

Yoruba in Diaspora

AN AFRICAN CHURCH
IN LONDON

Hermione Harris



YORUBA IN DIASPORA

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For Alexis and Anna, and in memory of Marc

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Contents

<i>Acknowledgments</i>	ix
Chapter 1 Introduction	1
Chapter 2 “Stars of the World”: Yoruba Worker-Students in Britain	19
Chapter 3 The Cherubim and Seraphim Church, United Kingdom	41
Chapter 4 From <i>Aṣẹ</i> to <i>Agbara</i> : The Concept of Spiritual Power in the Cherubim and Seraphim	55
Chapter 5 “Electrical Energy”: Dynamic Metaphors of Spiritual Power	83
Chapter 6 Experiencing Power: Possession by the Holy Spirit	111
Chapter 7 Revelation as Divinatory Practice	139
Chapter 8 “Practical Christianity”: Revelation and the Power of Prayer	171

Chapter 9	
Epilogue: Empowerment and Yoruba Christianity	209
<i>Glossary</i>	239
<i>Notes</i>	241
<i>Bibliography</i>	261
<i>Index</i>	284

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Chapter 1

Introduction

And to our Sister Harris. I saw a tall ladder stretching up, and you were halfway up the ladder. You were saying that this is too big, it is too tall, and I want to come down. But the Lord says that you must pray to be able to go forward, and that you will finish your work with success.

Surely even Elder Ilelaboye, interpreting the trance-inspired images of his vision as a message from God, could not have imagined just how long the ladder would be. He was speaking at the end of 1969, a few months into my fieldwork on the Cherubim and Seraphim, a Nigerian church in London. I held onto the rungs until 1974, by which time several chapters of what was then a Ph.D. thesis were already written—but then I jumped off. It was not until the 1990s that I clambered on again, and found that I had to go back to the bottom step to rethink, rewrite, and re-research before I could finally reach the top.

There were various reasons for my starting the ascent once more. Looking at the sagging shelves of notes and documents, tapes and transcripts, the choice of their destination was between my newly acquired computer—or the bin. But too much work had already gone into the project (albeit nearly 20 years previously), not only by myself, but by scores of church members who had spent time they did not have to help me understand their world. Struggling to gain the professional qualifications for which they had come to Britain, the majority was also working to support themselves and their families. Their ladders, too, were long. The commitment I had made to record something of the lives of Yoruba worker-students and the history and practice of their church could not be abandoned lightly.

In the intervening decades, there has been a surge of publications on the Yoruba, the main ethnic group in southwestern Nigeria, and one of the largest linguistic groups in Africa as a whole.¹ I therefore

imagined that my material might have been made redundant by subsequent literature on Yoruba in Britain, given the considerable growth of the Nigerian community, which now includes professionals and entrepreneurs as well as students. But it is striking, both at the time of my original research and in the intervening years, how little has been published on Yoruba communities in London. In Carey's *Colonial Students* (1956), Craven's *West Africans in London* (1968), and Mayo's article on "West African Voluntary Associations" (1969), Yoruba are subsumed in the general category of West Africans, as they are in Killingray's later chapter on "Africans in the United Kingdom" (1994b). In the plethora of analyses of race and ethnicity, now as then, the Nigerian diaspora is hardly mentioned. This silence is partly because the West African community has in the past largely been a transitory, not a settler, population, which was, as Smith commented, "very small, and therefore extremely difficult to survey" (1977: 21). The models of social adaptation and integration used by Carey and Craven were inappropriate for a community not intending to settle. But even in the following fashion of ethnic pluralism and the study of minority communities during the latter part of the twentieth century, Yoruba seem to have exercised little fascination. Many of the present generation of Yoruba in London contemplate permanent settlement, but still as yet have not attracted research.

One explanation for this neglect seems to be that Yoruba have not, as a group, constituted a problem either as a topic for cultural studies or for social policy. One of the mainsprings of research on race has been the threat of black unrest: the 1967 Political and Economic Planning (PEP) Report on racial discrimination anticipated that the second generation would not be "equally docile [as their parents] when faced with the frustrations and humiliations of discrimination; anger and violence, rather than self-effacement, may seem to them to be a more realistic response" (Daniel 1968: 14). Ten years later, the next PEP study warned of conditions that would lead to "conflict" and "open confrontation," "and lead [immigrants] to see themselves first and foremost as members of an oppressed class" (Smith 1977: 333). Yoruba were not incorporated in these studies. For reasons explored in chapter 2, they had, in general, excluded themselves from this "class." This tradition of political nonparticipation has largely continued; as an ethnic group, Yoruba have posed no public threat—nor have they captured the interest of radical researchers as providing potential militants.

But there are two specific areas defined as problematic by social agencies, which have produced some investigation. The first of these,

from the 1950s to the early 1970s, was that of the student from overseas. In the pre- and immediate postwar period, the population of students from the then colonies was small and largely came from elite families. As the numbers grew, and the range of their class background broadened, so did associated problems, provoking worries over the educational and social experience of West Africans coming to Britain to study.² Many students took longer than they had hoped, and started families. This created the second problematic area: childcare. The Yoruba practice of fostering children with British families resulted in difficulties that confronted social services and the courts, generating research that still provides the principal ethnography on Yoruba in London.³

It therefore seemed essential to chart this period in Yoruba migration to Britain before this particular historical moment becomes erased by concern with current globalization. In chapter 9, I look at the contemporary diaspora of Yoruba who are leaving the collapsing Nigerian nation-state. But the body of the study focuses on the immediate post-Independence period, when young—and not-so-young—men and women saw education in Britain as their way into the new elite of Nigerian professions and state bureaucracy. The value of resuming a project after two decades is the comparisons it allows between these generations. My more recent research, undertaken from the end of the 1990s to the present, does not pretend to have the depth of the earlier fieldwork, but nevertheless provides both material and hypotheses unavailable elsewhere.

The same is true of my main topic: Yoruba Christianity in London. The Cherubim and Seraphim Church (C&S)⁴ is one of the principal players in what have become known as AICs. The various referents of this acronym trace the development of the Cherubim and Seraphim, along with other Yoruba Aladura, or “praying” churches that originated in Western Nigeria.⁵ First, in the 1960s and 1970s, the C&S was classed in the literature as an “African Independent Church,” its members having moved out of the mainline Protestant mission churches from 1925 onward, to develop their own structure and mode of worship. Brought to London by students in 1965, the C&S was often later referred to as “Indigenous,” stressing the ethnic character of congregations and practice rather than the early connection with orthodoxy. Toward the end of the last century, Aladura were described as “African Initiated” or “Instituted” Churches, hence leaving space for their aspirations to internal inclusivity as well as their external connection to the wider black church movement. Now, with the global spread of AICs, they may well come to be known by Ter Haar’s term: “African International Churches” (1998: 24).

This development of the C&S and other Aladura over the last four decades or so means that they are now a ubiquitous part of London life. On Sundays, carloads of white-robed members are to be seen driving round the capital to the numerous branches of their churches. But this was not so when I first began my research. From my experience working and traveling in southern and eastern Africa in the 1960s, and recognizing African men and women on London streets, I knew that somewhere there must be an African religious organization. I set out to find it; it took me six months. Social workers, vicars, community organizers—all denied that any such thing existed, until a black Anglican priest recollected that some African group made use of a Congregational church in Shepherd’s Bush. This was the C&S. I made contact with the secretary, asked if I might carry out research, went to a service—and found that, quite unprepared, I was under way.

At that time there were two main sources to provide me with Nigerian background: J.D.Y. Peel’s classic study *Aladura* (1968) and H.W. Turner’s two volumes on the history and theology of the Church of the Lord, another Aladura organization akin to C&S (1967). All these churches, together with various other West African groups, also refer to themselves as “spiritual” churches, from their emphasis on the Holy Spirit. This religious movement has been increasingly studied over the past three decades,⁶ but all this research still focuses on West Africa, and neglects the Nigerian diaspora.

When I resumed my work in the 1990s, I imagined that it would have been preempted in the meantime. Two-third of black Christians in Britain are members of black-led churches.⁷ But, despite their importance in their respective communities, they have still received little attention: a recent collection edited by Owusu, *Black British Culture and Society* (2000), does not even include religion in the index. Aladura organizations have also suffered from being subsumed in the general category of black churches, which are largely African-Caribbean. Gerloff (1992) and Kerridge (1995) include short pieces on Aladura in their surveys of black churches, as does Ter Haar in her study of African Christians in Europe (1998), but there is little that is specific. This elision of Yoruba and African-Caribbean experience leads to skewed analysis; Kalilombe, for example, argues in his “Black Christianity in Britain”: “The origin and development of black Christianity in Britain is preponderantly the result of black people feeling alienated and marginalized” (1997: 317), a conclusion in line with earlier theories that accounted for black churches in terms of problems with assimilation or status deprivation. The C&S, with its norms of mutual assistance and elaborate, inclusive hierarchy, clearly provided

support for an insecure, disadvantaged immigrant group. But Yoruba and African-Caribbean experience is not identical; Nigerian students in the 1970s were engaged in a class transition. C&S members saw themselves as a nascent national elite—as agents, not victims. But there is little to put the record straight: a doctoral thesis on the church in Birmingham,⁸ two dissertations on the Church of the Lord,⁹ all unpublished. My most recent research looked at the Nigerian Pentecostal Born-Again movement. There is a burgeoning literature on global Pentecostalism,¹⁰ which includes the West African experience, but as yet little on Born-Again practice in London.

Another body of work developed over recent decades is that on new religious movements (NRMs).¹¹ But this concentrates on organizations, many with Eastern origins, which appeal to Western constituencies. African churches, springing from different roots and not attracting European members, do not fall easily into this category. Aladura and other spiritual churches have been labeled NRMs, but only in an African context.¹²

A significant development in the literature has been the growth of scholarship within the black churches themselves. As in other contexts, those with whom anthropologists have worked are now often equipped to comment on the results—or produce their own studies. There is a long tradition of Yoruba scholarship on indigenous society and religion,¹³ and Aladura have always been interested in producing pamphlets on their history. Now the two have married: the work of J. Akinyele Omoyajowo (1978, 1982, 1984) on the Nigerian C&S is an example. In Britain, conferences attended by West African scholars who are also leaders of spiritual churches have produced invaluable exchanges.¹⁴ Nevertheless, what is still lacking is a detailed ethnography of this major aspect of Yoruba life in London.

Spiritual Power

There also has been a lacuna in anthropological literature on the subject that forms the central focus of this study: spiritual power, the invisible energy with which the C&S God infuses his creation. Capable of being utilized for good or ill, power, it is said, may be solicited from gods or manipulated through speech, gesture, or material objects. In C&S thinking, evidence of power lies both in the assaults of unseen enemies that account for misfortune, and in the efficacy of prayer that protects and produces blessings. Its most dramatic manifestation is in entrancement, interpreted as possession by the power of the Holy Spirit.

Knowing nothing about either the Yoruba community or their religious practices when I first attended a C&S service in 1969, it was this aspect of the proceedings that immediately held my attention. Although no doubt succumbing to the tendency to exoticize the Other, criticized so fiercely in current anthropology, an uninitiated visitor could not avoid being arrested by evidence of the Spirit. From the gallery where I was sitting, I looked down on a sea of some 300 white-robed men and women, singing, dancing, clapping to the drums and organ, praying spontaneously in unison, or following the extemporaneous prayer from the leader of the service. As the atmosphere quickened, I noticed that a number of men and women began to tremble and shake; some were shouting unintelligibly, but others gasped out sentences, either in Yoruba or English.

The contents of these utterances, I saw, were being jotted down in a notebook by another member. Then, at a particular point in the service, first women and then men, in an orderly fashion, were asked to deliver their visions. Prefacing their delivery with “In the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, as the prayer was in progress I saw . . . ,” there followed a message to an individual or to the congregation, such as the one with which I opened this chapter. I was to learn that these revelations were based on images, “like cinema,” which the visioners saw when in trance, and then interpreted according to Aladura conventions. They often enjoined unity, or right living, but also prescribed ritual to ensure well-being and success in the areas of health, fertility, exams, employment, housing, travel—an immediate window into the lifeworld of their recipients.

Even on this first occasion, I noticed that warnings of the assaults of enemies and the power of evildoers featured large. At one point in the service, a sister suddenly began to shriek, flinging her arms backward and forward, back bending, deep in trance:

Don't use them—don't use them—don't use what you don't understand—black power, black power . . .

I was astonished. Even from my brief acquaintance with C&S members, it seemed that their personal ambitions and political orientation had little in common with the disciples of Stokely Carmichael or Malcolm X organizing the Black Power movement in Britain's cities at the time.¹⁵ I was enlightened later by a member. Gossip had it that a certain elder was using occult literature,¹⁶ invoking spirits of dubious provenance to supplement his own spiritual power. Although, to avoid conflict, he was not overtly named, this was a warning that he should not seek powers

other than the Holy Spirit. The thrust of these accusations was partly moral: using sources of power other than holy water or oil, or personal prayer and fasting, smacked of indigenous “juju,” Yoruba spells and incantations that Aladura condemned. But in addition, to summon forces not fully comprehended, without the necessary personal power to control the consequences, was to run the risk of spiritual or physical danger.

The following Sunday, these unseen perils were brought closer to home: summoned into the side-room after the service, I was told by a group of church elders (men in senior grades in the C&S hierarchy) that a sister had reported a dream concerning myself: pursued by a group of people, I had been captured, strung up by my hands on a telephone wire, and pushed to and fro. These aggressors, I was told, were evildoers, that is, witches or enemies posing as friends. The possible effects of their power were to be neutralized by prayer, duly said by an encircling group of elders.

From that moment, I became aware of the Cherubim and Seraphim’s preoccupation with the pursuit of *agbara emi*, “spiritual power.” Reworking my material some years later, it was still this concept of unseen energy that appeared to draw together different aspects of the C&S. The longer I looked at ritual practice, the more closely I read ritual texts, the more the salient features of this vitality emerged and the logic of its operation became apparent. To unpack an ineffable essence such as spiritual power is not inimical to the tropes of Yoruba religious discourse, in which “reification turns spiritual ideas to material things and makes them behave as [if] they are totally enfleshed” (Ilesanmi 1993: 65). Nevertheless, I am aware of the dangers of essentializing a fluid and ambiguous concept, of distorting C&S interpretations by overprivileging the notion of power, of presenting an idealized, intellectualist account of Aladura practice with few dissenting voices. It is certainly true that ordinary members would be unable to present the concept in such detail as I do in chapters 4 and 5. Nor would the adepts, the experienced elders on whom I heavily relied, spontaneously formulate the model in the way I have done. But neither have I, in the manner of some deconstructionist studies, imputed meaning to metaphor or significance to ritual acts where this was not explicitly confirmed by elders themselves. One of the advantages of undertaking fieldwork “at home” is the potential for checking emerging analysis with the community concerned. “You might not think it,” said a prophet after one such session on *agbara*, “but that’s actually what’s going on.” Elders did not always agree on detail—adepts have their own ritual styles—but the main conclusions were not disputed.

Reliance on indigenous experts has always been a key anthropological strategy, although in the early days the main informant may not have put in a personal appearance in the final account. Recent studies of Yoruba ritual in Nigeria such as that by Drewal (1992) are explicit about individual sources, and the relationship is more of colleagues or co-researchers than ethnographer and informant.¹⁷ In the sensitive London context, those on whom I most relied preferred not to be forefronted, so do not appear as major characters. But their personalities and viewpoints molded my perceptions. For whether made apparent or not, fieldwork is a dialogue; the wresting of meaning from practice becomes a joint venture in which the informant is involved in self-realization as much as the ethnographer seeks to transcend his or her own cultural confines. Comments reached me from some of those with whom I talked: they found discussions “very interesting,” discovering how much they knew about their church, and reflecting on this knowledge.

Whether because of their educational experience or personal curiosity, several of the elders displayed a high degree of reflexivity. For example, I did not encounter the problem that puzzled Carter (1997) in his study of the Celestial Church of Christ (a popular latecomer to the Aladura scene, much given to elaborate ritual): how could a church that clearly exhibited commonalities with traditional ritual so firmly reject charges of syncretism? The C&S reflected openly on the replacement of indigenous practice by Aladura. They made no apology that visions, especially those solicited from visioners with respect to particular problems, had supplanted Ifa, the Yoruba oracle; that Aladura ritual rivaled vernacular medicine and juju; that the power of the Christian God had now overtaken that of Yoruba deities, the *oriṣa*.

The forging of Christian forms from familiar cultural practice is effected in the C&S not by the reproduction of traditional ritual behavior, but through persistence of religious orientations and cosmological assumptions, those “dispositions which, integrating past experiences, function at every moment as a *matrix of perceptions, appreciations, and actions*” (Bourdieu 1977: 82–83). Central to these is the discourse of spiritual power. But this unseen energy is often as much a taken-for-granted matter for ethnographers as it is for many of those they have studied. In previous work on Aladura and similar West African churches, the significance of spiritual potency has been acknowledged: Beckman (1975: 114) writes that the theology of the Ghanaian spiritual church movement “can be summed up in a word: power.” But it is not explored, or taken as a starting point for analysis. An exception is Hackett’s study of the discourse of power among

contemporary West African spiritual churches (1993). She demonstrates the centrality of the concept, the elision of ritual and secular power, and the various contexts in which it is represented. But she does not consider the dynamics of spiritual power per se—the principles by which it is assumed to operate.

Neither do the majority of studies of power in different cultural contexts take these into account. One early and perceptive cross-cultural study along these lines was attempted by Webster in his *Magic, a Sociological Study* (1948). But the analysis was trapped in the evolutionary framework of its time: from “magic” to “religion.” Articles in Fogelson and Adams’ *Anthropology of Power* (1977) lack a common theoretical perspective, and it is hard to tell whether differences discernable in the discourse of power proceed from the cultures concerned or from the categories employed in analysis. This collection shows that the notion of spiritual power is more salient in some societies than in others, but we do not know whether this is inherent in differing metaphysical structures or due to the extent of the reduction of indigenous culture by external forces. Writing over a decade later, Arens and Karp’s *Creativity of Power* (1989) adopts a sharper focus on power as a cultural construct. Challenging the secular definitions assumed by Western social scientists, they argue that analysis of power should start with indigenous concepts: “power is how power means” (xv). But although they draw attention to the sources and exercise of ritual power, and note its universal transformative capacity, the articles in their volume do not enquire *how* this power is constructed or examine the particular shape it has in local imaginations.

Early studies of magic drew much on the concept of *mana*, a Polynesian term originally documented at the end of the nineteenth century, and then adopted as a generic term for concepts of innate, effective vitality in living beings, material objects, and invisible entities.¹⁸ But Keesing, in “Rethinking Mana” (1984), argues that *mana* itself may not have been conceived as a “thing-like” potency, but more as a quality of efficacy, only realized through visible results. The oft-employed metaphor of electricity, he maintains, was not indigenous. Awareness of subtle differences in the concept of unseen energy warns against the derivation of metaconcepts from one particular cultural context for indiscriminate use in others. Fr. Placide Tempels, driven by a quest for effective evangelization in the 1940s, overemphasized the ubiquity of an all-pervasive *force vitale* in Africa rather than examining the dynamics of unseen vitality in its particular Congolese setting. His *Bantu Philosophy* (1969) had considerable influence over African scholars generalizing on the “African philosophy of life,” which “conceives of

the quality of ‘force,’ ‘energy,’ or ‘power’ ” that “derives from God and runs through the whole of creation” (Echeknube 1987: 18). These conclusions are, however, contested in the debate within African scholarship over the extent to which this “life-force” is a universal feature of African epistemology.¹⁹

In Western Nigeria, however, the concept of power as a necessary vitality is omnipresent. For the C&S, *agbara ẹmi mimo* “the power of the Holy Spirit” is a fundamental principle of general efficacy; the metaphor of electricity is their own. It forms the focus of ritual, the pivot of prayer, the subtext of all dreams and visions. It is also the basic dynamic behind the Aladura divinatory system of prophecy and prayer, whereby the visioner, empowered by the Spirit, reveals the activities of unseen forces. These may then be challenged or reinforced according to divine instruction through the enlisted power of God.

Although the nature of the unseen power remains culturally specific, I would argue that this circular oracular model, the dynamic relationship between etiology, oracle, and remedial action, is applicable to a wide range of African divination systems. Although rarely analyzed, the ontological ground is some notion of unseen energy articulating these aspects of the divinatory process both at an explanatory and performative level. However implicit, there will be some understanding of a spiritual force that influences both the diviner’s operations, and the agents whose activities are so revealed, whether this vitality is personified or not.

Take the famous case of the Azande: in spite of the relative insignificance of deities, spirits, and ancestors in the Zande cosmology,²⁰ Evans-Pritchard records that it is the “play of mystic forces” that determines misfortune or success (1937: 340–341). These are revealed only through divination, where it is the “mystical potency”²¹ of the poison administered to chickens, or the medicine in the entranced diviner’s belly,²² which operates the oracles. This dynamic *mbismo*, the “inherent power”²³ of persons and things,²⁴ lies behind all unseen agency;²⁵ it “bridges over the distance” both between witch and victim,²⁶ and between rectifying ritual and its result.²⁷ In another classic study, Turner’s analysis of Ndembu divination (1975), malign agents are held responsible for misfortune through the “attribution of magical power to motivation”;²⁸ it is the power of a spirit that shakes the diviner,²⁹ determining the fall of the objects in the divinatory basket—symbolic objects “invested with some animate quality”³⁰ whose “meanings rest ultimately on axiomatic beliefs in the existence of mystical beings and forces.”³¹ By way of introduction, Turner asserts that in “African thought . . . materiality is not inert but vital.”³² But the

character of this vitality, which links the ideational with the performance, the ontology with the séance, remains opaque.

By emphasizing the dynamic quality of spiritual convictions, I am not suggesting that this is exclusively African. Much of Western New Age practice is essentially the pursuit of unseen powers with a modern gloss:

Celestial Black Dragon Power, awaken its lightening bolt power, instantly create a power centre at home or work . . .

The Field: The Quest for the Secret Force of the Universe, the key to life itself may lie in the vibrations that connect everything.

(Programme for Mind Body Spirit Festival,
London, 2002: 6)

Modern physics affirms that everything in our world is formed by energy, and that it is the variations in its vibrational frequencies which make this energy able to manifest in all shades of density, ranging from rocks to gases. Everything then is an integral part of the Whole, constantly exchanging this basic common factor. By becoming aware of this process of exchange, we can employ it far more purposefully.

(St. Aubin 1990: 21)³³

But in the C&S this search is at once less self-conscious (as needing no justification) and implicitly more coherent (being grounded in indigenous epistemology). The pre-Christian Yoruba term for the power was *ase*; for C&S it is *agbara* that makes sense of prayer and prophecy. I would maintain that all oracular practice that goes beyond mere fortune-telling will be similarly informed by some notion of spiritual power as the effective principle behind causation and cure.

Returning to Anthropology

The connection between power and divination was apparent to me during my original research. But I had problems in deciding what to make of it. A relevant question might be not only why I started up the ladder again after so long, but why I slid off in the first place. The reasons were various, but in retrospect, I think that although I had so much already written, I could not find a way to deal with all of my material. I was stuck.

My theoretical aim was straightforward. I wanted to argue for religion as a significant factor in its own right, and to accord belief and ritual practice equal weight in the analysis of social action to political and economic factors. The way people interpret their reality, and therefore how they act upon it, has a dynamic, dialectical relationship

with other aspects of their lifeworld, but is, I wished to show, an autonomous determinant both in the construction of social groups and the decisions of individuals. To relegate epistemology to a second level of analysis, it seemed to me, was to distort agency and distrust emic accounts of motivation.

This is now a commonplace assumption, in need of no special pleading. But it was much less so in the early 1970s. On the one hand there was Marxism, and on the other, the functionalist heirs of Durkheim. Marxist perspectives were once again fashionable in academia, in forms ranging from the synthesis of structuralism and Marxism in French anthropology to the dependency theory of Latin American provenance. These currents stimulated new insights into the social relations of production, such as Gavin Williams's work on the political economy of Western Nigeria (1970, 1976). But what of religion? This was seen as ideology, relegated to a superstructural second order, which was held to mystify exploitation and inequality.³⁴ Although they stood at the opposite ends of the political spectrum, Marxists thus merged with structural functionalists in treating religion as essentially epiphenomenal, whether of political domination or social cohesion. Although many of the classic studies of religion in the early 1970s were more complex than a crude label implies, the underlying premise of the functionalism in which I was trained was reductionist. Ritual was often represented as "all purpose social glue," either binding communities together, or providing a cathartic release of conflict to enhance social solidarity.

Clearly, a sociology of religion must recognize what a religious practice or organization *does*. But it must also take into account what it *is* for its followers. Part of anthropological debate in the 1970s was over the definition of "religion." My own working model of the concept was substantive rather than functionalist: as beliefs and practices arising from the supposed operation of spiritual forces in the universe, whether invested in objects, words, or gestures, or embodied in spirits or gods. This emphasis bypassed the old debate on the distinction between "religion" and "magic,"³⁵ and replaced it with members' own interpretation of their ritual behavior. I was interested in how the *content* of ritual expression and the assumptions that lay behind action and speech affected the life course of individuals, as well as the development of a Yoruba organization in London. But current theory was addressing different questions.

When I finally returned to my research in the 1990s, I had been out of anthropology for nearly 20 years; that is, divorced from the academic discipline, for anthropological insights proved invaluable in the

Central American development projects with which I had been working. In hindsight, I can see that this practical application of anthropology reinforced my theoretical bent. The success of projects depended on the meaning assigned by a community both to their present economic, political, and social arrangements, and to proposed changes. Many a development scheme that has been based on theories of modernization but which has ignored local understandings has ended in failure.

I then found that what had happened to anthropology in the interim helped me make sense of my data. The cultures that anthropologists had traditionally studied were changing, and old models no longer served. By the late 1970s, the much-mentioned theoretical shift from function to meaning was well under way. Although their theoretical approaches were distinct, the monographs on spirit possession with which I started—Lambek (1981), Danforth (1989), Boddy (1989), amongst others—shared this interpretive concern: to uncover the meaning behind social practice, what it signified not only to the community but to individuals. “Agency” put people and process in a dialectical relationship with systems and structures. The metaphor of text for approaching culture, popularized by Clifford Geertz (1973, 1983), embraced all social behavior; every aspect of life could be read for its symbolic relationship with others. In my own work it was the sermons, prayers, and visions that assumed particular new significance as multilayered texts, operating on both performative and metaphorical levels. Whereas their manifest content spoke of members’ daily preoccupations, the imaginative universe they conveyed was one of the battle between good and evil forces, the nature of the power through which this conflict was conducted, and the principles upon which it was thought to operate. To start as I have done (chapters 4 and 5) with an outline of these assumptions, rather than with lived events, might seem to divide social practice into “worldview” and “behavior.” But this epistemology is as essential a background for interpreting possession and ritual, as is the socioeconomic position of members in explaining the formation of the C&S.

The 1980s also saw a renewal of interest in African divination, which “continues to provide a trusted means of decision making, a basic source of vital knowledge” (Peek 1991a: 2). Typologies of oracles tend to set apart the possession of spirit mediums from mechanically operated oracles,³⁶ but it has also been recognized that the two methods act as structural equivalents.³⁷ In Aladura practice, consultation with visioners over the vicissitudes of life is part of the attraction of the C&S to its members, as well as to those who seek a divinatory service

without identifying with the church. An appreciation of this oracular function of possession in African independent churches appeared from the 1960s,³⁸ but the process of divination through the Holy Spirit—how it operates in practice—has received surprisingly little attention.³⁹

Earlier functionalist approaches emphasized the instrumentality of oracles;⁴⁰ Aladura prophecy, as all divination, certainly has both intended and unintended consequences in terms of personal and collective decision-taking and ordering of community life. But it also conveys Aladura epistemology, rendering personal problems meaningful by setting them into the C&S cosmological context. In recent studies, “attention is focused on the aspect of purposeful articulation of meaning” (Devisch 1985: 77), analyzing the *process* by which an oracle creates consensus from diversity, clarity from confusion, and arrives at a result. Instead of a prototypical presentation of divinatory procedure, contemporary ethnography explores examples of oracular discourse, showing how meaning is wrested from metaphor and ambiguity in the context of concrete cases.⁴¹ To date, there have been no comparable studies of the divinatory aspect of spiritual churches. Through the pages of a prophet’s diary, in chapter 8, I flesh out a model of the divination process with cases from his clientele.

Ethnography and the Self

The reliance on a record solicited from a practitioner in place of direct observation stems from the context of this study: for reasons of confidentiality, I could not attend or follow up individual consultations with visioners. But my fieldwork was also shaped by the academic climate of the times as well as the community concerned. Although I might have tussled with its constraints, I had begun my research within a particular disciplinary culture, which inevitably influenced what and how I observed, not only how I interpreted the findings. I was working, for example, before the women’s movement challenged the andocentric bias in the collection of data. I had a position of responsibility in a female Band (a subgroup within the church), and formed close relationships with several women. But my main research relied on the male spiritual experts and elders of an organization that was led and controlled by men, rather than the more inaccessible experience of women.

Feminist theoreticians have also been in the forefront of the debate on the author in ethnographic writing, demanding a self-awareness of a situated researcher through the exercise of reflexivity: “the turning

back on oneself, a process of self-reference” (Davies 1999: 4).⁴² This freedom for the author is exemplified in rich and fascinating studies such as Cornwall’s work with Yoruba women in Ado (1996) or Barber’s experience of Yoruba popular theatre (2000), where the writer’s presence is woven seamlessly into the account. Other authors are more self-consciously autobiographical, such as Rabinow in his *Reflections on Fieldwork in Morocco* (1977), or adopt a confessional mode, as do the contributors to *Taboo: Sex, Identity and Erotic Subjectivity in Anthropological Fieldwork* (Kulik and Willson 1995). Then there is the “ego-ethnographic” genre, which charts the researcher’s personal odyssey of self-discovery as in Stoller and Olkes’s *In Sorcery’s Shadow* (1987). One definition of hermeneutics—the explanatory, interpretive strategy of much contemporary anthropology—is that made by Ricoeur: “the comprehension of self by the detour of the comprehension of the other” (quoted in Rabinow 1977: 5); conversely: “the conscious use of the self as a resource for making sense of others” (Hervik 1994: 92).

Either way, in what follows I seem largely, and unfashionably, absent. Educated in an academic tradition where the first person was prohibited—“I think” was scored out by teachers in favor of “it could be argued that . . .”—I was trained in an anthropology that still saw itself as an objective science. “Personal” accounts of fieldwork tended to be relegated to journals, famously by Malinowski in *A Diary in the Strict Sense of the Term* (1967), novelized as in Bowen’s *Return to Laughter* (1954), or regarded as academically inferior.⁴³ When working with the C&S, my fieldwork notebook labeled *Diary* soon became a record of others’ experience, rather than my own. The most extreme case of this self-negation was my personal experience of possession, which took place during one late-night service in 1973. As it was one of the most “powerful” events of my life, I do not need a record to recall it, but my field notes enter members’ questions and comments on the incident, but without a word on what happened to me, or my own response.

When writing the chapter on possession (6), I first included a personal account of my trance-experience. But the change of voice sat oddly, and I took it out. Nevertheless, it is there—as an understanding, not as an event. My own “sensory knowledge” of possession gave me an understanding of others’ encounter with the Spirit, and also influenced my analysis. Whatever additional significance the possession phenomenon might have, for the C&S a primary meaning is that of *experienced* power. Experience, both physical and emotional, I also found, was now recognized as a significant aspect of ethnography, which helped me approach my material afresh.

In the “Field”

The gathering of this material was conditioned by the concrete conditions of the community with which I worked. Every “field” has its difficulties: I was faced with a scattered, unbounded community in a large city with no focus apart from intermittent meetings and services, and a web of personal relationships.

Nevertheless, becoming an active member of the church drew me immediately into a network of ritual, administrative, and social activity. For two years I had the experience of being completely immersed in a community that was part of my own society, but almost invisible to it. Through a member’s landlord, I found a place to live in Stoke Newington: a divided room at the top of a large, dilapidated Victorian house, in which also lived one Yoruba and four African-Caribbean families in the sort of conditions experienced by many C&S: one barely functioning lavatory for all, no usable bath, but plenty of rot, crumbling plaster, and mice.

My most important piece of equipment was the telephone, a virtual equivalent of village street, market, or town bar where anthropologists hang out. Much of my data depended on reportage: secondhand accounts passed on over the phone; conversations, rather than just “being around.” A pulsing web of communication across London between members conveyed the latest church news, summons to group prayers, announcements of meetings and gossip. The obligation to report a significant dream or vision either directly to the person featured, or to elders, in order for prayer to follow, provided opportunity for exchanging further information. Included in the network, news reached me fast. When once I was upset about a malicious rumor about myself that had come back to me, an elder consoled me: “If they didn’t gossip about you, you wouldn’t be one of them.”

This particular accusation was that I had purchased my car from the proceeds of the Building Fund Committee (established to buy a prayer house) of which I was a member. What lay behind this and other rumors was distrust—a fear that as the only white member of the church I was a CID agent/Home Office spy. Suspicions were exacerbated by my tape-recording church services, a researcher’s persistent questioning, and stories of a vision allegedly disclosing my true intent. These episodes revealed the extent of members’ insecurity. Mistrust was legitimate; immigration rules were tightening, and some members may well have been sailing close to the wind.⁴⁴ The fear of official authority, “trouble,” and deportation was ever-present. The C&S was also applying for registration as a religious body; elders were

apprehensive that the church was under investigation as a covert political organization, which would threaten their official recognition.

Many Yoruba have commented to me on the preoccupation with privacy amongst “our people”; personal enquiry, which would be the stuff of English polite conversation, can be considered impertinent or suspect. One C&S friend refused to take on life insurance as the form “asked too many questions.” This initially made investigation into members’ backgrounds problematic. When I asked the head of one male Band if members would answer four brief queries including date of arrival in England, the request was rejected as being “too personal.” A premature attempt to administer a more detailed questionnaire to elders nearly ditched my fieldwork.

However, with time, and through the support of many members at both an official and personal level, these problems receded. The elders’ survey (referred to as the elders’ sample), which I conducted with 32 men, covered both personal background and church careers. Seventy-five members of two male Bands responded to a shorter written questionnaire handed out at a meeting. These two together formed the male members’ sample—a total of 92 men, as there were elders amongst the members of the Bands. But even though not yielding quantitative data, far more information was gathered by constant discussion with both elders and “floor members” over two years, with more irregular contact for several more. Although I would have an agenda for each meeting, I found that relatively unstructured and openended discussion was more productive for deeper insights both on individual lives and C&S practice. Personal records—diaries, photo albums, correspondence—filled in individual stories. Although such confidences were vital to my understanding, to use directly the intimate knowledge I acquired of friends’ personal histories and subterranean church events would be a betrayal of trust. I have attributed texts such as prayers and visions, together with comments on church affairs, to their speakers, but I have changed names when dealing with personal lives. Details of the C&S in Britain were filled in from church archives; the plethora of C&S pamphlets on the history and doctrine of the church brought from Nigeria (translated for me by elders where necessary) were supplemented by interviews with visiting leaders of Nigerian branches.

Over a period of two years I attended church occasions regularly: services, Sunday schools, Band meetings, committees, services in private houses, prayers organized for particular purposes. I became involved in church administration and social life. More intermittent participation continued for another four years. I also attended other Aladura churches⁴⁵ and interviewed their leaders. During 1999–2001,

besides returning to the C&S, I attended services and events at four Pentecostal churches popular with Yoruba,⁴⁶ and discussed their organizations with pastors and members.

During the first stage, I recorded and transcribed 26 services of different types. These included nearly 2,000 revelations. A sample of eight services of four kinds yielded 678 visions (referred to as the vision sample), which I analyzed in more detail. Sermons and Sunday schools were in English, but prayers and revelations were delivered in both Yoruba and English. To my shame I never learnt Yoruba. I had the unusual experience of starting fieldwork without knowing the ethnicity of the community concerned, and then found that everyone could speak English. So texts in the vernacular were translated for me by an elder. I have used these versions throughout, as they are closer to their English counterparts than a stricter rendering would be. When quoting verbatim from written or oral sources, I have retained original spellings and constructions, and dispensed with indicators of technical errors, such as *sic*. Amongst other sources, I have used Yoruba popular fiction⁴⁷ written in English, a genre that offers rich insight into contemporary life both in Nigeria and Britain, and the social and epistemological background to the Cherubim and Seraphim Church.

Chapter 2

“Stars of the World”: Yoruba Worker-Students in Britain

When you come to England, you lock up your identity. In the work you do, and the way you live, you could be anybody. You must be prepared to take any job and sink to any depths—as long as you know what you are aiming at, and you don't let yourself lose sight of it.

(Elder Oguntulu)

Students and professional people! You are the Stars of the World!

(Sermon 1969)

When Yoruba students arrived in Britain in the first half of the 1960s, they envisaged a short, temporary stay in London before returning to Nigeria to join the ranks of the national elite. They came from a newly independent Nigeria with one aim in mind: to continue their education in the country by which they had been colonized for over half a century. What they were to experience was a Britain gradually slipping into economic decline, which afforded them little of the welcome they might have expected, and relegated them to the position of a black immigrant proletariat. As their stay became protracted, daily difficulties accumulated, frustrating their goal of gaining their qualifications and returning home. For members of the Cherubim and Seraphim it was their church that both helped them survive their problems and maintain a sense of their own professional identity and future.

Samuel Ajayi's Story

An elder in the C&S, Samuel Ajayi once told me of the turning point in his decision to come to England. It was in 1960, when he was working as a sanitary inspector in Lagos. One evening he arranged to

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