

What role does ritual play in the everyday lives of modern Africans? In particular, how are so-called traditional cultural forms deployed by people seeking to empower themselves in a world where "modernity" has failed to deliver on its promises?

Some of the essays in *Modernity and Its Malcontents* address familiar anthropological issues—like witchcraft, myth, and the politics of reproduction—but treat them in fresh ways, situating them amidst the polyphonies of contemporary Africa. Others explore distinctly nontraditional subjects—among them the Nigerian popular press and soul-eating in Niger—in such a way as to confront the conceptual limits of Western social science. Together they demonstrate, imaginatively and provocatively, how ritual has been powerfully mobilized in the making of history, and will continue to be used in the present and the future.

In response to the challenges posed by contemporary African realities, the editors subject such concepts as modernity, ritual, power, and history to renewed critical scrutiny. Writing from a shared perspective about a variety of phenomena, they are united by a wish to preserve the diversity and historical specificity of local signs and practices, voices and perspectives. Their work makes a substantial and original contribution toward the historical anthropology of Africa.

The contributors, all from the Africanist circle at the University of Chicago, are Adeline Masquelier, Deborah Kaspin, J. Lorand Matory, Ralph Austen, Andrew Apter, Misty L. Bastian, Mark Auslander, and Pamela G. Primor.

"In this time of ethnography as text and fiction it is wonderful to read essays based on forceful fieldwork. Indeed, these articles take some of the basic themes of classic ethnography—spirit possession and witchcraft—and infuse them with new vigor."

Luise White, University of Minnesota

Jean Comaroff and John Comaroff are professors of anthropology at the University of Chicago. They have each written many books and together have coauthored *Revelation and Revolution*, also published by the University of Chicago Press.

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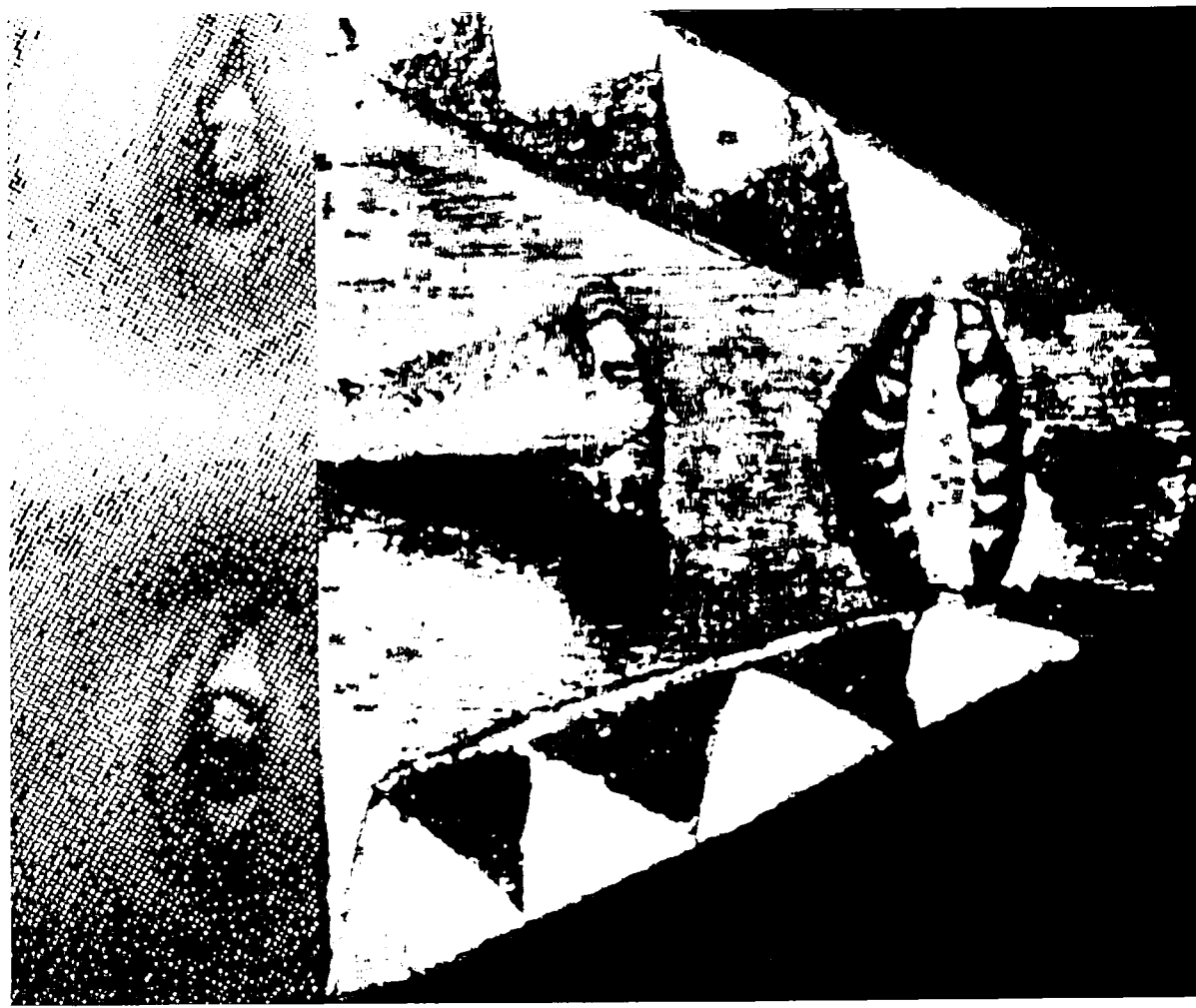
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MODERNITY AND ITS MALCONTENTS

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Ritual and Power in Postcolonial Africa

Edited by Jean Comaroff & John Comaroff



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Government by Seduction: History and the Tropes of "Mounting" in Oyo-Yoruba Religion

J. Lorand Matony

IN THE SAVANNAHS AND FOREST OF SOUTHWESTERN NIGERIA live approximately 15 million Yoruba, a collection of linguistically and culturally related groups, of which the speakers of Oyo dialect are the largest. Oyo speakers are descended from the subjects of a precolonial royal empire called Oyo and live mainly in the Oyo State of Nigeria. The moral and political implications of gender in the oldest and most loyal province of the extant Oyo kingdom—Oyo North—are the focus of this chapter. I will illustrate aspects of a gendered logic that has made femininity a privileged status in the delegation of politicoreligious authority (*àṣẹ*) as well as the consequences, upon that logic and its application, of a changing political economy.

That logic draws much of its authority from references to the distant imperial past. Elsewhere, I have drawn a more comprehensive portrait of the imperial system of politicoreligious delegation (in press *a*, and 1991). Here, on the other hand, we will be concerned primarily with the motives and tropic design of contemporary references to Oyo imperialism. Oyo's gendered ideology and administration are not alone among models of contemporary action. Islam, for example, had penetrated Oyo-Yoruba society by the seventeenth century and Christianity by the nineteenth. A sizable literature on Islamic and Mediterranean Christian societies documents the role of women as symbols of the community and emblems of its global moral values (e.g., Boddy 1989; Counihan 1985; Abu-Lughod 1986; Giovannini 1981). Even amid their rapid expansion in Oyo North during the nineteenth century, these evangelical religions encountered a powerful countervailing morality and iconography of gender which highlight very different dimensions of womanhood as metaphors of the local sociopolitical order. Rather than vilifying or exorcizing women's sexuality, that countervailing ideology defines women's sexual relations as a paradigmatic idiom of royal government and of production generally. In modern Oyo-Yoruba ritual and historical narration, even men's political conduct is figured in

metaphors of women's sexuality. These forms of figuration invoke and legitimize forms of community leadership antithetical to the dominant religious, political, and economic forms of the contemporary Nigerian state. They declare, for rural women and transvestite men, a privileged role in the creation and distribution of the society's supreme value, namely, fertility.

Through rites of spirit possession and gender transformation, worshippers of several important *òrisha*, or gods, of the Oyo-Yoruba rehearse particular—and not unchallenged—visions of history and politics. Sacred body techniques, mythology, poetry, and shrine iconography—all rich in figurations of the female body—not only recall specific political orders of the past but they inform and transform modern sociopolitical relations. The ideology embedded in the possession religions emerges most clearly when we set ritual practices alongside the explicitly historical narratives propagated by leading male political actors in this society. The tropic parallels between these two communicative genres—verbal history and ritual—serve as vehicles for diverse assertions about the proper political structure of Oyo-Yoruba society and women's role in it.

On the one hand, we will consider the sense of personal and political possibilities that these historically redolent possession rites burn into the consciousness of modern rural women and men, despite the encroachment of religions and a form of government that marginalize them. On the other, we will witness some exploitative and murderous transformations of this ancient ritual technology in the postimperial age.

Igbobo and Its Men: The Context and Logic of Men's Political Narratives

The town of Igbobo has existed at least since the sixteenth century and was long a central hub in the political economy of the Oyo Empire. Hence, even more than most Yoruba cities, Igbobo has generated multiple and contradictory accounts of its history, often in the service of intergenerational political rivalries. The narration of history by men and in male-controlled fora reveals not only the bases of conflict but also the shared understandings of the constitution of hereditary authority. Among the most fundamentally shared understandings are those that concern the central role of gender and its transformation in the project of government.

Igbobo lies in the northernmost savannahs of Oyo State and in what has been, during the twentieth century, one of the most infrastructurally underdeveloped regions of Yorubaland. Only in the past three years has the Oyo North Development Project leveled and paved feeder roads to facilitate the outward transport of agricultural goods. Partly because of its

distance from the national centers of economic production and partly because of its political history, this sizable town is still without piped water. The electrical power supply, too, remains unreliable, as in most of Nigeria. Igboho's population is between 25,000 and 40,000, not including the inhabitants of the surrounding hamlets and the large number of its citizens engaged in labor or commerce abroad (Agbaje-Williams 1983: 161; see also Eades 1975). Emigrants may spend months, years, or decades away from the town. Yet they retain hereditary rights to land and titles and are considered subjects of one or more of the hereditary authorities in the town.

The town is divided into a dozen major quarters (*adágwò*), each with a hereditary ruling family and a male chief. Each quarter hosts several patrilineal "houses" (*ilé*, or *idilé*), each of which may have hundreds of members. Ideally, a man lives with his wives and his children in the same "house" as his father and brothers. Trade and labor migration has, therefore, generated culturally unexpected residential situations. Because the young men are more likely to emigrate, the old men, divorced or widowed daughters of the house (*qmq oṣú*, or *dálémoṣú*), wives of the house (*obinrin ilé*), and their minor children now make up the vast majority of house inhabitants. Emigrant traders visit what they affectionately call "the village" on holidays and use their savings to build retirement homes and to finance community projects, like the building of a clinic, roads, a post-office, and houses of worship. A resident male chief monitors the disposition of land belonging to his quarter, on which resident men grow cassava, melons, yams, tobacco, corn, and beans. Chiefs also adjudicate in civil and minor criminal cases involving divorce and petty theft, for example. Most importantly, chiefs act in all communal rituals as affectively potent embodiments of their subjects' social and political unity. However, their role in political affairs beyond the quarter and in the wider town is in dispute.

Through the course of the nineteenth-century wars among the Yoruba groups and of twentieth-century British colonialism, the political relationship of male authorities to women has changed radically. In the seventeenth-century Oyo Empire, royal wives had been the paradigmatic delegates of kings. As a source of legitimacy, local chiefly dynasties also claimed ancient descent from *daughters* of the Oyo palace. More recently, some Oyo North women have held titles as market chiefs, or *ìyádlòde*. Since the 1950s, however, women's chieftaincy titles have disappeared.

Most women today describe themselves as traders (*onísòwò*), although few in this region possess sufficient capital to support themselves in that profession. Far more than women of southern Yoruba groups—like Egba and Ijebu—the women of Oyo North tend to depend heavily on the financial support of male kinsmen who have access to the greatest of all local income sources—municipal government coffers and contracts for services to the government.

Contemporary local government is run by elected councils of men. The Ifelodun "town-improvement society"—which administers the market, funds community projects, and monitors important social developments—does not admit women. Members of the town-improvement society explain that women cannot be trusted and may betray the town on important matters. They relate legends of women who betrayed their own natal patrilineages for the benefit of their children and betrayed their husbands for the promise of marriage to a richer man. A prominent Christian member of Ifelodun told me:

There was once a war between the king of Oyo and the king of Abeokuta . . . The king of Abeokuta had a commandant with a *jijú* [an item of magical power] in a *koto* [a large calabash], from which he would take water and bathe himself. Then he would get on his hands and knees on four *mortars*. Thereby, he would turn into an elephant and could go to the war front and kill invincibly . . .

The king of Oyo made a deal with the commandant's wife that he would *marry her* if she revealed the secret of the commandant's power. The commandant performed his magic and he went to the war front. When his wife destroyed the *jijú*, he realized . . . that something had happened at home. He rushed back and found a bit of water, with which he changed back into a person before he died.

The woman went to the king of Oyo expecting him to fulfill his promise. He took her in, and on the seventh day he invited everyone in the town to the market in front of the palace to announce the wedding plans. The king indulged her with fine food and courtesy but refused sex. He just told her every day how close the all-important day was. One day, the king sent the guards to bring her out. The king said, "You married your husband; you bore children for him. All the good things he did for you, and you would have me marry you so you can betray me? Never!" Then he had his messenger cut off her *head*. (Emphasis mine)

This Ifelodun member added, "The trouble in Igboho is caused mainly by the daughters of the house [*àwọn qmq oṣú*]." This story places at the disposal of a new male political exclusivism some ancient and widespread elements of Yoruba ritual logic. A woman's betrayal of her husband is equivalent to the spoiling of his magical calabashes and mortars, of his vessels, all elements of the metaphor-based technology whereby, symbolically, male powers take control over vessel-like feminine heads. The duplicity of the Abeokuta commandant's wife is, significantly, both sexual and political, and it warrants the removal of her head. This testimony affirms the dependency of royal men on women but emphasizes the threat posed by the disloyalty of women. Despite the silencing of women in local gov-

ernment politics and administration, they are still blamed for the intracommunity among the men of the town.

Whatever the source, there are deep and numerous divisions among local male-run chieftaincies and religious organizations in Igboho. Conflicts are debated with reference to mutually contradictory histories of the town, in each of which arise seemingly extraneous and, on second thought, revealing details about gender and the Oyo-Yoruba political charter. During the period of my research—spanning the length of the 1980s—prominent Igboho men recounted and revised the town's histories in yearly court battles over which chieftaincy title is supreme—the Onigboho, the Ona-Onibode, or the Alepata.

The dispute hinges on who founded Igboho and thereby earned the right of sovereignty. Some say that Igboho was founded by the king of Oyo after Nupe armies ransacked the previous Oyo capital. Therefore, Oyo has the right to indicate which chief is locally sovereign. Others say that the first Onigboho had already lived there by the time the refugee Oyo dynasty arrived. Therefore, Onigboho is sovereign. Beyond dispute is the fact that four Oyo kings ruled from Igboho, approximately from 1555 to 1610 (Smith 1965:74). Nineteenth-century testimony from the Oyo palace hards suggests that the Ona-Onibode chief was sent there to rule in the dynasty's name after the palace returned to its earlier capital (Johnson 1921:166). Twentieth-century Oyo kings, on the other hand, have endorsed the supremacy of the Alepata.¹

Stuck between legal contention and military history are details whose fullness seems intended more to demonstrate the speaker's expertise than to prove sovereignty. Yet, the fascination that these details continue to exercise outside the courtroom, as well as the parallels they find in royal ritual, prove their importance in the very constitution of political sovereignty in Oyo North. The debate over the implications of Oyo's exile in Igboho consistently combines elaborate details of gender relations with a sense that inappropriate and sexually conceived disjunctures brought about the present lamentable state of town politics.

The beneficiaries of Oyo's rule recall the exile of the dynasty in Igboho as an era of recovery and vast prosperity. A number of other phenomena are attributed originally or uniquely to this epoch, implying their role in generating this prosperity. Some say the second Oyo monarch who reigned in Igboho, Orompoto, was a woman; others say she was a woman who "danced in and out on the day of her coronation and then the king-makers looked up and realized she had turned into a man." That very monarch is said to have introduced cavalry into the Oyo military, not only the means by which Oyo conquered the lands southward and became the largest empire in Yoruba history but a factor with rich implications, as we shall see, for the contemporary Oyo-Yoruba logic of gender. Up until the

time of Orompoto, no woman had ever assumed the Oyo throne, and no woman has done so since. Orompoto's successor, who also reigned in Igboho, is remembered as the first Oyo king to impose castration as a condition of service upon the ranking male official of the palace (see Johnson 1921:163; see also R. and J. Lander 1832, 1:129, 169).

Whereas the political centralism and prosperity of Igboho under the Oyo dynasty are rendered in metaphors associating equestrianism with extraordinary gender transformations, the departure of the dynasty and the subsequent political disorder, with some symbolic consistency, yield sexual disjunctures and bizarre sexual mismatches. In a 1982 public inquiry over the current chieftaincy disputes, a female elder of Ona-Onibode House dictated:

... after the departure of Alaafin [Oyo king] Abipa there was a bad and notorious [sic] incident in the town so that everybody in the town was not happy. The incident was that dogs were meeting [i.e., having sex with] goats, cocks were cohabiting ducks etc. It was this time that Oba [paramount ruler—sic] Ona-Onibode sent a message to Alaafin on the incident and the then Alaafin sent one of his servants bearing [the title] AARE to Oba Ona-Onibode to be leading the ayabas [Oyo royal wives] to perform the sacrifice on the tomb of four Alaafins who dies [sic] in Oyo Igboho. (Signed by Mojere Asabi, representative of the Alayabas, in Aderele 1982:163).

According to this account, the disorder created by the Oyo dynasty's departure was not only political but sexual. Not only did the local political hierarchy lose its head but the Oyo king abandoned hundreds of his wives and his predecessors' wives. Mojere Asabi tells us that this improper polytosexual order was repaired with the arrival of the Aare—a ritually prepared and usually transvestite palace delegate—who led the royal wives in the worship of the kings' graves. The Aare belongs to a class of palace delegates known as *ilári*, who will be described at length below. As late as 1965, the descendant of this delegate appears to have worn women's clothes to lead this annual procession (Aderele 1982; see also Smith 1965:60). Likewise, in both the imperial delegation of power and in the modern Oyo-Yoruba religion, we will discover, "wives" and male transvestites take on the power of the greatest of deceased Oyo kings—the god Shango.

The Power of the Past

The Royal Husband and His Many Brides

According to royal history, Shango was an early king of Oyo. Various accounts have it that either Shango is a Nupe or his mother was born of these powerful Northern enemies and trade partners of Oyo (see, e.g.,

Johnson 1921:149; Frobenius 1966:210; Idowu 1963:92). To many, he is now a god, the Lord of Fire. He hurls stone "thunder axes" (*q̄dun àrà*) from the sky to kill thieves and to punish his enemies by setting their homes on fire. As the tutelary god of the Oyo palace, he is by far the best-known god among the Oyo-speakers. His sizable priesthood is centered, ideally, on the Oyo palace and was once an instrument of imperial power. His priests acted as imperial viceroys in outlying subject kingdoms; Morton-Williams 1964:255; Biobaku 1952:40. Officials known as *ilārí*, initiated by Shango priests, and royal wives (*ayaba*), themselves often priestesses, played prominent roles in the projection of Oyo royal power (R. and J. Lander 1832:109–10; Clapperton 1829:21; Babayemi 1982:6–11; Babayemi 1979:15–21, 26–32, 40–46). They continued to do so until the end of British Indirect Rule in the 1950s.

The administration of Oyo royal prerogatives by wives, male transvestites, and priests appears to have followed conscious motives, which are evident in the historical record. Though these motives lapsed as the foundations of royal power changed, the contemporary initiation rites of Shango possession priests bear the unmistakable mark of those motives. These rites of spirit possession mobilize the norms of a defunct empire in the service of a rival modern order, which, unlike the modern hegemony, valorizes feminine authority.

During the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, Oyo was the largest empire among the various groups now called Yoruba. Although it collapsed precipitously around 1830, Oyo's authority has never lapsed in Oyo North—the region that includes Igbobo. The Oyo palace has long regarded the king's kinsmen as a source of not only administrative support but competition. Hence, the palace faced the problem of protecting the reigning king from these potential usurpers (see Johnson 1921:41–42, 189; Babayemi 1979:149–52). Palace bureaucrats had an interest both in protecting the throne from usurpation and in checking the influence of the king's nonroyal and, in some cases, foreign mother. The king, for his part, desired a corps of delegates of guaranteed loyalty, free from the influence of subordinate chiefs and his plebeian subjects.

In answer to these requirements, a variety of religious innovations over the course of Oyo's expansion and imperial consolidation were instituted to prepare a body of personnel as "wives" of the king and of the royal dynasty's tutelary god, Shango. Few of these palace delegates were "wives" of the king in the conventional sense. Rather, notions of the proper relation between husbands and wives were embroidered with a range of other metaphors to define and affect these delegates' absolute submission to the royal will. The image of the horse was integrated neatly among the gendered metaphors of both imperial delegation and Shango worship.

Until Oyo's collapse in the 1830s, Oyo monopolized the trade in horses from the North, enabling it to conquer virtually all the savannah kingdoms to the South. Horses (*esin*) were Oyo's main instruments of conquest. Analogously, the king's possession priest delegates were called "mounts" (*q̄léḡin*) and "horses" (*esin*) of Shango. In being called "brides" (*iḡawo*) of the god, the Shango possession priests share the symbolic nature of royal wives as well. The foremost term for spirit possession condenses several of these metaphorical predilections about priests of the royal god. Not only do gods "mount" (*ḡin*) possession priests, but riders "mount" horses and males "mount" females in the sexual act. These relationships at the core of the royalist order might be rendered in the following proportion:

husband	:	wife ::
god	:	possession priest ::
rider	:	horse

In royalist projects, each of these usages colors the others and illuminates a variety of otherwise opaque ritual and narrative practices.

From the beginning of the seventeenth century, the military expansion of Oyo precipitated continual shifts in the balance of power among the king of Oyo, the ranking general (Basorun), and the two Oyo councils of state (Ogboni and Oyo Misi). Royal servants and delegates called *ilārí*—whose very name and ritual preparation by Shango priestesses suggest some variant of "mounting," or possession, by the king's personal spirit (*orí*—lit. head)—gave a radical boost to the authority of the late-eighteenth-century Oyo king Abiodun and his successors over the nonroyal chiefs (Johnson 1921:183).² For generations, *ilārí* had served as officers of the royal *òrìṣà* priesthoods, including that of Shango. Much after the manner of the Shango *q̄léḡin*'s initiation, *ilārí*'s initiation was focused on the head. It was conducted by the second-ranking royal wife. During the reign of King Abiodun, the *ilārí* not only supervised local rulers but collected tolls and policed trade routes (Johnson 1921:63; Babayemi 1979:62, 79ff). They and the palace wives made up the majority of palace delegates and functionaries.

Repeated and lengthy arguments in the scholarly literature dispute the literal meaning of the term *ayaba*, or "king's wives," and seek to specify the difference between them and the *ilārí* (Johnson 1921:62, 63; Oroge 1971:205; Awe 1972:269–70). All have made it clear, however, that, whether literally or figuratively, many of the women and all of the *titled* women in the service of the Oyo palace were called "king's wives." Moreover, writes Johnson, "all the ladies of rank are often spoken of as *Ilaris*" (1921:63). Many of the male *ilārí*, for their part, were horsemen (*ibid.*, 62), and many must have cross-dressed, like their early-twentieth-century counterparts. Hence, throughout the empire, they displayed and popular-

ized much the same symbolism of politicoreligious delegation as did the wifely and equestrian *elégùn*, or Shango possession priests. In a sense, not only were the *ilári* delegates, the king's wives, and the possessed *elégùn* metonymic images of Oyo royal authority, but they were projected images of the king himself.

The Shango initiation—*idòṣù*—contains the most elaborate ritual formula of this projection. It condenses and embroiders major symbolic forms and terms of Oyo royal sovereignty, which are articulated partially in *ilári* preparation and partially in royal marriage. Before ascending the throne, the Oyo king himself undergoes the *idòṣù* initiation. The prospective king is himself, in effect, a bride of the god. Upon coronation, he becomes Shango himself, suggesting his permanent state of possession by the god (King Adeyemi III, personal communication—17 October 1988; see also Isola 1991:97). The *idòṣù* initiation symbolized each level in a hierarchy of delegation—from the most husbandly, kingly, and ancestral Shango to the reigning king and downward through various orders of wives, delegates, and subjects. This hierarchy was not only administrative but spatial and temporal: personalities from above and from the past penetrated and thereby ruled subjects in the earthly present.

Colonial Transformations

As in much of Africa, British colonialists in the Nigerian Protectorate employed the policy of Indirect Rule. In order to avert the need to deploy large numbers of European officials, the colonial government co-opted existing political systems and used their personnel to levy taxes, organize labor, and maintain civil order. For their own cultural and strategic reason, British administrators favored the Oyo palace over the mighty plebeian generals of Ibadan to rule the Oyo-Yoruba (see Atanda 1979). In the wake of that decision, the British inadvertently revived and expanded the effective domain of Oyo's gendered ritual politics.

In the first half of this century, not only the Oyo dynasty in itself but the *ilári* enjoyed an unprecedented degree of authority (Asiwaju 1976:99; Atanda 1979:74, 101; 1970:216). According to various reports, even male *ilári* during this period represented themselves as wives of the king. Tales of their extortionary and coercive behavior make comic reading (see Atanda 1979:203) but also suggest the power inherent in this wifely symbolic role, as well as the symbolic constitution of Oyo royal authority even under the British Colony. The most famous Oyo king of the colonial era and, next to Shango, the most famous of all time is Siyanbola Ladigbolu. Though backed by British firepower and the friendship of the British Resident, the unparalleled might of this king was construed in very local cultural terms. He is eulogized as having almost been able to "turn a man

into a woman," and vice versa (Atanda 1970:227), a phrase intended to evoke the *extraordinary extent* of his political authority but also recalling its specific *ritual foundations*. The theater of Oyo royal authority magnified and amended the structure of husband/wife relations, making palace "wives" into the public icons and agents of their husband's insuperable authority.

Royalist historical claims and ritual enactments are not unrivaled. The collapse of the Oyo Empire around 1830 resulted from internal dissent and the success of Fulani jihadists from the North. Under the rule of generals, the predominantly Oyo-Yoruba city of Ibadan replaced Oyo as the most powerful polity south of the River Niger. Although the Oyo palace remained prestigious, its sovereignty could no longer be taken for granted. Until the British restored the ethos of Oyo supremacy and divinity, a nonroyalist ritual complex reigned outside Oyo North. As Ibadan expanded into the southern and eastern forests, its tsetse-smitten cavalry became useless (see Smith 1988:101; Johnson 1921:288). As nonroyal warlords conquered and pillaged, slaves rather than "wives" became the paradigmatic servants of sovereign power (see Akintoye 1971:72 and *passim*). Concomitantly, the preeminent religious cult of the nineteenth-century state belonged to the nonpossessing, nonroyal god of war—Ogun. Not only are horses, "wives," and "mounting" irrelevant to that cult in Oyo North, but women are systematically marginalized in or excluded from its rites (see Matory, in press *a*).

Wifeliness and the hierarchy of "mounting" have not been women's only means of achievement—a fact made colorfully evident by the lives of several famous women during Ogun's nineteenth-century supremacy. Indeed, the most famous women in all of Yoruba history are the Iyalode—women chiefs of the market—in towns like Ibadan, Abeokuta, and Lagos. In the nineteenth century, the Iyalode Omosa and Efunshethan of Ibadan and Tinubu of Abeokuta rose to prominence as traders and war financiers in these cities created by imperial dislocation. Like the powerful men of their age, these women entrepreneurs were mobile, militarized, and more in control of royal institutions than under their control. Their personal fame distinguishes them sharply from the generations of anonymous palace women and men who exercised power as the "wives" of Oyo kings and gods. The Iyalode thrived amid the nineteenth-century marginalization of the hierarchy of "mounting"; instead of representing the palace, they represented themselves and other women in collective action and on the councils of state.

Yoruba historical writings about these women represent them in dramatically unwifely terms. Awe says they were without a "normal domestic life"; Tinubu and Efunshetan are said to have been childless (Awe 1972:271–72; Biobaku 1960:40). Efunshetan's character is represented as not

only unwifely and militaristic but legendarily antireproductive. She bore only one daughter, who died while delivering her own child. Thereafter, according to Johnson's contemporaneous account, Efunshetan submitted all of her own pregnant slaves to abortions using such cruel methods that the pregnant women usually died (Johnson 1921:393). Whether we take these accounts literally or not, what seems clear is that these women did not depend on Shango-style metaphors of marriage as conditions or parameters of power. From Johnson in particular, we draw an even clearer sense of the nineteenth-century royalist apprehension of nonroyal power. Johnson's is a portrait of sociopolitical disorder drawn, again, in images of the female body.

The Past in the Present

Despite challenges in the nineteenth century and progressive marginalization in twentieth-century hereditary government, the metaphorical conjunction of horses, wives, and priests as bearers of royal authority remains highly evocative in postcolonial possession religions preoccupied outwardly with uterine fertility. These religions reiterate and recontextualize the precolonial and colonial projection of Oyo's power. The ideology of the *òrìṣà* religions suggests that subservience to royal authority guarantees prosperity and protection from witchcraft as well as authority over inferior personnel within the king's "cone of authority," to use Prince's term. Stepping outside that "cone," through disobedience or inattention to its internal hierarchy, makes one automatically vulnerable to misfortune. Conversely, misfortune and illness are diagnosed as signs of one's withdrawal from the "cone," and the cure entails reentry and the reinforcement of its internal hierarchical norms (Prince 1968:1172 and passim). Though the king is conventionally the nodal figure in this system of politicoreligious delegation, he occupies that position because he is a vessel and conduit of divine forces, an inferior participant in the god's "cone of authority" (see Matory 1986). There are multiple potential nodes in this system of delegation, making any given king or worldly kingship in general a dispensable intermediary. Oyo is now a town without a worldly empire. Even its administration of the Shango cult and its initiations has lapsed. Yet, the ghost of its past might remain alive and pivotal in the religion of rural Igboshoans. The memory of the Oyo Empire has replaced the modern palace as the sacred font of sociopolitical order. One suspects that, despite their metaphorical design in images of the female body, the requirements of empire distanced the priesthood from the medical problems of individual women. Today's Shango priesthood, on the other hand, focuses its public concerns and claims on those very problems, especially those related to uterine fertility. The shrinking of royal government has left rural women

with fewer leadership options beyond literal motherhood, underscoring the importance of institutions that guarantee such fertility. Hence, a real and rewarded order of authority and community remains alive in the priesthood. The priestesses and priests of Oyo North administer an empire of healing and fecundation.

The chieftaincies of Oyo North have been progressively integrated into new networks of symbolic and material power. Pecuniary wealth, the profession of Christianity or Islam, Western-style education, and access to the resources of the federal state have grown in importance as qualifications for and instrumentalities of royal power. At least in the public personae of kings and chiefs, the importance of association with the possession religions and their gender transformations has decreased both proportionally and absolutely.

The graves of the Oyo kings buried in Igboloh are no longer worshipped annually by the royal wives or the Ona-Onibode chief. The Aure—noble descendant of the transvestite Oyo delegate—does cast a kola nut of divination and sacrifice on some market days, but he does not cross-dress. Part of the present Alepata's coronation took place at the graves, but he does not regard his neglect of the Shango shrine in the reception hall of his palace as regrettable or harmful. He receives the parading "brides" of Shango during the various Shango festivals just as he receives Christian and Muslim groups on their various holy days. Contrary to reports elsewhere that Shango possession priests acted as political delegates from the palace, the present Alepata denies that Shango possession priests ever lorded over his predecessors, a point the present Oyo king echoes. King Adeyemi III says,

Yes, *múggbà* [nonpossession priests] and *elégùn* [possession priests] were representatives of Oyo in the provinces. They could issue directives in the name of the *Aláàfin* [Oyo king] but only on religious matters and related to the Shango devotees—not on royal administrative matters. *Because the Oyo practiced secularism; they did not allow religion to interfere with their administration.* (Emphasis mine; King Adeyemi III, Oyo Town, interview, 17 October 1988)

The king's depoliticization and compartmentalization of "religion" contradicts various anthropological and historical accounts of the Oyo Empire (e.g., Babayemi 1979; Morton-Williams 1964; Biobaku 1952). The fact that the king acknowledges having been initiated in the Shango priesthood as a condition of his rule makes his unconventional historical revision even more ironic. This testimony evidently reflects an effort to legitimize the Oyo kingship in the light of the republican conceptions that orient Nigerian national statecraft. More concretely, it reflects the reality that the Shango priesthood has been progressively marginalized in the Oyo kingship.

Consequently, the Shango priesthood has become a center in its own right, having gained a high degree of autonomy from the Oyo palace and the local chiefly houses. Although King Adeyemi III believes that prospective Shango possession priests from Oyo North must go to the Oyo capital for their initiations, Oyo North possession priests have assured me that they did not go there and do not have to do so. The palace has lapsed as the ritual center of the Shango priesthood, and the interests of the palace have ceased to guide the priesthood's conduct. The hereditary chiefs of Oyo North—who are now all male and mostly Muslim and Christian—demonstrate a will to “secularism” much like that of King Adeyemi, although their coronations, too, link them inextricably to the gods of their respective dynasties.

Such “secularism,” like its American counterpart, is sometimes zealous and imprecisely aware of its religious content (see Bellah 1968:14). The courtroom narratives of Igboho's history emerge in the fora of republican justice and negotiate the diverse political interests of Muslim and Christian men. Yet, the signs invoked in defense of those interests seem distant from any secular objectives. The links they draw among gender, history, and political hierarchy are well precedented and, nowadays, are most plainly manifest elsewhere. Elaborately invoking many of the same signs and historical sources, the rituals of women and male transvestite priests in Oyo North dramatize a politicoreligious order from which modern male chiefs and kings have tried to dissociate themselves.

As a form of personal and political assertion, the possession religions have fallen increasingly under the control of women and untitled rural men whose predecessors had been recruited as palace functionaries. The royal possession religion now represents an *alternative* historical vision and power base for the disenfranchised. It emblemizes the village sanctuary even for powerful emigres, conscious as they are of the ultimate insecurity of their status in the city and the national macrosystem (see Matory, in press b). Ritual and verbal claims about history wrought by the possession religions legitimize their own presence and authority in the collective life of the “village.”

The processes of labor and trade migration, particularly among younger men in Igboho, accelerated during the oil boom of the 1970s and early 1980s. So did the marginalization of rural dwellers. For the women left behind, and especially those without an independent trade, the Shango cult was the most powerful image of an empire and of patrilineages no longer administratively present but emblematic, for many rural wives, of health, fertility, and familial order. Once administrative organs of the sovereign state, the possession cults have become *de facto* foci of rural women's organization and fertilization, in all its polysemic dimensions. If

their migrant husbands cannot “fertilize” them, young brides hope that the children Shango gives with his healing touch will someday support their financial liberation from both husbands and fathers. Besides offering healing from barrenness, affliction, and dependency, initiation in the possession religions affirms women's power and centrality in their own and other people's lives as well as their worth as active arbiters of the society's supreme moral values. In marked contrast to local Islam, Shango-worship valorizes women's mobility and *de facto* authority in sociopolitical arrangements that—in Oyo North—increasingly deny women's potentials beyond servitude and troublemaking.

Each generation of adherents to the Near Eastern religions brings more vocal condemnation of the “*kẹ̀fẹ̀rẹ̀*,” especially from young and unmarried Muslim men.³ On the other hand, Muslim and Christian husbands, fathers, and mothers-in-law show considerable tolerance for Muslim and Christian women's involvement with the *òrìṣà*. Evangelical piety could hardly nullify the Oyo-Yoruba adoration of uterine fertility. Muslim and Christian husbands would sooner divorce a barren woman than one who “worships sticks and palm trees” (*abogilòpẹ̀*). Hence, the relations of supplication, submission, and healing—the “cone of authority”—of the *òrìṣà* in Oyo North increasingly cut across kin groups and public religious identities. *Òrìṣà* worship promises salvation to those local communities that rely on birth for their reproduction and challenges the monopoly of the state medical establishment in satisfying this paramount popular demand. In the process of their indigenization and popularization, the Near Eastern religions, too, have had to find ways of assuming and fulfilling this promise. The Shango cult, though, more than any other, links that fulfillment to a familiar and encompassing political order, to whose history Igboho itself is a monument.

Women and Their Shango

In Oyo North, women's access to public fora for their verbal self-expression is severely limited by their exclusion from chieftaincies, from the town improvement society, and from local government councils. Other opportunities for leadership and for women's collective self-expression are scarce. Igboho differs from the southern Yoruba metropolises in lacking a vocal market women's association. Igboho's Baptist churches show no signs of the emergence of the Christian chieftaincy titles for women that have developed among the Egba-Yoruba, for example, to the south. Women are featured visibly but silently among the elders on the pulpit in the services of the Cherubim and Seraphim “spiritual” church in Igboho. On Islamic holidays, some unmarried Muslim girls parade and sing with the mostly

male Young Muslims' League in the town, whereas adult Muslim women, as such, participate in no such gatherings.

For women of various religious convictions, occasions celebrating family gods and ancestors, therefore, furnish an unparalleled opportunity. The rites of the god Shango include both the recitation of descriptive poetry (*oriki*) and the even more articulate dramas of initiation, possession, and blood sacrifice. The metaphors projected in these multimedia extravaganza etched into the local consciousness a vivid and historically based sense of women's extant powers and possibilities. Yet, for us, the constituting visual, tactile, and verbal signs of possession ritual can yield their meanings only through close intertextual readings.

Shango's poetry, called specifically *Ẓàngó pipè*, is composed and sung by women priests, whose memory and apperception, therefore, become a public resource and reference. This poetry identifies Shango unmistakably with Oyo and its royalty; he is called the "King of Koso," the site of the king's main Shango shrine in the Oyo capital. Koso is also the name of a quarter of Igbobo, where the dynasty left a local family to care for the Shango shrine it left behind. The mere fact of singing hyperbolic praises to the god/king asserts the value of a history that the Muslim hierarchy in this predominately Muslim region would suppress if it could. The women's poetry presents its own revision of local religious history, describing Shango as an errant Muslim, identifying him with the power of Muslims in the region and, at the same time, ridiculing Islam with allusions to Shango's blatant violation of Islamic law (see Matory, in press b). These mythic attributes suggest the religiously plural context of Shango worship and its incorporative nature as a pursuit of power.

Indeed, Shango worship embodies at its foundation both a mythic conception, a technology, and a strategy for bringing foreign power into kings and their agents. Oyo's military successes through the monopoly importation of horses from the Muslim North and the prosperity Oyo achieved through taxing the north-south trade are among its prototypical accomplishments.⁴ It follows that many of the *òrìṣà* themselves are identified with origins in powerful political and religious centers in the North and the Near East. Odudua, an *òrìṣà* and the first Yoruba king, came from either Mecca or heaven (*grun*), depending on the tale. The Nupe Shango is the one who brings his own foreign and celestial power into the heads of his "brides" and "mounts."

The language and conduct of spirit possession, as well as the iconography of *òrìṣà* shrines, encode a conception of power, agency, and history deeply rooted in a shared Oyo-Yoruba past. Hence, although it is articulated most elaborately in the *òrìṣà* cults, it is the shared patrimony of Yoruba Muslims and Christians as well. First, as we have seen, the con-

cept of "mounting" (*gígún*)—which likens the priest to a royal charger and to a royal wife—also makes the possessed priest the most dramatic and visually evocative image of a past sexual-political order with which Igboho's oral historians and lawyers unfavorably compare every subsequent era. Equally evocative, pots and calabashes are used to incite the action of god upon priest, to call the past sexual-political order into contemporary action. For example, vessels filled with river water are placed on the heads of priestesses of water goddesses, like Yemọja (the goddess of the River Ògùn) in order to induce possession. Since Shango is the god of fire and lightning, a vessel containing burning coals may be placed on the head of his medium.

Indeed, heads generally are compared to pots and calabashes. Mythically, people's heads are said to have been made in heaven by the divine potter *Ayálá*.⁵ The word for "skull" in Yoruba (*akotorí*) compares it to a calabash known as *koto*, the same kind that regularly represents Yemọja in Oyo North shrines and contained the Abeokuta commandant's war medicine, according to the misogynistic cautionary tale discussed above. In shrines, calabashes and pots are permanently filled with items iconic of the god—like cowries, conch shells, river stones, and "thunder axes" (*ẹdùn àrú*).⁶ In Igbobo, most of these shrines are arranged and maintained by women.

Òrìṣà shrines are regarded by many as important repositories of dynastic power. Hence, we may read the variation in their iconic figuration as a sort of sacred dialogue concerning relations of power. For example, the presence and form of the imperial god Shango in the shrines of Onigboho House—whose claims of supremacy are undermined by Oyo imperialism—are suggestive. Yemọja is the tutelary goddess of Onigboho House. With a precedented mythic rationale, her shrines incorporate Shango's power, while apparently stripping it of the imperialist pretenses encoded in the foremost Shango shrines.

In Shango shrines, the icons of that god's power usually rest atop another type of container—the mortar. When spoken, the word for "mortar," *odó*, can also mean "You fuck." The visual/verbal pun suggests Shango's brashness and the force implicit in his relations to the world. His "brides" are also the objects of that force; they sit on the mortar in order to be "mounted" for the first time. The normal action of the pestle (*qmq odó*) in the mortar suggests the phallic character of Shango's penetration of the "bride." Reinforcing the parallel, an apparent pun likens the action of the pestle to that of the god: the pestle "pounds" (*gún*) and the god "mounts" (*gún*), the two Yoruba words differing only in their tones.⁷

In leading Shango shrines—like those in Koso and Ago Igishubhu Quarters of Igbobo and Koso Quarter of Oyo—Shango's stones sit atop an

inverted mortar or one that is not even hollowed out, suggesting Shango's impenetrability and the notion that the Shango shrine is self-sufficient in power and requires input from no higher source.⁶ Shango is, in imperial principle, the paramount divine ruler: he gives power and orders rather than receiving them.

In less important Shango shrines, like those belonging to individual possession priests of the god, Shango's stones are often found in rightside-up mortars, a symbolic weakening that prefigures Shango's ultimate demotion in Yemọja shrines. Myths identify Shango as the offspring of the river goddess Yemọja, giving rise to various joint shrine arrangements that materialize a variant assertion about the relative authority of the Yemọja-worshipping Onigbobo House and its Shango-worshipping overlords in the Oyo palace. In Yemọja shrines, Shango's rocks and "thunder axes" rest inside simple pots and bowls, lower in height than Yemọja's calabash. This sequence of iconographic transformations suggests both increasing distance from the source of Shango's power and diminishing interest in Shango's autocracy. Indeed, Yemọja priestesses emphatically describe the representations of Shango and the other auxiliary *òrìṣà* in her shrine as the goddess's "children."

The Shango cult is the foremost among several extant possession religions in Igbaho. It hosts annual festivals in nine of the town's quarters. Each of those quarters boasts two or three possession priests (*elégún*) and several nonpossession priests (*núgbà*), who officially head and sponsor the cult in the quarter. The chief priest of the town-wide Shango priesthood is the nonpossession priest entitled Igishubu, who is also the chief of a quarter. He is a professed Muslim, however, and attends none of the private rites as far as I know. He receives perfunctory obeisance from all other Shango priests, but he is neither expert nor active in the priesthood's regular operations.

Not only is the Shango priesthood the most populous, but the amount of time each possession priest devotes regularly to the cult recommends its priesthood as the most professional. Shango priests are present at the public rites and many of the private rites of all other *òrìṣà* possession religions in the town—including those of Orisa Oko (the Farm God) and Yemọja. Indeed, the Shango cult itself has possession priests of Oya (Goddess of Wind, Storm, and the River Niger) and of Yemọja. Shango priests cooperate closely with the sizable cult of the Egungun masquerades as well. In fact, these two groups together dominate the only official organization that embraces all *òrìṣà* worshippers: *Olórìṣà Parapò*, meaning "Union of *Òrìṣà* Worshipers." This group enlists members from all the towns of Oyo North, that is, the core of the former empire. The group appears to be of recent origin—its ecumenism, much like that of local Christian organiza-

tions, being a response to the persistent threat of Muslim aggression. Its titular head is the head of the Shango priesthood.

Though no longer officers of the Oyo imperial state, the Shango priesthood has led in the reconstitution of a supralocal politicoreligious unity. In a very nonsecular sense, the ritual cycle of the Shango cult recapitulates the imperial order. First, since Shango is a deceased king and the apotheosis of Oyo royalty, Shango altars are the most prominent in the palaces of quarter chiefs who rely most on Oyo's authorization—the Alepata and the Aare. Second, the sequence of Shango festivals culminates in the festival of Shango Koso—counterpart to the personal Shango of the Oyo king, called by the same name, in Koso Quarter of the present capital.

The leadership role of the Shango priesthood is not only organizational; it is ideological and exemplary. Shango is the paradigmatic possessing god. The term *gín* (to mount) is associated foremost with him, whereas less emphatic terms like *dé* (to arrive) and *wá ayé* (to come to the world) are sometimes applied to other possessing gods. Shango's festivals are the most popular. Hundreds of children seeking entertainment and as many women seeking the god's healing touch attend every Shango festival in Igbaho. To the peasantry and the bourgeoisie alike, Shango represents an era of Oyo-Yoruba might, an orderly royalist and noncolonial past, and an epoch when kings struck fear in witches, thieves, and other enemies of sexual and political order.

Embedded in this politically charged nostalgia are particular images of gender and health, displayed particularly in the eye-opening persona of Shango's transvestite male brides. Understanding the message of this ritual display relies on establishing the connection between the semiotics of this cross-dressing and the practical concerns that bring these hundreds of mainly Muslim and Christian women to appreciate it. The verbal and material signs of "wifeliness" and "mountedness" are shared by both male and female possession priests. When imposed on male priests, though, we are led to recognize their quality as distillates, as a signified quintessence. For not every metonym of womanhood is applied to the male priest's body.

Several discussions in the anthropological literature have interpreted male cross-dressing in Islamic societies as tropes defining womanhood *by negation*. Wikan (1977), for example, argues that male transvestites in Oman demonstrate, through their inadequacy as women, the qualities that make up proper womanhood. Boddy (1989) observes in Sudan that women's dramatization of male and foreign characters during *zar* possession rites demonstrates, again by a negative example, what qualities must be segregated from the persona of a female to make her a proper local woman. Oyo-Yoruba rituals also declare what women are not: they are not ultimately responsible for their fertility. The agent is structurally male and

penetrating. Certain feminine biological and social attributes, however, are positive prerequisites to the worldly fulfillment of this agency. The male possession priest displays the *selected* feminine qualities that enable a man or a woman to be "fertile" in this sexual and political order, that enable him or her to embody the power of the royal god.

The initiatory biography of the possession priest encodes a process of essentializing the feminine state of "mountedness." New initiands are really the principal referents of the term "bride" (*iyàwò*). This terminology follows the pattern of marriage into the patrilineal house: early in marriage, a wife is addressed simply as "Bride." Once the primary reason for her entering the affinal house is realized, through the birth of children, she remains a "bride" to the house and to all her senior co-wives, but she is far more likely to be addressed with a teknonym—"Mother of [her senior child]."

Reflecting the incompleteness of his "mountedness," the neophyte male initiate of Shango is baldheaded and wears a woman's skirt and blouse during public ceremonies. As he matures, the signs of his femininity devolve upward to the head. Ordinarily, the mature priest wears men's clothing; during ceremonies, his skirts suggest an ancestral masquerade more than they do women's clothing (Gleason 1986). The unmistakable and fixed focus of his "wifely" relation to the god is on his head. Like married women of reproductive age, elder Shango possession priests do not cut their hair; instead, as is also proper for married women, they keep it corn-rowed year-round. Like rural women, they jewel their braided hair with safety pins, apply antimony (*tiròò*) to their eyes, and wear earrings.

The symbolic importance of the head in defining "wifeliness" and "mountedness" takes telling forms in worldly marriage. The defining feature of nuptial rites, which guarantees the legitimacy of any offspring's membership in his father's house, is the payment of *owó orí iyàwò*—"money for the bride's head." Hence, the reproduction of the patrilineal house relies explicitly on the appropriation of the heads of its genetrixes. The Oyo-Yoruba believe in a personal or ancestral spirit (*orí inú*—the inner head) that, once invested in the physical head (*orí òde*—the outer head), makes its bearer socially, physically, and mentally competent. Initiation in the possession religions invests another spirit in one's physical head; more or less permanently, that spirit rivals the personal or ancestral spirit for control of one's personal and lineal identity, one's body, one's consciousness, and the proceeds of one's production and reproduction—on all of which the natal or affinal house ordinarily stakes a preeminent claim.

The extensive treatments to which the heads of priests—not to mention religious supplicants, brides, and kings—are submitted appear to be acts of displacement and dispossession. For example, recruitment to the

Shango priesthood is often coercive, taking place against the will of the prospective priest's family. Priests refuse to bury a deceased priest until his or her chagrined relatives produce a replacement. The natal house—which is usually predominantly Christian and Muslim—must cede personnel and control over that personnel to the Shango priesthood. Like the family of a king, the possession priest's family loses the right to bury the priest—a fact strongly suggesting the priority of the priest's membership in the cult over his or her membership in the natal or affinal house. The requirements of kingship include some even more extreme parallels. In the past, upon installation, kings lost possession and hereditary rights over their houses and land. In Oyo, the ascending king even lost his affectively closest relative—his mother. She was killed as a condition of his installation. Whatever property the king acquired while on the throne would go not to members of his natal family but to his successor on the throne (Lloyd 1960:228; Johnson 1921:63). To varying degrees, manipulations of the heads of kings, brides, supplicants, and priests remove them from the authority of the kin group, potentiating both their liberation from one institution and their servitude to another.

The Shango initiation "makes an *òrìṣà*" (*ṣe òrìṣà*) in the neophyte's head. Secret rites include the shaving of the initiate's head, the planting of mystical substances there, and the feeding of the new *òrìṣà* in the priest with copious quantities of animal blood applied to the scalp. By circulating banknotes around the initiate's head, priests conducting initiations even mime the payment of bridewealth in order to claim the cult's legitimate control over the neophyte and his or her fertility. Possession rites that entail placing filled pots and calabashes on the priest's head mime the outcome of this ritual assertion: the filling, appropriation, and domination of the priest by a structurally male and alien power—in short, "mounting." This is not to imply that power in the palace always works in a top-down fashion. Rather, it implies that even acts of subversion by delegates and loyalists of the palace are configured ideologically in these terms.⁹ Priests and especially supplicants of Shango are engaged in acts of submission, but they are acts with a potential reward of liberation from threats and exploitation outside Shango's "cone of authority."

The stereotypic desideratum of supplicants, as well as the efficacy of this hierarchy and technology of "mounting," is advertised not only in priestly clothing but in Shango shrine sculpture. Initiands, male and female, wear *qjá*, the sling used to bind an infant child to his mother's back.¹⁰ The most common stereotype in Shango votary sculpture is a kneeling woman bearing (1) a child on her back and (2) either a vessel in her hands, a vessel on her head, or Shango's "thunder axe" embedded in her head. Her hair, like that of worldly brides and Shango priests, is usually elaborately braided. Her posture signifies both submission and birth: the female

gesture of submission to superiors and the delivery of a child are both called *ikúnlẹ̀*, or kneeling." The *òrìṣà* festival, which includes the possession rites, may also be called *ikúnlẹ̀*. Thus, the human and the wooden icons of Sango's worldly presence condense images of consummated "wifeliness" upon the head and connect cerebral "mountedness" causally to women's uterine fertility.

Mounted Men: The Politics of Fertility

Personal and lineal reproduction among the Oyo Yoruba are not simply genital and uterine processes. They are religious, historical, and political. Just as "mounting" entails inextricable references beyond sexual penetration, the concept of fertility entails inextricable references beyond uterine health. When rural female supplicants face the manifest king of an ancient empire and kneel so that he might touch their heads, they themselves become icons and agents of an ancient politicoreligious order. Their intense desire for children and related desiderata leads them to endorse and reenact an imperial order whose worldly power is increasingly focused not only on rural female capacities but on their aspirations and interests as well. If, in this imperial order, wives were once mainly instruments and functionaries of kings, it is now all the more clear that they are managers and beneficiaries of the *òrìṣà*'s powers.

By what logic does the touch of a transvestite empower a woman to bear and rear good children? On the one hand, he concentrates within himself the feminine feature associated with proper social reproduction—a properly controlled "head" (*orí*). Though that reproduction finds its most prominent instance in childbearing, the reproduction of the Union of *Orìṣà* Worshipers, of the Shango priesthood, and of an empowering vision of history equally manifest the fertility wrought by the *òrìṣà*, even against the forceful resistance of Islam, Christianity, and a "secularism" afforded by new sources of power in the merchant capitalist state. Igboho's royalist symbolic order codifies the reign of these nonroyalist forces in the same terms as barrenness. Hence, the healing wrought by Shango's modern brides concerns the postpartum world of mother and child as well. A child made possible by Shango belongs to Shango; the child is born into a world and into a ritual practice conducive to his own and his mother's prosperity and to safety from the malevolence of witches and thieves, big and small.

Hence, a woman's submission to this order of fecundity is also an acquiescence to a historical vision and a plea for a specific modern politico-religious order. That order explicitly classifies proper female authority as wifely—renouncing, as a source of illness and infertility, the female powers that function independently of marriage, "mounting," and the royalist hierarchy—namely, witchcraft (*àjẹ*), which is commonly associated with the

market. Shango rites declare a legitimate order of female authority by direct reference to the hegemonic prototype of political order and legitimacy in Oyo North—the Oyo Empire. This form of rural women's and transvestite men's resistance to their modern disenfranchisement is, to adapt Fernandez's (1982) felicitous phrase, an "argument of historical images."

Unmounted Women: Infertility and Political Chaos

In modern Oyo North, uterine fertility is a moral, economic, and political issue. It is the sine qua non of the survival of the "house" and the parents' posthumous reincarnation, the foremost index of social wealth, and a major determinant of a parent's status within the patrilineal house and in the town. Certain vivid ritual idioms promising to restore a threatened fertility and its analogs, as noted above, are linked closely in the shared historical memory of the Oyo Yoruba to royalist political formations. Those idioms, therefore, potentiate both an escape from and a critical vision of the current hegemony. They also inform frightening alternative modes of action in the postimperial metropolis.

The ritual and mythic critique of the contemporary order illustrates itself in images of female infertility and antifertility. The alleged antiprimitive and antisocial malevolence of some women finds one precedent in the image of the female market chiefs of the last century—the *Iyalode*. In the late twentieth century, market women attract greater suspicion and opprobrium than any other visible group of men or women in Nigeria. Although it is easy to find men and women who will testify to their mothers' generosity and its source in the market, most Yoruba are equally quick to blame market women in general for an unlikely range of social ills. For example, in the late 1980s women traders took the blame for the spiraling inflation and market shortages created by years of federal mismanagement, the ebb of oil wealth, and the government's efforts to secure IMF loans.

In some respects, witches (*àjẹ*) seem the nocturnal personae of market women. When they gather in conference, it is in the market. They fly about at night in the form of birds, devouring children in the womb and draining blood from their victims. Much lore attributes these women's evil powers to the pots and calabashes they keep (see Morton-Williams 1956: 318ff). Detractors of the postcolonial "big men" allege that these nonroyal businessmen and politicians have women with pots behind them—implicitly witches—guiding their greedy acquisition and providing the mystical means of their enemies' undoing. In tabloid comics, their diurnal personae are enormously fat women who stand alongside overfed men in flowing *agbádá* gowns. The *Alágbádá*—"Wearers of *Agbádá*"—are the stereotypical embezzlers of government funds and receivers of kickbacks. Thus,

modern political changes have generated new images of gender and recontextualized old ones.

Women have been all but invisible in both the military and the civilian regimes of postcolonial government. Although Yoruba women have the vote, elected and appointed government councils, judicial benches, and legislatures are invariably overwhelmingly male in their membership. Women are a minority in the civil service as well. The richest and most influential women, stereotypically, are those who secure government contracts by sleeping with well-placed men. Though, like "mounting," it is cast in a sexual idiom, modern women's so-called "bottom power" is fleeting; it has the longevity of a well-placed man's desire, and it elicits little more respect than prostitution. It is barren sexuality.

The paradigmatic vessels of power under the Oyo Empire, women are less and less recognized for any potential to hold legitimate power in the twentieth-century bourgeois state. Where women's normatively authorized options for achievement have diminished, accomplished women may be classified as men. In small towns, one might hear a woman driver praised as *obinrin bi ẹkúrín* (a woman like a man)! A ranking priestess in Igbóho distinguished herself from the subordinate priestesses of the goddess Yemoja by saying, "I am the warrior; they are the brides" (*Èmí nì jẹgun; àwọn nì iyawó*). In the former national capital, Lagos, a vastly wealthy market woman once summarized for me the significance of her accomplishment. She declared simply, *Ọkúrín nì mí* (I am a man)!

Neither where the ritual idiom of "mounting" is marginalized in royalist institutions nor when royalism in general is devalued does that idiom necessarily become obsolete. The bourgeois condemns erratic or imperious behavior by asking, *Kí ló n gùn ọ?* (What is mounting you?) He or she might suggest that the money of the overbearing rich man is mounting him, or that the beauty of the harlot is mounting her. Insofar as "mounting" still represents proper sociopolitical order in the urban context, it is reputedly under the constant and immediate threat of women's self-interested disloyalty. The core of the urban migrant family—partially detached as it is from the rural house—is the conjugal pair. Popular conversation and the urban press detail the effects of a "medicine" called *Mágún*, meaning "Don't mount." Once a suspicious man fixes it on his wife or girlfriend, any other man who penetrates her will die. On the other hand, if she proves innocent of the suspected betrayal, she herself will die. In the urban world, "mounting" is fraught with sometimes curious and sometimes frightening potentials.

The highly popular independent African churches cultivate rites akin to "mounting." Here, prophets under possession by the Holy Spirit protect supplicants from witches, heal them from disease, and enable them to bear children. Like the Shango cult, these churches confront the most

prominent worshippers with the question of who owns their persons and who controls their consciousness—themselves, or a supernal being? Yet, all these processes of shifting identity, consciousness, and control recognize the integrity of the human vessel, the irreducible humanity of the "bride" or "mount" in the execution of social re-design.

Somewhere between the glorification of female fertility and the vilification or exclusion of women lies a ritual complex, reported by respected Nigerian newspapers and television stations, in which women are murdered and their excised vulvas, breasts, and heads are used in money-making magic (*lùkúdi* and *ẹdà*). One instance occurred in Igbóho, between 1969 and 1970. In such rites, as in marriage and the possession religions, those female body parts likened in *òrìṣà* liturgy and iconography to pots and associated with fertility are used by ritual entrepreneurs as instruments of power. In the present case, however, those parts—breasts, "lower parts," and head—are regarded as alienable. An alternative technology requires the juxtaposition of the victim's head with a calabash, much as Yemoja possession ritual does. Hypnotized people, typically children, have calabashes containing special soap put on their heads. When the descriptive poetry (*oríkì*) of money or of the victim is spoken, money comes out of the calabash or the victims' mouth. When the victim dies, the body must be kept indefinitely. Some rural people believe these atrocities to be common among urban elites—"the rich Alhajis, Alhajiyas, and ministers," whose mansions are full of bodies.

Like labor, women's body parts and families appear to be alienable in the distant logic of capitalist exchange and accumulation—whose nefarious forms are particularly identified with Islam, the federal government, and the magical production of money. Unlike those who have exploited marriage and spirit possession for their own empowerment, the *gbòmgbòm* (kidnappers) can get power and wealth without acquiring a living dependent. Like marriage and *idòṣù* initiation, the rituals of the *gbòmgbòm* transfer the productive ownership of a person's head from one social group to another.

Women's bodies above all are metonyms of the social relations they produce through marriage, procreation, and nurture; they are also metaphors of the integrity of the social body. Their physical dismemberment and the kidnapping of their children are homologous images of an ambiguous social process. The state's protection of individual rights, including liberal divorce legislation, and the commodification of labor undermine the hierarchical and collectivist premises of Oyo-Yoruba royalism. Yet, urban ethnic pluralism, widening income gaps, and rising urban crime rates in the postcolonial age reinforce royalist nostalgia. The values inherent in Western economic individualism and the right (or obligation) of individuals to sell their labor are at odds with the ideology of "mounting," which

nullifies individual identity and responsibility. For the critics of modern Nigerian capitalism and individualism, the *ikúdí* victim is proof of the villainy of the new ideology, of its alienating and both socially and bodily divisive effects. For the opponents of royalism, the proverbial fury of the possessed Shango priest is an equally frightening apparition.

Conclusion

Prominent among the shared themes of men's political histories and the rites of the possession religions in Igboho are gender transformation, marriage, equestrianism, the filling of vessels, and the manipulation of heads—all depicted as conditions of or means to extraordinary politicoreligious power (*àṣẹ*). These motifs offer a view of the conditions and efficacious strategies of Oyo royal sovereignty. Such strategies faced identifiable opposition during the nineteenth-century reign of Ibadan, the early twentieth-century reign of Great Britain, and the late twentieth-century reign of Nigerian soldiers and businessmen. In both the oral histories and the rituals of Igboho, a wide range of political and moral trends, moments of royalist supremacy and resistance, have been interpreted and manipulated through the idiom of "mounting."

The hegemonic forms of the Oyo Empire have come to articulate a new configuration of interests—largely female and marginal to the mercantile capitalist state. The tropes of "mounting" have contributed a liberating apperception and technology to rural counterassertions. Yet, the gravity of the empire and its village altars extends to the metropolis as well. These metaphoric modes of thought and action structure city people's sense of belonging in and alienation from their native villages, rural and proletarian critiques of politicians and the comprador bourgeoisie, unscrupulous entrepreneurs' magical pursuit of wealth, and rural women's efforts to achieve fertility, in its broadest sense. No less than the narrative recitations that charter Igboho men's political claims, local women's rituals of spirit possession assert a theory of history and political order. Indeed, they dramatize that theory in a play of seduction: credulity entails the promise of penetration and fecundation by the most virile of lords.

Notes

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1. See, e.g., "Report to Support Recommendations for a Subordinate Native Authority and a Sub-Treasury for the Village Areas of Igboho, Kishi and Igbeṭti."

- p. 4, in Oyo Prof II, file 4162, undated (printed between 1940 and 1944). National Archives, Ibadan (Nigeria).
2. While recent etymologies of the word *ilárí* vary, Johnson's nineteenth-century account of the etymology presumably given in the palace specifies that the male *ilárí* were the "keepers of [the king's] head," translatable as *i l'ori* (Johnson 1921:62). This apparent folk etymology interpolates the same grammatical formula that is used to identify Shango possession priests as "keepers [or owners] of Shango"—*Onísàngó*. *Oní-* and *ilí-* are variants on the same inflectional particle. See Babayemi (1979:56–64) on Abiodun's revolution.
3. *Kùfèrì* comes from the Arabic *kafir*, meaning "infidel."
4. Oyo was an intermediary in the trade in natron, swords and knives, leather, beads, unwrought silk, and Saharan salt from the north, as well as kola nuts, pepper, cloth, and salt from the south (Smith 1988:38).
5. He is praised as *Ajálá alámq tó mq orí* (Ajala, the Potter Who Mold Heads) and *Ajálá Amùnkòkò* (Ajala, Molder of Pots).
6. Even gifts from pilgrims to Mecca—a cowry necklace in one case—make it into *òrìṣà* altars. As proof of access to goods from distant places, these are representations par excellence of power in both the Oyo kingdom and the present mercantile state.
7. In quotidian situations, a woman sitting on an upright mortar might provoke Shango's unwelcomed penetration—that is, the striking of the woman by lightning, which is conceived of as penetration by a "thunder axe." Hence, women are cautioned against sitting on mortars during rainstorms.
8. These shrines belong to the nonpossession priests (*múgbà*), who are the official heads of the cult and who are responsible for initiating possession priests.
9. E.g., the sacred poetry Yemoja priests chant to the chief of Onigbobo House suggest that he, too, is subject to "mounting" and that his own will is subject to limits (see Matory 1991:343–44).
10. Even senior possession priestesses beyond childbearing age do so in other possession cults, like that of Yemoja.

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