The second (*Omu Iya*) refers to the nourishment and sustenance a child derives from the mother's breast. This experience of giving the child the sacred milk of life is invoked as an equally potent force for action. Implications arising from these levels of meanings also manifest on the socio-cultural plane in Yorubaland. An illustrative portrait is the relationship between "mother" and child, which is regarded as the strongest kind of bond among Yoruba people. This classification would encompass relationships between goddesses and devotees, between kings and patron deities of their domains, and between deities and their mediums. Examples of goddesses who relate with their adherents in pursuance of the motherhood motif are Osun (goddess of Osun River),

Oba (goddess of Oba River), Yemoja (the most senior goddess of Yoruba pantheon), and Otin (goddess of Otin River).

It should be noted, however, that a negative manifestation of the motherhood motif is possible in Yorubaland. For one, the inability to become a mother could begin a traumatic process of alienation and frustration for the Yoruba woman. She is perceived as a dead end through whom the ancestral line cannot continue and this could translate to ridicule in the society. In the spirit of maintaining balance, however, arrangements are usually put in place for such a woman to cushion these societal reactions and these may include adoption of a sibling's child and care from her sibling's children. Succor for such a woman rarely comes from her matrimonial family. In addition, a negative stance could also permeate both levels of meanings for motherhood identified among the people. A biological mother could curse a child with the same elements used in blessing, nurturing, and caring for the child (breast milk, and the blood shed at childbirth). Similarly, the powers of the motherhood cult (*iya mi*) could be utilized for furthering or thwarting the plans of humans, both as individuals and as a collective. Inherent in the concept of motherhood among the Yoruba, therefore, is the access of the woman to self-realization and personal fulfillment. The pervasive overlap between the private and public sectors in Yorubaland attests to this submission. Moreover, sectors of the people's daily lives exhibit notions of the private and the public at once, oftentimes due to this overlap. The political life of the people, for example, includes a public as well as a private power structure. Although the ruler and his council make up the public structures of power, they are sustained by a mystic private power structure that does not allow itself to be analyzed by cognitive parameters but are nonetheless real and potent.

### Fieldwork Experience

My fieldwork among the Yoruba during the course of this work included the peoples of Osun, Oyo, Ekiti, Ondo, Lagos, and some parts of Kwara States of Nigeria. The study lasted between 1985 to 2001. Methodologies for the study included interviews (structured and unstructured), participant observation techniques for which shrines, churches, festivals, and other ritual occasions were visited. I also utilized the services of some research assistants

who assisted in data collection. My experiences during the course of this project were in themselves informative about notions of gender and power construct among the Yoruba. I am a Yoruba woman rooted in the culture by birth and affinity; it was therefore relatively easy for me to access information. I could speak the language, but most importantly, I could understand the language in its verbal and non-verbal forms. The import of differentiating speaking from understanding a language brings to mind an experience that is worth sharing. In making an excuse for praying in English rather than in Yoruba, a Yoruba clergyman recently told a gathering in London, "*gbogbo wa la gbo ede, ki se gbogbo wa lo ye*" meaning "we may all be able to speak Yoruba language, but not all of us understand it." I recognized and respected social boundaries embedded in the language and in the social norms. Where I needed to transgress some of these boundaries during my fieldwork, I knew and utilized appropriate language in explaining my reasons for doing so. Some questions that needed to be posed during my trips had to be asked implicitly, for societal prescriptions forbade that they be raised explicitly. On certain occasions I came to experience what could be described as the difficult yet rewarding transitions to friendships between the researcher (myself) and the researched (my respondents).

My sessions with women in Christianity were more relaxed than those with men in the same tradition. This, I believe is because men were skeptical toward my project, which they saw as an attempt to challenge the status quo, which could yield no positive results. Women, on the other hand, regarded my goal as worthy.<sup>4</sup> The women's reactions stem from the fact that aspects of my research have practical and existential implications for their lives. The same could not be said, however, for the men. The case of the three ordained women of the Kwara Anglican communion who were eventually disrobed comes to mind in this regard. Almost all the male leaders I spoke with in the African Independent churches assumed that I had come for prayers on problems concerning matrimony and/or childbearing. On certain occasions, I had to wait until the end of the prescriptions of ritual items to remedy my assumed situation before stating my mission. Conversely, prophetesses asked me about my mission before any conversation could commence. It was difficult to engage ministers of the Pentecostal churches (male and female alike) in discussion, as I was continuously told by their spouses or aides that they were traveling to fulfill speaking engagements within and outside the country.

Men in Yoruba religion regarded me as a daughter or sister and did their best to make me feel comfortable. These men were not in a hurry to get the interview over, for they went about doing their jobs as we conversed. I actually took lunch with some of them and on more than one occasion shared fresh African palmwine. I had a similar experience with women in Yoruba religion. I visited these women in their homes, market stalls, or shrine spaces. Our interactions were thus informal and relaxed. In addition, our discussions explored diverse issues not always focused on my research. Sometimes I ended up with multiple respondents even though I had an appointment with only one individual. People in the household or visitors gave unsolicited opinions freely, some of this interaction has yielded friendships. Since I completed the fieldwork for this research, I have been reflecting on some of these experiences. It occurred to me that perhaps one of the reasons why devotees of *orisa* were open to my inquiries was that they sensed that these traditions are becoming endangered and they felt the need to witness the beauty of a tradition that is undergoing rapid transformation.

I had to face the reality of some boundaries during my fieldwork. These included etiquette issues, especially limitations on language use, that forbids a young person from asking elders some questions in certain ways. To gain data on membership in secret cults, for example, I had to phrase my questions diplomatically to avoid ill feelings and misinterpretations. Finance was a great constraint during my work; many times I had to improvise to get my interviews. At no time, however, was I refused an interview by any of the informants contacted in the two religious traditions. Though repeated calls were sometimes required, eventually the interviews took place. On the whole, my field research experience was interesting, educational, and enjoyable.

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CHAPTER  
TWO



# Women in Yoruba Culture and Society

## Introduction

As a background for examining gender and the role of women in Yoruba religious life, I would like to provide an overview of the place and status of women in Yoruba culture and society. To begin with, we will explore the popular assumption among feminists and women's studies scholars that "without an ideology of difference, there can be no sustainable hierarchy" (Sered 1999: 246). We shall interrogate also the submission that "it is hard to find a society that does not create gender as a crucial category" (Sered 1999: 9). I will argue that principles of gender relations and construction differ from one society to another. Further, the presence of hierarchical structures among the Yoruba confirms to a certain extent the existence of an ideology of difference and as a consequence, gender constructs.

A review of Yoruba socio-cultural experiences reveals that women play momentous roles in all spheres of life. Evidence may be deduced from oral traditions and myths. Prominent in Yoruba philosophy and religion is the need for a balance between female and male principles, a notion informed by the assumption that the sexes are interdependent. Principles of oppression and domination were therefore not accommodated in the people's conception of reality. Individuals performed duties expected of them in the society based on the conviction that this was crucial to the well-being of everyone in the society. While it is true that "body type was not the basis for social hierarchy" (Oyewumi 1999: xii) the same cannot be said of occupational roles and lineage identities.

## Gender Constructs in the Yoruba Society

Gender classifications were present in precontact Yoruba society, but they were culture bound. Men and women were expected

to perform certain roles, though boundaries for such prescriptions remained fluid. Consequently, some women did perform roles expected of men and vice versa. When such performances occurred, society validated the situation using other cultural indexes such as seniority, communal cohesion, and continuity. The presence of "female husbands," for example, consolidated the position of the female in her natal compound. Though residing with her affiliate lineage, she remained an integral part of her natal compound. Her role as "husband" facilitated such a sense of belonging. This is to be differentiated from the practice of female husbands among the Igbo in southeastern Nigeria, where a woman could initiate a marriage proposal, pay the bride price, and lay claim to the offspring of such a union. As Ifi Amadiume clearly demonstrates, this practice is located in the Igbo people's historical and socio-cultural reality (Amadiume 1987). Women who transcend the boundaries of gender roles are often described among the Yoruba as "*obinrin bi okunrin*" (woman like a man). Examples include female warriors and hunters who are regarded as the exceptions rather than the norm.

In the religious sector, gender construct could be deduced from the constitution of same-sex cults. Examples of these are the *iya mi* cult (the invisible association of women of secret power who are often erroneously referred to as witches) and the *oro* cult (an association of men invested with the authority to execute judgment in the society). Although it is true that one or two of the members of these cults may be members of the opposite sex, the *iya mi* cult is predominantly female, whereas the *oro* cult is made up mainly of men. The functions of these two cults provide us with information on gender roles in the Yoruba thought system. The *oro* cult was in charge of executing judgment sentences on culprits in the society. The *iya mi* cult, on the other hand, was concerned about the sustenance of the ritual powers on which the Yoruba polity rested. Thus we see here a manifestation of different powers, visible and invisible, neither of which is less potent. Further, it illustrates the dependence of both genders on each other for the maintenance of a balanced cosmic view. The Yoruba stance on gender symbolism does buttress this line of argument. The male is taken as a representation of toughness, volatility, and aggressiveness. In contrast, the female represents coolness, gentleness, and peace. Oftentimes in religious practices, both the male and female principles are solicited in order to attain a balanced outcome. An

illustration of this may be located among the people of Ayede Ekiti during the *Odun Oba* (Yemoja), as described by Apter (Apter 1993). On this occasion, the king offers sacrifice to the Yemoja goddess for support. Appeal is made in prayers and song to the female principle to regulate the violent posture of the male principle in the religious setting. An example of such seem apposite here:

*Odun de loni oo*  
*K'odun ni yi yabo*  
*Abo lala bo mo*  
*Abo ni tura*  
*Abo ni rora*  
*K'odun wa ma y'ako*  
*Ako lo ni lile*

Translation:

Our festival has arrived today  
May this festival turn out to be female in nature  
It is in femaleness that peace is hidden  
It is the female that comforts  
It is the female that soothes  
May our festival not turn out to be male  
For toughness is of the male. (Apter 1993)

The Yoruba thus delineated roles for the female as well as for the male, but these were context bound and not rigid. Men in precontact Yoruba society were engaged in farming, land clearing, iron smelting, house construction, and palm tree climbing. Also, men were hunters and warriors. Conversely, women were involved in food processing, harvesting, and marketing farm products, dyeing, and trading (Fadipe 1970). Because gender classification was fluid among the people, it is difficult to find areas of social life from which either men or women were completely barred in the Yoruba society. All facets of the people's cosmic experiences manifest the principle of gender complementarity, and this has a profound bearing on the role of women in the society.

The Yoruba society is managed by hierarchies, which pervade the political, economic, and religious settings. Normally a leader is the paramount ruler or chief, and a council of elders may assist in the governing processes and function as a means of checking and

balancing the excesses of the leader. The guiding principles in this enterprise include seniority, the personal achievements of individuals, and sometimes gender roles.

This chapter examines the place of women in Yoruba history and myths, and family and lineage traditions, as well as in several genres of oral literatures such as the *ifa* (divination corpus), *oriki* (family praise poetry), *ewi* (oral chants from the Egungun ancestral performances), and visual arts. Central to these interrogations are the religious perceptions about women in the Yoruba social sphere. Though some scholars have examined different aspects of the Yoruba woman's social and cultural life (Sudarkasa 1986, Oluwole 1993, Awe 1992, Oyewumi 1999), this chapter considers the place of women among the Yoruba from a religious perspective.

### Women, History, and Mythology

I would like to examine women and gender in Yoruba mythology and also discuss their status in history. I should state from the outset that myth and history are not necessarily antithetical. In accordance with usage in the history of religions, I consider myths to be those sacred stories believed to be true by the people who hold on to them. By history, I mean chronological accounts collected either through oral tradition or archival materials. Oral literatures constitute the major sources of Yoruba history prior to colonial contact. Inferences to this effect are evident in early records concerning the Yoruba. History confirms that women played important roles in traditional Yoruba society. Women had well-defined and recognized roles in all spheres of human endeavor, and the emphasis was on gender-complementary relations (Awe 1992). Moreover, there is much evidence to show that women in traditional Yoruba culture dominated certain areas of social life (Johnson 1921: 115). The Yoruba woman in history was relatively independent in mindset and status. As a child, her training guided her toward designated societal roles, which included motherhood, wifely duties, and an occupation (e.g., trading, pottery, or cloth dying). She was tutored in these areas in order for her to attain self-fulfillment. She was required to leave her natal compound to reside with her husband's family at marriage. She assisted her husband on the farm, kept some domesticated birds, and may have engaged in food processing and trading. The Yoruba society, being a liberal one, has policies that enable individuals to pursue their goals and fulfill

their aspirations, as is evinced by the economic pursuit of the Yoruba woman. She was economically independent of her husband and could dispose of her resources at will. Every Yoruba woman worked and engaged in some economic ventures to augment the family's income (Fadipe 1970: 88). Where both male and female traded, there was usually a gender bifurcation along commodity lines. Yoruba men are rarely found as vendors of food items, nor do they engage in daily provisions retailing (*alate*), for these areas were considered women's domains (Terborg-Penn 1996: 35). In theory, the man was expected to provide for the needs of family members; polygynous marriages, however, made this impracticable. As a result, each mother had to care for her children as best as she could, supplementing whatever the father could make available. History therefore supports the position that women were participants in and contributors to the economy of the Yoruba society.

Yoruba social identities were and remain fundamentally relational, changing, and situational, with seniority as the crucial determinant of ranking. The social roles of the Yoruba woman were therefore informed to a large extent by her relationship with others in the society. Such social roles included mother, wife, and daughter. Privileges and obligations within the social framework, i.e., the family, attended these identities. Social roles such as motherhood bestowed an enhanced status on a woman. In addition, the daughter and wife roles were mediated by the complex configurations of gender relations, as we shall discover shortly during our discussion of women in family and lineage traditions.

In the religious space, women functioned as priestesses and votary maids, thereby constituting a bridge between mortals and the Supreme Being. Women were also in custody of the ritual power that sustained the Yoruba community. There were female professionals who attended to the medical needs of people, especially gynecology and pediatrics. Women also constituted the sustaining factor of the various religious cults; consequently the onus of daily worship and care of the sacred places of worship as well as of the sacred elements of worship depended on them. In addition, the well-being of all members of the family usually rested on the religious viability of the mother in the Yoruba society.

Women were active participants on the political scene, through their membership in political councils. These councils usually had offices for women leaders who supervised the activities of women in their domains and also represented other women on the traditional governing councils. Examples of these were the offices of the

*iyalode* and the *iyaloja*. Sometimes, women had a separate council, as is the case among the Ondo people where the Lobun, referred to as *oba 'binrin* (woman king) could rule (Olupona 1991). Worthy of special mention in this regard is the ability of women to dethrone a bad ruler through protest processions. In extreme cases, this is done in the semi-nude posture, thereby reinforcing the connection between the female procreative abilities and the sanctity of life. The example of the female ruler of Oyo, Alafin Orompoto is worthy of mention here (Oyewumi 1999: 65). The institution of regency whereby a daughter of the dead king is installed as a transition ruler pending the installment of a new king also reflects Yoruba gender perceptions (Olajubu 1995: 224). Yoruba political structures are believed to rest on certain pillars composed and sustained by mystical principles. These principles are within the custody of women. This ritual power is used to maintain harmony in the society; hence, while men in principle held political offices and authority, women controlled the ritual base that made political rule possible (Kaplan 1997: 319).

Myth legitimates social institutions and practices by their references to ancient precedence. According to Eliade (1987), myth has as its characteristic an authoritative voice in declaring what is real, what is true, and what is sacred. Myths are sacred stories that offer meaning and explanation for incidents that history could not account for, thereby obliterating any gap in a people's experiences of the cosmos. Myth fosters cohesion, exhibiting intrinsic values, which Malinowski described as "powerful charter" (Malinowski 1945: 118). Usually loaded with complexities, myth also provides meaning for people's living experiences. Yoruba myths deal primarily with the origin of the world (cosmogony) and the origin of social and ritual categories (cosmology). As noted by Sproul, "the most basic answers to life's questions are located in creation myths" (Sproul 1979: 4). Myth is an integral part of Yoruba religion, and it is on its base that all other constructs within the religion depend. Myths exert great influence on the people's perceptions of life. This influence may be observed in the process of the people's social engineering. The presentation of gender and power relations in these myths, for example, propounds great influence on the images and roles of women in the sociocultural setting. They reflect change and continuity and thus serve as normative expressions of the Yoruba existential conditions.

Beier (1980: xiv) classifies Yoruba myth into four types, myths of religious knowledge, from which information about Yoruba

worldview may be derived; folktales, in which protagonist(s) bear the names of the gods; myths about gods that have historical rather than religious functions; and lastly, the *ifa* oracular verses. These categories definitely overlap, as may be observed in the composition of the *ifa* corpus. Some of these myths exhibit influences and references to Islam and other modernist tendencies. Nonetheless, a bulk of the first category identified by Beier is to be located in the *ifa* oracular verses, to which we now turn.

The *ifa* corpus provides us with some mythological sources that relate to women. According to one of these myths, at the beginning of time, Olodumare, the Supreme Being, gave women power over men and encouraged the interdependence of male and female in the world. The *odu osa-meji* of the *ifa* corpus says:

*Nigbati won nbo l'aye*  
*Awon obinrin, won ko ri nkankan yan*  
*La t'odo Olodumare*  
*Nwon nbi ara won pe agbara wo ni awon ni*  
*Lati se gbogbo nkan t'awon fe se laye*  
*Awon okunrin beere si yan awon obinrin je*  
*Nwon nlo won bi eru, ati bi ko ti ye*  
*Awon obinrin ba to Olodumare lo*  
*Nwon ko ejo won ro fun*  
*Aanu won se Olodumare, o si fun won ni agbara*  
*Tio ko ja gbogbo ti awon ti o fun awon okunrin lo*  
*Olodumare lo gbe ase fun awon obinrin*  
*O ni awon aje ko gbodo maa lo lati*  
*Di 'ya je 'nikeni.*

Translation:

When they were coming to the earth  
 Women had no powers from Olodumare  
 Women asked themselves as to what powers they had  
 To do all that they wanted to do on earth  
 Men were maltreating the women  
 Men enslaved them and treated them harshly  
 Women returned to Olodumare and reported the case  
 Olodumare was moved with compassion  
 Olodumare promised them a power greater than that of  
 men

Olodumare gave women power over men  
 Women were instructed not to use the power  
     indiscriminately  
 Olodumare endowed women with the power of *aje*.  
 (Opeola 1994: 121)

Another myth recorded in the *odu ose tura* narrates how Osun was excluded by the other sixteen *irunmole* (primordial deities), which Olodumare (Supreme Being) sent to Earth on account of her being female. Osun reacted by gathering unto herself the women in *isalaye* (Earth) and formed the *iya mi* cult. The consequence of this was total chaos, which engulfed the whole Earth. The male *irunmole* went back to Olodumare with a report of these adverse happenings. Olodumare inquired about the female member of the group and was told of her exclusion by the male *irunmole*. Olodumare advised them to go back and make peace with Osun, which they did. Thereafter, peace and normalcy returned to *isalaye* (Badejo 1996: 73).

These myths pursue two distinct but closely related motifs, which are adequately represented in the social lives of the people. The *odu osa meji* posits that the power given to women by Olodumare, i.e., *aje*, is superior to the powers given to men. The *odu ose tura* does not deny this, but rather lays emphasis on the desire for gender complementarity. Thus it seeks to reinforce complementary roles and balanced structures in the people's social interactions. The first motif, which presents women as having superior powers to those of men, is to be located in the mystic and esoteric practices of female cults. These cults act as custodians of the "power" that regulates and sustains all other aspects of the society's cosmic experience, be it economic, governance, medicinal, or social. These cults could be benevolent or malevolent, depending on circumstances. Pragmatically, therefore, it would appear that women do possess powers higher than those of men among the people. Worthy of mention, however, is the prevailing practice of gender interdependence among the Yoruba. Consequently, the supposed superior powers of women are mediated by other social structures. For example, men occupy more official positions in the political sphere as compared to women, who serve in only a few political offices. The ritual base on which the political structure rests and from which it draws its sustenance, however, is secured by women/female principles.

Aside from the *Ifa* corpus there are other myths that provide us with information on women's roles in the Yoruba society. An

oral tradition from Ile-Ife provides us with the story of Moremi Ajansoro, a heroine of Ile-Ife. According to this account, Moremi, an indigene of Ile-Ife, volunteered to be raided as a slave by the *Igbo*, a group that constantly attacked the Ile-Ife people. This she did to discover the secrets of the enemies' success each time they attacked the Ile-Ife people. She sought spiritual assistance from the Esinmirin river goddess, and a pact was made between them. Moremi would succeed, but on attaining victory, must sacrifice her son Oluorogbo. Moremi agreed and proceeded with her plans. She was captured with other slaves at the next attack of the *Igbo* people. The *Igbo* king married her, for she was a beautiful woman. It was while at the palace that Moremi discovered that the *Igbo* costume that usually scared the Ile-Ife people into retreat and surrender was nothing but bamboo and grass coverings. She hurried back home to share the news, and the *Igbo* were utterly defeated on their next raid. Moremi thereafter sacrificed Oluorogbo, her son, to the Esinmirin river goddess, as agreed. This spectacular gesture is today remembered in Ile-Ife annually during the *Edi* festival. The festival, which spans seven days, is usually solemn, with some clapping, but no drumming. A wrestling match symbolizing the struggle of the *Igbo* with the Ile-Ife people is enacted in front of the palace of Ooni, the king of Ile-Ife. On the seventh day, a goat is sacrificed to carry away the ills of the city. This goat represents Oluorogbo and his sacrifice for the well-being of the society.

We may posit then, that an aggregate portrait of the woman in Yoruba history and myth presents us with an individual who is economically independent, socially active, and politically enthusiastic. Moreover, power and gender relations as presented by these sources confirm that women were not passive or oppressed but vibrant and powerful. Yoruba myths clearly acknowledge Olodumare as the source of women's powers in the society.

## Women in Family and Lineage Tradition

In our examination of women's status in the family and lineage tradition, we shall benefit greatly from Karin Barber's extensive work on the production and performance of *Oriki* among the Yoruba. Individual identities are dependent on family and lineage memberships among the Yoruba. Family and lineage are not distinct concepts in Yorubaland. Both may be referred to as *Ile* or *Idile*. *Ile* literally translates to house, but refers to a consanguine

compound, whereas *Idile* may describe a lineage or extended family spanning at least four generations. Families usually reside in *agbo-ile*, i.e., a group of houses, which is made up of housing units where family members reside. Membership in an *ile* is the fundamental prerequisite of citizenship (Barber 1991). The Yoruba reside in compounds usually made up of agnate children and their spouses, but groupings are possible as well. An individual's membership in an *ile* may also inform the choice and practice of occupation and religious affiliations (Babayemi 1979:4). A conflating picture of family and lineage conceptions may be perceived among the Yoruba. Reaction of scholars to this development has been to recommend one or the other of the two units, especially as primary political units in the Yoruba polity. Peter Llyod (Barber 1991) postulates that the Yoruba social unit is a localized agnatic descent group unified because of its singular claim to descent from a putative common ancestor based on patrilineal kin. The lineage, then, is to be regarded as the primary unit in his view. Fadipe (1970) and Eades (1980) submit an alternative model of the compound as the basic social unit among the Yoruba. Further, membership of the compound is informed by common residence rather than by kinship of its members. They submit also that such compounds may be made up of two or more separate descent groups living together. My own empirical studies among the people support a modification of the above submissions, as members of most *agbo-ile* were usually blood relations on the patrilineal lines. I am therefore persuaded that the basic social unit among the Yoruba is the *agbo-ile*, made up of housing units constructed in circular form.

The possibility of guest residents in the *agbo-ile* is a normal development, especially in light of Yoruba socio-cultural prescriptions of hospitality. Also, the presence of some daughters and/or their children in these compounds should be noted, though such is generally discouraged. These daughters are referred to as "*dalemosu*."<sup>1</sup> The Yoruba value system sustained marital relations and frowns at daughters who return to their natal compounds for residence except in the few cases where necessity demands such. For example, the *iyalode* (woman leader) of Osogbo is required to return to her natal compound on assuming office. This is because she occupies the post as a representative of her natal *idile*.<sup>2</sup> Structural and functional meanings of identity for the Yoruba are thus embedded in relationships. Women's roles and status in family and lineage traditions illustrate this and manifest in relational contexts. Women's roles derive from their status as daughters, wives,

and mothers. These categories usually constitute a continuum for the Yoruba woman. An unmarried childless woman is an aberration in the Yoruba community, but a married childless woman is adequately cared for by social institution, which ensures cohesion and harmony, including adoption, levirate marriage, and social networks within the culture. A childless married woman may adopt a child of one of her siblings to facilitate her becoming fruitful, a practice encapsulated in the Yoruba saying that "*ori omo ni pe omo wa 'ye*" meaning "it is the *ori* (personality soul) of a child that attracts other children to come to the earth." In a situation where the woman remains childless until old age and survives her husband, levirate marriage ensures that she is adequately cared for by the extended family. This is done by offering the woman the option of retaining her cooking place, hence the Yoruba say "*ko ma a pa aro da*" meaning "that she may not change her cooking place."<sup>3</sup> This will inevitably occur if she chooses to remarry into another family. Moreover, the status of a mother is not totally dependent on biological functions in the people's conception of motherhood.

Women's roles as wives position them at the center of power and gender relations in the social space. To be a wife among the Yoruba, as is true of other African ethnic groups, means being married to a given male (husband) and to everyone in the husband's family/lineage. This is informed by the people's conception of marriage as a union between families rather than the coming together of individuals. The wife is required to change residence at marriage to her husband's house. Marriage for the bride is a glorious attainment but also a painful time due to the change in residence and its implications. This is explicitly expressed by the bride in her *ekun iyawo* (bride lamentation), a genre of Yoruba oral literature rich in imagery and melody. The term *ekun*, i.e., crying, is used for this genre literally and metaphorically (Barber 1991: 110). Despite this change, however, the newly married bride remains attached to her natal compound in significant ways, in that she does not change her lineage affiliation<sup>4</sup> and is nourished by a web of social and religious devotions. In her marital *agbo-ile*, she is in theory a dependent in status and identity, with little or no power. In her natal compound, however, she has access to power as an *oko* (female husband) to the wives of the compound, both through inheritance, and as an active participant in decision making in her capacity as an *omo-osu* (children of the compound). The status of the wife is enhanced once motherhood is attained, because motherhood in the Yoruba thought system is a position of power. Manifestations

of this may be perceived in the social and religious experiences of the people.

As a daughter (*omo-osu*), wife (*aya*), or mother (*iya*), the Yoruba woman is an active participant in the religious sector. The daughter subscribes to the prevailing religious practices of her natal compound in addition to her personal *orisa*. For instance, a family devoted to the worship of Osun may comprise individuals who worship Obatala in addition to their allegiance to Osun. Arising from this personal religious affiliation are prescriptions and restrictions (*eewo*) incumbent on the individual. This is usually arrived at during the child's *ese nta 'ye*, which is conducted on the third day after birth. On this occasion, the child's feet are placed on the divining tray (*opon ifa*) on which the divining powder (*iyere osun*) had been sprinkled. Configuration marks are made on them in accordance with the *odu* that is prescribed for the child by the *ifa* oracle. The same *odu* makes known to everyone present the dos and don'ts for the child. From then onward, these regulations become a permanent feature of the child's life.<sup>5</sup> A daughter therefore possesses personal religious prescriptions as well as family and lineage religious obligations. She takes an active part in the family worship sessions and could function in the leadership cadre if qualified by training or calling to do so. Moreover, a daughter may be called by a deity to serve as a priestess of the family cult, and she is obliged to obey, as repercussions of disobedience may prove perilous to her.

At marriage, the daughter moves to her marital home with her personal *orisa* and her family/lineage deities. A space is provided for the worship of these deities in the compound. In some cases, the husband is expected to take responsibility for the expenses of such worship sessions in respect to his wife's deities. It thus becomes clear that over the years a cumulative ensemble of deities brought into the compound by wives will inform significantly the total sum of family/lineage deities. In other words, the mobility of women necessitated by a change in residence at marriage may account for the larger part of deities now regarded as family/lineage deities. Women thus constitute the sustaining factor of the religious cults in the family/lineage. This is reflected in women's roles in their natal and marital compounds alike. Ancestor veneration is an integral aspect of Yoruba religion, and women feature prominently in the procedure. Children of an ancestor hold an annual celebration of their father or mother's life, where offerings are made and prayers are rendered for blessings and guidance for all

in the family in the coming year. A sacrificial animal is offered, and its entrails are placed in a small clay pot. This pot is carried to the graveside or if the death is recent, to the doorpost of the ancestor's room. Here elongated recitations of the ancestor's *oriki* and his or her exploits while alive are recounted. The children appeal to her or him for support, protection, and guidance. After this, there are general festivities, drumming, dancing, and merry-making. For some families, a specific type of animal is required for sacrifice; this may be a she-goat, a grass cutter, or a pig.<sup>6</sup>

The wife's religious duties include the propitiation of *ori*, both for herself and on behalf of her husband and children. *Ori* (head) is conceived by the Yoruba as a representation of the inner essence in humans; it symbolizes the individual's essential nature. Its conception is underscored by the Yoruba perception of self as interior and exterior the latter being dependent on the former. Hence the Yoruba say, *ki ori inu mi ma t'ode mi je'* (may my inner head not spoil my outer head). The occasion is often solemn and may involve the participant and the officiating person alone. The individual whose *Ori* is to be propitiated sits on a mat, dressed elegantly. Items prescribed for the occasion by *ifa* divination are each placed temporarily on the participant's head, one after the other. Prayers are offered for the participants to solicit the support and guidance of *Ori*. Thereafter, a sacrifice is offered to Esu (god of the crossroad and messenger of the deities), to ensure free passage for the requests made. The individual is required to stay indoors for a few hours after these proceedings, during which he or she meditates and offers additional prayers to the *eleda* (the creator, God). The preferred time for this occasion is the early hours of the day.<sup>7</sup>

Records of Yoruba religion are transmitted orally and consistently reenacted in performances, especially on festive occasions. Women are known for their aptitude in the recitation of some genres of Yoruba oral literature, though some male professionals do perform. Occasions for these recitations may be social and/or religious. Thus, there are recitations for celebrants (humans) and deities, depending on the circumstances. Because the act of recitation and its performance require a long period of practice, these women are usually at the peak of their performance ability in their marital compound. Occasions of festivity therefore feature wives who serve as repositories of Yoruba oral literature, which is the storehouse of the people's belief system.

Religious stipulations prescribed for the children and husband are binding on the mother in Yorubaland. Consequently, the

harmony and peace of individual family members requires that she obeys these prescriptions and also ensures that her husband and children do the same to avert trouble for the family. The mother prays and inquires from *ifa* on any issue that may concern the family. Further, she constitutes the sole source of inquiry in crisis situations for the child. The *ifa* priest would require the name of an individual's mother in order to carry out any investigation by *ifa* divination. This is because the maternity of an individual remains undisputed, whereas the paternity may be contested.<sup>8</sup> In the same vein, the people's belief is that the name of an individual's mother provides antagonists access to the person's real essence, without which all diabolic intentions may fail. The implicit significance of motherhood could also be perceived in the Yoruba religious space through the *iya mi* cult. As mentioned earlier, the source of the powers of this cult could be traced to the creator, Olodumare. As noted by Ibitokun (1993), to equate *iya 'un (iya mi)* to evil witches is erroneous. They are not to be conceived as possessing the same qualities of evil as represented in Islam (djinn) or Christianity (satan). They could be malevolent or benevolent, depending on the situation. Popular references to them include, *iya mi osorong*,<sup>9</sup> *afejefoso ala*,<sup>10</sup> and *ajedo ma bi*.<sup>11</sup> Mothers may employ the awesome power of the *iya mi* for nurturing and protecting their children and for the community, which is itself a "child" of the *iya mi*. Worthy of mention, however, are tendencies to utilize this power negatively within the family/lineage in Yorubaland. The people's sense of propriety is always underscored by the need to avoid ostentatious acts. This is to avoid envy and negative dispositions from powers such as that of the *iya mi*. Hence the Yoruba say, "*bi isu eni ba jina, a a fowo bo o je ni*" (if your yam is done, you eat with your mouth covered).

## Women and Oral Literature

Oral literature constitutes the storehouse of Yoruba religion and philosophy, which informs the people's response to life experiences, individually and collectively. Orality enhances the value of the spoken word and may be regarded as the cannon and kernel of indigenous religious scholarship. It comprises several genres of literature composed and performed by the people and utilized for social engineering in a bid for societal cohesion throughout history. Oral literature for the Yoruba is always of present relevance, as is

reflected in its resilience to modernist tendencies. Embedded in the composition of these genres are elements of theater and performance. Its recitation is thus often closely linked with music and dance. In addition, oral literature exhibits a great influence emanating from the people's religion, since it derives a large portion of its contents from the Yoruba religious corpus. Moreover, it is performed for deities as well as individuals, and locates and situates its subject matter in time and space. The individual's identity in all its ramifications is coded in the oral traditions. History and myths of family and/or lineages are to be located in them, so much so that a family may lose anything but their *oriki*, a genre of oral literature. Examples of genres of Yoruba oral literature are Ifa oracular verses, proverbs, incantations (*ofo*, *madarikan*, *ayajo*), praise poetry (*oriki*), praise poems of hunters (*ijala*), chants of ancestral cults (*ewi/iwi*), bride lamentation (*ekun iyawo*), and stories (*itan*). The compositions and renditions of Yoruba oral literature are attended by several complexities, which include gender, class, and profession, and sometimes age.

The performance of oral literature is an integral aspect of religious sessions in the various cults. The god(dess) is praised through the recitation of some genres of oral literature to set the stage for a proper consultation between the deity and its human supplicant. The spoken word thus becomes an embodiment of the god(dess), consequently creating a multidimensional level of mystical communication. In addition, essential information on the deity's history, journeys, preferences in food,<sup>12</sup> drink, cloth type, color, and other taboo are all recorded in these oral renditions. The recitation and performance of some genres are peculiar to some professions (e.g., *Ijala* for hunters), while some genres are limited to particular religious cults (e.g. *ewi* for the *egungun* [ancestral] cult). The *ekun iyawo* is meant for brides on the eve of their wedding ceremonies, just as *oriki orile* is the known preference of old women in the family set-up. The recitation and performance of Yoruba oral literature is thus informed by space and time as dictated by parameters within the culture. Their structures and functions are not rigid but situational, as mediated by society's prescriptions, which may vary by occasions.

Qualifications for performance of Yoruba oral literature transcend gender boundaries. Women, however, constitute a larger percentage of those who recite and perform Yoruba oral literature, especially in the nonprofessional cadre. Women in their capacity as custodians of Yoruba oral literature constitute the repositories of the people's essence, history, and identity. This stance is underscored by

the fact that Yoruba philosophical thought system is based on oral literature. In spite of recent transcriptions of some genres of Yoruba oral literature, the people still reenact these genres through recitation and performance rather than through reading. Professional male artists involved in oral tradition transmission among the Yoruba are often found in the royal palaces. Where men feature in this regard in the religious sector, they are more often than not a minority among nonprofessional groups who recite oral genres peculiar to each religious cult. Women normally constitute a majority among experts on oral literature renditions. Some genres of oral literature will now be considered to facilitate our interrogation of women's place in oral literature among the Yoruba.

*Oriki* has been defined as a genre of Yoruba oral literature composed of attributions or appellations, collections of epithets, pithy or elaborated, which are addressed to a subject (Barber 1991). Its subjects are as numerous as its methods of rendition, and performance varies. They are discursive and compelling, with scope spanning every sector of human concern, be it food, politics, economic, or spiritual. *Oriki* also serve as a tool for identity reinforcement, validating the authority of some groups while denying others access to power. All these *Oriki* achieves by appealing to past records embedded in the oral literature passed down from generation to generation. *Oriki* recitation and performance form an integral part of any social and/or religious occasion among the Yoruba.

There are different types of *Oriki*. Personal *Oriki* are given to the individual at the eight-day naming ceremony in most parts of Yorubaland. Such *Oriki* are informed by a combination of factors, which may include the circumstances of birth, the position of the baby in the line of siblings, and the level of prosperity within the family at the time of birth. Examples of these are *ajani*, *abeni* (a child birthed after much struggle), *ayoka*, *ayoni*, *amoke* (after much expectations) *isola*, *akanbi* (a noble birth) *anike*, *arike* (cherished birth, especially preferred sex), and a host of others. This type of *Oriki* functions mainly as an endearment used to praise the child for good conduct or to placate the child whenever he or she is hurt. Husbands are also sometimes known to use this type of *Oriki* to win the approval of their wives. Derivational *Oriki* have also been identified, in addition to the personal *Oriki* mentioned above (Babayemi 1989). These are acquired by the child from birth until old age and are informed by the multileveled identities of the individual in the society. Illustratively, a person named Abimbola at birth could be given the personal *Oriki* Anike, and due to her neat

appearance, she acquires other derivational *Oriki* like. *Aji yo bi ojo*, meaning "one who comes out neat as the dawn of day"; being a tall person, she is also called *opelenge* (slim and fit); and at old age she is made the *Iyalode* of the town. In sum, her *Oriki* will look like this, *Abimbola, Anike, Aji yo bi ojo, opelenge, Iyalode*. Another group of personal *Oriki* may be identified among the Yoruba, usually to celebrate local personalities, especially rich (big) men and women (Barber 1991). The *Oriki* of big men and women are composed by a combination of other types of *Oriki* with the sole aim of uplifting the ego of the subject toward which it is directed. Heroic exploits of the individual's ancestors are recounted to give the individual courage to do the same. These are recited in conjunction with the personal and financial attributes of the individual. The predictable response of the subject at this time is the showering of cash gifts on the artist(s) and sometimes cloth materials. In the three cases of *Oriki* identified above, women feature prominently in recitation and performance. Mothers use the personal *Oriki* of the children on a daily basis, since they are closer to their children than anyone else. The performance of *Oriki* for the rich man or woman also features women predominantly. Women learn and master the *Oriki* of families and by extension individuals, which they weave together to produce the composite *Oriki* of these eminent personalities on festive occasions. These women are often wives in the compound of the subject of their recitation. The art is learned by observation and understudy from the moment of marriage into the compound, but individual aptitude plays a large part in the art of recitation. This is evident in the expertise of some younger wives in the compound.

*Oriki orile* (family/lineage praise poetry), another strand of *Oriki*, is concerned with the records of family/lineage history and interactions with other groups of people over time. *Oriki* constitute the social map on which people construct identities (Barber 1991). The first indication of women's important roles as conceived in oral literature among the Yoruba can be located in the assumed posture that *Oriki orile* must necessarily cover both the maternal and paternal roots of families/lineages; the Yoruba saying, "*a ki nile baba, ka ma nile iya*," meaning "you cannot have a father's house without having a mother's house," encapsulates this clearly. The mother's side is thus an essential component for any meaningful identity construction among the Yoruba. Apart from this, women, either as individuals or as a group, perform *Oriki orile* predominantly. As a consequence of this, women possess access to authority because

they reenact and re-enforce a people's identity and citizenship in the society.

Further, there is the *Oriki* of deities, which could supply information on the deities' exploits, characteristics, taboos, and preferences. Again, women are at the forefront of such presentations. Performances such as these are normal components of weekly (*ose*) as well as annual worship sessions in these religious cults. During the weekly session for worship of Obatala, for example, women dressed in all white attire praise him thus:

*E pa orisa, orisa epa  
Olua o wa jire bi  
Agbe won ji taro taro  
Aluko won ji tosun tosun  
Lekeleke o ji re pel'efun  
Erin o je ko binu  
Oosa t'ro mi titu  
So'ogun agan  
Baba to r'omi titu  
So'ogun abiku<sup>13</sup>*

Translation:

Great divinity, great divinity  
Our Lord, we hope you woke up well  
Agbe bird woke up with dye  
Aluko bird woke up with camwood  
Lekeleke bird woke up with chalk  
He laughs and does not get angry  
Divinity who uses water  
To make medicine for the barren  
Father who uses water  
To make medicine for the born-to-die child.

Women thus constitute the repositories of cultic history and continue to keep its memory alive through oral poetry performances such as those discussed above.

Proverbs are expressions that summarize cosmic events in concise and didactic language. They express wisdom acquired through reflection, experience, observation, and general knowledge and are closely related to the culture of each given society (Mbiti 1991). In them, the wisdom of Yoruba sages is safely stored. They have been

conceived as a core linguistic area for resisting language invasion and for upholding the purity of language, which in turn sustains the Yoruba tradition and cultural identity (Fadipe 1970: 17). Proverbs are veritable storehouses of information about women and how they are perceived by the society. Subjects investigated by proverbs as they relate to women include beauty, jealousy, childbirth and care, loyalty, and disloyalty. The position of the Yoruba society on women, and the traits attributed to them can best be described as ambivalent. This is adequately reflected in proverbs found among the people. Whereas some proverbs extol the virtues of motherhood and childcare as well as the loyalty of some wives to their husbands, others depict women as being disloyal and treacherous.

<i>Iya ni wura, baba ni jigi</i>	Mother is gold, father is a mirror.
<i>Iyawo dun lo sin gin</i>	A bride is sweet to take in youth.
<i>E wo le f'obinrin, orisa l'obirin</i>	Give women due respect, women are like gods.
<i>Ojo wu 'binrin, a b'ponrin leti</i>	The jealous woman with a sharpening stone by her ear.
<i>Eni to fe arewa fe iyonu</i>	He who marries a beauty, marries trouble.
<i>Oko ku nba o ku, ekun eke ni l'odo obinrin</i>	Husband die, I will die with you is a fake cry by women.
<i>Iwa lewa obinrin nile oko</i>	Character is the beauty of a woman in her marital home.
<i>Akesan lopin Oyo, ile oko lopin obinrin</i>	Akesan (a market) is the end of Oyo, marriage is the end of a woman's journey (Olajubu 1995: 183).
<i>Ati gbeyawo ko t'apon, owo obe lo soro</i>	Getting a wife is no big deal; it's money for soup that's hard to find.
<i>Alakori baba ni jogun omo, oponu egbon ni su'po aburo</i>	It's a senseless father who inherits his child's property and it's a Foolish brother who inherits his younger Brother's wife (Yusuf 1998: 71).

These proverbs show women in uncomplimentary lights and extol their qualities at once. We may deduce from them that women were subordinates in the society but at the same time occupied

prominent positions on the spiritual plane. The fact that men occupied prominent leadership positions in larger numbers should therefore not obliterate women's significant roles in the society; especially in the spiritual plane. The Yoruba recognize this and accommodate it in the practice of mutual gender complementarity as reflected in some proverbs, such as

<i>Ajeje owo kan o gbe'ru do'ri</i>	Behold, one hand cannot lift a load to the head
<i>K'okunrin r'ejo k'obinrin pa,</i>	A man sees a snake but a woman kills
<i>k'ejo sa a ti ku</i>	it, the important thing is for the snake to be killed.
<i>Agbajo owo la fi nsoya</i>	We beat our chest with combined hands (as opposed to one hand).

The import of these three proverbs is to reiterate the necessity of communal living and to postulate on its merit for harmonious gender relations. Vices attributed to women in some of the proverbs discussed earlier in the paper are not peculiar to women alone, but when considered in light of historical records, the prevailing patriarchal coloring in them becomes understandable. The onus of retrieving positive female imagery in Yoruba proverbs rests with feminists in the many fields connected to the people's culture and religion.

### Yoruba Women in Contemporary Times

The contemporary Yoruba woman and the Yoruba culture could be described as strange bedfellows. This results from a conflicting and often confusing influence of Western civilization and education on the woman while she remains an integral part of the society for which the norms of daily living continue to be located in the traditional Yoruba philosophy of life. She strives to attain heights recommended by Western culture and recognized by the Yoruba philosophy but through Western methods that are unappreciated in the traditional Yoruba world. Moreover, though ignoring the prescriptions of Yoruba traditional life, the contemporary Yoruba woman seeks to find fulfillment within the parameters of the very system that she condemns and describes as being archaic. The

result has been chaotic and sometimes sad. Central to this confusing enterprise has been the marriage institution and procreation. Yoruba culture prescribes marriage for every man and woman, and any attempt to disregard this is tantamount to being ostracized from the community. In the same vein, the emphasis of the Yoruba on procreation is paramount as it is for most African communities. Everything is done to ensure that people have children, because the sustenance of the community depends on it. The Yoruba woman today views the compulsion of marriage and procreation by the culture as an infringement on her freedom to choose a single life and/or to remain childfree like her Western counterpart. She may believe that monogamy is to be preferred to polygamy, the latter being far removed from what she has come to identify with civilization. She holds tenaciously to this stance, despite apparent realities of disguised and/or diffused polygamy all around her. Resistance to these traditional and supposedly imposed categories clearly manifests in the increasing statistics of single parenthood and divorce cases in Yoruba society, especially in the cities. These developments result in the disruption of family life and consequently an undermining of the society, since the family remains the foundation for society. The prevalence of failure in the model societies to which the modern Yoruba woman aspires is far from encouraging; in fact those societies present nothing in the way of a model to which anyone should aspire. Indeed, these societies are themselves seeking a return to the very ideals, especially of family life, from which the modern Yoruba woman would like to be excused, perceiving them as archaic and oppressive.

Though patriarchy existed before the advent of Islam and Christianity to Yorubaland, the influences of patriarchy on women since the coming of these two religions have been momentous. This is closely linked with the subservient prescription of both religions for women, in contrast to Yoruba religion, which allowed female participation at all levels. With the coming of Christianity and Islam, women were encouraged to be satisfied with being appendages of men and their husbands. The encounter between Yoruba culture and these religions, resulting in the domestication of both religions has, however, ameliorated this situation. Notwithstanding, the plane of conflict for the contemporary Yoruba woman remains true within the psyche (Sofola 1993), which is where issues of reorientation need to commence. There is an imperative need for Yoruba women to re-evaluate their heritage, focusing on those

powerful women who took initiatives and who although married, were appendages to no one, because marriage did not erase their previous identities. Moreover, a reappraisal and appreciation of cultural prescriptions must be part of any quest by women to retrieve their true personhood in the face of intimidating categories such as patriarchy and sexism.

Economically, the paradigm of operation in the Yoruba economic space has continued to shift. Whereas women controlled the economic sector traditionally, present examination reveals that men now occupy significant positions in the economic space. This, for the woman, is a challenge that calls for attention and continuous assessment. The other side of the coin for the woman is the need to reconcile her career pursuits with her family responsibilities. To attain fulfillment in the home and in her career calls for a measure of continuous evaluation, but is not impossible, as Yoruba married career women can attest.<sup>14</sup>

Cumulatively, we may surmise that the contemporary Yoruba woman has available to her numerous resources for actualizing her potential in every sector of the society, and that culture occupies a prime place therein. Efforts for self-fulfillment should therefore be directed toward the forging of paradigms that will take cognizance of the Yoruba culture as well as the woman's experiences of Western education and civilization.

CHAPTER  
THREE



## Women in Yoruba Christian Tradition

### Introduction

Women occupy important positions in Yoruba Christian tradition as is evinced by their large membership of churches in Yorubaland. Further, women have been able to significantly influence the configuration of power relations in the church in Yorubaland. I begin with some explanations and clarifications. I am aware that the social grouping called women, all of whose members are the same, feel the same, and experience the same degree of influence from diverse phenomena is, to say the least, illusive (Shaw 1985, Meigs 1990, Moore 1994). Apart from this, biological components of sexes are predominantly viewed as the prime category for belonging to this class called "women" (Rosaldo & Lamphere 1980, Foucault 1984, Yanagisako and Collier 1987). Nevertheless, I use the term "women" because it serves my purpose here, not because it describes a united group characterized by sameness but as a collective describing people who sometimes exhibit similar reactions to some events on some occasions. This stance is especially appropriate given the focus of this work, which is Yoruba religion. Differences in class and status are more often than not attenuated in the Yoruba religious setting, at least during worship.

In recent times, a number of scholars have focused on gender relations, the place of women, and female symbolism in Yoruba culture and society (Sudarkasa 1996, Drewal & Drewal 1983, Abiodun 1989, 1990, 1994, Olupona 1991, Oyewumi 1999, Matory 1994, Lawal 1996). Although these scholar's works attempt an examination of the significance of gender as a factor in the process of societal and cultural organization, some scholars present more nuanced explanations of women's roles in Yoruba culture and their

works are relevant to our discussion of gender construction in Yoruba Christianity.

In addition, although gender analysis in women's studies is multifaceted, there is general agreement that gender is socially constructed and that the interpretation of gender issues in any society should be examined in the context of that society's historical experiences and culture. The changes that the society has witnessed are especially significant for gender analysis in Yoruba Christianity because gender relations in Yorubaland have never been static. Gender construction has been an ongoing process beginning in precolonial times and continuing to the present.

"Christianity" as used in this chapter refers to the Christian church as introduced by missionaries into Yorubaland in the 19th century. While its mode of expression has undergone some changes (for example, the mediating role of the people's culture in doctrine and liturgy), the core of the message continues to be the redemptive work of Jesus Christ, the son of God, who is believed to have died on the cross of Calvary, been buried, and risen on the third day after the crucifixion. Salvation is obtained only through a belief in Jesus' redemptive work. The Christian tradition in Yorubaland is generally grouped into three forms: the mission churches, the African independent churches, and the Pentecostal/Charismatic churches. The mission churches were introduced into Yorubaland around 1843,<sup>1</sup> first by the Methodist missionaries and later by other missionaries from Europe and the United States. These included the Church Missionary Society, the Baptists, the Roman Catholics, and the Sudan Interior Mission. A close relationship existed between the colonial authorities and the Christian missionaries in Yorubaland. In some cases, as is true of Ijebuland, colonial might was used to enhance missionary enterprise. Moreover, the colonial authorities and the missionaries were perceived as belonging to the same homeland. In terms of effect, Christianity and colonialism cooperated. For example, the missionaries trained Yoruba pupils in schools, and the colonial authorities provided the graduating students avenues for employment as clerks in the civil service.

By the early 20th century, some African church members from the mission churches who lay claim to prophetic callings began to establish separate independent churches, now referred to as Aladura (the praying one). A central feature of these new religious movements was the emphasis placed on the Yoruba worldview and the recognition of the Yoruba person's ability to create new doctrines

and rituals that were more relevant to the members' needs than those provided by the mission churches.

The third group of churches is the Pentecostal/Charismatic movement, which came on the scene in the 1970s. These are churches established by young, educated Yoruba members of either the mission or the Aladura churches. They claim to have been called by God through divine visitations to start these churches. A distinguishing feature of the Pentecostal/Charismatic churches is that they are not ethnic in outlook. They appeal to a broad-based clientele encompassing all ethnic groups in Nigeria and beyond.

### History and Historiography

European mission churches arrived in Yorubaland through Badagry and Abeokuta around September 1843. Efforts to introduce Christianity to Yorubaland were made by missionaries like Henry Townsend, Thomas Freeman, Father Francisco Borghero, and Thomas Brown. Concomitantly, there were freed slaves of Yoruba origin who had been rescued from slave ships and converted to Christianity in Sierra Leone and Brazil (Ajayi 1965) who also returned home and brought with them the Christian religion. The early mission churches were Eurocentric like their mother churches in Europe. As the European and Yoruba missionaries embarked on the Yoruba people's conversion to Christianity, they encountered indigenous religious worldview and value systems that were highly developed and rich in tradition. These missionaries had to deal not only with kings and chiefs but also powerful women who hitherto had played significant roles in their communities. The presence of powerful women was in sharp contrast to the mission churches' agenda, characterized mainly by hierarchical structures and a strict male-dominated ritual setting. These churches offered little room for women's participation in leadership roles and completely excluded women from decision-making forums. Moreover, they detached themselves from any aspect of the Yoruba culture and labeled the people's culture as demonic, evil, and fit only to be discarded by all true believers. Although some scholars (Ajayi 1965, Ayandele 1966) have documented the activities of the mission churches in Yorubaland, none have specifically addressed women's roles in these churches. This work will fill that gap by showing how the Christian tradition in

Yorubaland has produced a shift in gender construction and power relations in the mission churches.

The second wave of Christian churches in Yorubaland began in the early 20th century. New churches took hold as a consequence of the 1914 influenza epidemic (Peel 1968) and the failure of the earlier mission churches to provide the needed medical and emotional support to those affected by the epidemic. Other reasons for their establishment include the nonparticipatory roles of the Yoruba people in worship and the imperative need to contextualize the Christian message in the Yoruba cosmic perspective. Some Yoruba church leaders started to congregate in small prayer meetings, which inevitably led to the establishment of new churches, now referred to as African independent churches, which addressed the Yoruba sensibilities and met the people's needs. Men and women who professed the gift of prophecy were instrumental in founding these churches. Although male leadership was predominant, unlike in the mission churches, women's spiritual gifts as prophetesses and ritual leaders were recognized for the first time. In addition, the doctrines and practices of these churches are strongly influenced by Yoruba religio-cultural conceptions. Examples of such influences include the parallel mode of leadership wherein a dual structure of leadership is established, one for females and the other for males, the use of cultural musical elements in worship, and the practice of prophecy and spirit possession.

By the beginning of the 1970s in the post-independence era, some educated Yoruba Christian members of the mission and Aladura churches started to form prayer groups in colleges, universities, and urban centers. Due to their exposure to Pentecostal/Charismatic movements in Europe and America through literature and travel, these youths were equipped to experiment by founding similar churches in Yorubaland. Their work represents the third phase of Christian churches in Yorubaland. Among these churches were the Deeper Life, the Redeemed Church of God, the Living Faith Chapel, the Rhema Chapel, the Christ Chapel, the New Covenant Church, and the Mountain on Fire Ministry. One significant difference between the Pentecostals and the Aladura churches was that several Pentecostal leaders were professors and teachers in institutions of higher learning, from which they drew the largest segment of their followership at the beginning. As with the Aladura churches, however, women founded some of the Pentecostal churches, which emphasized the direction of the Holy Spirit as opposed to organizational structures in these churches. Leaders

of the Pentecostal churches include women who serve as representatives of God and are usually charismatic and eloquent, while spontaneity and a relaxed atmosphere mark worship sessions. Sermons emphasize the prosperity of worshippers, which is directly linked to giving large donations and paying the mandatory tithe of 10 percent of one's earnings to the church. The more an individual gives, the more he or she will receive from God. Some have labeled this trend as "the prosperity syndrome" or "bread and butter gospel." In the last few years, some of the Pentecostal churches started the ordination of priestly officers such as bishops, archbishops, reverends, deaconesses, and deacons. This may be an indication of the use of organizational structures, borrowed from the mission churches. Within the Christian tradition, these structures sometimes work against female participation in leadership and in mutual power relations.

### Theorizing Gender in Yoruba Christianity

The three divisions of churches enumerated above (Mission, African independent and Pentecostal/Charismatic) have engaged the attention of scholars for a long time. Ayandele (1966), Ajayi (1965), and Laitin (1986) have examined the activities of mission churches in Yorubaland. Other studies on African independent churches include Turner (1967), Ayandele (1966), Peel (1968), Ikenga-Metuh (1989), Hackett (1987), and Omoyajowo (1982). Ojo (1989) has studied the Pentecostal churches. In addition, some research works in Departments of Religious Studies in Nigerian universities have resulted in new analyses of the Christian tradition that are worthy of our attention, especially as they relate to issues of gender.

I would like to discuss these three strands of Yoruba Christian tradition in the context of three central issues in gender theory and cultural studies. First is the issue of cultural contact; Geertz (1973) has argued that the close encounter of traditions produces assimilation, modulations, or accommodations for all traditions involved (see also Blanc-Szanton 1990). The hypothesis that all traditions involved in such contact relations change in one way or another informs the strand that neither identity nor culture is static, as inter-relationships exist at all levels of life. Nonetheless, within each culture, mechanisms safeguard the core philosophical strand, which itself is highly resistant to influences from without (Kato 1976). The encounter between the Christian and Yoruba religious

traditions has led to changes in both traditions. The core of each of the two traditions under consideration here, however, remains intact.<sup>2</sup> We may raise some salient questions here about the implications of cultural contact for both religious traditions. To what degree do the Christian churches respond to the Yoruba indigenous tradition, which they encountered? How did this encounter affect gender relations in the society to which Christianity was introduced? How have women fared in this process of cultural contact?

The second concept is patriarchy, defined here as a product of sexism and androcentric perceptions. Patriarchy has been described in some quarters as a hierarchical understanding of difference, which is based on notions of dualism. It finds expression in the oppression of one group over another, with a strong emphasis on separateness as a quality for holiness (Sharma & Young 1999: 191). Others perceive patriarchy as a product of male elitism, which arises from the fundamental doctrine of Christianity, based on the idea that salvation by a male savior perpetuates patriarchal oppression (Hageman 1974: 44). A clear manifestation of the patriarchal prescription in the Christian tradition is the exclusion of women from leadership structures based on the notion that separateness is a quality of holiness. As an antidote to this, some feminist theologians recommend equal gender representation in the leadership cadre of the Christian tradition (Oduyoye 1995).

Thirdly, the perpetuation of hegemonic structures in some aspects of the Yoruba Christian tradition has produced different reactions from women who occupy the "periphery" of the corridor of power. These reactions are often informed by the prevailing cultural and social practices of the people. One such reaction has been the concept of different kinds as well as alternative spaces of powers, especially in gender epistemologies (Sharma & Young 1999: 29). This refers to the power to name a space and determine guiding rules for conduct within the space. Closely linked with this is the concept of a different axis of value, which makes it imperative to contemplate the inherent values of these alternative spaces of power and their function for women in the face of an intimidating patriarchal hegemony. An alternative space of power has been construed by some as a form of resistance whereas others regard it as an avenue of empowerment, the guiding principle for each group being the definition of power (Stark & Bainbridge 1985). The theory of an alternative space of power is different but not opposed to Susan Palmer's (1993) trifold pattern of gender relations among women in new religious movements. She submits that the trifold

pattern include sexual polarity (the two sexes are distinct and generally helpful to each other), sexual dominance (of the two sexes, the male is superior) and sexual unity (two sexes but both are equal). These three manifestations occur in the same congregation at different times and in different contexts, which point to multiple models of gendering rather than a unitary model. Semblances of these patterns are sometimes visible in Yoruba Christian tradition especially in the ritual space. Some scholars have argued that ritual space is the most significant place where African religious life is played out (Zeusse 1979, Ibitokun 1993, Matory 1994, Olupona 1991). Powers held and exhibited in the ritual setting in Africa could therefore be regarded as potent and active. Women occupy significant positions and play leadership roles in the ritual setting of Yoruba religion. This paradigm, having been transferred into Yoruba Christianity, now provides women with an alternative avenue for power within the tradition.

My aim in this chapter is to examine the Christian tradition in the context of Yoruba culture and society, with particular attention to gender dynamics within the tradition. I will pursue this analysis bearing in mind the prevalent gender and power relations manifested in the tradition, which is informed by notions of cultural contact, patriarchy, and alternative space of power. Case studies from the three groups of churches previously identified will be used.

## Women in Mission Churches

The Roman Catholic and Anglican churches will serve as case studies for our consideration of gender relations in mission churches. Our choice of these two churches is informed by the contrasting realities of gender construction within them in Yorubaland. Whereas the Roman Catholic Church adheres to strict gender roles and power relations, the Anglican Church maintains characteristics that are suggestive of some gender negotiations.

The prevailing ideology in both churches is a hierarchical hegemony, which sustains patriarchal structures of leadership. It is this leadership that dictates the structures of power and prescribes regulations guiding gender relations in these churches. It finds an ally in the scriptures and elucidates interpretations from the Bible to consolidate its patriarchal strongholds. Emphasis is laid on Biblical passages, which prescribe subordinate roles for women.<sup>3</sup> More-

over, interpretation is male focussed because the interpreters are male. Thus, the web of patriarchy in the mission churches has been, until recently, self-sustaining and unchallenged. Women have accepted and performed roles prescribed for them by their religious leaders as an indication of their obedience to the divine. The encounter between the churches and Yoruba culture, however, challenged this situation. First, the church waged incessant doctrinal wars against Yoruba traditions that were constructive in certain instances to women's rights and status in the society. The church condemned polygamy and levirate (widow married to a member of the deceased husband's family) marriages and made it clear that those involved in these practices could not be regarded as true Christians. The response was that a large number of men who had been converted to Christianity agreed to divorce their wives for the sake of the gospel. Also, levirate marriage, which from time immemorial protected the extended family system, was disbanded, and widows were left to fend for themselves. All the mission churches adopted education as the instrument of emancipation and growth in society. Schools were established to educate the new converts; nevertheless a high premium was placed on the education of males. Consequently, grammar schools were established particularly for boys by the early part of the 20th century. It was not until the late 1950s that parallel girls' schools and dual-sex schools were founded to provide avenues for the training of girls. Even with the creation of these new schools, the curricula were heavily laden with domestic science, which trained the young girls to cultivate habits of obedience and respect for men and their future husbands. In order words, girls were trained for their roles as domestics and housewives. Undoubtedly, the Christian worldview and the church agenda undermined women's traditional roles and significance in Yoruba society.

The Catholic Church, referred to as *ijo aguda* among the Yoruba, was introduced to Yorubaland in 1846 when Brazilian Christian ex-slaves returned to Africa with the resolve to evangelize their compatriots at home. They possessed superior educational and professional skills. In fact, the first set of upper-class Lagosians (Lagos Elites) were Brazilian Yoruba ex-slaves. The Catholic mission that was introduced to Yorubaland shared the universal Catholic ethos, values, and patriarchal ideologies; hence nuns and religious sisters were excluded from leadership roles, for they could not be ordained into the priesthood. Consequently, they were constrained to play subordinate roles, because the Bible is interpreted

as saying they should, and consequently, church doctrines support this. The practice of Mariology, which exalts the position of Mary the mother of Jesus but fails to give credence to women's roles in the leadership cadre of the Church, is full of paradox. This stance on Mariology and female empowerment also indicates that motherhood does not always lead to empowerment, a fact that makes the Yoruba case appreciable. Motherhood is a position of power for the Yoruba woman both on social and religious planes. Some scholars view female exclusion from the priesthood in the Christian tradition as symbolic. They perceive the ordination question as extending beyond the pragmatic level. According to them, because the priest stands before the faithful as a representative of Christ, Christ stands before the world as God, and God in the popular understanding of both Jewish and Christian traditions is male, therefore the woman is not an appropriate symbol as a priest. She cannot stand for God, for she is not male. The credibility of arguments like these is contestable, especially in the light of the gospel's claim to universality (cf. Galatians 3:28), but such arguments are used to debar women from ordination. Moreover, any attempt to repeal these restrictions is construed as disobedience to divine instruction, which raises fundamental questions about the individual's spiritual standing in the church. In the Christian tradition, then, patriarchy sustains the status quo. This has elicited opposing reactions from feminist scholars worldwide (Daly 1973, Staton 1967, Ruether 1979, Johnson 1992, Schussler-Fiorenza 1998).

The Anglican Church in Yorubaland exhibits similar features, though with some modifications. Men lead, women follow, and any attempt to overturn this practice is discouraged. Recently, however, challenges to the status quo seem poised to unseat patriarchy. Participants in this enterprise have been mostly but not exclusively women. Working on the implicit agenda that "whatever subjugates also dominates, and whatever exhibits superiority divides and manipulates,"<sup>4</sup> women continue to seek avenues of self-affirmation within the constraints of the Yoruba Christian tradition. Their efforts recently culminated in the ordination of three women into the Anglican priesthood on December 12, 1993 in the Ilorin diocese, Nigeria, by Bishop Haruna (now retired). Much controversy greeted this development, and eventually the House of Bishops Episcopal Synod at Aba, Nigeria, annulled the ordination on January 5, 1994. A statement signed by the former primate of the Church of Nigeria, Anglican Communion, Abiodun Adetiloye, dated January 20, 1994, advised members of the churches concerned

to reject the ministrations of these women, since their ordination was null and void. One of the women gave information that all three women completed the necessary training programs and passed with good grades. The annulment was therefore not based on any inadequacies on the part of the women rather the annulment of the women's ordination established an imperative that sexism be demolished. Described as "the fundamental inability of a dominant group to deal with otherness, to acknowledge equal humanity and kinship from those who are different from themselves,"<sup>5</sup> sexism seeks to suppress any behavior outside of the established norm.

The annulment of the three priests in the Kwara Anglican diocese in Nigeria is a clear case of resistance to change. On the other hand, it is an indication of impending change. The three women involved continue to be active members of the Anglican Church, Nigeria, buttressing the fact that leadership roles in the church should be a calling and not a struggle fraught with overwrought emotions. For now, the situation is calm in the diocese and the future may proffer the next step concerning female ordination in any diocese in the Nigerian communion. It is important to state that though the ordination and annulment of the ordination of the priests occurred in the Kwara diocese, the women are now members of the Kogi diocese, which was carved out of the Kwara diocese.

Until the battles over formal ordination are won, ritual space offers women an alternative avenue for empowerment in the Yoruba Christian tradition. Ritual enactments in these churches include the rendering of songs, and prayers, and fasting. Women constitute the majority of choir members and also engage in the writing of songs, which contain a form of sermons. Moreover, women prayer leaders in the Anglican Church preside over prayer meetings and by implication lead other worshippers to God. Another area of the ritual space in which women access power is women's groups such as Mother's Union and the Women's Guild in the Anglican Church and the National Council of Catholic Women Organization in the Catholic Church. In these settings, women meet to engage in theological deliberations, socialize, and develop support networks that foster solidarity and harmony. The group formation displayed in these churches can be traced directly to Yoruba cultural practices. Though these bodies exist in the two churches elsewhere, the agenda and methods of pursuing them in the Yoruba churches are strongly influenced by the people's culture. In addition to discussing theological concerns, these groups also attend to social and economic needs. Members learn skills that enhance their economic status,

receive training, and sometimes gain access to credit facilities. Also, these groups serve as a forum for promoting sisterhood, as members support each other in good or bad times (e.g., during wedding ceremonies of children, widowhood, or bereavement). The power and authority that women were denied as individuals are here exercised by the women in solidarity as a group. Fortunately for the women, their power is such that no church leader could afford to fall out with them.

The influence of Yoruba culture on the Christian tradition is shown in the creation of offices for women in the mission churches that open up avenues of empowerment for them. The Yoruba traditional and cosmological experience requires that all persons be involved in all decision making. This is reflected in offices within the government and in religious sectors. Occupants of these offices are considered representatives of their constituencies, which bestow on them great responsibilities and powers. Mission churches in Yorubaland have found it expedient to emulate this practice by providing chieftancy offices for women and men alike in the church. This is based on parallel gender structures existing in the Yoruba tradition. The *Iya Ijo*<sup>6</sup> and her lieutenants<sup>7</sup> oversee activities of women in the church. In addition, they assist the minister as advisers to ensure the smooth operation of the church. Some of these officers have become formidable authorities in the church. I was reliably informed by one of the ministers I spoke with of the case of one *Iya Ijo* with whom he worked in the early 1950s without whose signature no money could be withdrawn or spent,<sup>8</sup> though the presiding officer of the church, he had to abide by her dictates for peace to reign. Although a situation like this is not the norm, it provides us with information about the people's conception of power construct even within the Christian tradition. Gender classification, which at the advent of Christianity was fixed and rigid, has been renegotiated because of the cultural factor. Despite this, however, there are restrictions for women in the Yoruba Christian tradition, to which we now turn.

The concept of the pure and impure in religion is universal. An extension of this reflects people's understanding of what is sacred and what is profane (Eliade 1987). Blood has been conceived in different ways, in different settings, but most especially in religion. Whereas some view blood as a source of life to be revered, others consider it a contaminant, and avoid any contact between it and sacred elements. Some traditions blend these two positions, focusing on that which is auspicious (Marglin 1985). Some churches

in Yorubaland exclude women from leadership positions due to the impure label given to the menstrual blood by missionaries in the early years of Christianity among the people, the influence of which is still discernible today. This ban on women manifests itself in transient and permanent sanctions, depending on prevailing situations. In some cases, a woman may not come to church during her menstrual period. In other situations, she is denied ordination into the priesthood because of her susceptibility to menstrual periods. Worthy of note, however, is the increasing trend of de-emphasizing this notion that menstruation signals impurity. This trend manifests at the personal level among female worshippers, who may choose to attend worship sessions during their menstrual period. This notwithstanding, one of the unspoken arguments used against the ordination of women into the priesthood derives from the impure label placed on menstrual blood. Feminist theologians and other feminist scholars have emphasized the need to reappraise this position, a reappraisal that is increasingly becoming pertinent to the empowerment of women in Yoruba Christian tradition.

Negotiations of gender construction and power relations in mission churches are informed by a combination of Yoruba cultural prescriptions and church doctrines. These negotiations indicate that there are different types of powers as well as diverse axis of values. Power is not limited to that which is coercive and domineering, but encompasses the ability to influence and to act. Consequently, alternative spaces of power may be regarded as empowering and fulfilling. Granted, the role of women in the Yoruba Christian tradition needs to be improved by making available to every Christian equal opportunities at all levels of the tradition. It would be misleading, however, to conclude that the Yoruba Christian woman is powerless because she is not preaching from the pulpit.

## Women in the African Independent Churches

The need to contextualize the Christian message was one of the reasons for the establishment of African independent churches. Consequently, the influence of Yoruba culture on the structures and practices of these churches is strong. The role of women in the African independent churches is therefore highly influenced by the female role expectations embedded in the Yoruba socio-cultural perspectives. Some of these churches include the Cherubim and Seraphim, the Evangelical Church of Yahweh, and the Celestial

Church of Christ. Jules-Rosette's critical observation of many African churches that "ceremonial leadership which give women the chance to rise to power in African churches without them holding official leadership status" (Rushing 1996: 102) is not true of the Yoruba Aladura churches. The African independent churches have created increasingly more avenues of fulfillment for Yoruba women than the mission churches before them. We should view this primarily as an influence of the Yoruba culture and tradition. Paradoxically, the same factor plays a strong role in limiting their participation in certain religious activities. Let us now examine how the roles play out in the organizational structure and the ritual activities of these churches.

In the Celestial Church of Christ, for example, offices are provided for women leaders to ensure gender balance in organizational structures. Examples of these include titles such as the Mother Superintendent, Mother in Israel, and Mother in Jerusalem. These offices are created with the purpose of linking them up with Biblical frames of reference to underscore their significant elements while at the same time making them relevant to the African notions of motherhood. These offices are attended by charismatic responsibilities in the church, with officers taking active roles in the daily administration of the church. Perhaps the most important designation and title in the African independent churches is that of the prophetess. The prophetess occupies an important position in African independent churches. She holds prayer sessions in the church and sometimes in her home. Her duties encompass the conveyance of messages to the people from God and from God to the people. In the state of possession, she represents the divine and makes divine instructions available to members of the congregation. This is a position of power and an indication of a fluid gender construction, which negates submissions that God is male and could only be represented by the male. Prophetesses also founded churches over which they preside. An example I came across during my fieldwork was that of Prophetess Olubunmi Olujide of the Celestial Church of Christ, Oke-sa, Ilesa, who is widely known for her gifts of prophecy and visions. People throng to her home for help and prayers at all times of the day and week. Those whose needs are met usually return with gifts to signify their gratitude to God. She felt the calling of God in her life and founded the Iyanu Celestial Church in 1986. Male and female auxiliaries alike assist her in the administration of the church. This is very important, given that the Celestial Church of Christ under whose auspices

Prophetess Olujide established her branch is a church characterized by a predominant male leadership.

Similarly, women are visible and active in the leadership cadre of the Cherubim and Seraphim Church. Unlike some African independent churches in Yorubaland, the Cherubim and Seraphim Church was founded by both a woman (Christiana Abiodun Akinsowon) and a man (Moses Orimolade Tunolase) in 1925. Upon the death of Moses Orimolade, Abiodun Emmanuel (nee Akinsowon) became the leader of the church, but not without opposition from some members. The dispute went to court and was finally resolved in favor of Abiodun Akinsowon in 1986. This was a classic case in the history of African Christianity because of the long struggle of Madam Akinsowon to maintain control over a church she co-founded. In addition to this was her rejection of the arbitration of Yoruba kings who had advised her to accept the control of the church by male leaders. Women's church groups all over the country celebrated Akinsowon's victory in 1986. The unforeseen consequence of her victory was that women began to challenge the notion that power relations in the African independent churches were dependent on gender prescriptions, as we would see in the case of the Pentecostal/Charismatic churches. Akinsowon died as the leader of the Cherubim and Seraphim Church. That the decision confirming her as the church leader had to come after a court case, indicates that power is not dependent on gender prescriptions among the Yoruba. In addition, it confirms that the influence of Yoruba culture on gender and power relations within the Christian tradition is strong.

Women have played leadership roles in the Cherubim and Seraphim Church since its inception. Of the seventy disciples who started the effective spread of the gospel in this church, twenty-five were women. In the same vein, four members of the first board of trustees of the church were women.<sup>9</sup> Aside from those mentioned above, women do function as prophetesses, visionaries, and church founders. Women church founders preside over their churches and lead in all aspects of worship and administration. Examples are Mother in Israel V. John, who founded the Ona Iwa mimo C&S church, Ilorin; Prophetess F.E. Alabi, who established the God's Grace Church, Ilorin, and Her Grace E.B. Kolawole, the founder of the Saint's spiritual church, Ilorin. Power relations in the Cherubim and Seraphim Church are fluid and are attended by constant negotiations. The mark here is shifted from hegemonic structures to mutual complementarity. This situation is, however, not true of

all African independent churches, as we shall discover of the Christ Apostolic Church.

The third case study of the African independent churches is the Christ Apostolic Church (CAC), which was established in 1931, though the church has witnessed a series of secessions over the years. The 1931 formation has, however, witnessed fragmentation over the years, some of which concerns women church founders. The term CAC is used here to refer to the main body of the church from which other churches were formed or on which others depend for doctrinal perspectives. For easy identification, I will designate the second wave of CAC churches as CAC2. Some of the CAC2 churches were founded by women who found the restrictions within the prevailing patriarchal systems of the parent body cumbersome, unbiblical, and unjustified. In addition to this, these female leaders claim a calling in their lives to function in the priestly cadre. Since this could not be accommodated within the CAC, they left to establish new churches.

Within the mainline CAC, women's roles are subordinate and secondary to those of men. Biblical injunctions are regularly cited in sermons to support this situation, including Genesis 3:16; I Corinthians 14:34–35; and I Timothy 2:12. Women in these churches are excluded from leadership roles and the space of authority. They may not function as ushers in the church, although they are allowed to interpret sermons on certain occasions as deputies of official male leaders. The injunction that women cover their heads is strictly enforced in a bid to confirm women's subordination to men, for the man is the head of the woman, as is often claimed in the church. Women in this church practiced group formation, but not to challenge roles expected of them in the church. Instead, the focus of the women's groups in the CAC is informed by the need to prepare women for wifely and motherly roles. Unlike the situation among some mission churches and some other African independent churches, women's groups do not constitute an avenue for empowerment. The agenda of women's group formation among these churches is purely theological, serving as a medium for internalizing androcentric perceptions of women.

In contrast to this, the CAC2 churches established by women emphasize the mutual and complementary relations of gender construction in the Christian tradition. Examples of these churches are CAC, God's Power Never Fails (Agbara Olorun Ki Ba Ti), and CAC Daniel's Yard (Agbala Daniel), both in Ibadan, Oyo State, Nigeria. Gender and power relations in these churches are fluid and are

modulated by factors other than gender and sex. Sometimes women lead, whereas at other times, leadership is by men. The presiding officer, however, remains the woman founder of the church. I must remark, however, that the CAC2 churches should not be seen as isolated cases of mutual gender relations. Rather, it should be clear that numerous churches abound in Southwestern Nigeria where a combination of female and male leadership is a prevalent feature. The gifts of prophecy and vision for which women are particularly well known make these churches appealing to both men and women. The complementary relation of gender roles finds explicit expressions in the ritual setting of the CAC2 churches. Women are active participants in prayer sessions, song rendering, and the Eucharist. Symbolic expressions highlighting the feminine portrait of the divine are employed in worship, especially in songs. Symbolism is also reflected in the elements of prayers in these churches.

Two examples of songs of this character are here given for illustrative purposes:

Apon mo ma we 'hin/2ce  
 Pon mi Oluwa f'oja mu mi  
 Ma je nja lule  
 Lehin re Oluwa  
 Pon mi Oluwa  
 F'oja mu mi.  
 One who backs a child confidently/2ce  
 back me O Lord, and hold me with oja (sash)  
 do not let me fall to the ground  
 from your back, O Lord  
 back me O Lord  
 and hold me with oja (sash).

The background imagery of this song is that of a mother who puts the child on her back securely to ensure warmth, comfort, and protection. In the Yoruba parlance, for a child to drop to the ground from the mother's back is a taboo, with perilous consequences for the child, the mother, and the community at large. Christ is thus perceived as a mother who confidently puts the baby (worshipper) on her back and secures the child with oja, hence providing a mother's security. The next song presents an image of God as a husband who takes the worshipper for his bride. The husband is expected to provide the bride with care and protection, just as Christ protects and cares for his worshippers.

The song goes thus:

Mo ye ge Alleluia mo yege/2ce  
Jesu ri mi l'omoge  
O si gbe mi ni'yawo o  
Alleluia mo ye ge  
I have attained success. Alleluia, I've succeeded  
Jesus saw me as a maiden  
And he married me.  
Alleluia, I have attained success.

The implications of the songs are manifold: that Christ is conceived as being both female and male in the Yoruba Christian experience, and that Christ is expected to provide care and protection for the worshipper. In addition, female and male worshippers of Christ are portrayed as his brides. A similar situation may be found in Yoruba religion where male and female adherents are brides of the deities. It may be asserted then that gender fluidity in the relationship between the divine and humans is a similarity found with Yoruba religion and Christianity.

Similarly, contrary forces are given symbolic representations during prayer sessions. Bishop Bola Odeleke, female church founder of the Agbara Olorun Kii ba Ti (God's power never fails), for example, holds prayer meetings for different classes of people in the church, including artisans, students, businessmen and women, and expectant parents (Awon ti won nwoju Oluwa). She talks about the devil as the enemy responsible for the ills that people experience, and members are encouraged to destroy this negative power through means that are in no way conventional. For example, Odeleke instructs worshippers to bring with them canes (Atori) with which to beat the enemy severely (Ana ja ti) or cudgels (ponpo) with which the enemy may be broken into pieces during prayer sessions.

Worthy of mention are CAC2 churches led by couples. Interpretations of power relations in such a situation vary. Although some see the wife as secondary to the husband in her roles within the administration of the church as being in accordance with Biblical injunction for wives to be submissive to their husbands, couples in this situation seem to disagree. They profess that hierarchy is discounted in their mode of church administration, and emphasize harmony and interdependence instead. These couples present young Yoruba Christians with models for Christian homes where the guiding principle is mutual respect as opposed to domination and oppression.

There has emerged what we may call Aladura women's identity, which is distinct from women's identity in the mission churches, which we examined in the first part of this work. Though women have access to leadership roles and authority in varying degrees in the African independent churches, group solidarity remains for them a reality. The Celestial Council of Women and the Christ Apostolic Church's Good Women are examples of these group formations. This could be perceived as an indication of the Yoruba woman's preference for collective social relations above individualism (Rushing 1996). The norm for the Yoruba woman is to seek fulfillment through group identities rather than as individuals. This norm finds expression in all spheres of human activities, including the political, economic, and spiritual planes. Popularly referred to as *egbe*, the motif is here transplanted into the Christian tradition in pursuance of mutual gender and power relations. Some regard such group formation as a form of resistance to the status quo or as being compensatory, offering solace to women because of their exclusion from the space of power. The cases of the African independent churches in Yorubaland, however, seem to negate this stance. Despite their access to leadership positions in these churches, women still find group formation an integral aspect of their being and identity. We would rather consider these formations as an essential aspect of the Yoruba woman's bid for self-fulfillment, unrelated to her proximity to the space of power and authority.

Gender dynamics in the African independent churches are to a large extent accentuated by prohibitive rules concerning menstrual blood. Scholars have seen menstrual blood as a manifestation of the binary categories embedded in western history, categories that suggest that nature (the material aspects of existence) is female, whereas the mind (the source of abstract theories about existence) is male. Closely linked with this is the stance of some philosophers that matter is female (material, passive, corporeal, and sense perceptible) whereas the male is active, rational, incorporeal, and more akin to mind and thought (Bernard et al. 2000). Hence, by implication, the female is inferior to the male and the prohibitive tag placed on menstrual blood is but one of the many ways for enforcing this. These categories, however, are in no wise universal, and are often problematic. There is no cognitive basis for the assumption that certain aspects of nature or the human mind are predominantly male or female. Other scholars trace the prohibitive label placed on menstruation in the religious sphere to the fact that blood is a symbol of death; since the spilling of too much

blood produces death (Girard 1981). Yet other scholars hold that blood symbolizes life, and hence is sacred. The negative label placed on menstrual blood has also been construed as a reflection of men's primal fear of the blood emitted by women monthly.<sup>10</sup> The salient point here is that menstrual blood is labeled contaminous not by the women who experience it but by men, who do not menstruate. The prohibition leads to paradoxical situations, for instance some women in the African independent churches occupy positions of authority, but are unable to perform their duties during their menstrual period. Given that menstrual blood and childbirth are auspicious to humanity and should be appreciated rather than being debased, we advocate a reappraisal of such prohibition, so that women may enjoy their leadership potential in the African independent churches.

### Women in the Pentecostal Churches

It is imperative to state that the term "Pentecostals" refers to churches with diverse characteristics. This explains why differences in practices can be identified among these churches. However, certain common features of the Pentecostal churches in Yorubaland may be identified. One is an apparent emphasis on the gifts of the Holy Spirit, including but not limited to glossolalia. Second, leaders in these churches usually possess charisma and eloquence. Third, emphasis is laid on "prosperity gospel." Finally, most of the Pentecostal churches were founded between 1970 and 2000. There are male and female church founders among the Pentecostals. In each case, the spouse of the founder is automatically co-opted into the ministry. Central to an understanding of gender dynamics and power relations among this group of churches is the status of the leader/founder, because until recently, there were few organizational structures peculiar to the churches. Most activities were coordinated by and revolved around the personality of the founder. Leaders of the Pentecostal churches are usually educated, and some belong to the professional class; for instance, some are doctors, academicians, engineers, and administrators. Their educational status is reflected in the manner of administration and the management of human and other resources. The leader is the chief executive officer and the chief accounting officer. It has been suggested in some quarters that some of these churches are nothing but business enterprises, judging from their practices and methods

employed in attaining wealth. Such a suggestion is predicated on the church's emphasis on prosperity that for the church is dependent on the measure of giving by worshippers. Members are encouraged to give to the church so that they may be prosperous, though the only sign of prosperity over the years has been on the part of the leaders, who often maintain a flamboyant lifestyle. This has become a serious problem for the Pentecostal churches, especially in a society where poverty is a daily reality.

Women in the Pentecostal churches present a picture of empowerment due to their participation at the leadership cadre. Theoretically, women have equal access to leadership positions in these churches and may function in all capacities. Furthermore, there are no prohibitive rules based on female anatomy in these churches. Although no woman is barred from the house of worship or the ritual setting due to prohibitive rules concerning blood emission, some Pentecostal churches, however, require that women cover their heads in church. Most of my informants did not at all connect the head covering of women in the church with male superiority; rather they see it as a prescription of the Bible. It is worthy of note, however, that some other Pentecostal churches profess that the woman's hair is a covering for her head and so there may be no need for the use of scarves and hats. Finally, my discussions with some Pentecostals in Yoruba towns<sup>11</sup> suggest that the focus of the church is to win the souls of people to God; every other issue is secondary to this. I will now proceed to discuss some examples of Pentecostal churches in Yorubaland as case studies.

Mrs. Bola Adedeji Taiwo, popularly known as Mama Tolu, founded the first case, the Last Days Miracle Revival Church, Ilesa.<sup>12</sup> She received the call of God and started her ministry in 1985. She holds a National Certificate of Education and is married to Mr. Taiwo. She administers the church in conjunction with her husband. Her husband preaches and teaches in the church, while she functions mostly in the area of prophecy and healing. Prophecy and healing could be identified as avenues of empowerment for women in the Yoruba Christian tradition. Both phenomena are carried out not by the powers and abilities of the women concerned but by divine powers operating through the women. Hence, to challenge the authority of the prophetess or female healer would be tantamount to questioning the divine, for whom the woman is only an agency of expression. Women therefore derive enhanced status from prophecy and healing activities in Yoruba Christianity. Mrs. Bola Adedeji Taiwo's case is no exception, as is evident from the in-

crease in her followers during the short span of her ministry's existence. Women in this church enjoy equal access to the space of power and are subjected to no prohibitive rules. Gender relations are complementary, and the focus is on the effective preaching of the word of God for the well-being of the people. This has produced an atmosphere of harmony in the church, which is manifested in the high rate of growth since its inception in 1985.

In the same vein, Reverend Akindayomi, who died on November 2, 1980, established the Redeemed Christian Church of God. Pastor E.A. Adeboye succeeded Reverend Akindayomi in March 1981. In the Redeemed Christian Church, both women and men have equal access to divine power and authority, and treat each other with mutual respect. This church also emphasizes the calling of God in the individual's life. Women function in this church as parish and area pastors.<sup>13</sup> In addition, they officiate in the ritual setting, especially in the administration of the Holy Communion. Women in this church therefore have the opportunity to move to the top of the church hierarchy.

Situations in some of the Pentecostal churches are, however, not as empowering for women. Bishop David Oyedepo at Ilorin founded The Living Faith Church (also known as The Faith Liberation Ministries) in 1983. At its inception, this church had no organizational structures, but recently, pastors, deacons, deaconesses, and bishops have been appointed for the various branches of the church. No woman, however, has been ordained as a priest. Though women may sometimes lead the congregation from the altar, they are not allowed to preside as pastors in the church.

An assessment of gender and power relations in the Pentecostal churches then reveals a fusion of cultural and Biblical paradigms. The role of women is usually mediated by their status as wives; hence, there is a transmutation of the Christian matrimonial prescriptions into the worship realm. On the other hand, the fact that women play significant roles in the ritual setting in most churches may be connected to the Yoruba socio-cultural worldview that provides quality roles of worship for women. The negotiation of gender and power relations in the Pentecostal churches is thus a continuous journey in process and in time.

In summary, we may posit that women's roles and status in the Yoruba Christian tradition are influenced by patriarchy, power relations, ritual context, the uneven adaptations and borrowing from Biblical injunctions, and the Yoruba cultural and religious worldview. Patriarchal influences in the tradition may be located in practices

and regulations, especially the blood taboo. In reaction to these restrictions, women searched for alternative avenues of power and have worked to make changes at the pragmatic level of Christianity. Their efforts include the reinterpretation of some Biblical passages previously cited to bar women from leadership positions. Also, women have appropriated cultural frameworks to actualize their bid for equal opportunities within the Christian tradition. An example of this is the motif of group formation. Education and the influence of Western civilization have further assisted in the reappraisal of archaic gender prescriptions in Christianity. Culture serves as a potent tool in forging new paradigms for gender and power relations in the Yoruba Christian tradition. It is certain that the gender roles proffered by Christianity at its advent in Yorubaland are no longer tenable. With the increasing influence of women in the society, the process of weaving new patterns of gender and power relations in the Christian tradition is bound to result in even further opportunities for women.

CHAPTER  
FOUR



# Identity, Power, and Gender Relations in Yoruba Religious Traditions

## Introduction

Identity as a phenomenon encompasses a compendium of different elements that are nevertheless interconnected. Ingredients for the construction of identity are supplied by a combination of culture, religion, and power relations, among others. Moreover, fluidity and reconfigurations are salient features of identity construction, as time and settings dictate which aspects of the individual's identity are prioritized. Another important element in identity construction is myth. Myths provide the archetype for the construction of identity, especially in societies where religion is a significant and dominant feature. Myths offer models that influence the construction of identity explicitly or in subtle ways. This is specifically true of cosmogonic myths, which deal with the origin of the world, and cosmological myths, which supply explanations for values and meanings in a people's lives. To that extent, myths could be regarded as "a looking glass of reality, a reflection of real life, a derivative semantic form, in brief, an extension of primary cultural meanings" (Weiner 1988: 2).

Power conveys the notion of influence, the ability to effect as well as affect a situation significantly. Power can manifest between "every point of social body, members of families or between every one who knows and every one who does not" (Foucault 1980: 187). Though sometimes exhibited through coercive means, power can also include the ability to exert influence without coercion. As a concept, power is imbued with notions of difference and possession of exclusive knowledge and hierarchy. There is therefore the assumption that power is in the custody of a minority but exercised

over a majority. Worthy of mention are differences in types and forms of power. Power can be visible and formal, as is true of political authorities, but it could also be invisible and informal, as is the case with esoteric knowledge and mystical practices in religion. In both cases, the end product of such powers and the effect of their influence indicate their potency and relevance, even when such cannot be analyzed intellectually.

At the center of gender relations are issues of power and how humans are affected by the influence of power. Gender as a construct assumes certain basic characteristics for people because of their sex. Such a classification has, however, been consistently nuanced, as research continues to expose the inadequacy of a clear-cut and unitary definition of humans based on biological features alone. It seems clear that gender as a construct should necessarily accommodate multiple paradigms in order to remain valid in scholarly discourses.

This chapter will analyze the influence of myths on the construction of identity, power, and gender relations in Yoruba religious tradition. This will be done from a focus point that takes seriously women's access to power and the import of this for women's identity construction. In this regard, we shall consider cosmogonic and cosmological myths, goddess tradition, and the role of goddesses and women in sacred kingship and migration narratives. Until recent times, written records of Yoruba indigenous religious tradition have been portrayed predominantly from the perspective of men. A perusal of the key materials will indicate that the dominant discourse has been influenced by male sexism, with the exception of a few intermittent feminist readings of well-known texts on Yoruba religion such as those of Idowu (1962), Bascom (1969), and Lucas (1948). This chapter, however, examines Yoruba religious tradition to demonstrate not only the significant roles of women but also to criticize the images of women presented in standard texts. Employing an interdisciplinary approach, I shall be concerned with ethnographic materials and their critical analysis as they relate to gender issues, oral traditions, archival materials, phenomenological analysis, cultural studies, and feminist analysis. Ultimately, I hope to present a more balanced picture of women in the religious tradition.

## Cosmological Myths

Cosmological myths provide explanations for questions of meaning and primal causes. These myths constitute the basis for

people's construction of culture and worldview and provide models for subsequent patterns for those attempting to grasp the meaning of life and living (Sproul 1979: 6). They elucidate the connection between the supernatural and the natural, between the ultimate reality and humans. Cosmological myths employ symbols and metaphors to locate the beginning of the beginning and in the process offer archetypes for human endeavors. Because cosmological myths function as models for human activity (Eliade 1958: 412), roles played in them by males and females have great import for gender construction and relations in a given culture. Eliade (1967) delineates four types of cosmological myths. The first creation myth is *ex-nihilo*, i.e., creation occasioned by thought, word, or the creator being heated in a steam-hut. The second creation myth employs the Earth diver motif, where the creator sends aquatic birds or dives himself to the bottom of the primordial ocean to bring up a particle of earth from which the entire world emanated. In the third myth, creation results from the dividing in two of a primordial unity, which could manifest as the separation of heaven from the Earth, the cutting in two of a cosmogenic egg or simply through chaos. Lastly, creation is traced to the dismemberment of a primordial being.

According to Yoruba cosmogenic account, creation was not *ex-nihilo* (Awolalu & Dopamu 1979: 64). Certain preexisting materials were used to create nature and the physical figures of human. However, sometime after the creation of humans, a separation between the sky (which is considered the abode of the creator) and the Earth occurred. Explanations for this vary, but it seems clear that humans on Earth originally had free access to the abode of the creator, whereas deities (*orisa*) could visit the Earth at will.

### Yoruba Cosmological Myth

Yoruba cosmology is presented in many versions through which explanations for the origin of the universe are provided. These accounts trace the creation of nature as well as humans to *Olodumare* (God), who delegated some powers to the *irunmole* (primordial divinities). In one of the accounts, *Olodumare* delegated the powers to create the landscape and the physical figure of humans to *Orisanla* (senior divinity). *Olodumare* gave *Orisanla* some elements to achieve these objectives, including earthen mud (*erupe*) in a snail shell (*ikarahun igbin*), a bird (*eyele*), and a hen (*akuko*)

(Awolalu et al. 1979). In this version, Oduduwa was asked to accompany Orisanla on this mission journey. Oduduwa is a figure in the Yoruba thought system with dual classification as divinity and ancestor<sup>1</sup> (Awolalu 1979: 25). The account states that on the way to Earth, Orisanla got drunk and Oduduwa had to carry out Olodumare's injunctions concerning the founding of landscape on Earth (Beier 1980: 9). The significance of the story for the present study is that Oduduwa is presented in many oral texts as female, a fact that has been acknowledged by some scholars (Lucas 1948; Parrinder 1967: 13; Awolalu et al. 1979: 57; Olaniyan 1992: 65), but not by others, for reasons best described as controversial. If we assume for once that Oduduwa was, as this version claims, female, how would this affect the analysis of Yoruba cosmology? First, it would mean that Oduduwa, who is regarded as the progenitor of the Yoruba people and the first ruler, was female. Second, the story suggests that creation was jointly carried out by Oduduwa (a female) and Orisanla (a male). While Oduduwa created the land, valleys, and mountains with the items supplied by Olodumare, Orisanla, on recovering from his drunken state, created the physical figures of humans. Orisanla is said to have created some humans beautiful and others as albinos and hunchbacks; as a consequence, disabled people are still regarded as special and sacred beings to the Orisanla group in Yorubaland.

A female Oduduwa is entirely within the realm of possibility, bearing in mind that during a certain period, the Yoruba could have been ruled by females (Olaniyan et al. 1992: 41, 66). Evidence for this is provided by Yoruba oral traditions, especially the verses of the Ifa corpus, and by stories of origin describing the need for people to consult a female ruler before they could settle in an area. An example of this was the situation of Osogbo, where the visiting hunters had to negotiate with Osun before the people could settle in their present abode. The annual Osun festival is one of the agreed-upon requirements for the people's settlement in this area (Ogungbile 2000, Olupona 2000, Badejo 1996, Olajubu 1995). Similarly, accounts of how women had powers at the beginning of time but were tricked by men who took these powers from them and rendered them subordinates are replete in the Ifa corpus. One such account, often cited as the origin of the *egungun* cult, which originally belonged to women (Adediran 1994: 123), is recorded in Odu (chapter) *irantegbe* of Ifa:

*Ha! Agba t'oba s'aseju, tite ni te*  
*A d'ifa fun Odu*

*Nigbati ode isalaye  
Won ni ki o se suuru  
Ki o ma yaju  
Odu ni ko si nkankan  
Nwon ni ki o ru ebo  
O ni oun ko ru ebo  
E bo k'obinrin le ri agbara gba la t'od' olodumare loru  
Ko ru ko le lo agbara na titi  
Ko ru'bo k'aye ma ri idi oun  
Lo ba wo igbo igbale, o mu eegun jade  
Obarisa wa ko na 'pe  
Ase Odu ni Olodumare ko gbogbo aye le lowo  
Ati kaa eegun ni atiti oro tabi gbogbo orisa  
Oun ko gbodo wo kankan ninu won  
Obarisa ni ha! Obinrin yi ni yio wo 'gbo gbogbo aye naa  
Ni obarisa be ke si orunmila ti 'se babalawo ti re  
Orunmila ni ki obarisa ru 'bo, o si ru  
Orunmila si se ifa fun un  
O ni ile aye yi nbo wa di tie  
O ni sugbon suuru ni ki o mu  
Nigbati o ya Odu pe obarisa  
O ni igba ti o je wipe awon jo wa si 'le aye ni  
O ye ki awon fi 'nu han ara won  
Ni Odu ati Obarisa ba jo ngbe po  
Orisala fun Odu ni omi igbin ti maa je mu  
Odu ni ki Orisala kalo  
Obarisa si telee  
Odu si wo igbe eegun  
O si da eku b'ori loju Obarisa  
Ni oun ati Obarisa ba jade ni igbo igbale  
Nigbati won pada wo igbo igbale t'eegun wo le tan  
Ni Obarisa wa lo si ibi eku wa  
Ni o ba tun da, o fi awon ti ko si nibe tele si i  
Aso lasan ni eegun ti ko ba ni awon l'aju  
Lehin igbati nwon de ile tan  
Obarisa wo ilerun eegun lo, o si gbe eegun jade  
O si mu ore lowo  
Ko da gbere fun Odu mo ti o fi gbe eegun jade lo  
O bere si fo 'hun eegun, ki won ma ba da mon  
Eyi ni o s'eru ba Odu  
Bayi ni okunrin fi ogbon gba agbara lowo obinrin*

Translation:

Ha! An elder who misbehaves has to be disgraced  
*Ifa* was divined for Odu  
 When she arrived on earth  
 She was advised to rule her passion  
 Odu did not heed the advice  
 She was asked to sacrifice but 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 groove of *eegun* (*ancestral  
 masquerade*) one day and  
 Came out as a masquerader  
 Ha! So it is Odu that Olodumare (Supreme God)  
 gave the power  
 Over all the world said obarisa (Obatala)  
 Obarisa went to orunmila 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 had to be more  
 Familiar with each other  
 They 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  
 Odu then invited Obarisa to come along  
 And he followed her to the sacred groove of *eegun*  
 She put on her *eku* and came out a masquerader  
 They came out from the groove together  
 When they returned to the groove  
 And Odu removed the *eku*  
 Obarisa moved closer and inspected the *eku*  
 He modified it by putting 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* she was afraid  
 This was how men cunningly overpowered women

This myth presents Odu as a powerful woman who was in control of an important religious practice. Odu in Yoruba religion is also recognized as the wife of Orunmila (the deity in charge of divination and wisdom), and the designation of chapters in the *Ifa* corpus. Every consultation in *Ifa* divinatory system depends on one Odu or the other. Further, ancestors are perceived as part of the human community and thus a source of continuity for humanity. Similarly, procreation, which is seen as an attribute of women, is a means of ensuring the continuity of humanity. It would seem understandable, then, if ancestral practice, which is another means of continuity for the human race, rested with a woman. Gender tension is apparent in the story as well between Obarisa (a male) and Odu (a female). Such is accommodated within the Yoruba worldview, where females and males vie for power at all levels but especially in the religious setting. Snail fluid symbolizes coolness and softness (*ero*) in Yoruba religion and is often perceived as a female quality, but this story reflects the fluidity of Yoruba gender construct in that it presents snail fluid as food for a male deity (Obarisa).

Another and often cited myth that supports the primal place of women in Yoruba cosmological accounts is the story of Osun:

*Komu-n-koro*  
*Awo Ewi n'ile Ado;*  
*Orun-mu-dedeede-kanle*  
*Awo Ode Ijesa;*  
*Alakan-ni-n-be-lodo*  
*Ti-n-tele-tutu-rin-rin-rin.*  
*A dia fun'rinwo 'mole Ojukotun*  
*A bu fun 'gba 'mole Ojukosi*  
*Nijo won n t'ode orun bo*  
*Won de isalaye*  
*Won la igbo oro*  
*Won la igbo opa*

Won la ona gbooro olufe n to  
 Won gbimo  
 Won ko fi'mo je t'Osun  
 Won pe Eegun ile, Eegun ko je  
 Won pe oro, oro ko fohun  
 Won la 'na tooro olufe, won ko r'eni rin in  
 Won gun'yan, iyan won l'emo  
 Won ro'ka, oka won pa'pete.  
 Ase o d'oyun, Ato o d'omo  
 Ojo ko ro, ile nsa  
 Won se'le aye titi  
 Ile aye o gun rara  
 Agberegede Ajuba  
 A juba re, Aboju gberegede  
 Adifa fun Osun seegesi  
 Olooya iyun  
 Eyii ti yoo maa gbe ikoko  
 Ba ebo irunmole yooku je  
 A dia f'ejendinlogun Orodu  
 Won gbe'ra paa  
 Won to Olodumare lo  
 Olodumare ki won tan  
 O beere eketadinlogun won.  
 Olodumare ni, "kin ni o de  
 Ti e kii fi kee si?"  
 Won ni, "Nitori pe o je obinrin laarin awon ni"  
 Olodumare ni, "Agbedo o!  
 Obinrin bi okunrin ni Osun"  
 Olodumare ni,  
 Boribori, Awo Iragberi,  
 Omo ekose Osun ni i se  
 Egba, Awo Ilukan  
 Omo ekose Osun ni i se  
 Ese, ti i se Awo won n'Ijebu Ere  
 Omo ekose Osun ni i se  
 Atomu, Awo won ni Ikire Ile,  
 Omo ekose Osun ni i se  
 Awon Irunmole wonyii  
 Ni i je k'omo s'owo  
 Awon ni i je k'omo jere;  
 Sugbon, won ki i je  
 K'omo kere oja dele.

*Olodumare ni*  
*Ohun ti e ko tete mo*  
*Ni e waa mo wayi*  
*E pada s'ile aye*  
*Ki e si maa ke si Osun*  
*Fun gbogbo ohun ti e ba fee se.*  
*Ohunkohun tee ba da wo le*  
*Yoo si maa tuba-tuse.*  
*Igba ti won dele aye*  
*Won waa n'fimo je t'Osun ile aye wa n gun*  
*Ode ilu n tooro*  
*Won waa bere sii ki Osun bayi*  
*"A-ri-pepe ko 'de si*  
*a fi'ide re'mo*  
*Yee mi, Af'ilu gba'se*  
*Ota o! Omi o! Edan o!*  
*Awura! Olu! Agbaja!*  
*Abawonpejo nidii imoran*  
*Ladekoju! Oore Yeye Osun!.*

Translation:

*Komu-n-koro*  
 Their diviner in the town of Ado  
*Orun-mu-dedeede-kale*  
 Their diviner in Ijesa kingdom;  
 The-crab-is-in-the-river  
 And crawls on extremely cold ground.  
 They divined for the 400 *irunmole* (divinities) on the  
 right hand  
 They divined for the 200 *irunmole* on the left side  
 On the day they were descending from heaven  
 To the planetary earth  
 They cleared *Oro* grove  
 They cleared *Opa* grove  
 They constructed a wide path for Ife indigenes to pass  
 through  
 They planned,  
 They never reckoned with Osun in their plans  
 They invoked *Eegun*, *Eegun* never talked  
 They invoked *Oro*, *Oro* never responded  
 They constructed a straight path for Ife indigenes

The road was deserted  
 They pounded yam, it was full of lumps  
 They prepared *oka* (yam flour), it became messy  
 Ovaries and sperms never fertilized  
 There was no rain, the land was dry  
 They tried to maintain the world  
 There was no order in the world  
 Agberegede Ajuba  
 We honor you, *Aboju Agberegede*  
 Who divined for Osun, the wealthy and gorgeous one  
 The owner of beautifully beaded comb  
 The one who stays in hiding  
 To weaken the sacrifices of other *orisa*  
 It divined for the sixteen principal divinities  
 They rose up immediately  
 And went to Olodumare.  
 Olodumare greeted them and  
 Asked of their seventeenth person.  
 Olodumare asked them "Why don't you  
 Consult with her?" They replied,  
 "It was because she was only a female among them."  
 Olodumare said, "May it not be so!  
 Osun is a manly woman."  
 Olodumare said,  
 "Boribori, their diviner in Iragberi,  
 He is a divination apprentice of Osun  
 Egba, their diviner in Ilukan  
 He is a divination apprentice of Osun  
 Ese, who is their diviner in Ijebu Ere  
 He is a divination apprentice of Osun  
 Atomu, their diviner in the town of Ikire  
 He is a divination apprentice of Osun  
 These divinities  
 They allow a person to trade  
 They allow a person to make gains;  
 But they do not allow the person to carry the gains  
 home."  
 Olodumare said, "What you were ignorant of  
 Is what you now know.  
 Go back into the world, and consult Osun  
 In whatever you embark upon  
 Whatever then you lay your hands on

Will continue to prosper."  
 When they got to the world  
 They began to consult Osun for their plans.  
 Normalcy returned to the world.  
 Cities began to witness peace and tranquility.  
 They began to praise Osun thus:  
 "One who has a store for brass on a big shelf  
 One who generously appeases her children with brass  
 My mother, she who accepts ritual offerings with  
     drumming (and dancing)  
*Ota* (Osun's stone)! *Omi* (waters)! *Edan* (brass figures)!  
 Awura! Olu! Agbaja!  
 The ever-present counselor at their decision-making  
     meetings.  
*Ladekoju!* The Gracious Mother, Osun!"  
 (Ogunbile 2000)

This account brings to the fore two important motifs. First, Olodumare recognized and by implication endorsed the complementary roles of male and female humans, preferring that the male deities go back and make peace with Osun. Second, Osun possesses the ability to effect and affect the power that activates the life force (Badejo 1996); hence, she could render all normal life processes immobile. There is no doubt, therefore, that the normative account of Yoruba cosmology, which gives the female no role in the process of creation, fails to tell the whole story. The prevailing cosmology myths among the Yoruba reflect a latent patriarchal coloring that does not tally with the historic Yoruba cosmic experience, which makes room for male and female principles. Alternative traditions are often not taken seriously, and traditions susceptible to new interpretations are ignored. This is usually for subjective reasons that serve sectarian interest and that inadvertently seek to hide the fact that woman played positive and important roles in these accounts. It is thus appropriate to question cosmological accounts currently presented in Yorubaland. A hermeneutics of suspicion may be required when dealing with Yoruba religious texts. A reexamination from the feminist perspective may reveal that the primary agent in the cosmology process to whom Olodumare delegated authority may well have been a woman (Oduduwa). In fact, the feminine principle is primary to cosmogony and cosmology in religious traditions worldwide. Rather than being strange, therefore, female leadership would actually be regarded as the norm. The

import of this story for women's roles in Yoruba religion manifests in the leadership roles they play. Nevertheless, tension between the male and female is a common feature of Yoruba religion, and this could have informed stipulations put in place to restrict women's participation in some aspects of Yoruba religion. This notwithstanding, cosmological myths constitute rich sources of information on Yoruba gender relations and remain an undisputed model for women's empowerment in Yorubaland.

### Goddesses and Cultural Heroines

Goddesses have been objects of worship throughout world religions. Some scholars trace goddess worship to the fact that human societies were initially matriarchal, becoming patriarchal only with the advent of warfare. Scholars like J.B. Townsend (Bernard 2000), J.J. Bachofen, K. Max, F. Engel, and R. Briffault (Eliade 1987) belong to this group. Another group of scholars maintain that the patriarchal family was the original human social unit (Eliade 1987). Attempts have also been made to link goddess worship and the psyche of women and to explain how women, especially mothers, are viewed in society. Freud postulates that goddess worship represents the universal unconscious fantasies characteristic of a stage in early psychic development in which the mother seems to the child to be all-powerful.<sup>2</sup> Further, Neumann identifies four manifestations of the great mother to which he links goddess worship. These are the good mother (childbearing, vegetation mysteries, and rebirth); the terrible mother (death, dismemberment, sickness, and extinction); the positive transformative goddess (wisdom, vision, ecstasy, and inspiration mysteries); and the negative transformative mother (rejection, deprivation, madness, and impotence) (Eliade 1987). Although some of these theories may be inadequate to explain goddess worship, some are not only relevant but also crucial to any examination of the phenomenon in contemporary situations. There are similarities in goddess worship across cultures, just as there are differences. This is understandable, because each goddess and her worship is the product of a given culture.

Common themes in goddess worship include the notions of purity and fertility. Motherhood is another central theme in goddess worship, and is based on the assumption that the mother constitutes the source of spiritual and carnal life in human society. Closely intertwined with this notion is the conception of goddesses

as sources of fertility of all kinds. This link between goddesses and fertility is a logical extension of Western intellectual traditions, which identify matter as female and the mind (which is deemed superior) as male (Benard 2000). Not all goddesses are attached to the Earth, however, as evidenced by the Egyptian goddess Nut, a sky deity; the Japanese Shinto goddess Amaterasu, a sun deity; and the Yoruba goddess of wind and storms, Oya (Gleason 1987). Healing in its broadest sense is another common theme associated with goddess worship, probably because of the accessibility and nurturing qualities of mothers, who are the source of all life. Some goddesses do manifest anger and violence, and this is reflected in the discussion of goddess worship across cultures. When this occurs, the womb of the Earth from which all life proceeds is inverted to function as the tomb to which all returns. It is worth noting, however, that these classifications are not cast in iron, for the same goddess can manifest contrasting features on different occasions in a given culture.

There has been a resurgence of interest in goddess worship and its implication for the field of religious studies in general and women's studies in particular. There has been a parallel shift of focus in the scholarship of religion from the Western religious traditions to world religions. This last shift may be responsible for the increased interest in goddess traditions (Benard 2000). Moreover, the increase in the number of female scholars of religion, which has resulted in a serious consideration of goddess tradition and women's experiences in religious encounters cannot be ignored. Worthy of mention is the fact that appreciation for the goddess tradition has resulted in the emergence of a different set of categories for evaluating the place of the female principle in religious studies. These categories recognize both the cultural parameters within which accounts of goddesses or female principles in religions are considered and the complexities embedded in the goddess tradition and its study. Complexities such as differences in perceptions and the diverse origins of goddesses and methodologies employed in their worship have made a reassessment of the whole enterprise of goddess worship mandatory.

Goddess tradition is an important realm for understanding Yoruba gender issues. Goddess worship is a feature of Yoruba religion underscored by the people's conception of gender relations, which is essentially complementary. Deities are real personalities to the Yoruba, because they participate in the daily living of the people. To a certain extent, deities are as dependent on the people

as the people are dependent on them. According to Mbiti (1969), divinities are creatures of God or deified national heroes who are associated with God and often stand for His [sic] activities or manifestations. The Yoruba recognize different classes of divinities, however, including the deified and primordial divinities as well as personified natural phenomena (Awolalu 1979: 20). Goddesses in Yorubaland are represented in all of these classifications. The Yoruba recognize seventeen primordial deities, Osun being the only female. Deified deities among the Yoruba include Ayelala, Oya, Otin, and Orosen. The majority of Yoruba goddesses are manifestations of the personification of natural phenomena, especially rivers, streams, and the ocean. A study of goddesses would provide us with tools for evaluating and analyzing the position of women in Yoruba religion as well as assist our analysis of the inherent gender dynamics in the tradition. Selected examples of goddesses in Yoruba religion shall engage our attention presently.

#### Osun: The Goddess of Cool Waters

Osun, a river goddess, is personified in the Osun River, which runs across Osogbo but originated at Igede-Ekiti, in Ekiti State, Nigeria.<sup>3</sup> Osun River, which forms a confluence with the Oba and Asejire rivers, holds the primordial water used by Orisanla to soften the clay with which the physical figures of humans were fashioned. She manifests complex personalities as a spiritual being, a human, and a natural phenomenon. These become understandable in the light of the Yoruba cosmological perception, which views all elements, seen and unseen, as possessing two basic characteristics: a primordial existence and a composite of both human and spiritual elements. It is therefore possible to examine Osun in her primordial existence as well as her human and goddess personalities.

Osun as a goddess represents the sacred dimension of waters; she is thus essential to the daily lives of both humans and the deities. Just as water is necessary for sustaining human life, every divinity shrine in Yorubaland has water stored in clay pots for different reasons; and such waters represent Osun because *omi gbogbo l'Osun* (all waters represent Osun) as a Yoruba adage goes. In addition, Osun is perceived as the creative spirit and the spiritual dimension to pregnancy and childbirth because the human body is mainly constituted of water. Moreover Osun's fertility qualities guarantee people their only hope of immortality. The

importance of this singular quality cannot be over-emphasized in a culture such as the Yoruba, where the utmost significance is accorded to procreation. Osun's central role as a source of creative ability is illustrated by the many people who visit her shrine from far and near either to ask for the favor of a child or to give thanks for the gift of children. She is a benevolent goddess whose epithet is "one with lots of children" (*olomoyoyo*). She is a mother and giver of children, yet she has connections to other roles as well, having engaged in cloth dying and hair dressing, hence her praise name, *alaro* (one who dyes) and *olooya iyun* (one with the comb of precious bead). In addition, she is the leader of the *Iya mi* group (society of powerful women). She also has access to varied grades and types of power as a result of marriages to her deity husbands. In the same vein, Osun is the goddess who heals in the broadest sense both her adherents and all who take her waters. To this group of people, the water of Osun is *agbo* (herbal concoction). This is explicitly stated in a Yoruba song:

*Seleru agbo, agbara agbo*  
*L'osun fi nwo 'mo re*  
*Ki dokita o to de*

Translation:

Concoction from the ground like a brook  
 A flood of concoction  
 Is what Osun used for healing children  
 Long before the advent of Western medicine (doctors).

In addition, her healing qualities reflect in some verses of her praise poem (*oriki*):

Her eyes sparkle in the forest,  
 Like the sun on the river.  
 She is the wisdom of the forest  
 She is the wisdom of the river.  
 Where the doctor failed  
 She cures with fresh water.  
 Where the medicine is impotent  
 She cures with cool water.  
 She cures the child  
 And does not charge the father. (Beier 1980: xiii)

In addition to her fertility capabilities, Osun also possesses divination knowledge through which she offers help to her devotees, advising them about their destiny and helping them to overcome any obstacle to its full realization. Being the only female of the seventeen primordial deities sent to the Earth by Olodumare, Osun undoubtedly wields enormous powers in the actualization of physical and spiritual elements in the cosmos. These powers she makes available to her devotees, who believe that no worshipper of Osun could lack any good thing in life. Good things in the Yoruba parlance always fall into three groups: children, wealth, and longevity.

As noted earlier, Osun was the only female of the seventeen *Irunmole* sent to Earth by Olodumare to equip the Earth for human habitation. Osun's position among the *Irunmole* as one female in the midst of sixteen male deities does not give a fair appraisal of her importance. This is because the position of Osun is both literal and symbolic: she represents both the female principle and women in the cosmic enterprise. Although the ratios are not favorable, the symbolic import is considerable. Moreover, though the myth referred to here is patriarchal in character, the feminist concern and the need for gender equity is nonetheless apparent. Osun is the leader of women in the Yoruba thought system as depicted in the Osetura chapter of the Ifa corpus. Myths show her as a motivator of women for action (Bascom 1969: 413–419). She is also a goddess who fights and consequently protects her adherents and all who seek her protection. This is explicit in her praise poem, where she is described as a fighter:

*Obinrin gbona, okunrin n sa*  
*O tori ogun o da irungbon si*  
*Agegun s'oro*  
*O gbamugbamu, obinrin*  
*Ko see gbamu*

Translation:

Hot woman who blocks the road (by flooding it)  
 And causes men to run. She keeps her beard  
 Because of war. One who in fury causes troubles and chaos.  
 The powerful and huge woman  
 Who cannot be captured.

A recent example of this was the miraculous rescue of Iyanda Olayiwola-Olosun, an Osun priest who was kidnapped from Ondo,

where he was an apprentice. When his kidnappers took him to the forest to kill him, Osun appeared wearing a red dress, accompanied by many of her servants, to save him. The red color of Osun's dress was a deep red that one gets by dying cloths with indigo, which is to be expected since Osun is *alaro* (one who dyes). At the appearance of Osun, the kidnappers were rendered immobile. Osun instructed the kidnapped boy to walk in front of her but not to turn around. After only some minutes, the young man found himself near the palace in Osogbo. Osun touched him on the shoulders and left him with the words, "greet people at home." The young man was thereafter reconciled with his worried family, who had appealed to Osun for his safety.<sup>4</sup> Osun's powers are also evident in the use of Osun's water to detect liars and evildoers. Suspects are required to drink water in which *ota* (Osun's stone) has been placed. The belief is that a guilty party would swell up with water and die, but the innocent would remain healthy. Osun is thus an enterprising woman who protects and bestows wealth on her adherents. She is described as a manly woman because she displays features assumed of males in the community.

#### Otin: The Goddess of Defense

Otin, a river goddess, is personified in the river Otin located in the Odo-Otin local government area of Osun state, Nigeria. Towns where she is worshipped include Okuku, Ijabe, Igbaye, Inisa, Okua, and Eekosin. She has both a human existence and a spiritual one. As a goddess, she is perceived as a power that protects the people against any pending danger. According to mythical accounts, she prevented the town of Okuku from being invaded by enemies, and this marked the beginning of her worship. She is described in her praise poem:

*Mo bere, mo dotun poro*  
*Ajifoluke, o rin gboro*  
*O ya olu omo*  
*Arun-run roun s'ole*  
*Omo laalu, a wi bee 'se bee*

Translation:

I squat on the floor and  
 Became new, one who blesses

And pampers early in the morning  
 One who walks upright  
 One who is herself a choice child  
 Who is equipped to stem the lazy one  
 The child of Laalu who fulfills promises.

Her adherents are convinced that she bestows prosperity, good health, as well as longevity on them. Though she protects with her water, there are no records of her anger either in form of floods or as a means to detect liars, as is the case with Osun.<sup>5</sup> It is also interesting to note that no one could recall the Otin River ever overflowing its boundaries. Otin is perceived as the owner of wealth and as possessing the ability to grant great sales to her merchant devotees. She assisted the two male founders of Okuku to defeat their enemies, thereby ensuring a long period of peace for Okuku town. Her action is especially remarkable as she is an indigene of Otan and not Okuku. Otin was a warrior who defended her people against attacks, just as she does for her adherents today. Otin is worshiped weekly and yearly in these towns. Otin is an example of a goddess who exhibits leadership qualities and braveness. Her presence made the necessary difference in the polity of Okuku, and she is remembered for this even today.

#### Oya: The Goddess of Wind and Storms

The goddess of wind, storms, and the edge, Oya possesses dual identity, like other goddesses. She exhibits a human as well as a spiritual existence, her full name being Oya Akanbi.<sup>6</sup> Both history and myth concur that Oya was an indigene of Ira, a small town near Offa, in Kwara state, Nigeria. As a goddess, she could be benevolent or malevolent. She is highly unpredictable but seeks to maintain balance in a given situation, a process that is crucial to the Yoruba cosmic perception (Gleason 1987). Oya is believed to possess mysterious powers (*oogun*), which she acquired from her maternal family in Nupe land (Ile Tapa) across the Niger River (*Odo Oya*). Oya's mysterious powers make her a powerful woman described in Yoruba parlance as *obinrin bi okunrin* meaning "a woman like a man." Oya fights with thunderbolts like her earthly husband Sango. Liars and thieves dread her shrine, for she deals with them decisively; she is thus a custodian of morality in the community. Oya also gives children and wealth to her adherents, just as she

protects them from all dangers. These children are given names such as Oyabunmi (Oya's gift to me), Oyafunke (Oya entrusts to my care), Oyafemi (Oya loves me), and Oyawale (Oya comes home). Devotees appeal to her for help in crises period and attest to her effective assistance.

A consideration of the three goddesses discussed above would suggest that the construction of gender among the Yoruba is fluid and complementary. Females could exhibit features assumed of males and vice versa. Similarly, a goddess could manifest characteristics assumed of males and females at once. The prevailing notion is the necessity for balance and interdependency.

## Goddesses and Sovereignty

I will now examine the religious, political, and economic significance of some goddesses among the Yoruba. It is particularly interesting that many Yoruba goddesses are water deities. Examples of other Yoruba women who wielded considerable powers and influenced sovereignty in Yoruba towns are also recorded in the people's oral texts.

### Osun and Sovereignty in Osogbo

The Osogbo origin account gives a prominent place to Osun, who was in charge of the area before the advent of the immigrants who later settled there. The founding of Osogbo town clearly shows how myth becomes a vehicle for meaning and identity for a group of people (Ogungbile 2000). Olarooye, a prince of Owate in Ipole-Omu, a town near Osogbo, and Oguntimehin, a hunter of elephants, were on hunting expedition when they discovered the Osun River. They thereafter abandoned their expedition to announce the good news to people at Ipole, who were undergoing a period of draught at this time. While clearing the bush and felling trees in preparation for erecting buildings, a tree fell into the Osun River. An angry female voice immediately accused the people of breaking all her dying pots, saying, "*Oso igbo o, gbogbo ikoko aro mi ni e ti fo tan o*" meaning "wizards of the forest, you have broken all my dyeing pots." The name Osogbo is believed to be a derivative from her accusing label for the people, "*oso igbo*" (wizard of the forest), on this occasion. After much consultation and apology, Osun instructed

the people to move uphill and settle at a spot to be shown to them by some signs from the goddess. Osun presented Larooeye, the ruler, with a fish, which he received with his hands stretched out, described by the people as “*o te wo gb’eja*” (he received the fish with outstretched hands) from which the king’s title, *Ataoja* is derived. Osogbo therefore enjoys a special relationship with the Osun goddess, as is reflected in the elaborate worship festival held for her annually by the people.

In her human existence, Osun was a beautiful woman, wealthy and industrious. Osun was a fighter as well; it is on record that during the Fulani wars for the spread of Islam in Yorubaland in the 18th century, she hawked poisonous vegetables to the invaders who tried to raid Osogbo. The result of this was that the soldiers started passing loose stool and become weak, which led to their eventual defeat. Osogbo was thus rescued from the invasion of Islam and subjugation by Islamic forces.<sup>7</sup> Worthy of note also is the special relationship between the *Ataoja* of Osogbo and the Osun goddess. The king confessed that without the support of Osun (and by implication, women), he could not rule successfully.<sup>8</sup> The king represents a patriarchal structure but owes his first allegiance to Osun and those who represent her, who most often than not are women. The king is required to sit on the ancient stool on which Larooeye sat at the inception of Osogbo during the annual Osun festival, signifying a reenactment of the pact between Osun and the founders of Osogbo. Osun therefore occupies an important position in the sovereignty of Osogbo, and she is appreciated for this continually.

#### Otin and Sovereignty in Okuku

Myth states that Okuku town suffered reported invasions from its neighbors but that two men and a woman, named Oke Agbona, Oloku, and Otin, respectively, usually fought these wars. Otin was, however, not an indigene of Okuku: unlike the two men, she only came there to assist them against the enemies. Two attacks after her arrival on the scene convinced the enemy of Okuku’s invincibility, and the attacks ceased. When Otin realized that she had achieved her aim for the town, she returned to her hometown, Otan. The two men pleaded with her not to go, but she refused. She promised, however, to return to Okuku whenever she was ready to get married. Not long after this, one of the men, Oke Agbonna, died. An-

other brave man called Enle or Erinle replaced him. Erinle became so famous that Otin heard about him at Otan and decided to come and see him for herself. She found Erinle at Okuku, confirmed his prowess, and later married him. Otin was from a wealthy family prior to her marriage and served as helper and companion to her husband, who barred her from any domestic duties as a mark of his love. After some time they quarreled, and consequently Otin left her husband's house for the center of Okuku town, where she became a river. As a river, she shielded the people from enemy attack and thus began her worship in the area. Presently she is worshipped not only in Okuku but also in the surrounding towns, whose people are attracted by her benevolent characteristics. In this story, Otin fulfilled all the culturally defined roles for a woman as a wife and mother, but in addition she is also portrayed as a fighter, warrior, and saviour. She came to Okuku as a stranger and became a deity and protector of the people. Other examples of cultural heroines are Pupupu of Ondo (Olupona 1991) and Moremi of Ile-Ife (Awe 1992).

As the above discourse suggests, goddesses, and by extension, women (Eliade 1958: 421), have been active contributors to the Yoruba polity throughout history. They were not a subservient and oppressed group who only functioned in the domestic sphere. Attributes and roles played by these goddesses reinforce the multiplicity that attends the Yoruba construction of gender. Goddesses are presented as warriors and mothers at once, which reflect the people's bid to maintain balance by accommodating and reconciling all contraries.

### Goddesses, Marriage, and Power Relations

Yoruba philosophy is permeated with the idea that what is seen is a representation of the unseen. In the Yoruba worldview, therefore, it is logical that since humans marry, so too do deities. Yoruba goddesses have husbands with or from whom they acquire or exercise powers. The practice of polygamy is also a feature of such marriages; envy, jealousy, and struggles for a husband's favor are known to occur between some goddesses who are co-wives as well. Essential to an understanding of the gender dynamics of these marriages is the definition and use of power. Most goddesses possess certain powers, which they may use in conjunction with their husbands or which they may augment with their husband's powers. Some of the goddesses exercised powers on behalf of their

husbands; others utilized their powers independently. In other instances, a goddess outwits her husband in the use of power. These observations present us with interesting inferences concerning gender dynamics in Yoruba religion, rooted in the base of the people's cosmology. For example, to what extent do goddesses and their marriages influence the marriage relations of women? Is there any possibility that the conduct of goddesses in their marriages influenced the assumed or accepted conduct of women in marriages in Yorubaland? But most importantly, what inferences do these goddess marriages provide for a construction of gender and power relations in the Yoruba socio-cultural setting, both in the past and present? How may we appropriate these for future analysis of these same concepts among the people? We shall attempt to proffer reactions to some if not all of these questions during our examination of some of these marriages.

Osun was married at different times to at least three deities: Ogun, Sango, and Orunmila (some have suggested Obatala as well). Her marriage to Ogun (the god of iron) was probably short, for legend has it that she eventually eloped with Sango.<sup>9</sup> Nonetheless, she did acquire some powers from Ogun. Being a warrior, Ogun needed potent *oogun*<sup>10</sup> to succeed in war. It was the duty of Osun, his wife, to take care of these *oogun*, and inevitably she came to know some of the secrets concerning the *oogun*. When she eloped with Sango, she took with her some of these *oogun*. Ogun pursued the two lovers, and a fight ensued, during which Osun told Sango to leave the battle to her. The fight was therefore between Osun and Ogun, with Osun using those powers given to her by Ogun. At the end of the encounter, both of them split into pieces, and this is why we find the worship of the two deities all over Yorubaland. Ogun as the god of iron is involved with forging and creating implements of iron, just as Osun is involved in acts of creation through procreation. In addition, Ogun's implements are used to till the ground for agricultural purposes, which could be linked to fertility, an attribute of Osun, who bestows fertility on both the human and nature. The Yoruba notion of women as the source of fertility is thus reinforced here. Osun was believed to be a very beautiful woman. She eloped with a lover and also used her husband's power against him, which presents her as a disloyal wife. The Yoruba record in proverbs their conviction that women are traitors (*odale*), and the more beautiful the woman is, the more dangerous (*eni fe arewa fe iyonu*). Osun's marriage to Ogun, however, shows her as an independent woman who took necessary

actions as occasion demanded and did not shy away from the responsibilities arising from her decisions.

Osun's marriage to Sango placed her in a polygamous setting, where she had to struggle for favor with her co-wives, Oya and Oba, both goddesses also. Sango is the god of thunder and lightning, after which comes the rain (by implication, water, which is Osun). Her relations with her co-wives reflect to some extent the situation in Yoruba polygamous settings. One of the legends states that Osun was a very good cook, whereas Oba was not. Oba asked Osun for the secret of her good cooking, which always won her the favor of their husband, Sango. Osun told Oba that her ear, which was bound due to a wound, was actually bound because she had cut her ear and used it to prepare Sango's food and that was the secret of her good cooking. Oba, willing to do anything to get Sango's favor, cut her own ear and used it in preparing soup. When she brought the food to Sango, he asked her about her bounded ear, which she confessed to using for the soup. Sango chased her away with the dish.<sup>11</sup> Such squabbles are everyday occurrences in Yoruba polygamous settings. Could this be a replica of the situation with the goddesses?

Osun was also married to Orunmila (the god of wisdom). She received the *Eerindinlogun*, sixteen cowries divination system from Orunmila. The *Eerindinlogun* divination knowledge and her leadership of the *Iya mi* group bestows on her tremendous power, which she employs in either sustaining or disrupting essential life forces, depending on circumstances. Her marriage to Orunmila thus underscores her connection to the cult of divination among the Yoruba. The *Eerindinlogun*, which she received from Orunmila, offers direct access to herbs and roots (*ewe ati egbo*). These are crucial to any attempt at healing or restoration among the Yoruba. An explanation for this has been located in Osun's leadership role in the *Iya mi* group (Ogungbile 2000). Hence, while other diviners have to pay homage to the *Iya mi* group through offerings and sacrifices for the efficacy of herbs and roots used, *Eerindinlogun* practitioners, because of their position in relation to Osun, do not need to undergo these processes. Worthy of mention is the labeling of these *Eerindinlogun* practitioners as wives of Osun (irrespective of their sex). Osun, a goddess, thus has wives just as the *omo-osu* (male and female members of a natal compound), is regarded as a husband to all the wives in the extended family among the Yoruba. Osun's marriage to Orunmila is thus a case of the wife acquiring power from the husband and utilizing it for the good of the community.

Emanating from Osun's many marriages, as discussed above, is the dual perspective from which the Yoruba view women, positive and negative. This ambivalent posture is one of the factors that compel a continuous need for maintaining balance among the people.

Oya had only one marriage, and this was to Sango (some postulate an earlier marriage to Ogun). She was Sango's favorite wife and the envy of his other wives. Her native town was Ira, whereas her mother was from Nupeland (*Ile Tapa*). It is believed that she acquired potent magical powers from her maternal relations in Nupe land anytime she visited, which was often. Usually while returning from such trips, she would test some of these magical powers at the river Niger, and this is why the river is known as Oya River (odo Oya).<sup>12</sup> There is a contention in Ira, at least, that it is unclear if Oya got some of her powers from Sango or if it was Sango who got some of his powers from Oya. Whichever the case may be, it seems clear that both had independent powers before the marriage but exercised complementary powers as a result of their union. Two different accounts of the marital relations of Oya and Sango substantiate this complementary power relation. The first said that Sango had a powerful medicine that made fire come out of his mouth; he gave some to Oya for safe-keeping. Rather than keep it, Oya ate the remaining part given to her to keep. The result was that she could also spit fire, just like her husband (Beier 1980: 28). The second account states that Oya married Sango on the condition that he would keep her secret of being an animal, an antelope. She became Sango's favorite and was greatly envied by his other wives, who eventually got Oya's secret from Sango. They used it against her, and she fled into the bush as an antelope. Sango apologized and made peace with her, but she refused to return. She promised Sango, however, that whenever he was in need, he should strike the two horns, which she had given to him, and she would come to his aid (Beier 1980: 33). Yoruba complementary gender and power relations are exemplified here, relations that are replicated on the social plane among the people.

### Women and Sacred Kingship

Now, we turn to the relationship between women and sacred kingship in Yoruba religion. Women's roles in sacred kingship include female rulers, chiefs, and regents. Records of female rulers have recently been identified by some scholars from the king list

presented by Johnson (1921), which assumed the maleness of all Yoruba rulers (Oyewumi 1999, Olaniyan et al. 1992). Examples include Alafin Orompoto (female ruler of Oyo town in Oyo state, Nigeria), and Ooni Luwo (female ruler of Ile-Ife). Information on these rulers are, however, still scanty and requires further research by scholars.

Yoruba societies are managed by hierarchical structures. At the apex of such hierarchies is the king or chief. The king is the embodiment of all spiritual power and material authority and is second only to the deities of the land; hence, he is described as "*iku Baba, Yeye, ekeji orisa.*"<sup>13</sup> In traditional pre-European contact settings, he was the owner of the land, and nothing could be done concerning the physical land and in the town without his permission. Though this is no longer true, the king continues to wield some influence on whatever happens within his domain, as is illustrated by the prescription in some towns that a specified part of any animal killed for festive ceremonies be given to the king. Irrespective of his age, the king is the father of all inhabitants of that town and usually stays at the palace (*aafin*). He governs the town with the assistance of female and male chiefs appointed from the various quarters in the town. Female chiefs are representatives of the women in any given setting, as well as being accomplished personalities. They act as links between the ruler and women in the town; hence, demands and grievances are channeled through them, both ways. Female chiefs in Yoruba towns include the *Iyalode*, the *Iyaloja* and their lieutenants. For illustrative purposes, however, I will discuss a female chief, Yeyesaloro of Ilesa, in Osun State, Nigeria. My choice is informed by the possibility of classifying the present occupant of this office as a chief and an *onisegun*, (medicine woman), not by training but by a gift given at birth.

### Women as Chiefs

The contemporary Yeye Saloro of Ilesa, Osun State, is Mrs. Abebi Kila, a remarkable woman who could be described as an achiever in life. Her office implies a mood of festivity on a daily basis. She is expected to be gaily dressed at all times. She is a powerful Yoruba traditional woman, and this is underscored by her mode of birth. Her mother gave birth to her at the age of fifty-two years, seventeen years after her last child. Her mother's waiting period also marked the waiting period for all the women in her

grandfather's compound. The other women started getting pregnant only after her mother became pregnant with her. At birth, she had a leaf in each hand, which was puzzling to people around. As a toddler, she prescribed herbs that were effective remedies for illnesses, no matter how serious. According to her, she could not recollect this stage of her life, but was told of these events by her parents and neighbors. Sometimes when a case is to be brought to her, she is given the prior knowledge and the remedies required for the case in a dream. In recognition of her healing gifts, she is also the *Otun Iyalode iseegun* (assistant to *Iyalode iseegun*) of Oyo State and the *Iyalode iseegun* (leader of medicine women) in Osun State. She claims to have cured diverse illnesses like hypertension, asthma, diabetes, and barrenness; she thus possesses intuitive herbal knowledge, which is not the result of training. Her jurisdiction as *Yeye Saloro* (title meaning perpetual celebrations) previously extended to the entire Ijesaland but is presently limited to Ilesa city. This is because smaller towns around Ilesa used to be under the jurisdiction of the Owa of Ilesa (the ruler of Ilesa), a situation that has since changed. She is a member of the ruling council and like all chiefs in the city, is required to correct all wrongs when she can and to ensure the peace and harmony of the community.<sup>14</sup>

### Women as Regents

There is an abrupt interlude to the assistance rendered by the chiefs to the king in the administration of the community at the death of the king. The period between the death of a king and the appointment of another is a crucial transition in the Yoruba polity. In some Yoruba towns, this transition period is placed under the authority of a female regent. She is often the first daughter of the dead king. It is difficult to state precisely when the institution of regency began in Yorubaland; it is, however, clear that regents have been appointed for as long as the kingship institution has existed in some parts of Yorubaland. A regent could be male as is true of Aramoko-Ekiti and Igbole-Ekiti towns, or female as is the case in Ado-Ekiti and Ikare towns. Opinions vary as to why some prefer female regents to male regents. Some posit that a male regent may refuse to relinquish power to the new king due to the lure of power, whereas the female regent more often than not sees the position as a restriction on her movement and conduct and consequently hands over power to the new king in all eagerness.

During her tenure, the regent is subjected to many ritual and cultural taboos, but she also holds the ultimate authority on all issues in her domain as the ruler. She oversees the governing council and amicably settles whatever crises may arise in the town. She dons the regalia of the dead king (her father) and is accorded all the respect due a king. As the ruler of the town, she becomes the husband of all royal wives (*ayaba*) except her mother, and as a result of this, she caters to the needs of members of the extended family as well as administering family properties. I spoke with one of the former regents in Ikare town in Yorubaland, the first daughter of Oba Amusa Momoh 111, the 19th Olukare of Ikare, who reigned for twenty years. The informant is now Mrs. Olufunmilayo Momoh-Fabiyi, but she was unmarried during her tenure as a regent. She was installed as a regent on March 9, 1976; her father died on February 26, 1976. She dressed in her father's apparel throughout her tenure. She was in charge of family properties and cared for the needs of every member of the Momoh family. While on the throne as king, she was given a cloak embedded with power (*bante agbara*), which she puts on before dressing. She could not, however, wear the cloak while menstruating. She had different types of crowns for different occasions. Her wardrobe and food were taken care of by royal wives; her mother played little or no role during her tenure as king. She met with the town people every nine days for deliberations on any pending issue. Taboos to be observed by the regent during and after her tenure include prohibition from kneeling or bowing to anyone; in addition, she may not carry anything on her head for life nor engage in any hard labor, she may not eat publicly nor leave her head uncovered, and she is not to touch a dead body. She may advise the reigning king at any time on any issue concerning the welfare of the town. In some cases, the regent and the new king are forbidden ever to see each other, whereas in other towns, both the regent and the new king rejoice together and exchange gifts.<sup>15</sup>

An appraisal of the institution of regency among the Yoruba reveals some dynamics of power and gender relations. The regent, though female, is husband to the royal wives, yet king and head of the family at once. She is in charge as the ruler with ultimate authority, but this does not obliterate the fact that she needs the support of the council of chiefs to rule effectively. She is given the cloak of power, which makes power available to her, but she may not put on the cloak while menstruating. Menstruation may be perceived on a dual plane in the Yoruba thought system. On the

one hand, it is seen as being contaminating, something that defiles and depletes energy forces, especially in sacred settings. On the other hand, it is regarded as a vehicle of power, because embedded in it is potential life. It should therefore be kept away from any other source, as a clash of "powers" may give explosive results. The imperative need for balance maintenance is again reinforced here as a continuous process that is subject to constant evaluation. The ultimate aim remains the need to maintain balance and complementary gender and power relations in every sector of the polity. The institution of regency could also be indicative of a matriarchal society prior to the establishment of patriarchy as the prevailing system in Yorubaland (Belasco 1980: 96).

We may surmise, then, that goddesses and their worship in Yorubaland constitute a rich source of material on which to base an analysis of gender and power relations. Because goddesses also represent the female principle in religion, a fresh perspective on gender roles emanates from consideration of their personalities and marriages. Most of these goddesses represent a strong female principle. They are contributors, not just women who are dictated to, and these roles influence the paradigm of analysis concerning gender and power relations among their devotees as well. As with other spheres of Yoruba life, no clear division between spiritual and physical categories is possible, even when engaging in gender analysis. This overlap explains the merger between every other sphere of Yoruba life and the religious. Consequently, any analysis of gender in Yorubaland should necessarily give religion a prime place. Goddess tradition constitutes one of the prime sources within Yoruba religion, providing important information on the people's cosmic perceptions concerning gender.

CHAPTER  
FIVE



## Women and Rituals in Yoruba Religion

### Introduction

Ritual as a phenomenon has been described in different ways as a consequence of the multifarious lenses through which it is observed. Some scholars have opined that ritual could be seen as being behavioral and effecting transformation. In this regard ritual is conceived of as “a kind of symbol, they communicate deeper meanings, often through subtle and implicit messages” (Wuthnow 1987). On the other hand, some postulate that ritual creates its own meaning in its performance rather than ritual being a symbolic idea of the divine. This group of scholars extols the performance of rituals above the “why” and “how” because for them, ritual lives by its performance. Furthermore, theories about the components and characteristics of ritual abound within and outside the field of religious studies. Notable among these is the classification of ritual by A.F.C. Wallace (1966), who delineates five types of rituals according to their functions: technological rituals aiming to control nonhuman nature through divination, agricultural, and protective rites; ideology rituals that foster control of social groups through rites of passage, rites for renewing group solidarity, and the observance of taboos; therapy and anti-therapy rituals manifested in curing rites, witchcraft, or sorcery; salvation rituals including possession rites, mystic rites, and expiation rites that enable people to cope with different problems in life; and revitalization rituals meant to cure societal differences and identity crises. But as has been rightly noted by Zuesse (1987), these

classifications are inevitably prone to overlap, because rituals are difficult to place in compartments. Zuesse presents an alternative dual classification of transformatory and confirmatory rituals. Also, Emile Durkheim offered a simpler system that included two broad classifications of rituals: the positive (sacrificial rites) and the negative (rites that separate the sacred from the profane) (Eliade 1987). Worthy of mention is the recent development that has led to the call for a fresh look at ritual as a departure from its confinement to the status of an analytical tool (Bell 1992). Despite the difficulty of compartmentalizing rituals, scholars agree on certain defining characteristics. Ritual is bodily based; it is not an involuntary action but involves conscious efforts to reenact an occurrence informed by some symbols or archetypes. It is an action that assumes a precedent; it is something that needs to be renewed in the people's life experiences. The validity of rituals is undeniably intertwined with religion, though it is susceptible to interdisciplinary investigation. Worthy of note also is the close affinity between ritual, drama, and dance. Ritual is based on a preconceived plot and is informed by a style from previous experiences. Ritual and dance are interconnected in Yoruba religion, as is manifested on occasions of festivals and worship sessions.

Women and female principles have always had a prominent place in ritual enactment and in religion generally. More often than not this is predicated on women's reproductive status and sexuality. Notions emanating from women's fertility further underscore the importance of women and female principles in rituals. Consequently, young virgin girls are depicted as brides and votary maids to the deities. As virgins, these girls symbolize purity and piety vessels fit for the habitation of deities and qualified to carry within them energies emanating from the deities. As brides, they may approach the sacred space with no fear of contamination. In contrast, childbearing-age women are not allowed such liberty, due to the negative tag placed on menstrual blood. Rather, motherhood is extolled and elevated as the source and nurturing point for all humanity. This is appropriated in the ritual space to portray the importance of motherhood and consequently care-giving and sustenance at every level of the society. The fact that women's dominant metaphors derive entirely from their sexual and reproductive status seems obvious; what is unclear is why this should be and why it should remain so (Hoch-Smith et al. 1978: 2).

In African religion, ritual has been identified as the space in which the relationship between human and divine beings is expressed and achieved (Olupona 2000, Ray 1976). Ritual is the link between the physical and spiritual planes of living; it orders and reorders any tension or conflict between humans and deities (Abimbola 1997). Ritual, dance, and drama fuse in Yoruba ceremonies and festivals, serving social and religious purposes in the community. There is a blend of what was, is, and will be in the vehicle of ritual. Rituals are reenacted in rites of passage (puberty, marriage, naming ceremonies, and funerals), and festivals (Osun festival, Otin festival, Oke-Ibadan, and Ifa festivals). Women and the female principle feature prominently in these settings and within them gender dynamics are played out on a continuous basis.

In this chapter, I will examine gender relations in the ritual dimension of Yoruba religion. An attempt will be made to analyze gender relations as manifested in rites of passage, religious ceremonies, festivals, medicine and healing, esoteric knowledge, spirit possession, and divination.

## Rites of Passage

### Puberty

Puberty rites among the Yoruba are either situated in the institution of marriage or lead to it. Popularly referred to as becoming a man or woman (*O d' okunrin/obinrin*), these rites mark the moment at which an individual attains a status of responsibility. (S)he is thus expected to act responsibly in all capacities, irrespective of any constraints. Of special concern to this work is what it means for a Yoruba female to become a woman (*d'obinrin*). This almost always occurs on the occasion of the girl's wedding, which is usually post-menstrual. The Yoruba perceive menstruation as the conveyor of potential life and by extension, power. Prior to this period, the bride is expected to have been tutored in a means of livelihood, a trade, or vocation. In addition, her housekeeping and culinary skills should be beyond reproach, or she will be ridiculed and her mother blamed. These attributes are predicated on the Yoruba notion that "*olobe lo l'oko*" (the one with the best culinary competence owns the husband). She should have acquired some

knowledge of childcare also. On the eve of her wedding ceremony, the woman moves from the house of one relative to the other, reciting the bride's lamentation (*ekun iyawo*).<sup>1</sup> This lamentation is composed of the lineage/family praise names and records of exploits by members of the family/lineage. Her family/lineage praise names comprise of records of exploits by her ancestors from the maternal and paternal lineages, as explicated in one Yoruba saying, which states "*a ki ni ile baba, ki a ma ni ile iya*" meaning "it is impossible to have a paternal lineage without having a maternal lineage." This saying invariably refers to procreation as a joint venture for the female and the male. It may also be construed as a reference to the Yoruba preference for complementary gender relations. Consequently, the bride is presented in the family/lineage praise names as possessing an identity made up by a combination of attributes from the maternal and paternal lineages. In the lamentation of the bride we find some indications of the bride's trepidation about her new status and the implications of a changed residence among her in-laws. As she moves from one house to the other, relatives shower prayers and blessings of children and well-being on her. After the wedding, the bride is escorted to her marital home in the dark hours of that day by her friends and some of her "wives."<sup>2</sup> An elderly member of the husband's family receives the entourage at the entrance, and a wife in the family pours cold water on the bride's feet, signifying coolness (*ero*) and the "birth" of the bride into the husband's family.<sup>3</sup> The eldest in her entourage then hands her over to the eldest in the husband's house on behalf of the bride's family, with prayers of prosperity, long life, and many children. Thereafter, an elderly person, on whose lap she sits to show acceptance into the family, carries her into the house. Here we see a clear demonstration of the multiple paradigms employed for social structures among the Yoruba. The requirement at this stage is seniority and old age. Old age among the Yoruba is an indication of wisdom and experience, both of which are considered crucial elements for successful living. Also embedded within the notion of old age is the assumption of integrity and responsibility, which explains why the bride is handed over to the eldest in her marital family rather than to the bridegroom. The marriage may be consummated any time after this (the bride is expected to be a virgin, though the same is not required of the husband). For the next few weeks, the bride is exempt from any type of work. Rather, she dresses up gaily and visits her in-laws, some of whom give her

gifts and cash. The culmination of her becoming a woman is the birth of a baby after nine months; hence, the Yoruba say, "*eyin iyawo ko ni mo eni o,*" which translates "may the wife's back not get used to the mat"; this prayer wishes the bride pregnancy within the shortest period of time.

### Naming Ceremony

Naming ceremonies do not constitute the only source through which names are given to children. Some children are born with names from heaven. These are described as "*oruko amutorunwa*" meaning "names brought from heaven"; examples of these include Taiwo and Kehinde for twins, Dada for a child born with curly hair, and Ige for the child born with feet first. Some of these names are given to males and females with no distinction, whereas others are sex-specific. An example of a sex-specific name brought from heaven for the child born with his or her body covered with ruptured membranes is Salako (male) and Talabi (female) (Awolalu & Dopamu 1979). Irrespective of the names brought from heaven, however, all children are given names (*oruko abiso*), which they receive either on the ninth day (males) or the seventh day (female) in traditional Yoruba societies. Presently, however, all naming ceremonies for children, male and female occur on the eighth day. Naming ceremonies are occasions of great joy for everyone in the family and community, because children guarantee the continuity of the family line. Names given to children at these ceremonies are informed by circumstances in the family, village, and society at large. Economic, political, and social circumstances come to bear on the name given to a child. The ceremony usually takes place in the early hours of the day, though the prevalence of civil service jobs has necessitated holding these ceremonies after office working hours, between 5:00 and 7:00 p.m. In the traditional setting, the child is taken to the Ifa priest on the third day for a consultation known as "*ese ntaye*" (first foot in life). Here, the feet of the child are placed on the divining powder (*iyere osun*), and configurations dictated by the Odu (Ifa chapter) prescribed for the child are marked on the powder. Thereafter, taboo for the child and his or her expected path in life is made known to the parents by Ifa. Sacrifices may be offered, if prescribed, and all given prohibitions should be adhered to faithfully. On the eighth day, the naming ceremony

proper is done. Items used include honey (*oyin*), kolanut (*obi*), salt (*iyó*), alligator pepper (*atare*), bitter kola (*orogbo*), fish (*eja*), and water (*omi*), to mention but a few (Awolalu et al. 1979: 174). An elder in the family uses each of these items to pray for the newborn. Honey signifies sweetness of life, kola nut is to dispel evil, alligator pepper represents many children, bitter kola is for longevity, and fish is for resilience, whereas water signifies coolness and good human relations, for no one could afford enmity with water. We bathe in, cook with and drink water; it is thus an essential of life. The Yoruba express this succinctly thus, "*omi la bu we, omi labu mu, eni kan ki b'omi s'ota*" meaning "it is water we wash with, it is water we drink, none could afford enmity with water." Concomitantly, Ifa verses are employed to support this prayer, an example is here given of some verses of the Eji ogbe, (a chapter in Ifa) used for prayers on the occasion of a naming ceremony:

*A yo yo gun  
A yo yo gun  
A yo yo gun mo gun mo  
Lo d'ifa fun orunmila  
L'ajo ti nlo mu yo yo ra  
Awa ta a mu yo yo 'ra  
Oro ayo ni ko moo ba wa  
Oro ibanuje kan kii ba yo.<sup>4</sup>*

Translation:

Ayo yo gun  
Ayo yo gun  
A yo yo gun mo gun mo  
Divined for Orunmila  
On the day he was going to  
Cover himself with salt (sweetness)  
We who taste salt today  
Matters of joy will be our portions,  
Sorrow never befalls joy.

To this, everyone present would respond, "*ase*" (amen). This ceremony marks the initiation of the child into the societal web of relations as well as bestows an identity on her or him. As noted earlier, this ceremony has undergone some modification in Yorubaland recently. Items used for prayers during the occasion are

now informed by the religious tenets of the parents. Christians use fruits, and sometimes the Bible, whereas Muslims follow procedures laid down for the occasion in the Quran. The festive aspect of the occasion has, however, remained constant, because rejoicing at the birth of a baby is accommodated by all the religions. Songs of thanksgiving, dancing, and abundant feeding mark the occasion. Other ritual activities that may follow the naming ceremony are the creation of facial marks (*ila kiko*) and circumcision.

### Female Circumcision (Female Genital Surgeries)

Male circumcision is assumed to be a positive event worldwide, but the same cannot be said about female circumcision (female genital surgeries). In fact, the issue of female circumcision, popularly referred to as "genital mutilation," has been a bone of contention in recent times on the local and international planes. I will be concerned here mainly with what the people who are involved in the practice say about it, because I am persuaded that no meaningful evaluation of the situation could ignore this. To the Yoruba, this practice is part of an individual's identity in the same way that his or her name is. The Yoruba therefore perform circumcision on the female as well as the male. Further, the practice is as cultural as it is religious. This is because religion dictates the ritualistic use of objects or animals during circumcision. For example, before the operation is done, the tip of a snail is knocked off and its fluid made to flow on the altar of the family deity, to whom prayers are offered for the success of the operation. Specific families, known as *Oloola*, engage in the act of performing circumcision for children, which presupposes that the Yoruba to a large extent do not circumcise adults.<sup>5</sup> In fact, a Yoruba saying states that "*adagba kola, siso ni so*" ("any circumcision or marking done at adulthood is likely to be problematic"). These families pass down the profession from one generation to the other, though techniques are updated as times change. Practitioners are males and females, and they use certain herbs for local anesthesia and cauterization. In the modern period, equipment is sterilized using boiling water and mild antiseptics such as Milton liquid. International outcry about the practice of female circumcision especially in Africa has failed to yield expected results, because the people's reasons for the practice have been largely ignored or at best considered unworthy of serious attention. Insofar as respect for the people's explanation is

disregarded, no meaningful changes would be possible, no matter how well intentioned those working for such a change may be. The very label "genital mutilation" is problematic and needs to be re-considered. For example, who calls it genital mutilation? Those who observe the practice from outside the culture? Or those involved in the practice? Or is it the females on whom the practice has been effected? How plausible is a blanket label and categorizations for the practice, bearing in mind the differences in the cultures of communities where the practice is done?<sup>6</sup> Why is there not the same reaction to male circumcision worldwide? And how may the responses to these questions be connected or disconnected from the enterprise of imposition and imperialism in its wide sense? These are questions that need serious consideration. The international community continues to proffer resolutions, yet the legislation by individual governments has yielded little or no positive response. Understood within each culture, the practice may be modified, but I am persuaded that international concern must be informed by mutual respect and understanding.

### Death and Burial

The last rite for any individual in the Yoruba community is the burial rite. Old age is highly valued among the people, for it is a requirement for becoming an ancestor. An individual's mode of living, religious affiliations, profession, and class dictate the type of burial rite to be performed. Burial rites for hunters differ from those given to kings, as do those of an Ifa priestess from those of an Iyaloja (mother of the market). Despite these differences, however, certain motifs are common to Yoruba burial rites. One is the need to separate the dead individual from those physically alive (Gennep 1960). This may sometimes demand the destruction of religious or professional paraphernalia of the dead person. If the deceased is an Ifa priestess, her divining powder (*iyere osun*) may be blown to the wind; only a fraction of it may be retained for her children, who may wish to consult her as an ancestor at a later date. The blown divining powder signifies a separation of the dead from the living, and this is considered as being beneficial to both parties. Such a separation allows the living to go on with the business of living while at the same time it integrates the dead into the abode of the ancestors. In the same instance, a drummer's drum may be beaten until the drum covering is torn, which in effect means that no one could ever beat

that particular drum again. These rites underscore the need to sever any physical connection between the dead and the living, for the former now belong to another realm. At burial, the corpse is cleansed with water and soap to ensure purity and qualification of admittance into the abode of the ancestors (Awolalu et al. 1979). If the corpse is female, the hair is plaited to make her look beautiful. Women sing the dirge and praise names (*oriki*) of the deceased, often accompanied by drumming and dancing. Again, such praise names consist of references to the paternal and maternal lineages of the deceased. Festivities continue after the interment, sometimes for days, and this puts considerable strain on the children of the deceased (*omo l'oku*). An aspect of these rites pertinent to this discussion is the widowhood rite.

### Widowhood Rites

Widowhood rites are informed by complex and diverse perspectives, just like burial rites. The widow more often than not is expected to be in a sober mood and to remain indoors for a specific period of time. Also, she usually neglects her hair and does not apply any form of makeup as a sign of mourning and her liminal status; she is exempted from household chores during this period as well. Until recently, she was expected to dress in black clothing for at least forty days, but some widows now dress in grey attire rather than black. Friends and relations sit with her to offer their condolences and sympathy while assuring her that all will be well. The widowhood rites performed for a spouse of the Ifa priest (Babalawo) provide us with some salient perspectives on their implication for women's roles and status in indigenous Yoruba religion.

The widowhood rites for Apetebi (wife of a Babalawo) Ifagbemi began around 6.30 p.m. on April 20, 2000 at Osogbo, Osun State, Nigeria. Prior to this occasion, the widow's movement had been restricted to the family compound for the forty days since her husband had joined his ancestors. The widow sat at the entrance of her husband's room with women from the lineage (hers and her husband's), who sang songs to encourage her that all aspects of the program that day would go well. One of the songs states:

*Ko ni soro, amori opo, ojo oni o ni soro*  
*Omo a r'oju we bi ojo*  
*Omo ogun ka r'aja fe ti kola wa le*

Meaning:

It will not be difficult  
 Amori of *Opo* lineage  
 Today will not be difficult  
 You child of the one with wet eyes like rain  
 Today will not be difficult  
 You child of Ogun (god of iron), follow me to the  
 Market and bring lots of okra back home  
 Today will not be difficult. (My translation)

Intermittently, throughout these occasions, gunshots are fired into the air to signify the departure of a great man to whom a final farewell was being made. A new set of songs reminding the widow of her new status, and its attending implications are again rendered by the women. For example:

*Amori Opo*  
*O o l'oko mo o*  
*B'oloko nje su oko*  
*Momo p'ogbo*  
*Omo Olaloje*  
*O o l'oko moo*  
*B'oloko np'oko re*  
*Momo p'ogbo*

Translation:

Amori of *Opo* lineage (her lineage)  
 You do not have a husband anymore  
 So, when you see wives eating the yams of their  
 husbands<sup>7</sup>  
 Turn a blind eye  
 Child of *Olaloje* (reference to her lineage)  
 You do not have a husband anymore  
 So, when you hear wives calling their husbands  
 Turn a deaf ear.

This song is an advice to the widow to be strong and take control of her life in the absence of her husband. At this stage, the woman begins to weep profusely, singing her husband's praise names and

saying goodbye all over again. After this second set of songs, the widow is taken to a spot in front of the house, followed by the other women with singing and gunshots. She is disheveled and supported by two women on either side. The spot she is taken to looks like a bed of flowers prepared for planting. Here a piece of yam had been ritually planted for this occasion, and it is the duty of the widow, without a prior knowledge of the spot, to unearth this piece of yam on her first attempt. She staggers and uproots the piece of yam. The uprooting of the piece of yam signifies her death with her deceased husband and return to the normal life of the living. This is greeted with congratulatory shouts and gunshots; she is then led back inside. Once inside, another set of songs congratulating her on successfully retrieving the piece of yam are given by the women. One of the songs goes thus:

*Alamori o ku ewu o*  
*Ewu ina ki pa awodi*  
*Awodi o ku ewu*  
*Omo idowu o ku ewu*  
*Ewu ina ki pa awodi*  
*Awodi o ku ewu*

Translation:

Alamori, congratulations  
 The danger of fire never kills the hawk  
 To the hawk, I say congratulations.  
 Child of Idowu, congratulations  
 The danger of fire never kills the hawk  
 To the hawk, I say congratulations. (My Translation)

Other songs like the previous song are rendered for a short period, and then the women change the focus of the next set of songs to exemplify everybody's involvement in the bereavement at hand. An example from this group of songs is here given:

*Gbogbo wa ng la gbagba ojo kan an*  
*Ifa t'emi d'orun re*  
*T'emi d'orun re*

*Gbogbo wa ng la gbagba ojo kan an*  
*Gbogbo wa nl'oro yi jo ndun*  
*Ifa t'emi d'orun re*

Meaning:

We are all elders of a day  
 Ifa, my lot is on your neck  
 My lot is on your neck  
 We all are elders of a day  
 We all are pained by this incident (death)  
 Ifa my lot is on your neck (My Translation)

This set of songs end the ritual period as well as the confinement period of the widow, who is hereafter allowed to resume all social interactions.<sup>8</sup>

An analysis of the above account would reveal some features of women's roles and status in Yoruba religion. The timing of the occasion (evening) reflects an ending for the interaction between the wife and her dead husband. This is a disentanglement devoid of violence, hence its occurrence in the cool part of the day (*ojo ro*). It is significant to note that women and the female principle are noted as symbols of coolness and peace (*ero*). Gunshots also signify an ending as well as a means of announcing the departure of a great personality. The widow's disheveled appearance underscores her mourning posture, especially since the Yoruba see the hair as symbolic of the personality soul *ori*. The Yoruba see the physical head of an individual as a representation of an inner head, which dictates and influences the destiny of that individual (Abimbola 1975: 158). By neglecting her *ori*, the widow disregards her appearance as well as her inner *ori*, thereby attending to her husband's needs at the expense of her own welfare. This could be an indication of her care and loyalty to her husband but may also be construed as a conscious attempt to subordinate herself to her husband. More importantly, it signifies a temporary disruption of her own life, which for years was intertwined with her husband's life in the family setup.

The role of women who stay with the widow during this period is important as well. Here we see female solidarity exemplified in a clear display of empathy and sympathy. The motifs of group formation and collective identity are again reinforced, substantiating the assertion that the Yoruba woman finds fulfillment largely in rela-

tional settings. The prevalent use of songs during these rites suggests that songs occupy a prime place in Yoruba rituals and that women are the custodians of these songs, without which no meaningful ritual could take place. Widowhood rites thus reinstate the ambivalent posture of the Yoruba concerning women as subordinates and powerful beings at once. They also reflect the primary place accorded balance and complementary gender relations among the people.

## Festivals and Ceremonies

If rites of passage are landmarks in Yoruba religious life and identity construction, festivals serve the dual purpose of social and religious forums, thus meeting the people's yearnings on two fronts at the same time. Socially, festival periods present family members the opportunity of meeting together and having meaningful interactions during which people hold discussions about individual and collective progress. It is also a period for feasting, thus guaranteeing a regeneration of identity in the community, especially in the form of the art. On the occasion, verbal arts, comprising songs, dance, and different types of recitations, are employed to give meaning and context to the social and cultural identity needs of the people. Festivals as religious occasions seek to maintain and sustain the important link between the deities and the people. Ritual components of festivals, which take care of this religious aspect, usually do not occur openly. A ritual like the breaking of kola nut, however, does take place in view of all participants. We note the significant roles played by cultic functionaries during these festivals as the link between the deities and participants. I will now examine some of these festivals and ceremonies especially those in which women play significant roles.

### Osun Festival

The annual festival of Osun takes place in Osogbo at the end of August each year. The festival has been described as a drama and a festival at once (Badejo 1996: 103). Further, the festival is described as a theatrical and visual rendition of, and statement about, Osun's personality, her essence, and her role in the salvation history of Osogbo (Olupona 2000). The festival to the devotees marks the renewal of mystic bonds between the goddess and the people

of Osogbo, who at that particular time represent all humanity. Programs for the festival usually last two weeks. The first day *Iwopopo* refers to the clearing of the main roads in the city. Accompanied by the chiefs, members of the royal families, the Iya Osun, the Aworo, the king and his wives, proceeds to *gbemu*<sup>9</sup> through other streets in the town and then returns to the palace. This act represents the traditional clearing of the town's main road of weeds and overgrown shrubs that might disturb the easy movement of farmers and visitors to the town. The clearing also reflects the removal of any obstacle in the spiritual realm that may hinder the success of the festival. The next event is the *Olojumerindinlogun*, Osanyin's (deity in charge of healing) sixteen point lamps. These lamps are lighted and kept burning until daybreak. The major events of this occasion are the lightening of the *olojumerindinlogun* lamps, the king's dance with his wives, and the dance and singing done by the Iya Osun and her companions (Badejo 1996: 110). The climax is the Osun day when a procession of the king, the priestess, the priest, and the votary maid as well as worshippers and participants move to Osun grove. Fused in this journey are religious and political concerns. Politically, Osun festival is a reenactment of the founding of the town and the agreement between the goddess and the founders of Osogbo. The journey is marked by song renditions and dances by various ensembles, usually donning the same attire (*aso ebi*). Rituals for the festival take place at the river shrine, which is open only to the king, the Osun priestess, the Osun priest, and the votary maid. It is only after these rituals have been performed that the priestess and priest give food offerings carried by the votary maid to the goddess. General festivities marked by dancing, singing, and recitations then commence. Cultic functionaries who feature prominently during the Osun festival are the Iya Osun, the Aworo, and the Arugba.

The Iya Osun is the only Osun priestess with this title; all others are designated Iya Olosun. She should be the widow of a past king, an indication that Osun is perceived in marital relationship to the kingship. The goddess through the divination process chooses the Iya Osun. Once she is chosen, she is required to move her residence to the palace shrine, and this remains her abode until death. She is the closest to the goddess, attending to worshippers year-round as well as offering weekly worship to Osun at the palace shrine. The votary maid, Arugba, stays with her throughout her tenure, which terminates with her marriage.

The Aworo is Osun's priest, who assists the Iya Osun in cultic functions, especially during the annual festival at the riverside. During the festival, he usually plaits his hair like a woman, because he is a wife to Osun, the goddess. He is knowledgeable in the Eerindinlogun (sixteen cowries) form of divination and employs this to solicit supernatural help for those who may consult him for help on various issues.

The Arugba is chosen by the Eerindinlogun divination. She is described in details by the cowries; in fact, if she has any mark on her body, the cowries will say so. She must be a princess from the family of the reigning king. She moves to the Osun palace shrines to stay with the Iya Osun throughout her tenure, which terminates with her marriage. She is required to take several baths every day with the water of Osun River for a month after her selection and for a month prior to Osun's annual festival. In addition, she is required to remain a virgin during her tenure and should be selective in making friends; she may not attend parties. It is a taboo to beat her, nor could she carry anything on her head. She is prohibited from eating snail, *odu* vegetable, and guinea corn, all of which are taboo to Osun. Indeed, she is the incarnation of Osun at this time as explicated in the recitations of the drummers during the festival. She is described by the drummers as "my Lord," and "the real king" (*Iwo l'oba, Iwo l'agba, Iwo loba loba loba*) (Ogungbile 1998). In the past she stayed with the Iya Osun throughout the day and could only venture beyond the palace when on an errand for the Iya Osun. Presently, however, the Arugba attends school. She acquires the knowledge of her office gradually by verbal instruction from the Iya Osun and past Arugba. On her last year as Arugba, she runs straight from the river to her husband's house,<sup>10</sup> breaking her bond with Osun in exchange for a new marital life.

### Otin Festival

Otin's annual festival takes place in October. Ten days before the festival, women and children dance round the town. The chief priest sends messages to neighboring towns informing them that Otin festival is ten days away. Repairs are carried out on the shrine, the road leading to the river, musical equipments like the drums are also tuned correctly. Otin has her own set of drums used during this festival alone. She has three shrines, one at the riverside, one

in the town, and another at the house of the priest. Seven days before the festival, the Aworo and all women worshippers in the town plait their hair in the *suku* style. Rituals for the festival begin five days before the festival, known as *ojo ikunle*. At dawn on this day, the Aworo, Arugba, Iyangba, and the last wife of the Aworo will converge at the Otin shrine, located at the house of the Aworo. Here some rituals take place for the success of the festival. The Aworo is to be in white apparel with a red feather in his hair and red beads on his neck, wrist, and ankles. He uses the native cosmetics called *tiro*. On the day of the annual festival, further rituals and food offerings are made at the Otin shrine by the riverside. People pray for prosperity and blessings of all types from the goddess. Thereafter, the procession returns to the town and is met on the way by the king, who should not go to the river with the people. This is followed by feasting, dancing, and displays by many different ensemble of artists of all ages, which makes the occasion very colorful. Gaily dressed women feature prominently in the singing and dancing sessions. They recite the *oriki* (praise poetry) of the goddess and offer songs of praise to her. An example states:

*J'ale mi  
Otin Aworo  
J'ale mi o dara o.*

Translation:

Let me reach old age.  
Otin of the Aworo  
Let my old age be good.

Otin's cultic functionaries are the Aworo, the Iyangba and the Arugba.

The Iyangba (priestess of Otin) is usually chosen from the Olomo-oba compound (the royal compound) in Ijabe town. It is her duty to dress the Aworo (priest of Otin) and plait his hair in the *suku* style as is required of all worshippers for the occasion. The Iyangba and the Aworo are "wives" to Otin, a goddess, thus confirming the fluidity and complexity of Yoruba gender construct. She performs some rituals for the Arugba (votary maid to Otin) and Aworo prior to the festival day. It is her duty to place the offering calabash (*igba Otin*) on the Arugba's head. She should immediately

turn her back on the Arugba because the people believe that nobody should meet the Arugba with the calabash on her head. This prescription may have emanated due to the concern for respect for Otin, as is true of the Yoruba sociological framework where rulers were always approached through an intermediary to show respect for the king. She dresses in the traditional attire (*Buba e/ Iro*) during the festival, embellished with beads and gold jewelries. In the past, she was required to live at the shrine near the riverbank, but presently she resides in town and visits the shrine every five days on the occasion of the *ose* (weekly worship) to offer worship to the goddess.

The Arugba Otin should be a princess chosen by the king with the guidance of Ifa at an early age (between nine and twelve years of age). She should be a virgin and is required to remain so until the end of her tenure, which spans seven years.<sup>11</sup> Arugba for Otin have been from two families in Ijabe town, the Ojomo and Odofoin families. These families have from the time of origin been linked with the priesthood of Otin; the Arugba is therefore picked alternatively between them. On the festival day, the Arugba dresses in white cloth with beads and gold jewelry on her neck, wrist, and ears. She is the incarnation of Otin and displays the beauty and wealth of the goddess in her dressing and conduct. She walks to the palace with the offering calabash on her head, accompanied by the Aworo, Iyangba, Elemoso-otin, and other worshippers. She should not strike her foot against a stone during this journey because this would signify a bad omen for her and the community at large. She is also required to kneel seven times before getting to the palace. Reasons for this act may be adduced to the number seven as a sign of perfection as well as a probable link between the seven sites where the Arugba kneels and the people's historical experiences. She moves to the river from the palace with her entourage. It is a taboo for her to get to the river on her two legs, hence she has to be carried on the shoulder by the Elemoso-Otin a few meters to the riverside.

The Aworo as the priest of Otin is chosen by Ifa and on appointment becomes a wife of Otin. He performs some rituals at the worship of Otin during the weekly and annual worship. He serves the goddess in cooperation with the Iyangba and the Arugba, and his office is for life. He is usually available for consultation to adherents who wish to seek Otin's assistance on an issue. We may assert then that festivals are an integral part of Yoruba religion and social life and that women play significant roles during these occasions. Moreover, gender classification during these festivals is

fluid and open to continuous negotiation, as men become wives of goddesses. Examples include the Aworo Otin, the priest of Sango and initiates of the Obatala, Sango, and Osun traditions who during possession become wives of the goddess or god as the case may be (Matory 1994: 7).

These festivals as social and religious venues serve as potent tools for evaluating women's role in the Yoruba society and the modalities for gender dynamics. The practices and rituals present clearly multiple paradigms for gender analysis within these festivals, and by implication the community also.

### Medicine and Healing

Medicine (*oogun*) among the Yoruba encompasses the use of herbs and the act of combining herbs with incantations and/or sacrifice. Medicine is a means of restoration and its scope is strongly influenced by the people's perception of diseases and healing. Healing (*iwosan*) presupposes sickness; its practice is therefore interlocked with a people's conception of sickness and diseases. Among the Yoruba, sickness attests to the fact that an individual is out of tune with nature and the supernatural, which are represented by the various deities. The physical signs are therefore a part of the story and not the whole story. Healing in Yoruba parlance is not limited to physical wellness. Rather it encompasses physical, spiritual, and psychological wellness. Three types of healing have been identified among the Yoruba: healing that is purely spiritual, based on ritual, incantations and mental applications of certain understood natural laws; healing that is purely physical based on the use of herbs without any ritual element or incantation; and a combination of the two types mentioned above (Ilesanmi 1994). Many healers in Yorubaland, however, practice the three types of healing with no marked distinction as remedies depend on the type of illness that each client manifests at the time of consultation. Present practices of traditional healing, however, seek to encourage the use of herbs for healing, especially with the desire for traditional medicine to be incorporated into the Nigerian medical system. Traditional medicine fairs (*ipate oogun*) encourage traditional healers to emphasize the use of herbs for healing while some of these healers have been able to produce herbal medicine in tablet forms. These fairs are common features in Yoruba cities today; herbal remedies are widely believed to heal diverse diseases. The practicability and

success of healers who emphasize the use of herbs alone for healing among the Yoruba remain contestable, however.

The Yoruba healer should be someone with knowledge about the people's worldview and belief system. He or she usually has vast knowledge of herbs, their names and uses, as well as restrictions pertaining to each herb. In the same vein, certain deities are perceived to be custodians of herbs for healing; the healer is expected to know and be on good terms with such deities. Examples include Osanyin, Obatala, and Osun, to mention but a few. The healer by training is also a diviner and sometimes a hunter. Healing is restoration, both physically and spiritually. Diagnosis begins with divination, which could be by two principal means among the Yoruba. These are the Ifa geomancy divination system and the Eerindinlogun (sixteen cowries) divination system. The result of the consultation will prescribe elements for the healing, which may include sacrifice, pharmaceutical mixtures, and offerings. Not all diagnosis ends with this kind of consultation, however; in certain cases, the healer may need to observe fasting and offer sacrifices even to arrive at the cause of the illness. By implication, then, the proficiency of the healer and his or her knowledge level would have a bearing on the efficacy and speed of healing. Usually when some of these healers run into problems with a knotty case, they consult other healers whom they regard as more knowledgeable. In addition, because the healer is part of the healing, the client should be confident in the healer's capabilities. If successful in healing seriously ill patients, healers' reputations are bolstered enormously. The healer more often than not recognizes this and takes the care of his or her patients seriously, checking on them at intervals in their homes and continuing consultations on their cases in the guild of the *Onisegun* in the society. The use of religious elements for healing is prevalent among the Yoruba; examples are oil, coconut, and salt/sugar/sugar cane, and palm oil.

### Medicine Women

Medicine women are cultic functionaries who are sometimes senior officials of religious groups, whereas others may be regular worshippers of some god or goddess. Women feature prominently in the bid to ensure balance in every sector of daily living, just as there is a prevalent appeal to female principles in the same enterprise. Herbs and their use are of great importance to medicine and

healing among the Yoruba. Further, the people perceive herbs as possessing life, names, taboo, and praise poems (*oriki*); hence to approach, annex, and utilize them, a special kind of knowledge is required. Avenues for acquiring such knowledge include the religious traditions (as is the case with the Iya Oosa and the Iyanifa) and the professional medicine women, known as *Onisegun*. Training for the *Onisegun* involves observation and the memorization of herb names and prescriptions. The apprentice medicine woman usually resides with the professional from whom she learns the names and use of herbs. The Iya Oosa and the Iyanifa acquire expertise on a particular religious group (e.g., Obatala, Osun) in addition to the herbal knowledge bestowed on them as *Onisegun*. These women offer consultation services to sick people, who oftentimes need both spiritual and physical healing. Some individuals claim to have been born with the gift of healing; these individuals have had no training but do effect healing and display a profound knowledge of herbs and their use. These individuals usually attribute their healing powers to favorably disposed spiritual forces. Women play important roles in the Yoruba conception of healing and medicine. Women offer healing services in their capacities as healers and cultic functionaries, especially in the area of childcare.

#### Olomitutu (Cold Water Group)

In every healing attempt among the people, water is given a prime place. Water to the Yoruba is a primordial element with supernatural qualities that regenerate and effect wellness in itself and symbolically. This stems from the people's perceptions of water bodies as embodiments of certain spiritual powers, especially goddesses who are often disposed to healing and the general well-being of the people. The Yoruba thus attribute therapeutic powers to water, and this reflects in their ritual offerings, as shown in the practices of purification and consecration of cultic objects and officials. An example of the *Onisegun* group in Yorubaland is the Olomitutu group.

The Olomitutu group concerns itself with issues of medicine and healing for childbearing women and children only (gynecology and pediatrics). Practitioners in this group are mainly women. Water, the main element used, is thought to have intrinsic value to effect healing, hence the label Olomitutu (one with cold water). A small clay pot (*oru*), the main symbol of this group, is the container in

which water (by extension healing) is kept. This pot is filled from the river water early in the morning, and this water is administered to sick children, the barren and pregnant women throughout the day, with songs explicating the efficacy of water for healing.<sup>12</sup> The pot (*oru*) refers to the women's pots made purposely for preparing medicinal liquid for children. However, symbolically, it invokes the image of the breast milk, a secretion that nourishes children. An example to such a reference is the designation of the Oke-Ibadan deity as "*Atage, olomu oru*" meaning "*Atage, the one with the breast like oru (pot).*" The process of filling the pot with water is repeated daily, thereby emphasizing the importance of renewal in healing. Practitioners in the Olomitutu tradition occupy significant positions in the Yoruba socio-philosophical plane where procreation and health constitute the irreducible matrix in which all of life values incubate. Women as custodians of these two crucial sectors are vested with the power of restoration and healing.

### Spirit Possession

Because spirit possession is not a prominent feature of Yoruba religion, the practice is limited to certain traditions. Perhaps it is in the realm of spirit possession that Yoruba women's religious involvement in the transcendence is most demonstrated. Spirit possession is the act of being taken over by a deity, usually in the course of ritual dance. The Yoruba refer to spirit possession as "*gun*" meaning "to mount" as if riding a horse. Hackett has observed that spirit possession is more frequent in women than in men. Reasons given for this position range from the malleable composition of women to the weak emotional base that woman often exhibit through acts like crying and fearfulness (Hackett 1987). Matory observed that where spirit possession is downplayed or nonexistent, women are usually marginalized, but where the practice is prevalent, women enjoy enhanced status<sup>13</sup> (Matory 1994: 133); more case studies are, however, needed to confirm this assertion. Nevertheless, it is clear that spirit possession elevates women to a higher religious status. In spirit possession, the immanence of the deity is reinforced for the worshippers. It catapults women to the center of cultic power, because under possession, the woman (*elegun*) becomes an embodiment of the deity and demands express and unchallenged obedience to her injunctions. It is generally asserted that a possessed woman is unaware of her conduct and utterances

during this period, an assertion that to a great extent substantiates her authority as the embodiment of the deity in question. Spirit possession among the Yoruba is construed as the deity taking absolute control of all the faculties of the individual possessed. The process is described as "*gun*," the underlying philosophy being the control (possession) of the individual by the deity at that particular time and in that space. There is nothing in the people's understanding and assessment of such occasions that point to any sexual connotation. It would not be accurate, then, to equate the Yoruba term "*gun*" in this context to the use of the same term when referring to sexual intercourse either of humans or animals. Though the same word is used, the meanings are different. Notions of eroticism are alien to the concept of *gun* in the context of spirit possession, rather, the emphasis is on control by the deity. As has been rightly noted, to insinuate that trance (possession) is penetrated by sexual drive would be a severe violation of taboo (Wenger et al. 1994: 133). An example of spirit possession as it affects women may be located in the Obatala tradition.

During the annual Obatala festival in Osogbo, women dressed in white sing and dance round the *opa sooro* (a staff made of iron), which is believed to be powered by the deity. It is often used for oath taking and detecting liars and evildoers. In the course of dancing, one or two of the women may be possessed by the deity. Possession is usually manifested by a change in posture and movement, which becomes irregular, and the individual flings her limbs vigorously in rapid succession. The other worshippers hold her, and she is made to drink some palm oil (*epo*) to effect calm (*ero*). After some time, the possessed individual gives messages from the deity to the people if they have any to convey and joins the other dancers to continue the merrymaking. The fact that the possessed individual is under the control of another is buttressed by the way she rolls in dirt, which turns her white attire to brown. Further, her movements are clearly uncoordinated, which explains why some of her clothing falls to the ground.<sup>14</sup>

## Divination

Divination as an aspect of religion is not peculiar to Yoruba religion. It is embarked upon in an attempt to discover the hidden mysteries of life. Among the Yoruba, three types of divination

processes may be identified. These are the Ifa geomancy system, Eerindinlogun (sixteen cowries), and Obi dida (divination by kolanut) (Awolalu 1979: 122). Female diviners engage in all three types mentioned above in Yorubaland. Female adherents of Osun, Sango, and Obatala are adept in the use of Eerindinlogun. These females are more often than not senior members of these cults; they are referred to as Iya Oosa. In the same vein, females who practice Ifa divination are known as Iyanifa as opposed to the male practitioners who are called Babalawo. Obi dida (divination by kolanut) refers to the act of breaking the kola nut and ritually throwing it on the ground to determine if the deity's response to issues placed before him or her is positive or negative (Awolalu 1979: 122). Women and men engage in this practice depending on the circumstance and issue at stake, the qualifying principle being advanced age rather than the sex of the officiator.

## Ifa

Women's involvement in Ifa divination<sup>15</sup> is to be located in the Ifa corpus, which is the storehouse of Yoruba thought system. The Eji-Ogbe chapter of Ifa states:

*Arowo d'ifa*  
*Awo 'le jegbe*  
*Agbagiwo nii s'oluwo*  
*Isalu orun*  
*Ifa pe 'wo Orunmila*  
*N'ijo ti n t'orun bo w'aye*  
*Won ni yio ni obinrin*  
*Won ni obinrin na yio bimo*  
*Meji lojo*  
*Gege bi oro ifa*  
*Orunmila n'iyawo*  
*O loyun, o si bi b'iji*  
*Oka j'okunrin, okan j'obinrin*  
*Lati kekere ni awon mejeeji*  
*Ti n wo baba won bo ti ngbe 'wo ifa*  
*Bi okunrin ti mo 'fa i da*  
*Ni obinrin naa mo; fa ida*  
*Nigbati awon omo eniyan*

*De isalaye awon awo  
 Ni iwo awawonlaseri  
 Omo re o k'ifa  
 O dahun o ni obinrin ni  
 Won ni ko leewo  
 Sebi akobi Orunmila  
 Naa t'o je obinrin ti k'ifa  
 Lati igba yi l'obinrin  
 Ti n k'ifa  
 Won n yan ebo  
 Won si n j'ewe ifa fun won.<sup>16</sup>*

Translation:

One who has money to consult Ifa  
 The secret one of Jegbe's house (the diviner)  
 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 like 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  
 Got to the earth to live, the diviners  
 Said "you Awawonlaseri  
 Your child does not practice Ifa"  
 He answered and said, "she is female"  
 They told him that is no taboo  
 So long as Orunmila's firstborn child  
 Who is female studied Ifa  
 From then on women  
 Have studied Ifa

They prescribe sacrifice  
And they are initiated into the Ifa corpus.

According to these Ifa verses, the first Iyanifa (woman diviner) was Orunmila's daughter. Iyanifa are not as many 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 or daughters of Babalawo. They often practice in conjunction with their husbands, since adult females were expected to be married in Yorubaland. It is rare to find an Iyanifa married to anyone but a Babalawo. The explanation proffered for this is that they are custodians of tradition and that only someone with an equal knowledge and the power that such knowledge bestows could marry them (*oloogun ni se oko abiku*). There are Iyanifa in Ile-Ife, Oyo, Ogbomoso, Abeokuta, Ijebu-Ode, Iwo, Sagamu and Egbado, to mention but a few locales.

### Eerindinlogun

Eerindinlogun is divination by sixteen cowries and it is believed to have been given to Osun by Orunmila, her husband. It is the most popular, reliable, and commonly used form of divination among orisa devotees today in Yorubaland. Eerindinlogun is practiced in another form in the Americas and Brazil, where it is known as Dilogun ifa (Verger 1966). The Eerindinlogun divination system is composed of sixteen main chapters, like Ifa, but practitioners are encouraged to limit their consultation process to the first twelve except in extreme situations when they may proceed to the sixteenth chapter.<sup>17</sup> Any of the chapters in Eerindinlogun may surface at the divination session, and a client is expected to perform whatever sacrifice the diviner prescribes based on the Eerindinlogun chapter. The system operates on a tripartite axiom of prognostication, explanation, and control (Ogunbgile 1998). Because Osun is assumed to be the owner of the sixteen cowries divination system, practitioners of Eerindinlogun, male and female, are considered wives of Osun. 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. The cowries are kept in a white porcelain bowl and covered with water. After a few hours, the

cowries are rinsed in some water and dried in white cloth; the cowries are then kept in *ate* (a small wooden or woven tray) covered with white cloth. Thereafter, the priest or priestess takes a sip of dry gin, says some prayers, and sprinkles the drink from the mouth onto the sixteen cowries. This is done regularly to maintain the sanctity of the cowries as tools of consultation with the deity. Iya oosa are often available for consultations on health issues especially as they concern children and gynecological matters. They prescribe herb mixtures (*agbo*) for mothers to alleviate illnesses as well as sacrifices (*ebo*) when occasion demands such. Their prescriptions may also include ritual baths taken with Osun water at designated spots and specified hours of the day. Recommendations may include baths at crossroads and at midnight, for example.

#### Obi Dida (divination with kolanut)

The third type of divination, Obi dida, is the process of using the lobes of the kola nut to consult with the supersensible world. Women who engage in this practice are mostly elders, and the setting often occurs in ritual practice. The kola nut used is comprised of four lobes, two of which are known as *abo* (female) and the other two as *ako* (male) as a consequence of the natural marks on them (Awolalu 1979: 122), an indication of obi's gender symbolism. The kola nut is split into singular lobes, an invocation of the deity follows, and thereafter the woman throws the lobes on the floor. When the four lobes fall on the ground facing up, the result is the Eji Ogbe (a chapter in the Ifa corpus) signature. In other situations, when two of the lobes face up and the other two fall face down, the request is considered to be favored by the deity. When the desired configuration is not achieved, the process is repeated until the favorable result is achieved. The Yoruba often say "*owo ara eni ni a fi tun wa ara eni se*," meaning "you effect changes in your disposition with your own hands"; hence, the process would be repeated until a favorable answer is received to the request made to the deity. Obi dida is the first step in any ritual setting among the Yoruba, be it public or private. Women as well as men engage in this practice, the qualifying principle being seniority rather than gender. We may submit then that women take active parts in the process of divination thereby constituting links between deities and humans in the Yoruba spiritual life.

## Secret Knowledge

The presence of hierarchies in Yoruba religion assumes the existence of different classifications for humans as well as information. There is therefore a difference in group classification informed largely by the access of members to certain knowledge and information within the religion. Those with access to special knowledge are known as "*awo*" (those with the secret) while people outside this group are designated "*ogberi*" (novice). The *awo* constitute the highest in the ladder of hierarchy imbued with knowledge (esoteric) and consequently "power and authority." Though more often than not the power and authority of this group manifest in the religious sector, it has social implications as well. This is especially true of a society like the Yoruba, where the demarcation between the social and the religious is rather thin. The *awo* thus feature as leaders in the religious and social sectors among the people. As is true of all access to authority, the powers available to these groups may be utilized for constructive or destructive purposes. Traditionally these groups came into existence to ensure the preservation of the community through ritual and moral control. They were expected to enforce and maintain tradition, customs, and belief systems as well as determine ritual attitudes and societal norms (Awolalu et al. 1979: 220). Members are usually sworn to secrecy during the initiation rites; hence, except for news gotten from ex-members, information on them remains to a large extent, speculative. Proceedings of their meetings, venues of meetings, and methodologies for executing their agendas all could only be theorized. These groups operate using coded language and gestures especially in greetings, the meaning of which is known to members alone. Membership cuts across sex, but members should be accomplished (they should have wealth and good reputation) personalities in the society. Worthy of note is the central question of what roles women play in this important sector of Yoruba power and ritual structure. Some have argued that secret knowledge is hidden from women because they are unable to keep secrets. Empirical analysis, however, negates this stance, as women are members of these secret groupings and in some cases have access and control of powers that are unavailable to the men. Examples of *awo* groupings in Yorubaland include the *Iya mi* group (witchcraft), the *Ogboni/Osugbo* group, the *Oro* group, and the *Egungun* group. We shall examine two of these groups, the *Iya mi* group and the *Ogboni* society.

## Iya Mi Group (Society of Powerful Women)

Witchcraft has elicited diverse reactions in history, especially though not exclusively in the religious sector. Theories proffered for it seek explanations for the phenomenon from the psychological or sociological perspectives. According to Zuesse (1979), witches refuse to submit to the ego-restraints and self-denial necessary for social intercourse. Others posit that the economic independence of women, which may suggest the inadequacy of men, may lead to accusations of witchcraft.<sup>18</sup> Yet another group of scholars regard the phenomenon of witchcraft as a second-rate rationality, as an explanatory recourse for people who need emotional reassurance and some form of false understanding in the absence of significant scientific knowledge (Hallen et al. 1986). In Africa, theories on witchcraft seek to offer explanations for its methods of operation not to prove its existence, for that is beyond the scope of contention. Scholars such as Idowu (1962), Mbiti (1969), Abimbola (1975), Awolalu and Dopamu (1979), and Simpson (1980) have provided different insights into the operative methods and agenda of this group. Although there is no controversy about the existence of this group in African religion, its form and function continue to be the subject of debate. Is witchcraft a power outside the individual or an inherent part of a personality? Arising from responses to this question is the puzzle of whether witchcraft is all evil or part evil and part good. This polemic posture on witchcraft underscores the complexities of issues relating to and emanating from it within African religions. Among the Yoruba, these complexities are especially compelling, since the woman is to some extent economically independent of her husband. This does not, however, obliterate the fact that witchcraft as a phenomenon does exist among the people and is a part of their daily living experiences.

The Yoruba recognize the *aje* (withcraft), which is dangerous, destructive, and anti-social, as well as the *aje*, which is extraordinary, development focused, and employed for good purposes. As a consequence of these, *aje* cannot be equated with notions of witchcraft as conceived in other cultural milieu, especially the European and American cultural settings. *Aje* is an art of the wise, utilized by people bestowed with inherent psychic power that may be employed for positive or negative purposes. It has been noted that witches who engage in the negative manifestations of this power operate in guilds, whereas the positive-focused witches usually operate individually (Awolalu et al. 1979).

The origin of the group may be located in the Ifa corpus. According to Odu Osetura of the Ifa corpus:

In the beginning of time, Olodumare the Supreme Being sent seventeen primordial divinities to occupy the earth. Osun was the only female of these seventeen. Because of this, she was excluded from knowing anything about decisions taken by the other sixteen primordial divinities. When Osun could bear this no longer, she gathered together women in *isalaye* (earth) and formed the first congregation of *Iya mi* in *isalaye*, who intervened and made all the divinities deliberations fruitless. The result was total chaos in every sphere of the earth. The situation was later remedied by pleas to Osun by the other sixteen primordial divinities.

From the story, it is clear that the *aje* power was from Olodumare. The claimed activities of this group are shrouded in mystery and secrecy, for no one is ready to admit that she is an *aje*. Moreover, the activities and the different venues of meetings for this group is a matter of the soul rather than the physical. It is assumed that members attend meetings as birds, cats, or bats and that such meetings occur on treetops, at crossroads, and in groves. In the course of this research, it was possible to get information about the group from a deserting member. The informant was childless for a long time and sought a cure for her childless state from Western medical doctors all over the world, all to no avail. She also consulted with traditional doctors in Nigeria and other West African countries, but the problem persisted. Eventually, she was advised to join the *Iya mi* group, which she did. She had to provide certain items for her initiation, including small native pots of various specified sizes, a dish, drinks (alcoholic and nonalcoholic), and a brass knife called *obe awo*. Initiation takes place twice every year; the first time in February, and the second in November. She was instructed that her left leg was *ese awo* (leg of secret), and on it a cut was made to drain the blood into one of the small native pots. Each member then tasted the blood. Incisions were made on her head and two eyelids to make her tough, hard hearted, and able to kill as often as is required. Her eyes were thereafter covered with a white strip of cloth; another white wrapper was put around her waist in the form of a very short skirt. She then heard a terrifying cry from a far distance; she learned that this was the person to

perform the initiation rites for her. After her initiation, she received some instruments of office. These were *yeri* and *gele*,<sup>19</sup> open mouth pot,<sup>20</sup> *abere aye*,<sup>21</sup> *tanwole* lamp,<sup>22</sup> and *eye aje*, a live bird, which she swallowed at her initiation. She displayed these items for all present to see. She later became a Christian, vomited her *aje* bird at the Faith clinic in Ibadan on December 17, 1989, and is now a mother.<sup>23</sup> The details come from my interview with the former *aje* and from members of the church where she was delivered. We can assume that this indeed was the experience of the woman and not a made-up story. It has been asserted in some quarters that new Pentecostal churches make up fantastic stories of deliverance in the bid to converting and attracting souls to the Christian fold. As a Yoruba woman, I have no reason to doubt this story, but what is ultimately important to us is the meaning of the story for women's access to sacred knowledge and how this affects their roles in the social plane. *Aje* operates at a different plane, which is extraordinary; it is neither seen nor could it be analyzed, yet it remains undeniably potent. The woman is fortified with needed equipment to face assumed attacks based on the use of her powers as a witch in the community.

We may assert that *aje* guilds comprise people who employ their powers for negative purpose in the society. Those who focus their power toward positive goals operate as individuals but may be required to pay dues for the exemptions granted them. These could be the atrophy of some parts of the body or other forms of payments that are not necessarily limited to material or monetary means. Women through this power wield considerable influence in traditional Yoruba societies. In fact, they constitute the final court of appeal on any case: neither the ruler nor the ruled could succeed in any venture safe with the sanction of the *Iya mi*. They uphold the very base on which the society rests, but usually operate behind the scene. This brings to fore notions of visible and invisible powers, both of which are interrelated and interdependent in the Yoruba polity.

### The Ogboni Society of Elders

Two types of Ogboni fraternities operate in Yorubaland today, the aboriginal Ogboni fraternity (AOF), and the reformed Ogboni fraternities (ROF). The aboriginal Ogboni existed principally as a political organization for the maintenance of law and order in the

society. They settled civil disputes and criminal cases, were king makers, and checked despot kings (Awolalu et al. 1979). The AOF propitiated *ile* (Earth) as a goddess, believing it to be the most senior of the three elemental forces: Earth, water, and sky (Simpson 1980). The Earth is construed as female because it is the source of life, and to it all life would return. It is thus the womb and the tomb for all humans (Opefeyitimi 1994). In addition, symbols of the group manifest a strong appeal to female principles. The *edan*, two brass figures of a male and female joined by an iron chain at the top, are perceived as one figure representing procreation abilities and old age. Members are addressed as *omo iya* (siblings), meaning that their relationship to each other is as close as that of members of the same family. Their greetings include the phrase *omu iya dun* (mother's breast milk is sweet), signifying that members are bonded by sharing the same symbolic breasts, just as is true of siblings. Membership includes females and males, and is restricted to a few individuals who have distinguished themselves in their professions and have proven to be people of high integrity and mature judgment (Lawal 1995). In location and activities, the AOF was, however, limited to Yorubaland. Presently however, branches of the AOF may be found in different locations worldwide including London and Europe. Female members of the group included the Erelu, Yeyelafe, Iyabese, Iyabiye, and the Iyalaje.

At the inception of Christianity and Western civil governance, powers accorded the AOF were to a large extent eroded. In 1914, Reverend Thomas Jacobson Ogunbiyi, an Anglican priest, incorporated the Reformed Ogboni Fraternity. It was founded with the aim of blending some elements of Christianity with the existing aboriginal Ogboni, and this resulted in a reinterpretation of old tenets and symbols of the group.<sup>24</sup> Also, the strong flavor of European Masonic lodges introduced into Nigeria by some British citizens cannot be denied. The ROF may be found anywhere the Yoruba people live; worthy of note also is the membership of non-Yoruba people who are vast in the knowledge of Yoruba religion in the ROF. Branches of the ROF may be found in Kano, Kaduna, Nsukka, Otukpo, Enugu, Onitsha, Benin, Calabar, Ilorin, Porthacourt, Cameroon, London, and throughout Yorubaland. A sizable number of members outside Yorubaland are Yoruba immigrants though some non-Yoruba members can also be identified. A woman of less than forty years cannot be initiated into the fraternity. Every concave (*Iledi*) is expected to have an average of thirty-four members, twenty-nine of these are officers and seven of the officers are women.

Women's roles and membership in these secret groups is of great importance to any consideration of power and gender relations in Yoruba religion. The permeating notions of female principles in the groups should not be ignored either, especially as these are interlocked with the Yoruba cosmology as recorded in the Ifa corpus. Women play concrete and important roles in the visible and invisible space of power, but most assuredly, this is more of the invisible space, which is located oftentimes in the secret groups. Methods of operation within these groups reinforce notions of complementary gender and power relations. Cooperation and harmony are elevated above competition, oppression, and domination, because the individual's welfare is dependent upon and embedded in the communal well-being.

In conclusion, we have examined the role of women and gender relations in various aspects of Yoruba indigenous religious tradition. We have demonstrated from our description and interpretation that in areas such as rituals, divination, and sacred knowledge, where men are often assumed to play central roles and women are marginalized, the truth is that Yoruba women play significant roles in approaching transcendence and the sacred. There is a continuous process of negotiation for gender roles and power relations within the religion, especially within the ritual space. The enhanced status of women in the religious sector is not explicitly replicated in the social realm because of the existence of the visible and invisible planes of power. In the visible plane of power, women are always represented either by representatives or through the prevalence of female principles. Women's formation of a collective through group solidarity is also critical to their roles in the visible plane of power. The invisible plane of power is within the custody of women, and it serves as the base on which the visible plane of power rests. That women control the ritual base of Yoruba life is made clear in injunctions of Yoruba oral texts, where the records of the people's cosmic experiences are preserved. Though invisible, this power is nonetheless real and exceedingly potent. There is a dynamic gender structure in the Yoruba religious tradition, which seeks to promote the incorporation of male and female principles in life's endeavors, as this chapter clearly illustrates. Consequently, we may posit that women's roles in Yoruba religion are momentous and subject to dynamic principles.

## Conclusion

In the preceding chapters, we examined the interplay of gender and power relations in the Yoruba religious sphere and the implication of this interplay for women's roles in Yoruba indigenous and Christian traditions. We noted that the Yoruba conception of gender influences and is in turn influenced by power configuration in Yoruba religious precinct, but also extends such influences to other sectors of the people's living experiences, including politics and economics. The influence of gender constructs in and through religious paradigms is underscored by the pervasive religiosity of the Yoruba wherein religion constitutes the base of every practice in the Yoruba polity.

Culture emerges as the critical phenomenon in our investigation of gender and power relations in Yoruba religious traditions. Indeed, in some instances, Yoruba culture and religion are fused. The implication of this is that religious paradigms have a profound effect on the social plane in Yorubaland. To appreciate and evaluate gender and power relations in the Yoruba society, then, religion would be the appropriate point to begin. It follows, therefore, that cultural paradigms should be employed as vehicles for religious expressions, and this has significant implications within the social setting. Some of these cultural paradigms include complementary gender relations, cosmology as the base for gender construction, binary categorizations, multiplicity and fluidity of gender constructs, ritual as an empowering avenue for women, and a reconception of power.

In chapter 1, we examined some background information on Yoruba worldview and thought system and how notions of duality, integration, and harmony are elevated above considerations for competition and individuality. We argued for the Yoruba preference for cooperation and complementarity in gender and power relations

but not for equality and parity. Further, the need for a reconceptualization of tools employed in analyzing gender and power relations in the Yoruba context was highlighted. An example of this is the necessity to conceive power as visible, formal, and structural but also as invisible, informal, and nonstructural. Thus, a consideration of gender and power relations among the Yoruba should necessarily take serious the dialectical encounter between the obvious and hidden settings, especially in the religious realm.

Chapter 2 explored the role and status of women in indigenous Yoruba culture and society, in the past and present. Gender constructs in the indigenous Yoruba society during the precolonial contact period were fluid, cultural, and sometimes, context bound. An apparent tension could be discerned in the continuous negotiations involved in power relations between men and women in the Yoruba polity as reflected in the examples given from the social plane and in genres of Yoruba oral narratives. Moreover, notions of interdependency, harmony, and communal living guide the people in assigning roles and responsibilities in the Yoruba society.

In chapter 3, we investigated the complexities that attend women's roles and status in the Yoruba Christian tradition and how Yoruba women have significantly altered gender constructs in the Christian tradition. Women display their preference for group formation and collective identities, which they use as starting points for empowerment. Group formation has helped women in the Yoruba Christian tradition make significant changes in gender and power relations as compared to what was obtained at the advent of Christianity in Yorubaland. J.D.Y. Peel's theory (2000) that Yoruba men converted in large numbers to Christianity at its inception, whereas Yoruba women held on to the indigenous religion, could explain the initial period during which patriarchy went unchallenged. But with the increasing conversion of women to Christianity, change was inevitable, especially as these women were active participants and sometimes leaders in the indigenous religion. Understandably, Yoruba women sought to transform the subordinate role prescribed for women in Christianity. Women did this directly, by founding churches, and indirectly by creating alternative settings of empowerment. Concerning menstrual blood, prohibitive rules on its impurity and the need to debar women from the sacred space during their menstruation is presently attenuated due to the leadership roles of women in the Yoruba Christian tradition.

Issues of identity formation in gender and power relations among the Yoruba engaged our attention in chapter 4. As noted, the influence of myth in identity construction and by implication in gender and power relations cannot be over emphasized. Myth provides the archetype for social stratifications in the Yoruba polity. Stipulations embedded in Yoruba cosmology produce direct influences in the people's conception of self, gender, and power relations. Every aspect of Yoruba life has a tint of religion to it; hence, Yoruba cosmology constitutes the ultimate reference point for the people's perception of interpersonal relationships. Gender constructs derive from this ultimate reference, which more often than not constitutes an integral aspect of the people's collective identity. This underscores the significance of myths as tools for producing archetypes through which people construct identity. Yoruba gender and power relations, therefore, derive from the people's cosmology and form an important part of their identity. Whatever religious inclination the Yoruba person subscribes to, the influence of Yoruba cosmology continues to be of pervasive influence. One of the concepts rooted in Yoruba cosmology that has had profound implications for our investigations in this work is binary categorization. The Yoruba thought system assumes an opposite for every phenomenon, and this is reflected in the people's philosophy and language. In addition, binary categorization explains the Yoruba preference for complementary gender and power relations.

Our focus in chapter 5 was on women's roles in rituals and the proposition of these roles for women's status on the social plane. We examined roles played by Yoruba women in rites of passage, festivals and ceremonies, medicine and healing, divination, sacred knowledge, and spirit possession. It was observed that the ritual settings provide avenues of empowerment for women with salient connotations for social uplifting. Again, the multiple conceptions of power as visible and invisible reinforce our findings that power, influence, and authority need not be limited to the visible and cognitive. The ritual setting constitutes a cogent venue for women's empowerment in Yoruba religious traditions. This is true for both Christianity and indigenous religions, mainly because ritual is conceived as the setting of mediation between the Supreme Being (God) and humans. But whereas the Christian tradition assumed that God is male and could only be represented by males, the Yoruba woman contended that males and females could adequately represent the Supreme Being. Moreover, the Yoruba

woman challenged the predominantly male-gendered God of Christianity by showing that the Supreme Being exhibits female and male qualities, as is evident in songs and prayers. This is underscored by the fluidity of gender construct among the people.

Conclusively, we may submit that women in Yoruba culture and religion are custodians of sacred knowledge, which translates to power, the support of which is crucial to any successful endeavor among the people. Women regulate and maintain sectors of Yoruba life through this sacred knowledge, yet this knowledge and power are not formal or visible. Some have asserted that this sacred knowledge and power are not rational, because it is not possible to analyze them by scientific methods. It would be wrong, however, to classify this power as irrational or even nonrational; the truth is that it does not have to be described in these terms at all. The potency of this power among the Yoruba remains the only needed evidence that it is indeed power that is potent and resilient to foreign influences. Power as conceived in this work has significant influence on notions of women's empowerment in other sectors of Yoruba life. For example, Yoruba women's attempts to attain political power in contemporary times cannot be described as desperate or overtly assertive; could this be a by-product of the conception that power is not limited to that which is formal and visible? Bearing in mind the close connection between motherhood and the society of powerful women, would it not be plausible to suggest that women do not assume disempowerment because they are not in control of formal and visible power? Answers to these questions are worth pursuing, since they could provide valuable tools for understanding the Yoruba woman and power relations, specifically for groups that profess women's empowerment as their focus in Nigeria.

The important roles of women as repositories, recorders, and sustainers of religion in Yoruba society also come to the fore in our present investigation. Yoruba religion has until recently been largely dependent on oral texts passed down orally from one generation to the other. Women are custodians of these oral texts, and this bestows power on them. This privileged position is further enhanced because the daily practices of Yoruba religious traditions rests on women as well. Thus, Yoruba women shape religious traditions, whether indigenous or Christian. The dynamics involved in gender and power relations in Yoruba Christianity reveal the possibility that women will continue to shape these religious traditions in significant ways.

Investigations of women in any sector of Yoruba life should take the religious dimension seriously because religion permeates the people's worldview. The blend between Yoruba religion and culture should also be regarded as crucial to an understanding of the Yoruba woman. Once these two issues are appreciated, instances of subjectivity and imposition of paradigms would be minimized. It is worth mentioning, however, that with the Yoruba culture, essentialism is inadvisable; any effort to return to Yoruba culture as it was a century ago would be futile. But in spite of that, certain aspects of Yoruba culture remain resilient to change and integral to the people's identity. Efforts should be made by scholars and activists in the economic, political, medical, and social sectors to appreciate cultural and religious dimensions when dealing with the Yoruba woman. Attention to this essential aspect of Yoruba culture has great potential to influence the relative success of any project begun among the Yoruba people.

In conclusion, gender and power relations among the Yoruba are attended by multiplicity and fluidity, which necessitates a process of constant negotiation. Though certain features are assumed for the male and others for the female, such assignments are not rigid. Moreover, gender is not the only parameter for social identities among the Yoruba; seniority and personal attainments in the society play important roles in identity construction as well. Multiplicity seems to be the watchword for all who seek to understand Yoruba gender and power relations.

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# Notes

## Chapter 1

1. This is a short format of the phrase *iku mu olu*, which translate "death has taken the heir." Hence, for a woman to be so named assumes the absence of a male child.

2. Some cultures conceive of menstrual blood as a conveyor of power because embedded in it is potential life.

3. The term witch carries a predominantly negative connotation often times. Though the Yoruba member of the *iya mi* cult is capable of using her power negatively, the power could also be utilized for positive goals.

4. Some of these men stated this clearly during the interview sessions.

## Chapter 2

1. *Dalemosu* could be translated as Returnees, used in this case to refer to daughters who return to their natal compounds for residence due to conflicts in their marital homes.

2. Interview with Mrs. Doyin Faniyi, a priestess of the Osun Goddess, at her Osogbo residence, May 22, 2000.

3. The imagery here is informed by the *agbo-ile* residential arrangement earlier mentioned. Wives of the compound are allotted cooking spaces and leverage marriage ensures that the widow retains her cooking place and consequently her identity and status within the extended family structure.

4. All female and male siblings are husbands to the wives married into the family irrespective of age. See Oyewumi's *Invention of Women* for further reading on this issue.

5. Interview with Baba Awo Ifasola Onifade of the central economic planning office, Governor's office, Osogbo, June 24, 2000. He is also the Osun state coordinator of the Healing, Teaching and Tourism Temple (HATAF).

6. I witnessed this practice at Osogbo on May 15, 2000 when the Olosun family/lineage performed the ceremony for their dead father.

7. I also witnessed this at Osogbo where I found that the practice differs from the accounts of some scholars pertaining to it. Could this be a recent change in the practice or could it be a difference in practice from locality to locality in Yorubaland?

8. Interview with Babalawo Ifagbemi at Ogbomoso on February 18, 1998.

9. *Iya mi osorong*a could translate as "My great, powerful, and most feared mother."

10. "Who washes white cloth with blood."

11. "Who eats human liver without vomiting."

12. *Iyan*, pounded yam for example has an oriki:

<i>Iyan o, Iyan o</i>	Pounded yam o, Pounded yam o
<i>Osupa abe iti</i>	the moon under the shed
<i>A ran ma dele ole</i>	which shines but does not reach the lazy person's house
<i>Ole o lo 'mi lamu</i>	the lazy one has no water in the pot
<i>Iyan o, Iyan o</i>	Pounded yam o, Pounded yam o.

13. A video recording of the Obatala weekly worship sessions at Ifon, Osun state, Nigeria, 1999.

14. Examples include professors Bolanle Awe, a former director of African Studies at University of Ibadan, and Funmilayo Bickersteth, a professor of psychology at Obafemi Awolowo University, Nigeria.

### Chapter 3

1. Johnson (1921). *The History of the Yoruba*, New York: Routledge and Kegan Paul: 39.

2. The core of the Christian tradition is the good news of Jesus' death, resurrection, and ascension, while the core of Yoruba tradition is the total well-being of the community comprising the dead, the living, and the yet unborn.

3. Examples of such are Genesis 3:16, Corinthians 14:34, and 1 Timothy 2:12.

4. M.A. Oduyoye (1995). *Daughters of Anowa—African Women and Patriarchy*. New York: Orbis Books: 206.

5. E.A. Johnson (1992). *She Who Is*. New York: Crossroad Publishing Company: 22.

6. Iya Ijo, translates: the mother of the congregation. This is a symbolic reference to the duties expected of the officer, which include nurturing, sustenance, and guidance. A similar office exists in the Yoruba polity known as the Iyalode.

7. Her assistants include the Otun Iya Ijo and the Osi Iya Ijo; i.e., the right hand assistant and the left hand assistant of the Iya Ijo. Their roles are indicative of the Yoruba philosophical conception of diffused powers as opposed to pure despotism.

8. Interview with Reverend Gbadeyan of the Saint Paul's Anglican Church, Baboko Ilorin, on September 10, 1998.

9. E.O. Famodimu (1990). *Moses Orimolade Tunolase*. Kaduna: Abibcom, Nigeria Limited: 159.

10. M.A. Oduyoye, et al. (eds.) (1992). *The Will To Arise*, New York: Orbis Books: 28.

11. I visited Pentecostal Churches in Lagos, Ibadan, Osogbo, Ilorin, Ikirun, and Ila-Orangun. Examples are the Winner's Chapel, the New Covenant Church, the Rhema Chapel, the Reedem Christian Church of God, the Deeper Life Bible Church, the Power and Purity Church, and the Champions Church.

12. S.A. Owoeye, "Prophetess Adedeji Taiwo: A Decade of Healing and Prophecy in Nigeria" *AAP* 56 (1998): 179.

13. Examples are Pastor (Mrs.) Adeboye and Pastor (Mrs.) Adetola.

## Chapter 4

1. See also, R.A. Olaniyan & Akinjogbin I.A. (1992). *The Cradle of a Race*. Porthacourt: Sunray Publications.

2. S. Freud (1925). *Some Psychological Consequences of the Anatomical Distinction Between the Sexes*. Standard Edition, London: Hogarth Press.

3. *Osun Osogbo Brochure*, 1991, published by Osogbo Cultural Heritage Council, p. 2.

4. *ASE*, a publication of The Ibile Faith Society, published in Germany, Vol. 3, No. 6, December 1999.

5. Another version of the origin of Otin River is recorded in U. Beier (1980) *Yoruba Myths*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, p. 46.

6. Interview with Oba Abdulwahab Oyewale Oyetoro, the king of Ira Town, Kwara State, Nigeria on April 27, 2000.

7. Interview with Susan Wenger (Adunni Oloosa) at her Ibokun road, Osogbo residence on April 27, 1994.

8. Interview with Oba Iyiola Matanmi III, the Ataoja (king) of Osogbo, Osun State, Nigeria on May 17, 1995.

9. Interview with Babalawo (Ifa priest) Ifasola Onifade of the central Economic Planning Office, Governor's Office, Osogbo on June 14, 1999.

10. Oogun could refer to magic or medicine but is oftentimes used to designate a combination of both, as the two are interwoven among the Yoruba.

11. U. Beier (1980) *Yoruba Myths*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, p. xiii.

12. Interview with Oba Abdulwahab Oyewale Oyetoro, the King of Ira Town, Kwara State, Nigeria, on April 27, 2000.

13. Meaning "Most powerful father and mother, who is second only to the deities."

14. Interview with Chief (Mrs.) Abebi Kila, at her Egbe-Idi residence, Ilesa, Osun State, Nigeria on April 18, 1994.

15. Interview with Mrs. Olufunmilayo Momoh-Fabiye at the Federal Radio Cooperation Headquarters, Ibadan on June 16, 1994. In Ikole-Ekiti, the regent and the new king are forbidden to see each other ever, whereas at Akure, the new king and the regent may meet and exchange gifts.

## Chapter 5

1. See Karin Barber (1991). *I could Speak Until Tomorrow* London: Edinburgh University Press for more details on "bride lamentation" among the Yoruba.

2. Her wives comprise women married into her natal compound. This is one of the dynamics of gender construct and power relations among the Yoruba. For further discussion on this, see O. Oyewumi (1999), *The Invention of Women*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

3. I performed this ritual for the wife married into the Olajubu family after me, in 1994.

4. Interview with Babalawo Ifasola Onifade, HATAF coordinator, Osogbo, Osun State Nigeria.

5. Interview with Pa Bamidele Ogundele at his Offa residence on May 19, 1995 in Kwara State, Nigeria. He is an Oloola and thus performs male and female circumcision regularly.

6. There are various degrees of female circumcision but all are placed within the bracket of genital mutilation. These include clitoridectomy and infibulations.

7. This statement refers to the privileges that wives enjoy in their marital homes, including conjugal rights, which the widow can no longer enjoy.

8. I witnessed and participated in this ceremony at Osogbo, Osun State, Nigeria on April 20, 2000.

9. Gbemú is an area in Osogbo. It marked the boundary of the town prior to recent expansions.

10. Interview with Doyin Olosun-Faniyi at her Osogbo residence on April 14, 1994.

11. Requirements of virginity for votary maids seem predicated on the assumption that sex could contaminate and may obstruct the energy flow of the goddess. This is a paradox, since procreation, which is highly valued by the people, requires the sexual act.

12. Interview with Professor Oludare Olajubu, a Professor of Yoruba Studies (retired).

13. The implication of this submission explains why spirit possession is perceived as an avenue for empowerment and resistance to established patriarchal structures.

14. Video cassette, "Obatala in Praise" produced by Chief Priest Ifayemi Elebuibon. A documentary portraying Obatala's worship in Yorubaland, 2000.

15. For a full discussion of Ifa divination, see W. Abimbola (1975) "Sixteen Great Poems of Ifa." UNESCO.

16. Interview with Chief Priest Ifayemi Elebuibon at his Osogbo residence on April 20, 1994.

17. The first twelve chapters of Eerindinlogun are Okaran, Ejioko, Ogbeyonu, Irosun, Ose, Obara, Odi, Ejiogbe, Otua Oriko, Ofun, Owonrin, and Ejila Aseborá.

18. See, J. Hoch-Smith et al. (eds.). (1979). *Women in Ritual and Symbolic Roles*. New York: Plenum Press.

19. Yeri and Gele refer to a scarf and skirt, both of which eventually turned red from the color of the blood of victims killed by her.

20. This was for drinking human blood at the meeting of the witches.

21. An iron shaped like an injection needle. It is for sucking blood from human victims without killing the person.

22. A native lamp (Atupa) whose fuel is human blood.

23. Information from Mrs. Sade Fadipe of Ogbomoso as recorded on a video tape.

24. For example, the Edan figures came to be seen as representing Adam and Eve of the biblical creation story.

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