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# Òrìṣà Devotion as World Religion

## *The Globalization of Yorùbá Religious Culture*

Edited by

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# 26

# Is There Gender in Yorùbá Culture?

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The title of this essay is one of two related questions that dominated debate at the 1999 conference that inspired this volume—"From Local to Global: Rethinking Yorùbá Religious Traditions for the Next Millennium." The answer to this first question—which is the main objective of this chapter—hinges on the definitions, methods, motives of the analyst, as well as the quality of his or her observations. The other, related question concerns who has the right to speak about and for the various religious traditions—such as West African òrìṣà-worship, Cuban Santería (or Ocha), Brazilian Candomblé, and Trinidadian Shango—with formative origins among the ancestors of today's Yorùbá people, and particularly among the ancestors of the Ọyọ́-Yorùbá. Insiders and outsiders to any given local culture or tradition have qualitatively and quantitatively different knowledge of that culture or tradition. Also qualitatively and quantitatively different are the ways that insiders and outsiders are materially affected by the authoritative "truths" that the academy exports.

Therefore, what follows is also an intellectual history and an anthropology of scholarship. Such a study speaks not only to the changing assumptions behind the study of sex and gender but also to the changing

assumptions behind the term "culture" itself and the politics of its representation in a transnational world. Is the analysis of any given culture best monopolized by the people who grew up in it? What if they have long lived elsewhere or occupy a highly distinctive class position within that culture? Are the ideological and positional biases of natives (including the temptation of émigré natives to idealize the homeland) inherent obstacles to nonpartisan social analysis? Is the evidence that is available to non-natives quantitatively and qualitatively inferior, or simply different by virtue of the perspective and disciplinary framing from which it arises?

These questions necessarily arise in the comparison of two recently published books about the Ọ̀yọ́-Yorùbá people of Nigeria. Published three years apart by the University of Minnesota Press, both of these books examine the theme of gender and its relevance to the study of Ọ̀yọ́-Yorùbá history and society. Yet they reach opposite conclusions. My *Sex and the Empire That Is No More: Gender and the Politics of Metaphor in Ọ̀yọ́ Yorùbá Religion* (1994; also 2005b) and Oyeronkẹ Oyewumi's *The Invention of Women: Making an African Sense of Western Gender Discourses* (1997) have thus inspired the most vigorous controversy of the past half-century in Yorùbá studies.

*Sex and the Empire That Is No More* is based upon twelve months of field and archival research in Ìgbòho, a former capital of the Ọ̀yọ́ royal empire. It focuses on the priesthoods of Ṣàngó (an early Ọ̀yọ́ monarch now apotheosized as the god of thunder and lightning) and Yemọja (goddess of the River Ògùn and, in Ìgbòho, tutelary goddess of a chiefly dynasty in conflict with the Ọ̀yọ́ palace's local representative for sovereignty in the town). From September 1988 to August 1989, I lived day in and day out with the priests of these two gods and with the main partisans in this chieftaincy dispute. I also sought out—at the National Archives (housed at the University of Ìbàdàn) and at the Ọ̀yọ́ State Secretariat at Ìbàdàn—all of the documents available on the history of the town and on the decades of local political and judicial activity that led to the current standoff in local chieftaincy affairs.

*Sex and the Empire* interprets this field and archival research in the broader context of the available literature on Yorùbá history and culture and on the Yorùbá-Atlantic diaspora, as well as seven years of my own prior field research among practitioners of Afro-Cuban Ocha in the United States, eight months of field research among practitioners of Candomblé in Bahia, Brazil, a prior year of research, classroom study,



and residence in Ìbàdàn (1982–83), and repeated, extensive interaction with the Muslims, Christians, and devotees of all the òrìṣà in Kétou (Benin Republic), Ọ̀yọ́ Town, Ìbàdàn, Òkè Ihò, Ìgbòho, Sakí, Ṣẹ̀pẹ̀tẹ̀rí, and other Ọ̀yọ́ North towns. I am acutely aware of both the similarities and the differences of history, worldview, and practice among these diverse locales, all the better to grasp what political interests and social history motivate interregional and intergroup divergences of ritual and mythic narrative and to grasp what shared vocabulary of action and performance enables these diverse assertions of sociopolitical interest.

Though published three years earlier and focused on gender in the same region, my *Sex and the Empire That Is No More* curiously receives no mention in Oyeronkẹ Oyewumi's *The Invention of Women: Making an African Sense of Western Gender Discourses*. Oyewumi chooses instead to refer her readers to my relatively inaccessible 1991 Ph.D. dissertation at the University of Chicago. Yet the differences between Oyewumi's dissertation and her book appear largely to be a response to the ethnographic and historical materials presented in both my dissertation and my book.

*The Invention of Women* critically re-examines the existing historical and ethnographic literatures based on Oyewumi's own lifelong sense of Yorùbá language and society. She rereads these literatures in the light of the highly novel hypothesis that gender did not exist in Yorùbá culture during what she represents as the unchanging period before "colonialism" and does not exist in the deep essence of present-day Yorùbá culture. Oyewumi dates "colonialism" variously—and confusingly—from the slave trade, from the beginning of the nineteenth century, and from European colonization, the last of which did not take place in Ọ̀yọ́ until the end of the nineteenth century. She does not claim to have conducted intensive research on any particular area of Yorùbá life but implies that her personal identity as a princess and her upbringing in the twentieth-century Ògbómọ̀ṣọ́ palace grant her superior insight into pre-nineteenth-century Ọ̀yọ́-Yorùbá culture and into the essence of twentieth-century Ọ̀yọ́-Yorùbá culture. She writes,

> I would assert that I am Yorùbá. I was born into a large family, and the comings and goings of my many relations constituted an important introduction into Yorùbá lifeways. In 1973, my father ascended the throne and became the *Ṣọ̀ún* (monarch) of *Ògbómọ̀ṣọ́*, a major Ọ̀yọ́-Yorùbá polity of some historical significance. Since then and up to the present, *àáfin Ṣọ̀ún* (the palace) has been the place I call home. Daily,

> I have listened to the drummers and heard the *oríkì* (praise poetry) of my forebears recited as the royal mothers rendered the poems to family members as greetings as we passed through the *saarè*—the courtyard in which the departed monarchs are buried. Our ancestors are still very much with us.
>
> . . . . All these happenings [in the palace] provided ample opportunity for me to observe and reflect on the personal and public aspects of living culture. (Oyewumi 1997: xvi)

Oyewumi's identity and upbringing are impressive. Yet, like any social scientist's autobiography, they help the reader to appreciate not only the potential empirical strengths but also the sociopolitical interests and the class-specific, region-specific, and network-specific experience and perspective from which she speaks. Thus, Carole Boyce Davies (2002) wonders whether so elite an observer as Oyewumi will automatically understand or represent the experience of non-elite women as they would. Mojiṣọla F. Tiamiyu (2000: 122) denies Oyewumi's assertion that her gender-free model of Yorùbá culture applies to all Yorùbá subgroups, such as the Èkìtì and the Òǹdó, with whom Tiamiyu—another Yorùbá woman—is familiar. Moreover, Oyewumi's argument and reporting of her sources reveal no evidence of participation in òrìṣà worship or long-term, intensive participant observation among any of the diverse categories of òrìṣà worshipers. Today, the vast majority of Ọ̀yọ́-Yorùbá people and their monarchs are Muslim or Christian, while òrìṣà worshipers are a highly marginalized lot. Being an Ọ̀yọ́-Yorùbá person—even a princess—guarantees no familiarity with their beliefs, practices, or daily experience.

The Matory-Oyewumi debate at the 1999 Florida International University conference inaugurated the most vigorous debate in Yorùbá studies since scholars in the 1960s and 1970s debated the relative importance of agnation and cognatic principles in Yorùbá kinship (see, for example, Eades 1980: 37–38). The debate over whether there is gender in Yorùbá culture holds considerably broader implications for worldwide scholarship and, despite its frequent testiness, bespeaks the academic health and importance of Yorùbá studies. Since 1999, this debate has inspired scores of public lectures, a 2002 African Studies Association roundtable, a dozen scholarly articles, the founding of an online journal, an edited volume, hundreds of citations, and at least one book primarily devoted to the topic.[1] This essay, then, examines the substance and the



context of this debate, exploring the diverse definitions, methods, motives, and facts that appear to have motivated Oyewumi's and my opposite conclusions, as well as other scholars' responses to this debate. What scholarly traditions does this debate revise or amplify? How do the scholar's social origins affect the credibility and the social effects of his or her publications? In particular, what does this debate between an Ọ̀yọ́-Yorùbá princess and an African American—both scholars in the Western mold—teach us not only about Yorùbá society but also about the social dynamics of authoritative truth making in the academy?

## Definitions

Like "kinship," "mental illness," "medicine," "physics," and so forth, the analytic rubric "gender" has undergone continual definitional revision, while the scholars who employ the term have debated and changed their minds over time about what aspects of it do and do not vary across time and space. An understanding of this debate about gender in Yorùbá culture also depends on a contextual understanding of such terms as *ìyáwó, ọkọ, gùn,* "cross-dressing," "transvestism," and "homosexuality."

"Gender" is not a theory or a general premise about how everything in all societies works at all times. Rather, it is the descriptive rubric for an aspect of society—that is, the learned ways in which reproductive roles are assigned and meaningfully interpreted—an aspect of society that was once assumed to be merely natural (e.g., Rubin 1975). Before "gender" became a named line of questioning it had been easier to overlook the fact that people with different biological and socially assigned roles in reproduction often have commensurately different roles in and perspectives on the rest of their social lives and are unequally willing or able to talk to researchers and reporters (Ardener 1975). As a research agenda, "gender" implies that there is nothing merely natural about those roles and perspectives and that we must ask where and how they matter.

Influential gender scholars have repeatedly and emphatically denied that any given set of biological categories—such as "male" vs. "female"—and any given choice of the distinguishing features—such as X and Y chromosomes, external genitalia, mammary size, role in coitus, or fertility—is culturally and historically universal in its salience

(e.g., Ortner and Whitehead 1981: 1; Matory 1994, 2005a: ix–xiv). Even scholars who still assumed that there was something natural about the "male"/"female" contrast have argued that gender categories "are not reducible to, or derivative of natural, biological facts. They vary from one language to another, one culture to another, in the way in which they order experience and action" (Shapiro 1981: 449).

Not all gender theorists regard gender categories as binary or dichotomous. A sizable literature has discussed cross-gender behaviors and social roles, third genders, gendered roles in social reproduction such as "husbands" and "wives" (whose local counterparts in sub-Saharan Africa often encompass members of both sexes), and the use of male-female difference in the metaphoric construction of same-sex relationships (Trexler 1995; Whitehead 1981; Amadiume 1987; Matory 1994, 1988; for a further listing, see Matory 1994: 1–3, 180–83).

Nor does the term "gender" require its users to believe that all women in the world, or all women in any particular society, think alike and have the same interests. The population describable as "women," for example, is regularly subdivided and cross-cut by identities referent to race, ethnicity, citizenship, class, sexual orientation, marital status, age, kinship, parenthood status, and so forth (e.g., Moraga and Anzaldúa 1983; Butler 1990: 3; Behar 1995; hooks 1981; Collins 1989).

Nor does the term "gender" require the premise of universal male dominance or even universal sexual asymmetry. Most authors in gender studies do report the universality of male dominance or male bias among historically recorded human societies (e.g., Rubin 1975; Rosaldo and Lamphere 1974; Ortner and Whitehead 1991), but many other authors contest this assumption (e.g., Mead 1928, 1963; Rogers 1975; Sacks 1976, 1979; Leacock 1978; Schlegel 1977; Caulfield 1981; Nzegwu 2001). Moreover, the use of the term "gender" does not imply that gender is the *only* form of social differentiation or even the *preeminent* one (Yanagisako and Collier 1987: 7).

Thus, positions in the debate over the degree of biological determinism, the salience of binarism, the isomorphism of all gender with reproductive dimorphism, the relative salience of inter- and intrasexual social difference, and the universality of male dominance and sexual asymmetry do not constitute the *definition* of "gender." Instead, these questions constitute the diverse research agendas inspired by "gender"—the set of learned social categories, moral judgments, rights, constraints, social processes, normative behaviors, symbolism, and metaphors that, to quote Judith Shapiro, "have some connection to sex differences" (1981: 449).



## Matory's Definitions

My *Sex and the Empire* and Oyewumi's *The Invention of Women* are both deeply engaged with the tradition of cross-cultural gender studies and debate, but in different ways. Whereas I embrace and attempt to expand this tradition, Oyewumi critiques and ultimately dismisses it.

I observe that Òyó-Yorùbá life is full of gender-related vocabulary, practices, social processes, iconography, and moral expectations that differ from those of most English-speaking North Americans. Based upon that understanding, I detect in many Òyó-Yorùbá historical narratives, sacred icons, and ritual practices symbolically transformed citations of daily forms of heterosexual marriage, female dress, and female headbearing. Yet Òyó-Yorùbá narratives, icons, and ritual practices also cite and validate particular standards of parent-child relations, master-slave relations, blood kinship relations, equestrianism, relations of containment, relations of economic stratification, and relations of imperial subjection. *Sex and the Empire* describes not only the historical subcultures in which these gendered and nongendered arrangements have mattered but also the ways in which those arrangements vary amid the religious pluralism of Òyó North and have changed over time, during the rise and fall of the Òyó royal empire, the rise of the nineteenth-century military republics of Ìbàdàn and Ìjàyè, British indirect rule, and postcolonial republicanism.

I argue that the shrine iconography, the initiations, and the spirit possession performances of the Ṣàngó and Yemọja priesthoods of Òyó North employ representations of these gendered and nongendered arrangements and combine those representations in powerful mixed metaphors, in a way that makes the priests' ritual assertions about the proper order of authority in society seem inevitable and inexorable to the people seeking the gods' help. In exchange for obedience to these metaphoric ritual prescriptions of social order, supplicants are promised, above all, uterine fertility. In my observation, gendered terms and symbols are—*pars pro toto*—the most prominent public representations of the complex gendered and nongendered arrangements that underlie their meaning.

So, for example, initiates of the possession priesthood are called *ìyáwó*, or "brides," of the gods, whether those initiates are male or

female. I regard the term *ìyáwó* as gendered because, aside from the male brides of the god, all brides in Ọ̀yọ́-Yorùbá society are female. Gender is not *all* that is denoted by the term *ìyáwó;* it also refers to hierarchies of relative seniority in the affinal home. Hence, senior members of a household paradigmatically address *junior* wives by this term. Nonetheless, *ìyáwó* may denote *any* woman who is married to the speaker or to the speaker's male and female agnates. In Yorùbá language, the term *ọkọ,* which Yorùbá English speakers translate as "husband," refers not just to the bride's connubial partner and paradigm of the relationship—the *ọkọ gidi*—but also to his male and female relatives. The term *ọkọ,* however, *is* gendered: it differs in meaning from the term *ana,* or "in-law," in that nonpriestly men have *ana,* but not *ọkọ.* In the world beyond the possession religions, only a woman can have *ọkọ,* and a man cannot be an *ìyáwó.* Nor can a man have a male *ìyáwó.* A married woman is both an *ìyáwó* to a certain group of males and females and an *ọkọ* to a specific group of women. Whether a woman is, at the moment, an *ọkọ* or an *ìyáwó* is relative to the reference group. On the other hand, no man experiences this situational relativity of marital status in relation to human interlocutors. Thus, I describe *ọkọ* and *ìyáwó* as categories of *relational* gender, structured by the gendered conventions of marriage.

Although the *ọkọ-ìyáwó* relationship is not isomorphic with the man-woman distinction, the first pair is clearly related to the second. First, except for the male possession priest, all *ìyáwó* are female. Second, the paradigmatic exemplar of the husband category, and the indispensable linchpin in the relationship between an *ìyáwó* and her multiple *ọkọ,* is invariably a man. Third, the gifts of cash and kind that legitimize a marriage—*owó orí ìyáwó,* or bridewealth—always flow asymmetrically from the male spouse's house to the female spouse's house. Fourth, it is conventionally the female spouse who moves to the male spouse's family home, and not vice-versa. In her affinal home, she automatically becomes junior and therefore subordinate to every co-resident who was born before she married in. This constitutes a loss of status in the primary residence that men do not conventionally suffer. Moreover, marriage in Ìgbòho does entail some loss of rights in the wife's natal home. The moral opprobrium heaped upon *ọmọ ọ̀sú,* or *ilémọ̀sú*—that is, estranged wives and widows who return to reside or consume resources in their natal homes—strongly suggests that women do not retain the same moral rights in their natal homes as do their brothers (see also Cornwall 2002). The *ọkọ-ìyáwó* relationship is therefore not reducible to



the anatomical contrast between men and women. Yet, clearly, the *ọkọ-ìyáwó* relationship is deeply marked by gender—in linguistic principle, moral expectation, social process, and demographic fact.

I argue that the male wives of the possession priesthood dress like women because the paradigm case of the "wife" is clearly a woman. The presence of a gendered metaphor is also evident in the fact that even male initiates wear a style and combination of clothing—including *ìró* (wrap skirts), *bùbá* (blouses), *ọ̀já* (baby-carrying slings)—that are worn conventionally by almost all women and by no other class of men. In the Ọ̀yọ́ North towns where I conducted my research, the most important ritual duty of a bride on her wedding night is to carry a pot of water on her head into the affinal house. This act is understood to demonstrate the social fact that she owes labor to her affines and to highlight the most onerous and symbolically important subset of that labor—the head-bearing of water for household use. In the towns where I conducted my research, children too are responsible for the head-bearing of water and other loads, but boys endeavor, as soon as their arms are strong enough, to avoid bearing anything on their heads. Head-bearing becomes, for them, a shameful act, and adult men avoid it entirely. Girls and women express no such shame and attempt no such avoidance. Thus, the concept of gender also helps us to understand the social references behind the ritually central head-bearing of pots full of iconic substances in the òrìṣà possession religions. In my observations among the Ọ̀yọ́-Yorùbá, Ṣàngó possession priests are the only adult men who are ever seen carrying pots on their heads. In Ìgbòho, where most of my West African research took place, bar keeping and strip weaving were exclusively female vocations, except for the one male Ṣàngó possession priest who kept a bar and the one male Ṣàngó possession priest who wove cloth. Senior male priests also braid their hair in a manner that is sometimes expressly compared to a woman's bridal coiffure, and they are the only males in Ìgbòho who braid their hair at all. Thus, in Ọ̀yọ́ North, male possession priests build much of their ritual and nonritual lives around a gendered metaphor.

The term *gùn* ("to mount") also condenses a number of literally and symbolically gendered phenomena. The term *gùn* denotes not only what a god does to a priest in possession but also what a rider does to a horse and what a male animal or brutish person does sexually to his female partner. It is no surprise, then, that mature possession priests are called not only "mounted ones" (*ẹlẹ́gùn*) but also "horses of the gods" (*ẹṣin*

òrìṣà). Ọ̀yọ́-Yorùbá sacred arts—which, contrary to Oyewumi's argument, are highly visual and socially significant—suggest that horseback riding is a gendered activity. The two most common visual themes in wooden shrine sculpture are men on horseback (equestrian images of women are extremely rare [e.g., Fagg and Pemberton: esp.126]) and kneeling women (often bearing children on their backs and vessels on their heads or in their hands). The sacred myths of virtually every goddess—and of no male god that I know of—also include accounts of the pots or expressly pot-like breasts with which the goddess fled from her estranged male husband. In Ìgbòho, even the *àkúdàáyà* tales of the dead describe the spirits of dead women walking away with head-borne pots and baskets. No such vessels appear in the *akudaaya* tales about men. Amid this proliferation of gendered signs in Ọ̀yọ́ possession terminology, sacred mythology, secular storytelling, ritual, and iconography, it requires no great leap of imagination to grasp the notion that the verbal symbolism of *sexual congress* and *sexual domination* implicit in the term *gùn* also illuminates the symbolically sexual, gendered, and hierarchical nature of the "marriage" between Ṣàngó and his bride.

Oyewumi and some other scholars have contested my view that sexual intercourse—*gígùn*—is one dimension of the gendered metaphors illuminating spirit possession in the Yemọja and Ṣàngó priesthoods (Oyewumi 1997: 117; Abimbọla in Matory 1991: 117; Olajubu 2003: 114). In a July 2006 personal communication, Mọlara Ogundipẹ argued that sexual references by a priest would be undignified and are therefore unlikely to be implied by the term *gùn* in religious contexts. I must give careful thought to this objection, because, at this point, I find it perplexing. At least nowadays, these priesthoods—and most others throughout Yorùbáland—are devoted above all to facilitating sexual reproduction. This function may have grown, in colonial and postcolonial times, relative to the priesthood's state administrative functions, but it can hardly be regarded as a new function. Why would such religions avoid references to sexual intercourse? On the contrary, in my year of participant observation among the priests of Yemọja and Ṣàngó, I was party to numerous prayers, praise poems, double entendres, jokes, and conversations about sex, and I witnessed many a ribald dance by the Ṣàngó possession priests. Indeed, at one leisurely gathering of the priests, an elderly possession priestess of Ṣàngó grabbed at my crotch and jokingly proposed marriage. The fifteen or so Ṣàngó priests present laughed happily and congratulated me on my good fortune. The Ṣàngó and Yemọja priests I know are socially responsible, respectable, and reasonable people. Following their own joy and realism about life, they sometimes joke and sometimes entertain serious conversations about sex, in ritual and nonritual contexts.



I must consider multiple explanations for the resistance of some Yorùbá scholars to the discussion of sexuality and its symbolism in the Yorùbá possession religions. First, it is possible that few of these scholars have spent much relaxed time with òrìṣà possession priests, who generally belong to a social class and age rank quite different from those of my scholarly colleagues. In my experience, Yorùbá peers who are close to each other discuss sex quite openly, but such conversations are virtually prohibited across generations. I also suspect that conversations between unschooled, older priests and schooled, younger scholars—especially ones who are daughters of the reigning monarch—would be constrained by courtly displays of formality and mutual respect. Certain matters would be especially difficult to discuss or ask about (see also Olajubu 2003: 18). As a young foreigner who, laughably, sometimes carried things on his head and yet displayed obvious respect for their religion—while most educated Yorùbá people treat it with contempt or fear—I might have inspired some level of confidence, or at least generated the feeling that they need not care about my potential disapproval.

Abimbọla's view that I exaggerate the gender implications of òrìṣà possession also demands acknowledgment and respect. He emphasizes the fact that the admittedly gendered term *ìyáwó* is applied to the priests but temporarily, and not throughout their lives. He says that the term *gùn*, while applied throughout the priest's life, has bestial or brutish implications, which make it inappropriate. I, on the other hand, regard this implication as consistent with the violence that worshipers and priests indeed ideally attribute to Ṣàngó and his possession episodes (see Matory 1991: 538).[2] Abimbọla speaks with the authority of the Àwíṣẹ́, or spokesperson, of the Ifá priesthood in Ifẹ̀ and as the son of a late Aṣípadẹ, or chief priest of Ògún, in Ọ̀yọ́ town. These factors make his opinion invaluable but also demonstrate a gendered difference of perspective. Both the priesthood for which he speaks and the one that he came to know through his father are—quite unlike the Yemọja and Ṣàngó priesthoods of the Ọ̀yọ́-Yorùbá—almost entirely male, non-possession-related, and virtually devoid of the vocabulary and symbols of marriage, mounting, and horsemanship that characterize the òrìṣà spirit possession religions. Far from dismissing Abimbọla's point, however, I take it as a

demonstration of the diversity of gender concepts within Yorùbá culture and of the fact that, even within the heart of the òrìṣà religions, the same sacred signs are available for diverse and interested readings.

Okome implicitly faults me for using the terms "cross-dressing" and "transvestitism" in reference to Yorùbá possession priests when I would not, in her opinion, describe Roman Catholic priests in those same terms: "if we contrast the cross[-]dressing claim with the fact that when Catholic and [P]rotestant priests become brides of Christ at the final moment of their initiation, and are given rings to symbolize this relationship, it is not cast as transvestitism. Why then use such characterization to describe Yorùbá ritual?" (Okome 2001: 12; also Oyewumi 1997: 118).

The fact is that I *would* use those terms if there were evidence that male Christian priests wore clothing that is otherwise associated only or chiefly with women, but the garb of male Christian priests does not generally resemble or share the names of any women's clothes that I know of in the societies where the priests wear those clothes. Nor are my Christian informants aware of the practice of male Catholic or Protestant priests' wearing wedding bands or being described "at the final moment of their initiation" as "brides of Christ." However, the initiation of *nuns* in some orders did, in the past, involve this parlance and practice of ring wearing (e.g., Father George Saltzman, St. Paul's Roman Catholic Church, Cambridge, Massachusetts, personal communication, July 11, 2006). Okome's assertions about Christian priestly dress and epithets deserves further research, but neither those assertions nor her speculations about the terms I would use in the description of a phenomenon on which I profess no expertise is a good reason to avoid so clearly substantiated and carefully contextualized a description of male Ṣàngó priests.

We cannot discount the possibility that the responses of Abimbọla and other scholars to my observations about sexual symbolism in òrìṣà religion are partly defensive reactions to (1) *Christian* notions that sexuality is not respectable in a religion (celibacy being especially respectable in Pauline Christianity) and (2) the white racist notion that nonwhites are profligate and therefore uncivilized and unworthy of equal rights. Such Western prejudices might shape what Abimbọla is willing to say as the foremost spokesperson of these traditions in the West, and what Yorùbá-diaspora scholars are willing to say as de facto representatives and members of a stigmatized continent-of-origin group in the United States—that is, Africans.

That being said, my own perspective is no more objective than theirs,



and I could be wrong, though my moral premise be right. I have little respect for the sexual puritanism and homophobia of the Abrahamic religions, and my respect for non-Abrahamic religious traditions could never hinge upon either. This particular detail of my argument—that sexual intercourse is among the aspects of the gendered metaphor that structures Ọ̀yọ́-Yorùbá spirit possession—just might not apply to any Ọ̀yọ́-Yorùbá possession priest's demonstrably conscious or unconscious experience of possession or to any nonpriest's perception of it. The main proof that I rely upon is the uncontestedly multiple meanings of *gùn* ("to mount"), the priests' *choice* to use this term (rather than other terms), and the contextual backdrop of vivid and continual references to male-female difference, sexual reproduction, marriage, and other forms of intergender merger, or *religio* (from the Latin for "binding together again"), that numerous other scholars of these traditions have also documented.

I report that the word that all local parties use for possession by Ṣàngó has, in daily language, sexual intercourse as one of its referents. It is a fair question to ask if or when any given priest thinks about this homonymy in reflecting upon and acting out his or her relationship to the god. It is fair to ask what *aspects* of the acts of sexual intercourse called *gígùn* are thus identified as characteristics of the god-priest relationship. Domination? Fecundity? Physical superposition (i.e., the god's being on top of the priest)? Interiority (i.e., the god's being inside of the priest)? The combination of force and cooperation with potential pleasure and potential pain? Post-interactional exhaustion? I cannot specify or generalize. Sacred symbols do not, as Victor Turner (1967) pointed out, always work at a conscious level, possess a single, settled meaning, reveal all of their implications at once, or have the same meaning under all circumstances for all people.

American English includes similarly latent metaphors. For example, the components of an electrical plug can be described as "male" and "female." An inexperienced person can be described as a "virgin" to some nonsexual activity, and upon his first experience, it can be said that he has "lost his cherry." Sexual intercourse is so important and widely known a feature of human social life that it is frequently employed as a metaphor to describe less familiar or less concrete experiences (see Fernandez 1986). To give another example, in white American youth dialect, a young man in trouble might exclaim, "I'm really fucked now!" or, "The boss really stuck it to me!" The metaphor of intercourse, as it is

interpreted in this subculture, is thus used to visualize the subordinated or diminished status of the victim. The young speaker would likely find it shocking to be accused of imagining himself being "symbolically if not actually" (see Oyewumi 1997: 117) penetrated by his boss. Nonetheless, the meaning of the young man's speech would be incomprehensible without a consideration of the literal meaning of "to fuck," as well as the local conceptions of male and female honor and the local understandings of the power hierarchy implicit in acts of sexual intercourse.

Inattentive to such meanings and pragmatics of metaphor, Oyewumi and some other Yorùbá scholars have explicitly (Oyewumi 1997: 117) or implicitly (Olajubu 2003: 14) accused me of attributing "homosexuality" to West African male Ṣàngó priests. To such critics, I recommend a more careful and firsthand reading of my work. It would require some mischievous intent to conclude from my locally based semiotic analysis, as does Oyewumi (1997: 117), that I am describing Ṣàngó priests as "drag queens" or as practitioners of "symbolic if not actual homosexuality."

In fact, I have never said or believed that the West African "cross-dressing," or "transvestite," priests were or are in any sense homosexual (Matory 1994: 208, 1991: 22, 520–21, 538 for relevant passages), and Oyewumi avoids all direct quotation of my work, which at least would have guaranteed some fidelity to what I had actually said. I wrote explicitly that, in Ìgbòho, male Ṣàngó priests "regularly have multiple wives and children, and no one even seems to wonder if they engage in sex with other men" (1994: 208). The terms "transvestism" and "cross-dressing" do not denote any particular sexual object choice, or even imply it to the serious scholar of gender. Nor is homosexuality implied by the verbal analogy among possession, horsemanship, and sexual intercourse that I observe in the term *gùn*—which, beyond any dispute, refers to all three actions.

An analogy might clarify the nature of Oyewumi's rhetorical strategy. I sometimes call my wife Bunmi *iyùn mi* (thus comparing her metaphorically to a rare and precious stone bead) and *òdòdóo mi* (comparing her metaphorically to a flower). A person intent on distorting my meaning and undermining my marriage might spread the rumor that I called my wife an "ornament" or a "symbolic if not actual plant reproductive organ and a piece of agricultural produce." Similarly, Oyewumi's gloss of my argument is no more logical or true than it would have been to say that I had called the priests "broncos" and accused them of practicing



"symbolic if not actual rodeo." But such a slam would not have carried the same homophobic appeal. In sum, *Sex and the Empire That Is No More* has nothing to do with the sexual object choice or orientation of Nigerian òrìṣà priests; it concerns the history, metaphorical representation, and sociopolitical entailments of the priests' symbolic if not actual *marriage* to the gods.

Only in her own introduction of the term "drag queens" into her gloss of my argument does Oyewumi find evidence that I introduce "homosexuality into Yorùbá discourse," which is, in her view, "nothing but an imposition of yet another foreign model" (Oyewumi 1997: 117). Yet it must be noted that the exclusion of same-sex intercourse from Oyewumi's "Yorùbá conception" is prima facie evidence that conceptions of male and female anatomy are, contrary to her own argument, significant beyond the act of procreation: people's nonreproductive sexual partnerships and behavior are, in Oyewumi's "Yorùbá conception," limited by their own sex-specific anatomies and by those of their partners.

What I *do* argue is that the culture-specific and cult-specific gender symbolism of the Ọ̀yọ́-Yorùbá possession religions has, in *Brazil*, been "reinterpreted" in the light of the culture-specific constructions of sociosexual roles in *Brazil*, a country whose gender conceptions not only differ from Nigeria's but also belie the internal homogeneity that Oyewumi attributes to "the West." On the one hand, English-speaking North Americans tend to distinguish sharply between those men who engage in sex with other men ("homosexuals") and those who do not ("heterosexuals"). On the other hand, like many Mediterranean peoples and pre-Columbian Americans, Brazilians are far more likely to distinguish men who penetrate others during sexual intercourse (*homens*, or "[real] men") from those who are penetrated (*bichas*, *viados*, or, in Candomblé language, *adés*).[3] Even when the Brazilians I know use the term *homossexual* ("homosexual"), most are referring only to the party in sexual intercourse who is assumed to be habitually penetrated, or "passive." Of course, the real behavior of both *homens* and *bichas*, or *adés*, is regularly more varied than what is stereotypically attributed to them, and the normative assumption that the "active" party is dominant in the sexual act and in nonsexual dimensions of the social relationship is often more fantasy than material reality. However, local ideological assumptions and expectations tend to link habitual male "passivity" in sexual intercourse with transvestism, feminine gestures, feminine occupations, and the social subordination of the penetrated party.

Ever since the 1930s, scholars have documented the presumption among Candomblé insiders that most male possession priests of the Brazilian *orixás* are *adés*. Yet I am the first scholar to introduce West African cultural history as part of the explanation. The enormous influx of Ọ̀yọ́ captives into Bahia, Brazil, in the first half of the nineteenth century constituted the foremost influence on the Candomblé religion today and helps us to make sense of the syncretic logic implicit in the following words of journalist and long-term Brazilian Candomblé affiliate Édison Carneiro:

> Sometimes they call a priestess the *wife* of the god, and sometimes she is his *horse*. The god gives advice and places demands, but often he just *mounts* and plays.
>
> So you can see why the priestesses develop great influence among the people. They are the pathway to the gods. But no *upright man* will allow himself to be *ridden* by a god, unless he does not care about *losing his manhood* . . .
>
> Now here's the loophole. Some men do *let themselves be ridden*, and they become priests with the women; but they are known to be *homosexuals*. In the temple they *put on skirts and mannerisms of the women*. . . . Sometimes *they are much better-looking than the women*. (In Landes 1947: 37; emphasis added)

In sum, the West African men who are regularly "mounted" spiritually by the gods have a great deal in common (sartorially, professionally, and symbolically, though not necessarily sexually) with the Brazilian *bicha* or *adé* category. Yet the comparison in no way relies on the premise that these two Ọ̀yọ́-influenced traditions are identical, or that "homosexuality" is an accurate description of the social and sacred practices in either place. I am not reliably aware of any widely known or religiously acknowledged category of male-male sexual relationship among West African Yorùbá people. Therefore, I refer to or imply the existence of no such category or behavior in my discussion of the West African priesthood. Moreover, in Bahia, male-male intercourse is construed not in terms of the identical sexual anatomy of the participants—as the term "homosexual" suggests—but in terms of the putatively dissimilar and hierarchically arrayed, non-anatomical *social* personalities of the partners. In neither case does my native, English-speaking North American concept of "homosexuality" seem the best description of the local logic of sociosexual classification or of what those sociosexual classifications, as metaphors, imply about the relationship between the possession priest and his or her god.



Imagine my surprise, then, when I made the acquaintance of a highly respected Yorùbá art historian from Ọ̀yọ́, whose extended family includes many Ṣàngó priests in that West African cultural capital. During his time among òrìṣà-worshipers in the United States, this scholar, too, became aware of the importance of men who love men in the New World priesthoods. Without having read my work, he had concluded that male-male sexual conduct among New World priests was a *continuation* rather than a mere reinterpretation of the West African religious traditions. He told me that, on two occasions between 1968 and 1973, he witnessed possessed male Ṣàngó priests anally penetrating unpossessed male priests in an Ọ̀yọ́ shrine. He does not know, however, if this practice was widespread or whether it represented a tradition or norm. Nor do I. As yet, I would extend my case no further based upon this unique testimony, which the original observer has shared with me privately but has himself hesitated to publish.

I cannot say whether male Ṣàngó priests experience anything akin to a "homosexual relationship" or a "sexual drive" in relationship to Ṣàngó (see Olajubu 2003: 14, 114). That is why I did not say so. I have, however, met Yorùbá men who love men in both Lagos and London, some of whom wear Yorùbá women's clothing, and several Yorùbá women I know have spoken to me vividly of the "lesbian" relationships they witnessed in boarding schools. These phenomena do not fall within my expertise, but they do lead me to conclude that a society as populous and complex as West African Yorùbá society is far more internally heterogeneous in its ways of thinking and acting about gender and sexuality than phrases like "the Yorùbá conception" (Oyewumi 1997) will allow us to recognize.

Given Oyewumi's sensational gloss of my argument, I must summarize here what I believe to be the analytic implications of the Nigerian Ọ̀yọ́-Yorùbá case. Strathern (1987: 6–7) argued that in Pacific societies, sexual/gender inequality is the irreducible "idiom" in which even inequality between persons of the same sex and gender is understood. Yet, like some other gender scholars, Strathern implies that the gender difference between biological men and women is simply given and is therefore not constructed, historically or logically, under the influence of nonsexual axes of inequality. On the contrary, I argue that, in the

Ọyọ́-Yorùbá case, the creation and inscription of gender are themselves extensive projects in social coordination and are influenced by nongendered conceptions and metaphorical ritual operations. "Gender" in this case refers only indirectly to the anatomical or reproductive role contrasts between "man" and "woman," or *ọkùnrin* and *obìnrin*. The West African possession priests use gendered words, clothing, and ritual to present their relationship to the gods not as analogous to the relationship between anatomical women and men but as analogous to the highly socially conditioned relationship between wives, who are almost always female, and their earthly husbands.

I argue, furthermore that such ritual "arguments by analogy" (see also Fernandez 1986) are subject to enactment and resistance by parties with diverse interests. Thus, not only individual gender transformation but also changes in collective conceptions of gender are *negotiated* according to resolutions of the divergent political interests of royals and commoners, the rulers and the ruled, the urban and the rural. Gender concepts are subject to influence from various non-gender-based realms of ideological and social production, just as gender concepts influence them. Thus, I do not argue that initiation and possession by the god Ṣàngó is all about gender. I simply argue that the symbolism of marriage is the primary way of naming and forming a sacred relationship—between god and priest—that is also illuminated and shaped by symbols of parent-child relations, master-slave relations, "blood" kinship relations, relations of containment, relations of economic stratification, and relations of imperial subjection (see Matory 1994: 170–215; 2005: 179–225).

Nor do I take the compacting of multiple metaphors of relationship into the gendered signs on the body of the Ṣàngó priest as a representation of a gender conception shared by *all* Yorùbá people. Instead, I identify it as a ritual assertion of power designed strategically by the Ọ̀yọ́ palace in its project of eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century rule, a brand of ritual assertion that has remained useful to and adaptable by a certain subset of the Ọ̀yọ́-Yorùbá population—that is, the possession priests, as well as the monarchs, the chiefs, and the worshipers who call upon the priests for help. I observe a very different set of assumptions about gender roles—and about which ones should serve as the primary model of god-priest relations—in the Ọ̀yọ́ Yorùbá worship of, for example, Ògún and Ifá. In Ọ̀yọ́ North, the priesthoods of Ògún and Ifá, unlike the predominantly female priesthoods of the other òrìṣà, are almost



exclusively male, do not cross-dress, are not called "wives" of the god, and are not "mounted" (or possessed) by the god (Matory 1994: 1–25, 133–35, 229–30; 2005: 1–27, 140–42, 240).[4]

I embrace the "gender" rubric as the foundation of my observation not only that Yorùbá gender constructs are different from Anglo-American ones but also that gender constructions in Yorùbáland, like those in the West, are multiple, varied, and subject to debate, transformation, and strategic manipulation—often through metaphor. Gender constructions are available for use as models for or paradigms of the relationship between in-laws, gods and their worshipers, and monarchs and their delegates, although the partners in these relationships are often of the same real or imagined anatomical sex.

## Oyewumi's Definitions

Though also immersed in the scholarship on gender, Oyewumi distances herself from that intellectual legacy in highly critical terms. Indeed, despite having borrowed insights from influential Western scholars who articulate analytic premises identical to her own (such as Collier and Yanagisako 1987 and Butler 1990), Oyewumi seems to argue that all Westerners—including scholars—have always believed in one specific and extreme set of hypotheses, so much so that these hypotheses are taken to define the term "gender" itself.

For example, Oyewumi's definition of "gender" severely modifies that of Lorber (1994: 1), while merely appearing to quote it:

> Gender is a construction of two categories in a hierarchical relation to each other; and it is embedded in institutions. Gender is best understood as "an institution that establishes patterns of expectations for individuals [based on body type], orders the social processes of everyday life, and is built into major social organizations of society, such as the economy, ideology, the family and politics." (Oyewumi 1997: 39)

Whereas the internal quote derives from Lorber, the prefatory sentence and the bracketed amendment come from Oyewumi.

Astonishingly, all of the ways in which Oyewumi frames and amends the quote with her own glosses precisely *contradict* what Lorber herself said in the rest of her book. Lorber argues specifically that gender is *not* necessarily hierarchical, *not* binary or dichotomous, and *not* wedded—outside of specific historical and cultural circumstances—to anatomy.

Lorber writes, "gender is not synonymous with patriarchy or men's domination of women. *Gender* is a more general term encompassing all social relations that separate people into differentiated gender statuses" (Lorber 1994: 3). Citing her agreement with black feminists and "cultural feminists" since the 1960s, Lorber expressly denies "a binary opposition of women and men" and challenges "the concept that gender categories are dual and oppositional" (4). Lorber denies that "gender inequality is ultimately based on procreative differences" (6). Oyewumi's entire theoretical argument rests, without citation, on Lorber's own gender-based point that "where women and men are different but not unequal, women's birth giving is not a source of subordination" (6).

Indeed, Oyewumi borrows, uncited, some of the most insightful and influential scholarly arguments of the past forty years and then, with considerable exaggeration, proclaims the Yorùbá the perfect example. In order to highlight her point, "the West"—including the Western scholars who first articulated Oyewumi's theoretical premises—is depicted as the cartoonish opposite of an almost equally cartoonish "Yorùbá conception."

Oyewumi's opening proof that "the West" has gender and that "Yorùbá culture" lacks it (Oyewumi 1997: ix–xxi; 1–17) requires us to accept (1) that the term "gender" denotes the allegedly "Western" notion that every aspect of an anatomical female's life is determined by her anatomy, (2) that no cross-cutting identity or category of social belonging (such as kinship, age, parenthood, or marital status) shapes any anatomical female's social role or status, (3) that every anatomical female is always socially inferior to every anatomical male, (4) that an anatomical female may perform no roles that anatomical males also perform, (5) that no woman can ever rise within the system, and (6) that the gender categories are determined entirely by the referent's visible or chromosomal biology. Moreover, despite her citation of several scholarly works that discuss third genders or relational gender (Amadiume 1987; Lorber 1994; Matory 1991, see also 1994 and 2005), she argues (7) that the analytic term "gender" always imposes an anatomically based binary or dichotomy upon its referents. In sum, Oyewumi's definition of the term "gender" is a straw person unprecedented in any scholarly work or in the thinking of any "Western" person I know.

Yet, on the basis of the inapplicability of this extreme definition to any aspect of what she calls "the Yorùbá conception," she concludes that there is no "gender" whatsoever in authentic Yorùbá culture. Writes



Oyewumi, "Yorùbá is a non-gender-specific language" (1997: 158), which she takes as evidence that "gender was not an organizing principle in Yorùbá society prior to colonization by the West" (31) and that "Yorùbá society did not make gender distinctions and instead made age distinctions" (157). People's anatomical sex "did not privilege them to any social positions and similarly did not jeopardize their access" (78). And her claims are not limited to the distant past. "In Yorùbá society," she declares, the physical differences between men and women "count only in regard to procreation, where they must" (12); "those differences are not codified [in the Yorùbá lexicon] because they do not have much social significance and so do not project onto the social realm" (42).

Contrary to summaries of her argument that I have heard from her defenders—at the FIU conference and in the hallway outside the 2002 African Studies Association Roundtable devoted to assessing the book and its impact—Oyewumi is *not* arguing that Yorùbá gender works *differently* from Western gender or that Yorùbá gender is more *flexible* than Western gender. She argues point-blank that gender characterizes the West and its thought, and that gender is absent from both the precolonial Yorùbá past and from the essence of present-day Yorùbá culture and society. It follows from this definitional premise that, as soon as Yorùbá people can extricate English influences from their thought and language, anatomical females will cease to be a population class tending to share any experience (besides the bare biological facts of their physical role in intercourse and birth) that distinguishes them from anatomical males, and all forms of social convention and practice that confer advantages upon anatomical maleness will disappear.

## Methods

The centerpiece of value-neutral, comparative, and cross-cultural research in the academy is sociocultural anthropology. The anthropological tradition of ethnography begins with the assumption that human lifeways vary across time and space, but that a population united by longtime interaction—on the same area of land or around the same long-distance projects—tends to develop conventions of meaning and conduct that differ in their content and overall shape from those of other populations. Ethnographers, who write comparatively about any given people's culture, begin with the indispensable task of learning the people's language

and thus grasping how that population understands the shape and workings of the world. The awareness that the words of one language seldom translate perfectly into other languages is well understood. Thus, simple, readable glosses—such as "husband" and "wife"—are regarded as a necessary evil, which must always be accompanied by the culturally sensitive explanation of the indigenous concepts to which those glosses refer.

The best of ethnographers will also document the *diversity* of local sociopolitical interests and the diversity of their worldviews. Yet a good ethnographer still does not rely solely upon what people *say* about themselves or about anything else. He or she also watches what the people *do* and records *patterns* of their social interaction—even the patterns that most of those people may take for granted, ignore, or suppress discussion of because they violate the dominant public sense of what is good and right or normal. Of recent, the use of archives has become standard in the ethnographic project of determining how apparently primordial ideologies and patterns of conduct came about historically and through the workings of human effort, rivalry, and strategy.

The Africanist ethnography in the 1970s had put to rest any lingering supposition that the gender roles and gendered social arrangements of African societies duplicated those in the West, and had established the heterogeneity of gendered social arrangements across African societies as well. Opportunities for female agency were not everywhere the same, and one could no longer posit that African women suffered disproportionately in the comparison with Western women (e.g., Hafkin and Bay 1976). At the same time, anthropologists were outgrowing the notorious "ethnographic present," which represented colonized societies as though they had never been touched by a history of both precolonial and colonial change. By the mid-1980s, anthropologists had increasingly recognized that African societies were as inherently dynamic as European ones and that colonialism itself was but one among the historical transformations that had shaped African life and that deserved documentation.

## Matory's Methods

*Sex and the Empire* builds upon the standard methods of sociocultural anthropology, grounding its interpretation, to an innovative degree, in (1) the assumption of ongoing historical change and (2) the sense that the personal agency of many powerful actors expresses and is shaped



by a culture-specific logic of personhood and history. In sum, I wanted to *historicize* Yorùbá religion, which most previous scholars had represented frozen in the "ethnographic present"—as though Yorùbá religion had remained static throughout the precolonial period and as though colonial and postcolonial changes were uniquely inorganic and therefore unworthy of study. I endeavored to revise the view—common in studies of diasporas and homelands, Yorùbá and non-Yorùbá alike—that a people's religion represents that people's timeless essence. Religions are as historical and as dynamic as any other aspect of a people's history, and all of these aspects of life change in dialogue with each other. Also innovatively, I sought to describe Yorùbá cultural history in terms of the tropes of personhood and agency that I heard vocalized in indigenous narratives and saw mimed in òrìṣà worship. Thus, the distinctive watchword of my own method is "icono-praxis."

The versions of myth and history recounted within Ìgbòho and across the territory of the Ọ̀yọ́-Yorùbá vary greatly, as do the religions practiced and the gods worshiped. I interpret this variation—and the rival political positions it represents—in the light of the ritual iconography shared among Ọ̀yọ́-Yorùbá religion, Brazilian Candomblé, and Cuban Ocha. That is, amid the enormous doctrinal variation among these sub-Yorùbá and Yorùbá-diaspora traditions, I also noticed elements of ritual iconography that virtually all of the òrìṣà-based religions of the African diaspora share with the Ọ̀yọ́-Yorùbá possession religions—an emphasis on marriage, on "mounting" (with its homologous spiritual, equestrian, and sexual implications), and on vessels that contain objects and substances iconic of the gods (Matory 1986, 1994, 2005b). While resting on the heads of priests or on altars, filled vessels mime the forms of power and agency that can be made to repose in or depart from the vessel-like heads, breasts, and wombs of possession priests and other important actors. Ritual and narrative references to marriage, horsemanship, sexual intercourse, sexual betrayal, and vessels are interpreted as metaphors that stipulate the essential or proper character of the nonmarital, nonequestrian, nonsexual and non-vessel-related relationships upon which the ritual experts and narrators wish to act.

An enormous variety of conflicting assertions in the competition among royal authorities is debated through verbal narratives and ritual performances that take these iconographic themes for granted. I assume that rituals and narratives borrow daily verbal and iconic forms because these daily forms embody powerful and widely shared assumptions,

which, when arranged and displayed in new persuasive combinations, can re-arrange social relations in ways favorable to the political interests of those actors who invented or, through history, continually adapted and reinvented these rituals and narratives. All parties' interests, understandings, and actions shape and are shaped by such a genealogy of "icono-praxis" and by its rivalry with other equally ideologically tendentious and conflict-driven genealogies of icono-praxis, such as the anvil-, iron-, gun-, hunting- and male camaraderie–based icono-praxis of Ògún worship among the Ọyọ́-Yorùbá. The contrasting gendered logics of today's Ṣàngó and Ògún cults are employed to illuminate past changes in the Ọyọ́ polity and religion. Conversely, past changes in the Ọyọ́ politics and ritual are used to illuminate the thematic preoccupations of contemporary Yorùbá historians, as well as the contrasting projects best served by these two ritual formations today.

From 1988 to 1989, I listened closely to the oral histories and tendentious etymologies that the people of Ìgbòho recounted to justify their rival positions in the local struggle for power between Muslims and non-Muslims, between rival factions of the priesthood of the goddess Yemọja, between husbands and wives, and between partisans in the town's ongoing "chieftaincy tussle." I also had the benefit of access to the court records of a major public inquiry into that tussle. In all of the written and oral accounts that I encountered, otherwise self-explanatory military victories, defeats, and changes of political regime are punctuated with unexpected details of marital loyalty or betrayal, surprising sexual acts, and the head-bearing or destruction of vessels—none of whose relevance was obvious from the standpoint of my own indigenous hermeneutics of history. Key to my understanding of those signs was their side-by-side appearance in both nineteenth- and twentieth-century historical narrations and the late twentieth-century rituals of marriage, burial, òrìṣà spirit possession, and, reputedly, money-making magic.

Unlike many prior studies of such indigenous African priesthoods, *Sex and the Empire* is set in real time and in the real-world context—recognizing not only the circum-Atlantic growth of òrìṣà religion and ongoing local chieftaincy disputes, but also four centuries of Islamic influence, nineteenth-century warfare, British colonialism, and Christian and Muslim dominance in the postcolonial Federal Republic of Nigeria. European colonialists were not the original arbiters of culture change among the Yorùbá and their ancestors. Nor were the Europeans *omnipotent* agents of change. Another aspect of this real-world context is the



reality that Yorùbá priests have, over the past century and a half, been talking across religions, national boundaries, and oceans (see Matory 2005a, 2005b, 1994). For a century, priests, nationalist activists, politicians, and scholars have also collaborated in selectively canonizing and therefore reshaping òrìṣà worship—all amid a circum-Atlantic circulation of ideas among Nigeria, Benin Republic, Brazil, Cuba, Trinidad, and the United States.

I do not assume that there was some primordial period in which the Yorùbá or their ancestors were a single, bounded collective isolate—by virtue of language, culture, or conduct—sheltered from interregional streams of marriage, migration, commerce, and communication of ideas by itinerant hunters, soldiers, priests, traders, pilgrims, slaves, and wives. There is neither archaeological nor linguistic evidence of such a period of Yorùbá isolation, making overly confident speculations about a prehistoric and transhistorical Yorùbá essence little more than a fiction in the service of colonial indirect rule or xenophobic nationalism. Oyewumi has unwittingly borrowed a very un-African model of cultural history long after all but the most politically conservative and xenophobic of Western thinkers have renounced it as an accurate model of their own cultural history (see, e.g., Bernal 1987; Levine 1996).

## Oyewumi's Methods

Oyewumi has set out for herself a method that is, at once, historical and profoundly ahistorical. She uses the lexicon of the colonial and postcolonial Yorùbá language to infer the nature of precolonial gender arrangements. Her basic technique is to locate genderless aspects of Yorùbá language and remove them so far from the existing oral historical, historiographic, and ethnographic context that they appear to give evidence of a prehistoric Yorùbá past and of a present, ahistorical Yorùbá essence. Beginning with her unusual definition of "gender" and an empirically inaccurate assessment of "Western" social life, she seeks to prove that all gender and all male bias in Yorùbá society today originated from a single, foreign source—European colonialism. According to Oyewumi, in precolonial Yorùbá society and its deep present-day essence, family membership differentiates people, but the *only* value according to which one person outranks another in authentically Yorùbá society is chronological seniority.

The result is an argument far more extreme than her supporters

attribute to her. Although many scholars have acknowledged that Yorùbá women as a class enjoy enormous *power and a high status*—owing to respect for *motherhood*, the "flexibility" of Yorùbá gender categories, and/or the valorization of the *complementarity* between men's and women's duties—Oyewumi *alone* claims that there is *no* difference between the normative social roles of men and women or between men's and women's de jure or de facto opportunities in Yorùbá society. Oyewumi is *not* saying that seniority is *more important than* gender hierarchy and yet *overlaps* with it (in that women tend to marry men older than themselves and only women lose decades of seniority in relation to their co-residents upon marriage). She is *not* saying that Western influence *amplified* the importance of gender and *increased* sexual asymmetry in Yorùbá society. *Nor* is she saying that the culture-specific gender order of Yorùbá society *converged* with the culture-specific gender order of Western society to form a hybrid order that *changed* the opportunities available to and constraints imposed upon men and women. These are the sort of arguments that have been trained by a century of careful ethnographic, archival, and statistical scholarship on societies at the crossroads and by nearly eight decades of scholarship on gender.

Because there are literally no written sources about the "precolonial" period to which she refers, Oyewumi relies for evidence upon those cherry-picked aspects of present-day Ọ̀yọ́-Yorùbá language and, occasionally, aspects of social convention that, she says, do not encode gender. Oyewumi cites the extensive gender coding of pronouns, names, kinship terms, and occupational terms in English, alongside numerous Yorùbá pronouns, kinship terms, and occupational terms that, in her opinion, do not encode gender—such as *òun* ("she/he"), *ọmọ* ("child"), *ẹ̀gbọ́n* ("senior sibling or cousin"), *ọba* ("monarch"), *Ìyá Olóńjẹ* ("Food Vendor" [lit., "Senior-Female Owner-of-Food"]), and *Bàbá Aláṣọ*] ("Cloth-Seller" or "Weaver" [lit., "Senior-Male Owner-of-Cloth"]).

Oyewumi deserves credit for reminding me and others that *ọba* does not specify the gender of the titleholder. Ever since her reminder, I have taken care to translate the term as "monarch," rather than "king" or "queen." However, Oyewumi surely exceeds logic and the facts of comparable cases (where the efficacy of her deductive method cannot be demonstrated) when she claims that the gender-neutrality of the term *ọba* implies that men and women had, until the colonial period, equal access to this office and that Yorùbá oral historians would have forgotten the sex of past monarchs. Given the importance of patriliny in



Ọ̀yọ́-Yorùbá kinship, the difference between having one's mother on the throne and having one's father on the throne is the difference between being ineligible and being eligible for the throne. The difference would matter to every member of the royal family and to the loyalists of every potential heir to the throne. This is far more than a "distinction without a difference," to borrow Oyewumi's parlance.

The selectiveness of Oyewumi's evidence in the pursuit of a foregone conclusion is evident when one considers the many gender-neutral English terms for heads of state as a comparison case. For example, the terms "head of state," "chief executive," "ruler," "prime minister," "president," "monarch," and "sovereign" would hardly count as evidence that men and women are even nearly equally represented in these offices—even in the distant past of the Anglophone West. Nor does the availability, in English, of gender-specific words like "kinglist" mean that, in the distant past of England, no woman ever became a monarch.

Oyewumi takes pains, then, to explain away or conceal the gender coding that actually does appear in much Yorùbá terminology and social practice. For example, there are clearly words in Yorùbá for "male" (*akọ*), "female" (*abo*), "man" (*ọkùnrin*), and "woman" (*obìnrin*). The terms of address and reference for parents, senior relatives, senior strangers, and people of almost every occupation indicate the referent's gender—as in *Bàbá Ayọ̀* (the teknonymic "Father of Ayọ̀"), *Bàbá Ẹlẹ́ran* ("butcher"), and *Ìyáa mi* ("Mommy").

Most professions in Yorùbáland have long had vastly more of one sex than another practicing them, and virtually all social clubs (*ẹgbẹ́*) are segregated according to sex. Certain Yorùbá religious and political titles are strongly gender-marked, despite their infrequent adoption by a person of the other sex, such as *babaláwo* (a type of divination priest [lit., "senior male-who-owns-the-mystery"]), *baálẹ̀* (nonroyal quarter or town chief [lit., "father of the land"]), *ìyálé* (eldest wife of the house [lit., "mother of the house"]), and *baálé* (head of residential compound [lit., "father of the house"]). It should be noted that *baálé* and *ìyálé* are *etymologically* distinguished from each other *only* by the gender of the referent. Yet, *in real social life* the persons described as "fathers of the house" rank far higher in the house than do the people called "mothers of the house." On the other hand, one of the most important chieftaincies of the nineteenth century was that of the *ìyálóde* (the chief of the market [lit., "mother-who-owns-the-outside"]), and, as far as I know, this title has never been held by a man.[5] Moreover, the fact that there are a few

female *baálẹ̀*, or "village chiefs," near Oyewumi's hometown should not allow us to overlook the male gendering of power that the term implies, especially if Oyewumi intends to be true to her hypothesis that vocabulary reveals the culture-specific ideology underlying statistics of otherwise unclear implications. In this case, contrary to her general deductive argument, Oyewumi chooses to privilege the statistic of the exception over the linguistically implicit ideology of male dominance (see Oyewumi 1997: 41, 49, 75, 77).

This is a society in which men and women have long worn markedly different styles of clothing, a wife is regularly expected to supply her husband with cooked food (and not vice-versa), almost all professional cooks (except in European-style establishments) are women, and the social norms of legitimate reproduction differentially affect the experience of anatomical males and females throughout the life cycle—in ways ranging from infant clitoridectomy to earlier marriage for women than for men, bridewealth and its asymmetrical implications for female fidelity and obedience, polygyny (and the unthinkability of polyandry), viri-patrilocal postmarital residence, the levirate, and the normatively different roles of mothers and fathers in childcare. Oyewumi even makes the credible claim that motherhood is the most honored of Yorùbá institutions, but given her unusual definition of "gender," this observation is taken to illustrate the absence of gender in Yorùbá society (1997: 75). The author also claims that polygyny is frequently initiated by the existing wife, that male interests are not supreme in polygynous marriages, that married women's sexual dalliances are tacitly accepted, and that husbands have no rights over the wife's labor. These indications of wifely "agency," alongside Oyewumi's argument that polygyny entails male self-discipline and deprivation, are taken to prove that polygyny is "ungendered" (61–62).

Most of these reports are inconsistent with my observations in Òyó North, Ìbàdàn, and Lagos over the past quarter century and with others' observations during the past two centuries. Even if they were true, however, the claim that they prove an absence of gender in Yorùbá culture follows more from Oyewumi's shifting, idiosyncratic definition of "gender" than from a careful assessment of the Yorùbá lexicon or the empirical data on Yorùbá marriage. Oyewumi's conclusions also reflect a distortion of what has been described in terms of "gender" in Western marriage and social life, and of how "gender" has been used to illuminate other non-"Western" social arrangements as well.



Oyewumi's reliance on lexicon-based deductions, to the near-exclusion of other evidence, can result in terrible empirical errors. For example, the *levirate* (or "widow inheritance") is no longer commonly practiced in Yorùbáland, but the archival records of the Customary Courts during the early colonial period demonstrate, contrary to Oyewumi's claim, that it was often practiced without the widow's consent (pace Oyewumi 1997: 45, 53, 62). Records from just before the actual colonization of the Òyó kingdom indicate that female adultery was often severely punished by indigenous authorities, and women were sometimes forced, on threat of violence, to remain in marriages that they wished to leave (Matory 1994: 28–44). The colonial codification of the legal terms of women's release from marriage enabled many women to act upon dissatisfactions that Oyewumi has declared foreign to "the Yorùbá conception" (see, e.g., Denzer 1994). Oyewumi fails to produce any documentation of her claims that Yorùbá marriage does not and did not, throughout its documented or inferable history, entail systematically different social experiences for the male and female partners. The statistical and ideological norm that a wife moves to her husband's natal household and enters as a subordinate to every person previously born to or married into that household is a structural disadvantage that affects almost all women in this society *because* they are women and not men. These facts are not easily dismissed. It is not that Oyewumi has examined alternative sources of information—such as archives and statistics—and found evidence of their inaccuracy. Rather, she has simply decided to ignore them.

Oyewumi focuses great attention upon lexical evidence because any claim that present-day Yorùbá culture fails to distinguish men from women, or offers them equal access and privileges to the same important social options, is manifestly false. Any such claim about the documented precolonial, nineteenth-century antecedents of this culture would be just as manifestly false. Hence, Oyewumi claims that her analysis reconstructs the *real* Yorùbá culture, which preceded colonization, the nineteenth century, and/or the slave trade, a period to which we have hardly any documentary access. The earliest document the author consults is dated 1829, long after the slave trade had begun to affect the Òyó-Yorùbá, and the author elides all historical periods that preceded the elastic period that she calls "colonialism" into a single "authentic" prototype, which she believes remains evident and selectively alive only in those aspects of present-day Yorùbá parlance that do not mark gender.

When evidently old gender-marked aspects of Yorùbá language are addressed at all, they are excused by various means. For example, *bàbá* ("father" or "senior man") and *ìyá* ("mother" or "senior woman") are said to indicate *not only* anatomical sex but *also* adulthood; therefore, they are not gendered, argues Oyewumi. Does it follow, then, that the terms "man" and "woman" in English are not gendered? They too indicate not only anatomical sex but also adulthood. In English, "mother" and "father" indicate not only anatomy but, more importantly, social responsibility for the children. Do those terms then cease to be gendered? Oyewumi argues that the term for *ìyáwó* ("bride" or "wife") is ungendered because it refers to both the female brides of worldly husbands and possession priests regardless of sex. Does the fact that the church is called the "bride of Christ" in English then imply that the English term "bride" is also ungendered? Is the church not made up of males and females? The fact that a fruitful year is called a "female year" (*abo ọ̀dun*) is said not to indicate any Yorùbá conception of gender because, Oyewumi reports falsely, no one speaks of its opposite as a "male year" (*akọ ọ̀dun*) (Oyewumi 1997: 33).[6] Even if the statement were true, its logic would imply that the term "phallic symbol" in English is ungendered because there is no commonplace word for its feminine opposite.

Moreover, in English, as in Yorùbá, one could recite an endless list of gender-free references to people without ever proving that the language or the culture is or once was gender-free. Could one reliably infer from the gender-neutral English terms "I," "you," "we," "they," "parent," "cousin," "sibling," "child," and "president" that Anglo-Saxon or Western language and culture are in their essence or once were free of gender and of gender hierarchy? I think not. But this is the logic of Oyewumi's linguistic argument that Yorùbá culture, in its deep past and in its present essence, is completely without gender. The weakness of this logic is evident if we imagine the linguistic future of today's social arrangements. For example, certain weighty moral judgments (such as the opprobrium directed toward *ọmọ oṣú* in Ìgbòho) and structurally important demographic facts (such as the huge gender imbalance in most Yorùbá occupations and in childcare roles) are not inscribed in the present-day lexicon of Yorùbá, and they will be invisible to future students of gender history among the Yorùbá if those students rely on mere word lists as evidence for the way that Yorùbá people live today. The fact is that Oyewumi's deduction that relative gender neutrality in the lexicon of a language reveals a distant past of gender neutrality in social organization cannot be demonstrated in any other case—whether in the nearby and historically connected cultures of West Africa or in the distant case of China, where pronouns are also gender-neutral and written documents from the precolonial past could easily have been used to prove the principle, if it were true.



Oyewumi's translations are sometimes highly misleading. For example, she mistranslates *ayaba* as "palace mothers," when it clearly means "wife/wives of the monarch" (1997: 49). Oyewumi apparently intends to emphasize these women's dignity and authority, since calling them "wives" (*aya*) would, instead, emphasize their subordination to their *ọkọ* ("husband")—in this case the almost always male *ọba* ("monarch") of the Ọ̀yọ́ palace. But Oyewumi's mistranslation does less to prove the *ayaba's* authority than to distort the gendered marital logic that confers their great authority upon these "wives." Oyewumi also conceals the gendered polygynous and sexually asymmetrical context of its exercise. Many of the women called *ayaba* in the Ọ̀yọ́ palace historically exercised enormous power, but because they were nonroyal outsiders marrying into the palace, their sole source of authority and legitimacy lay in their having married a male monarch or the male predecessor of a female monarch. Their authority in the palace hierarchy does and did not derive from their motherhood but from their wifeliness. Like palace slaves in many other kingdoms across the globe, their virtue as powerful delegates of the monarch's authority lay precisely in the fact that—unlike the monarch's siblings, cousins, and children—the *ayaba* possessed no legitimacy to usurp the throne. In fact, their de facto power as mothers of future monarchs was a *threat* to the legitimate order of palace life. According to Johnson, the mother of the ascending monarch was conventionally put to death, on the grounds that the reigning monarch must be supreme in the land and owe obedience to no one (Johnson 1921: 63; Matory 1994: 8–13; 2005: 8–13).

At the 1999 FIU conference, Oyewumi's conference paper underlined the importance of careful translation and later inspired the consensus that Yorùbá concepts are most accurately conveyed in the Yorùbá language. Later, a senior Yorùbá scholar consented to deliver the remainder of his lecture on the Ifá priesthood in Yorùbá, and Oyewumi asked to be the translator. Yet, when the scholar spoke of the important assistance rendered to a *babaláwo* divination priest by *àwọn ìyáwó ẹ̀* ("his [the *babaláwo's*] *wives*"), Oyewumi translated the phrase as "his [the *babaláwo's*] *wife*." Spontaneous translation is not easy, but given

the centrality of the theme of gender and the importance, for Western audiences, of polygyny as an indicator of sexual asymmetry in other societies, it is surprising that Oyewumi would overlook the conspicuous plural-marking term *àwọn* in this senior scholar's statement. Oyewumi's mistranslation, in violation of her own clarion call for careful translation, appears strategic. It also further clarifies the weakness of her linguistic method of inference about the Yorùbá past. Yorùbá grammar does not automatically mark number any more than it marks gender. Yet, in social context, number is often highly relevant—as in the difference between one sack of cowries and fifty. Like gender, number can be neglected or it can be marked, and *is* marked on the frequent occasions when it matters. Thus, when the senior scholar took pains to include the plural marker *àwọn* in his description—though nothing in the Yorùbá lexicon or syntax required him to do so—he indicated clearly that polygyny is what he had in mind as the context of the *babaláwo*'s practice. When I volunteered a correction from the audience, Oyewumi replied angrily, "It doesn't matter!" I was left wondering what principles of truth and accuracy *do* matter to Oyewumi.

Oyewumi's linguistic method simply does not stand up to sustained ethnographic investigation, as is demonstrated by the work of numerous Yorùbá scholars who intensively study the ancient palaces and priesthoods from which Oyewumi selectively draws real-world facts to support her lexicon-based inferences. For example, Olupọna (1997) demonstrates that the Òǹdó political structure includes a category of obligatorily male chiefs and a category of obligatorily female chiefs, and that the foundation of both categories is attributed to the action of the town's founding *ọba*. The fact that this *ọba* was female is an important element of palace oral histories and lies at the heart of official explanations for what Olupọna describes as the kingdom's "dual-sex political system"—a common West African political form (Olupọna 1997: 318; see also Nzegwu 2001; Okonjo 1976).

Renowned expert on the visual arts in Ṣàngó worship Babatunde Lawal verifies the terms and principles of my 1988, 1991, and 1994 argument about the metaphoric meaning of possession priests' titles, hairstyles, and attire. He shows that the even male priests bear female-coded titles, clothing, and hairstyles in order, metaphorically, to symbolize their likeness to female wives. Lawal shows that "cross-dressing" certainly has multiple and overlapping meanings in Yorùbá culture, and



that nothing about the term is inherently nonsensical or inapplicable to Yorùbá cultural phenomena (2001: 7–8).

According to Abimbọla, a world-renowned *babaláwo*, Ifá represents only women as capable of being an *àjẹ́*, which he defines as "a blood-sucking, wicked, dreadful cannibal who transforms herself into a bird at night and flies to distant places, to hold nocturnal meetings with her fellow witches who belong to a society that excludes all men" (Abimbọla 1997: 403). On the one hand, Ifá credits women uniquely with the marvelous capacity to bear children and to be loyal wives. On the other hand, it represents women as deceitful (Abimbọla 1997: 408–9). Abimbọla summarizes, "These few examples of women in the Ifá literary corpus clearly demonstrate the ambivalent attitudes of Yorùbá men to women and the powers women possess. There is a love-hate relationship in the attitude of Yorùbá men to women" (411).

One of the pillars of Oyewumi's argument is that whereas Western culture is "visual" and judges people according to their bodies, Yorùbá culture is "aural" and judges people only according to the words they use or the words that are used about them. This claim ignores, among other things, the highly visual use of facial scarification to identify group membership in Yorùbáland (e.g., Daramọla and Jeje 1975; Abraham 1962), as well as the extraordinarily elaborate depiction of the human body in Yorùbá sculpture, in which breasts, kneeling, and the bearing of children on the back are crucial visual and bodily symbols of *distinctively* female forms of social subordination, power, and nurturance. In Ọyọ́-Yorùbá sculpture, women's bodies are rarely shown on horseback, the men on horseback regularly feature gender-accentuating beards, and men are never shown backing babies.

Contrary to Oyewumi's linguistic inference, it is highly doubtful that the gendered elements of the Òǹdó "dual-sex" political system described by Olupọna, of the "cross-dressing" that Lawal identifies in Ṣàngó worship, of men's ambivalence to women that Abimbọla identifies in the Ifá literary corpus, and of gendered iconography in sacred sculpture were imposed upon Yorùbá culture in the colonial period by "the West."

Oyewumi suggests that Yorùbá scholars who disagree with her do so because they are mentally colonized by English language and English concepts, and that foreign scholars who disagree with her do so because of their linguistic incompetence in Yorùbá. Oyewumi's own unique breakthrough is attributed to her upbringing in the palace (see,

e.g., Oyewumi 1997: xvi; 17–30). Hence the credibility of Oyewumi's argument rests not on evidence or on tested principles of historical and scientific inference, but on autobiographical claims of authority, tendentious glosses and mistranslations, and the *hope* that Yorùbá exceptionalism provides to feminists and to people in the African diaspora who recognize in Oyewumi's "Yorùbá conception" a potential source of dignity for subaltern ethnic groups, races, or sexual identities.[7]

Oyewumi's book has received its heartiest published accolades from scholars who know little about Africa or its diaspora (e.g., Ficek 2006; Chaudhuri 2001; see also Matory 2004: 37 on the Sex and Gender Section of the American Sociological Association). They are impressed by Oyewumi's claim to have unveiled a society that proves the reality of what, in truth, more than a few gender scholars (e.g., Yanagisako and Collier 1987; Lorber 1994) had imagined as the most extreme of possibilities—a society completely free of sexism, where male-female anatomical difference makes no social difference at all. On the other hand, not a single Africanist has come out in writing to support this representation of Yorùbá society, though several have—in the wake of Oyewumi's publication (and usually in publications edited by Oyewumi herself)—sought to reinforce the more moderate and well-established ideas that (1) African women occupy many highly esteemed social roles in their societies, and that (2) precolonial African gender systems often differ radically from Western ones (e.g., Adeekọ 2005; Okome 2001; Nzegwu 2001; Oyewumi 2005).

## Motives

Rita Laura Segato, who attended the 1999 FIU conference, observes that scholars use social analysis to "ventriloquize" hidden political agendas (Segato 2003: 19). It is a condition of our shared humanity that Oyewumi and I share certain motives and diverge radically on others. We are equally invested in the premise that Western ethnocentrism and racism generate inadequate thinking about both the West and the rest, and that ethnocentric assumptions about other cultures generate misunderstanding and often facilitate oppression. We are also equally aware of unfair stigma that attaches particularly to blackness, Africanness, and femaleness in U.S. society, and both of us see the liberatory value in changing the minds of the oppressors and of the oppressed. Though we share the



same desire for equality of opportunity across races and genders (she is less liberal about sexual orientation), we appear to understand the nature of oppression and, therefore, the possible means of liberation in very different terms. Whereas I view the operation of social hierarchy within any given society as complex, multi-axial, negotiated, and crisscrossed by multiple channels that are not equally visible to people in every class position, Oyewumi views social hierarchy as simple, mono-axial, fixed, and equally self-evident to everyone native to a given society. Moreover, whereas Oyewumi bets on the efficacy of supra-empirical clarity and of dichotomizing battle lines, I bet on respect for the complexity and intelligence of the people I study and of the people who I hope will, as a result of reading my analyses, better appreciate the complexity and humanity of black people and women in general. To me, it is equally unproductive to represent the oppressed as angels or as devils.

## Matory's Motives

In *Sex and the Empire*, I seek to show that Yorùbá people, who are such important players in the creation of African-diaspora culture, are real-live, multidimensional, historical human beings, not cardboard cut-out mascots of white supremacy or Black Nationalism. To my mind, the image of an unchanging, innocent, and isolated Africa, where no one faced ambiguity or made choices, is both untrue and insulting. As a child of racist America, I have found much liberation in my experience of Nigeria, where my chocolate skin qualifies me as a human being, not as an exceptional being whose humanity and complexity require proof. As a child of the feminist movement as well, I looked kindly, from my first moments in southern Nigeria, upon evidence of women's power and symbolic importance, which are equally important in African American culture. But I was not naive to the differences between these two black cultures or to the internal complexity and ambiguity of each. Indeed, it was the complexity of racial and gender hardship in the Americas and of gender hardship all around the Atlantic perimeter that, to me, made the triumph of many black women so heroic and worthy of study. These facts are what, to my mind, make the study of straight, white, Christian or Muslim men so much less interesting.

Nonetheless, understanding the travails of less powerful populations requires us simultaneously to grasp the cultural meanings, logical principles, and sociopolitical structures that have conferred disproportionate

advantage upon other populations. Having come of age in a racially desegregated but not-yet-integrated United States, I was keenly aware of how dominant populations—even in the absence of any explicit rules (or racially coded pronouns)—can both benefit from and deny the existence of structural bias against other populations. For example, by the time of my first year in Nigeria, virtually every American law that named whites as a privileged social category or named blacks as an encumbered one had been rescinded. Moreover, whites had begun a trend toward calling themselves "Irish," "Polish," "Italian," and so forth in order to avoid calling themselves "white," thus rendering inaudible the benefits that continued to accrue to their phenotypical whiteness (Alba 1990). Yet invisible and inaudible structural distinctions often have the most palpable effects.

I had been attracted to Yorùbáland not only because it provided evidence nonpareil of the African diaspora's enduring cultural connection to Africa but also because the reputed power, dignity, and perhaps even equality of Yorùbá women to men gave evidence of that cultural connection. The mighty goddess Yemọja and her New World avatars—the Brazilian Iemanjá and the Cuban Yemayá—attracted me long before Ṣàngó, Xangô, and Changó demanded my attention. Upon my first sojourn in Yorùbáland, I was not disappointed. At Ìbàdàn's Institute of African Studies, I met no scholar more respected and formidable than Bọlanlẹ Awe. I confronted the power of market women and their daughters everyday. More often than not, I had to capitulate. Even more than in the United States, I noticed, men were far more likely than women to possess and publicly display their multiple sexual or marital partners, and, particularly in the context of polygyny, people tended to feel much more warmly toward their mothers than toward their fathers. When I traveled to a town or a compound to meet the priests, most of whom were female, the person to whom I was always sent to ask first for approval was a male *baálé, baálẹ̀, olóyè, ọba,* or *olórí ẹlẹ́gùn.* What I ultimately saw was a setting where many women had significant dignity, power, and power over me, but I did not see a gender-free idyll. Nor was it possible for me to imagine that Yorùbá culture had ever been gender-free.

I was fascinated by the cultural logics and social conventions that so empowered some Yorùbá women, but, after years of intensive coresidence, I find it difficult to ignore the ways in which some highly gendered logics—such as wifeliness—could empower some men and women, while disempowering many more women. It was impossible, in



Ìgbòho, not to notice how the entrepreneurial success of the visiting and more Westernized Ìjẹ̀bú-Yorùbá women yam traders contrasted with the poverty and political marginality of the local Ọ̀yọ́-Yorùbá women. Moreover, the most dissatisfied people I met in the town were the *ìyáwó* ("wives") of overbearing *ọmọ oṣú* (adult divorcées and widows who have returned to their natal home), and no class of people was more resented by men and other women than were the *ọmọ oṣú.* I met no men who faced similar levels of dissatisfaction or hostility in their residential homes—a fact that I could only attribute to the different structural norms of men's and women's lives in Ìgbòho. My sympathy for and admiration of Yorùbá women coincides with my sympathy for and admiration of black people generally, gay people generally, and poor people generally. Yet my sympathy does not rest on the assumption that such groups are powerless, or that people of these categories do not find ways of oppressing or exploiting other people when they have a chance. Nothing in my experience of Nigerian society could convince me that contemporary Yorùbá people are hapless dupes of mental colonization by "the West," or that such an assumption is an effective first step toward the empowerment of Yorùbá people, black people, gay people, or poor people.

In pursuit of my motives, Segato (2003) summarizes my argument as follows: that the structure of gender in and around the Ọ̀yọ́-Yorùbá possession religions allows many women to achieve power, despite the enduring androcentric bias of the system. She reads this argument as an appeal to majority groups not to discriminate against minority groups, because admitting them to the system does not really, in the end, undermine the system. Though this implication was not my conscious intention, I tend to believe that it is true—and far too unfair for me ever to endorse it as a sufficient program of social change.

## Oyewumi's Motives

Oyewumi shares her motives with at least two major traditions of feminist writing and another major tradition of African nationalist writing. The first is the tradition of seeking in the distant past or in faraway places role models of matriarchy or gender equality. Each example asserted or discovered is taken as further proof that the sexual asymmetry plaguing the nearby and present-day societies with which we are familiar is neither natural nor universal or, therefore, inevitable and immutable. Oyewumi is the most extreme partisan of this motive that I have yet

read. She is the first scholar to deny not only the phenomenon of sexual asymmetry but also the salience of male-female diversity at any moment in the social process other than copulation and parturition.

Oyewumi also extends the worthy tradition of assertions by feminists of color that their interests have been overlooked by a white, middle-class-dominated feminist movement that once presumed to speak for all women (Amadiume 1987: 1–10; Nzegwu 2001; Moraga and Anzaldúa 1983; Davis 1985; hooks 1981; Collins 1989). Two decades of scholarship and literature by feminists of color has demonstrated beyond doubt the impossibility of the demand that women of color forget about the array of hierarchical social differences beyond gender that privilege some women and marginalize others—such as race, class, sexual orientation, educational level, and nationality. Contrary to Oyewumi's critique of feminist scholarship, there is hardly a white feminist scholar writing today who has not recognized the importance of this critique.

In overlapping ways, Oyewumi and I recognize that people like us are stigmatized and marginalized according to multiple indices of social difference in the West. However, our responses to this problem differ. My response is to recognize the complex internal and externally imposed realities that stigmatized or marginalized people must understand in order to overcome those realities. Oyewumi's response, on the other hand, is to deny that there was ever any internal problem or complexity.

It is important for women, women of color, and Yorùbá women—not to mention Western people, Americans, African Americans, African American women, *santeros, candomblecistas,* Ṣàngó worshipers, Nigerian Christians, Yorùbá people, and so forth—to "speak for themselves," to borrow Marta Moreno Vega's statement at the FIU conference. However, such groupings so easily become an artifact of the leadership strategies of the people who manage to position themselves as spokespeople and who then subject dissenting subgroups of the spoken-for to insinuation, ridicule, defamation, misrepresentation, and worse. One Yorùbá woman or even a committee of Yorùbá women does not instinctually speak for every subset and cross-cutting subcategory of Yorùbá women, any more than one white woman or committee of white women can speak instinctually for every kind of woman. And the classification of whole areas of discussion as foreign—as Oyewumi has branded "gender"—entails the risk of silencing those subsets of Yorùbá women and men who recognize previously unnamed or unquestioned dimensions of their experience through it.



Oyewumi's argument shares the motives of a major tradition in Black Nationalist activism and scholarship as well, a tradition that seeks liberation from the European definitions and standards that are inherently biased against the interests, values, and realities of Africans and black people generally. However, some strategies in this tradition, such as Senghor's Négritude, much of Afrocentrism, and the "acting white" phenomenon (e.g., Fordham and Ogbu 1986),[8] imprison black people within an inverted mirror of those very European standards, and the inversion makes those inverted definitions and standards no less confining and no less capable of blinding us to our own complex realities. Declaring ourselves inaccessible to the analytical tools generated by cross-cultural analysis—rather than refining those tools and contributing new ones—further marginalizes Africa and subjects us to the Mobutus of the world, who, in the name of African distinctiveness, would kill Africa's greatest virtues—diversity, open-mindedness, and democracy.

## What Is at Stake in This Debate?

Two fundamental issues seem to be at stake in this debate. First, what, in truth, is the usefulness of the gender concept in the scholarly analysis of Yorùbá history and social life? Second, which answers are most liberating to women and dignifying to women and to the other disempowered populations that crosscut this gender category, such as Yorùbá people and black people generally?

At a rational level, it is entirely reasonable to ask whether the axes of social differentiation and hierarchy that shape one society, or even most societies, also shape any given society. It is reasonable to ask whether male-female anatomical difference corresponds to any difference of normative social role or opportunity in that society. It is reasonable to ask which differences of reproduction-related anatomy are construed as indexing salient social categories, as well as what anatomical, sartorial, behavioral, or age-related variations exempt some people from these particular social categories. It is even reasonable to ask if there are some societies where anatomical differences correspond to *no* expected or statistically demonstrable differentiation between the roles of males and females—or of any other visibly distinct bodies—in childcare, clothing, subdialect, occupation, access to any given political office or to political offices in general, and so forth.

Even if one can conceive of a culture in which the anatomical differences between males and females—or any other bodies—are never interpreted as reasons for or symbols of noncoital or nonparturitional social role differences, Yorùbá culture is *not* such a culture. No definition and no analytical method could change that fact, though certain motives could lead a partisan actor to conceal it. However, such motives are not, to my mind, inauthentic or foreign to Yorùbá culture. Within the heart of any culture, any given actor will find it advantageous to emphasize some principles, rules, and precedents over others. A culture is not some perfectly unchanging, essential, or internally consistent set of rules that people simply "follow" until they are colonized. Culture is that aspect of collective social life in which the legitimacy and efficacy of our actions flow from references to an often-conflicting set of available precedents. In Yorùbá society, actors continually select and reframe legitimizing precedents from near and far, and have done so as long as the Yorùbá have been studied.

The second fundamental issue in the Matory-Oyewumi debate concerns which analysis will be the most liberating to the marginalized and stigmatized. At the end of this debate, what allies do we stand to gain or lose in the struggle for fairness to all? If Oyewumi wins, will Yorùbá men feel exonerated of sexism (Ogundipẹ 2002)?[9] Will they feel let off the hook? Will Yorùbá men and women be persuaded that the intrafamilial tensions inherent in polygyny—as well as the gender hierarchy induced by wives' competition for their husbands' resources and affection—are mere figments of their colonized imaginations?[10] Will women be further persuaded that the heartless exploitation of the junior domestic workers called *ọmọ odo* is consistent with the exclusive value placed on "seniority" in Oyewumi's "Yorùbá conception" and therefore a justifiable reward of restoring Yorùbá cultural authenticity? Will critics skulk in fear of betraying Yorùbá nationalism, or of being told, "It's a Yorùbá thing; you wouldn't understand"?

Let us also suppose that the credulous feminist scholars who once believed that Africa was women's hell now believe that Africa is women's heaven. Will they have understood better, or become better allies in the struggle against the truly complex forms of inequality and exploitation that afflict Africa and the West? For example, would they be right to discourage development agencies from funding programs targeted at un-Westernized rural Yorùbá women as a class, or from scrutinizing programs that do not consider their potentially differential effects on the lives of un-Westernized rural Yorùbá men and women, under



the pretense that authentic Yorùbá people have no gender in the first place? Let us also suppose that many feminist and nonfeminist scholars will read Oyewumi's work carefully and, drawn by this complex and beautiful culture, will undertake archival and ethnographic research in Yorùbáland on their own. Will they emerge with a greater respect for the scholarship of people like us?

## Notes

1. The roundtable featured formal remarks by Mọlara Ogundipẹ, Niara Sudarkasa, Carole Boyce Davies, Titilayọ Ufomata, J. Lorand Matory, and Desirée Lewis. For other critiques, see, for example, Afọnja 2005 and Bakare-Yusuf.

2. Their devotees often identify outrageous, antisocial actions as evidence of the gods' indefatigable power and impunity in defense of their followers (Barber 1981: 735, 743, n. 23).

3. *Adé* in Portuguese orthography has an open "e" sound, as in the English word "pet," and should not be confused with the Yorùbá term for "crown."

4. See also Peel (2002) on the gender imbalance among the nineteenth-century devotees of Ifá, who were predominantly male, and of the other òrìṣà, who were predominantly female.

5. Oyewumi argues that the *ìyálóde* title originated in the nineteenth century and was a product of Ìbàdàn influence (1997: 108). Oyewumi does not mention that Ibadan is the largest and one of the most important Òyọ́-Yorùbá polities—far more populous and historically important than Ògbómọ̀ṣọ́. Nor does she demonstrate the sense in which the gender-specificity of the *ìyálóde* title results from foreign or Western influence or is foreign to "the Yorùbá conception." She also argues that, because not all women fell under the authority of the *ìyálóde* and the *ìyálóde* governed affairs beyond the affairs of women, the title is not gendered. I fail to see how this cascade of evidence proves that a title reserved for women escapes analysis in terms of gender. Moreover, the fact is that, in some Yorùbá towns, the *ìyálóde* did indeed govern the affairs of all women or of women as a class (Denzer 1994; also Olupọna 2005).

6. Consider also the Yorùbá proverb *Pẹ̀lẹ́ l'ábo; pẹ̀lẹ́ l'ákọ* ("Even in expressing sympathy, there's a nice [lit. 'female'] way and a mean, ornery [lit., 'male'] way"). In both verbal expressions, the contrast between male and female has a moral valence easily recognized by most Yorùbá people.

7. See also Case (2002), Clark (2001), Cooper (2004), and Customer reviews of *The Invention of Women* (2006). These are among the African American and Caribbean scholars who find in Oyewumi's work inspiration to appreciate female sexual freedom and resistance to racism.

8. Fordham and Ogbu (1986) were the first in a series of researchers who have reported, among young African Americans, a tendency to identify school achievement and related forms of social conformity as "acting white" and, therefore, as a betrayal of their race, thus discouraging their peers from efforts at academic success.

9. Ogunpidẹ specifies that the argument appears to exonerate Yorùbá men of "*male* sexism," since female sexism also exists.

10. Consider the contrary hypothesis that such tensions and hierarchy are quite old in Yorùbá society. A widespread myth reports that another of Ṣàngó's wives—either Ọya or Oṣun—tricked Ọbà into slicing off her ear, under the pretense that human ear was Ṣàngó's favorite food.

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