

The University of Chicago

VESSELS OF POWER:

The Dialectical Symbolism of Power
in Yoruba Religion and Polity

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SECTION I: INTRODUCTION

An introduction to the religion of the West African Yoruba must first address the symbolic processes persistently informing a diverse tradition. Yet, the peculiarities of each cult, temple, and individual worshiper must remain key issues in our analytic view. Not only do they illustrate the conditions of variation, but they are interesting in themselves. My effort reflects the influence of the Saussurean distinction between langue and parole, although I reject the reification of the langue. The creativity and diversity of Yoruba cultural discourse are not readily reduced to rules. Much less can its principle statements be said to derive from such rules. Alternatively, I postulate that by considering a range of tendencies among the most prevalent statements in that discourse we can better comprehend an argument, a coronation, or an offering. Therefore, the purpose of this analysis is to observe and characterize tendencies common to worship and other culturally marked endeavors in Yoruba society and, thereby, to appreciate better their particular instances.

I will argue that the terms of power creation, incorporation, and management dominant in the cults of the orisa (or "divinities") condense the representation of human agency in Yoruba culture generally. Section V of this essay will consider in depth a particular dynamic instance in

Yoruba people's discourse on and appropriation of power--the mythic cycle of Yemoja, goddess of the waters. Section VI will demonstrate the imbeddedness of material culture as well in a ongoing discourse whose religious quality cannot be overlooked.

This essay is informed by my own fieldwork, from 1982 to 1983, concerning regional variation in the cults of four specific orisa, or divinities--Yemoja, Sonponnon, Ogun, and Olookun, all of whom are worshiped in the New World as well. I am indebted also to an extensive literature of diverse quality--in comparative religion, history, art history, and anthropology. The cult of Yemoja will furnish the principal illustrative case in this analysis. I interviewed, recorded sacred oral texts, and observed ritual among Yemoja priests in four towns and cities--Igboho, Sepeteri (near Saki), Ibadan, and Abeokuta. Thus, I present data from Oyo and Egba subgroups, in which the worship of this goddess is currently strongest. Interviews with the priests always entailed contact with the reigning oba, or kings, who often hosted the meetings. Even when they simply authorized and arranged the meetings, they were anxious to share with me their understanding of Yoruba history and their own knowledge of the orisa cults. Moreover, because the cults are closely connected to the kingship, I learned a good deal about particular royal histories and state ritual as well. Among the enormous number of orisa in Yorubaland, most are

worshiped in but a single locality, and many of them by a single kin group. But all the divinities I have researched are well-known and widespread. Indeed, the cult of Yemoja, goddess of the waters and, by some accounts, mother to all the gods, is one of the ten largest cults in Yorubaland--where the cults undoubtedly number far more than the traditionally estimated 401--and is certainly the largest among the tens of millions of worshipers in Brazil, Cuba, Puerto Rico, and the United States. That Yemoja represents the common denominator among these diverse experiences may bespeak her detailed fidelity to none; yet, the number of diverging mythic, ritual, and exegetical elaborations on the cult makes her an excellent test case for the assessment of motive forces in the development of an African world religion. For reasons of technical manageability and the geographical bounds of my own fieldwork, I limit this thesis to the analysis of the Nigerian evidence.

The focii of this analysis are a key icon and a key event in the relation between most orisa and their worshipers. The earthenware shrine pot and the ritual act of spirit possession are the densest symbols of the more general "containment" of power in Yoruba society. By the term "icon" I indeed describe some pots that represent the conventionalized anthropomorphic figures of orisa and their worshipers. However, because many of these pots are quite non-figural and because many of the densest representations in Yoruba religion allude to processes rather than

personalities, I shall demonstrate the utility of a more embracing definition of the term than that prevailing in discussions of Western religious symbolism.

The kinship idiom of the people's descent from the gods, like that of the king's fatherhood of his people, has long been a focal point in the study of African theories of polity and religion. But as the most intensely emotional, clearly ritualized, and epiphanal moment in Yoruba collective worship, icons and acts of spirit possession represent not only an instance but a metaphor of a more embracing set of human relations in Yoruba polity--those relations constituting and regulating the circulation of power. In fact, Yoruba concepts of reincarnation and the soul implicitly recommend possession as the model of even descent relations. I will discuss these and the similar patterns arising in kingship and residential proxemics. Thus, the ritual process of possession alludes to an infinitely varied hierarchy of relations of encompassment, all of which are fundamentally transformative.

To the Yoruba, Olodumare (God) is the ultimate source of all events, including creation and inertia. Known also as Olorun, or Lord of the Sky, is power itself, abstracted from its particular human purposes and from its natural manifestations (see Verger 1966). To govern particular phases of the world, Olodumare has created the orisa, or divinities, who receive all their power from him (Babayemi 1982: 8). Therefore, people traditionally build shrines not

to Olodumare but to the orisa. Within the shrines, worshipers further particularize and concretize divine power as they deposit it ritually in earthenware pots or calabashes, each containing the distinctive symbols of a god and the cells of his power. Priests "feed" those objects sacrificially in order to enhance the power of the orisa they venerate and to enlist the orisa's power on the worshipers' behalf.

Within the orisa cults, the entry of a supernal¹ spirit into an earthly priest is known by the verb gun, meaning "to possess." In its varied usages, it implies a dynamic structural opposition between male and female, foreign and autochthonous, supernal and chthonic, contents and vessel, royal and plebeian. In the kingship, the lineage, the residence, the market, and the cult, these oppositions arise repeatedly in individual and group efforts at self-construction and self-empowerment. The divine cosmogony, as well as the existence, survival, and suzerainty of individuals and of groups, are predicated on the processual mediation of these oppositions. The key source of dynamism in the system is that oppositions are never entirely or permanently mediated. Agents choose continually the partners, occasions, and goals of such mediations. In turn, the mutual choice of the agents so united constitutes a new agency and simultaneously affirms the power of each agent distinctly.

The characteristic representations of such strategic conjunctions of opposites include both material and culturally marked actions--not only vessels of various sorts (oru ("pot"), a'wo ("bowl"), and igba ("calabash")) but substantialized power (ase), the head (ori), and the horseman (alesin, or elegun). . Ase is a concept fundamental to Yoruba thought. It has been defined variously as "power, authority, command (Abraham 1962: 71), "a coming to pass... effect; imprecation " (Crowther 1852: 47, quoted in Drewal and Drewal 1983: 5), and "the power to bring things into existence" (Drewal and Drewal 1983: 5). Ase is the potential power and efficacy present in all things. It is in the blood of sacrificial animals, in the plants and in the earth where they grow. It is the energy causing inertia and movement in rocks, hills, streams, mountains, sculpture, kings, ancestors, gods, their consecrated emblems, and utterances--prayers, songs, curses, and even everyday speech (Verger 1966: 37-8). Ase is power itself, the manipulation of whose cycling through the cosmos constitutes cosmogony, empire, kingship, kinship, and all accumulation of power, wealth, and prosperity (collectively called alafia). Its repositories vary synchronically and diachronically. Next, ori refers to the human head; the ancestral spirit that informs it; the reified form of one's intelligence, luck, and knowledge; the ruler of a social group; and the top of any vertical structure. The term also combines images suggesting the head's command of things

lower, and surrounding, with those suggesting its submission to and containment of things higher and surrounded. Next, the elesin or elegun is a potent and omnipresent representation of hegemony in Yoruba polity, worship, and architecture. In conquest and administration, the mightiest ^{king's} emperors relied heavily on their cavalries. Likewise, the possession priests on whom the orisa depend for their worldly realization and power are known as "horses" of the gods in many cults. Effigies of men on horseback occur in elite architecture and in most orisa cults, where they present in condensed form the chief mediations constituting power and possession. (see Illustrations I and II).

Finally, the image of the vessel is widespread in Yoruba historiography, mythology, marital relations, and state and cult ritual. Calabashes and earthenware pots are the vessels used to contain, feed, and manipulate relatively supernal, male, foreign, and ancestral forces. In the shrines, pots are used to house and feed the orisa (see Illustrations IV, V, IX, and X). During rituals of worship, the filling of calabashes and pots evokes and replicates the entry of the orisa into the priest's head, which is in some myths explicitly likened to a pot. On the sacred effigy shown in Illustration XXV, a bowl replaces the head of a woman. The representation of an orisa worshiper is more often a woman holding a bowl containing offerings to the god. She may also be pregnant, surrounded by children, and suckling (see Illustrations III, IV, V, IX, XI, and XII). I

will argue, like the head, that the womb and the breast in Yoruba symbolism are understood as vessels with qualities suited to the containment and regulation of relatively male agency.

I will argue that, in keeping with the polysemic qualities of all potent emblems, the imagery of vessels is associated also with secrecy, as well as the protection and monopolization of power, central themes throughout ancient Yoruba culture. As I shall demonstrate, the ritual of the kingship suggests the sovereign's likeness to a pot, in that he incorporates and traditionally monopolizes key foreign and supernal (i.e., sky-related) forces within his domain and is fed by his relatively domestic and chthonic constituency. Moreover, the heads of his subordinates in the palace hierarchy are often prepared as vessels of ~~the~~ his own authority, after the manner of the same preparations performed on the heads of possession priests.

Chthonic forces, like witches and Earth herself, are also compared to vessels; they variously consume, protect, and surround beings structurally more male, supernal, and foreign beings. The macrocosm of the kingdom, the world (aiye) is described as a covered calabash and is thus the macrocosmic vessel of divine force in general. I will demonstrate that, although the agency of chthonic forces and that of supernal forces are often given distinct normative values, they enact complementary roles in the same idiom.

In cult mythology, the departure or unleashing of power frequently occurs symbolically in the spilling or bursting of pots, just as its deposition and regulation occur in the filling of pots. Similarly, in the cycle of human birth and rebirth, the proper functioning of kinship occurs in the filling by ancestors of the pots that are their descendants' heads. Conversely, the destination of evil-doing ancestral spirits is, suggestively, orun apadi, or the heaven of potsherds. While the myths and rites constituting Yoruba polity and kinship allude repeatedly to the imagery of the vessel, that imagery--like the concept of possession--will receive its most explicit treatment in the cults of the orisa. By reviewing first the occurrence of possession and of vessel imagery in the state and family, I hope to demonstrate the significance of these symbolic constructions in the broadest social context. Then, in Section IV, I can faithfully treat its densest context. Sections V and VI, finally, assess the implications of the latter for a changing Yoruba polity and lifestyle.

I intend first to demonstrate the inadequacy of certain earlier descriptions of Yoruba religion to describe as historically and regionally diverse an ethnic category as the Yoruba and, second, to propose an alternate view of the religion as a dialectical conceptual idiom, permitting us to assess its role in varied contexts of Yoruba action. The dynamic imagery of penetration and incorporation that informs Yoruba historiography, genealogy, architecture, and

theology. Thus, it both informs Yoruba practice continuously and changes with historical circumstance. Therefore, my intents are but heuristic as I apply a synchronic model to the analysis of political authority, kinship, descent ideology, and worship under the Oyo Empire. Then, following my major intent, I will demonstrate the operation of an idiom of religious experience in historical change. In conclusion, I will consider the conditions and symbolic dimensions of their historical transformation.

SECTION II: A PHENOMENOLOGY OF WORSHIP AND THE INADEQUACY OF THE "PANTHEON" MODELS

In Divinity and Experience, Godfrey Lienhardt sheds light on the subject/object relation in Dinka culture. While the prevailing Western notions of human agency render absurd the personification and deification of supra-individual forces, the Dinka represent a whole range of experiences, or passiones, in the image of spirit beings. The role of the human being in the Yoruba representation of experience is quite opposite the passivity that Lienhardt attributes to the Dinka human being. Yet, I share with Lienhardt the intention is to describe the aspects of Yoruba social experience symbolized in in spirit beings and to illustrate the gods' likeness to a range of authority figures regulating and constituting personal action in everyday life. Therefore, we also share the assumption that the subject of experience is not self-constituted or even individually constituted. All agency is constituted by a collective negotiation among forces and beings.

From this phenomenological perspective, I reject the efforts of Mbiti and other Christian scholars of African traditional religion to render the African cosmos as a chain of being similar to European scholastic constructions. Students of Yoruba religion Awolalu and Idowu, for example, first marshall geographically far-flung details of orisa myth and ritual. Yet, divergences among locales and believers are ignored. INstances of Yoruba worship are cast

against the backdrop of an a priori cosmological hierarchy. This convention of Christian scholarship places the Yoruba's various spiritual beings in a hierarchy: at the top is the High God Olorun, or Olodumare, who lacks a cult; next in rank are the orisa, children or deputies to Olorun and apical ancestors to mankind; then come genealogical ancestors and, last, minor ghosts, tree spirits, fairies, and so on. Men stand below the ancestors, but, like the ancestors, they form their own hierarchy, equally predicated on spiritual values. The king, who is senior in human ancestry and therefore nearest to the gods, stands above other men, and men stand above women. This hierarchical model, more or less developed, appears in the work of Crowther (1852), Bowen (1857--Burton's original), Burton (1863), Baudin (1884), Ellis (1894), Frobenius (1913), Talbot (1926), Epega (1931), Bascom (1944), and Idowu (1963). Indeed the Near-Eastern influence on West African civilization--in the form of Islam--is over 800 years old, and the Christian influence on Yoruba ideology has spread consistently since the first half of the 19th century. However, the 19th-century theses on Yoruba worship show the unwarranted influence of a doctrinal European Christian theology on the analysts, many of whom were churchmen, and the equally unwarranted influence of 19th-century theories of "Primitive Monotheism" (see Idowu 1963: 202). Moreover, the hierarchical "chain of being" model demonstrates a penchant for systematicity and enduring bureaucratic order

that, if ever relevant in Yoruba worship, is relevant only in the context of particular kings' and cults' efforts to legitimize themselves and in the apologetics of syncretic reform. For example, while Idowu acknowledges the contradictoriness of elements in Yoruba myth and rite, his analysis culminates in so thoroughly bureaucratic a model that he describes the Yoruba gods as a "theocratic government" (1963: 57). Finally, like the presentations of Parrinder (1972) and Awolalu (1979), Idowu's eventuates in a discussion of the collapse of the "indigenous cults," and the natural enough emergence of the Yoruba from their "Primitive Monotheism" into Christianity and Islam. Idowu claims, then, to have proven the continuity of monotheism and of belief in the theocratic nature of the cosmos.

Peter Morton-Williams' analysis (1964) abandons the earlier presentation of the traditional religion as an accumulation of details and yet elaborates on earlier efforts to synthesize a cosmological structure. From "myths and liturgical expressions," he models a three-tiered cosmos--consisting in, first, a pre-existing and primeval Heaven (orun), and, second, a primeval ocean, actually identified as Earth (ile'), on which basis the third element, the world (aiye), was subsequently created when the orisa Odudua formed the land. Temporally and geographically, aiye is the island center at which natural and spiritual forces relevant to human life converge. As Morton-Williams points out, the model possesses some

"relativity of scale in application." That is, we can think of the whole world as aiye, lying between Earth and Sky, or of each Yoruba kingdom separately as aiye, its limits conforming to the edges of its cultivated land. Insofar as I agree with Morton-Williams' model, I would contend also that some situations render the lineage, the family, or the individual an island as well, on the model of aiye. Morton-Williams correctly acknowledges the multiple and distinct sources of influence--supernal and chthonic--on human life. Contrary to the hierarchical model, the line of command in the cosmos does not descend directly and simply from the Supreme Heavenly Will. Thus, Morton-Williams has had to recognize also that Yoruba conceptions are more often and in more ways anthropocentric than the clergymen's model would allow. Moreover, in the acknowledgement of relativity of scale and in the application of sociological models, the author begins to recognize the preeminence of contexts and logics over expository details of the sort that dominated 19th- and early 20th-century studies of the Indo-European "pantheons."

Accounts of Yoruba religious thought have tended to make it appear far more systematic and coherent in such details than it is in fact. Exceptionally articulate informants like the babalawo, members of the foremost order of diviners, might describe a system as it appears to them, though such constructions remain problematic (Bascom 1960: 405). Their accounts are constructions rather than

generally accepted bodies of dogma. As Morton-Williams notes parenthetically, most actors, initiated or not, are concerned only with the selected body of lore and ritual technique they have found helpful in daily life. The patterns of selections vary regionally, lineally, personally, and situationally. Even the most knowledgeable informant entertains divergent ideas when each idea, nonetheless, addresses satisfactorily the situations in which it is invoked. Judged by the standards of doctrinal sects, even the most highly homogenized Yoruba liturgical texts, the divinatory verses of Ifa (Bascom 1969b), contain apparently inconsistent assertions.

We will do well to bear in mind Middleton's surprising declaration about the East African Lugbara:

"Lugbara have no set of interconsistent beliefs as to the nature of man and the world. Their beliefs are significant in given situations and their consistency lies in the way in which they are used in ritual action....The instability and fragmentary nature of the total system is apparent in religious usage as much as, if not more than, in any other part of social behavior" (1960: 25).

As in the study of Yoruba religion, any model suggesting an overarching cosmic structure or a concomitant homogeneity of belief imprisons the situational and temporal flexibility of African religious symbolism. I cannot proffer such a system. Like Middleton, I find political and religious ritual profitable contexts in which to seek the regularities underlying belief. However, I consider verbal discourse itself an equally fertile locus of definitive regularities.

Yoruba beliefs and rituals vary across time and geography, as they do among individual performants and among spheres of social life. Therefore, what I hope to contribute to the study of Yoruba religion is a model of religious experience--one in which particular images unify the logic of divergent traditions and institutions.

Historical documentation on Yoruba political and religious history are limited. But the scrupulously preserved traditions of particular kingships and the European-written documents of the last two centuries suggest a variety of patterns in Yoruba ritual and social process--across space and time. Few Yoruba worshipers are simultaneously conscious of or active in relation to the whole panoply of divine beings acknowledged at different points in the socio-economic structure of Yorubaland or in the initiatory hierarchy of the cults. Yet, in the idiom of religion, relatively consistent in its implicit logical principles, a Yoruba might articulate the participation of a number of disparately constituted agencies in his action, each salient in its own variety of contexts. What Western personality theory and philosophical voluntarism represent as motives Yoruba understand as the interpenetration of multiply personified individual and collective forces. I will demonstrate that the phenomenon known in the Yoruba orisa cults as gun, or spirit possession, constitutes individual and collective agency in diverse realms of Yoruba experience. I hope to demonstrate this claim particularly

in light of Yoruba polity, economy, personality theory, and architecture. In these contexts, personified forces variously antagonize, protect, empower, and constitute the actor, who, again, may be individual but tends to be collective in some sense. Possession entails purposive or involuntary submission to these forces, the chief event constituting individual existence and action in the Yoruba view. Yet, these events occur in a number of processes, varying according to the actor's relative passivity or activity, his or her structural maleness or femaleness in the "mounting," and his dominance or subordination to the other party. Different spiritual beings, rituals, intents, and outcomes are associated with each set of relational coordinates. While coordinates change, the implicit logic of spirit possession persists, even amid the rise of the Near Eastern and European religious doctrines. In the next section I will explain how power was symbolized and invested under the Yoruba Empire.

SECTION III (PART ONE): THE EMPIRE AND THE SYMBOLISM OF
POLITICAL POWER

A) Historical Background. The Yoruba are a West African people with a long history and an elaborate ideology of hierarchical authority. That is not to say that a singular and integrated belief system bridges the diversity of all their fifteen millions or a millennium of archaeologically and historically documented development. No, the Yoruba live both in the rainforest and in the contiguous savannah of the Bight of Benin. The Yoruba inhabit southwestern Nigeria, Togo, and the People's Republic of Benin, and speak a variety of distinct but mutually intelligible dialects. About 50 per cent now speak the Oyo dialect, which has become the standard. At the height of political centralization, little more than half the people were subject to the savannah empire of Oyo, while the other half lived in those more or less local forest kingdoms immune, because of tsetse infestation, to the equestrian might of Oyo.

The complexity and diversity of Yoruba kingship notwithstanding, a generally consistent pattern appears to distinguish north from south. In the northern savannah, where speakers the Oyo dialect prevail, kingship is monarchical. In the south, kings tend to be subject to stronger councils of commoner chiefs in systems sometimes described as federal. Likewise across Yorubaland, it has been argued that patterns of reckoning descent and

inheritance range from largely agnatic in the north to markedly cognatic in the south (Lloyd 1962: Chap III).² Though all native Yoruba-speakers trace their line of descent from Odudua, most people in the 19th century still regarded themselves as Ife, Ijesa, Oyo, and so on, adopting the name of their natal kingdom. The term "Yoruba" is actually foreign in origin.

Historically, Yorubaland as a whole has seen periods of imperial peace, the tumult of military and big man politics, and the Pax Britannica. The Yoruba-speakers were principally agricultural, while those living variously in coastal, riverine, savannah, and tsetse-ridden rainforest climes necessarily adopted different strategies of subsistence. They also made contact with foreign peoples to different degrees and at different times. Therefore, although they share a language and a common tradition of origin, Yoruba people have only recently adopted a common name for themselves, and indeed, this term often remains less relevant to socio-political action than is the kingdom or village of one's origin.

The diversity of Yoruba history and experience will, in the Sections III and IV, take a back seat to their commonalities, but I offer these minimal illustrations in order to demonstrate the limitations on my task. First, unable to generalize easily about Yoruba religious experience, I can offer key examples of its vocabulary and logic. Indeed, what makes the Yoruba a people, by their

own agreement, is a shared set of symbols--embodied in language, etiquette, and mythology. Equipped with diverse experiences and confronted with differing historical and personal problems, Yoruba individuals construct different meanings. Yet, a relative homogeneity of vocabulary and logic unites these people in their disagreements.

Thus my second caveat. I do not hope to construct a system of faithful closure, in the tradition of Evans-Pritchard. I aspire no more to the systemic sociological homeostasis of Durkheimian symbolic models than to the neatly embracing structural grammars favored by Sahlins (see Culture and Practical Reason (1976)--e.g., pp.22ff). Though my methodology clearly bears the influence of his work on Melanesia and Polynesia, we must part ways on the ontological status of our models. His acknowledgement that structures can be transformed by their own internal contradictions in the event of a decisive "historical attack" (Ibid.: 43) not only assumes the self-existence of the structure but loses its analytic importance when the author describes the emergent new structure as "already prefigured." Even in describing the abstractly cognitive aspects of Yoruba experience, neat diagrams, synchronic or diachronic, must be applied circumspectly. The Yoruba-speakers are linguistically, politically, and religiously diverse; and their values are communicated chiefly by oral means and largely without the benefit of standard texts.

Therefore, what I note here are but widespread references in myth and ritual.

B) Danger and Power in Yorubaland. From the 16th to the 19th century the savannah kingdom of Oyo ruled the larger part of Yorubaland with the aid of horses acquired through the trade with the Hausa. Therein lies a large part of their symbolic significance. The name Oyo itself is alleged to mean "The Place of Slipping," for the town was founded where the horse of its first king, Oranyan, slipped in the mud. Horses were extremely costly to purchase and equally so to maintain in the tsetse-ridden mixed savannah. Their survival bespoke the skills of Hausa veterinarians imported as slaves to the court of the Alaafin, or Emperor of Oyo. Not only did external trade, therefore, furnish the military means of Oyo's vast conquests, but the taxation of trade routes to the Atlantic and to the Muslim North provided the principal revenues of the polity. Equally because the livelihood of the state relied on the acquisition of slaves and the trade products from diverse ecological zones, government in the last century was concerned chiefly with relations to other groups and kingdoms. At the coronation of each new Alaafin, the Emperor was presented with two covered calabashes known as igba iwa, or "calabashes of existence"--one, in this ceremony, containing the emblems of war, the other the emblems of trade. His blind choice

indicated to the diviners which of the kingship's principal duties would prevail in the current reign. The kings also controlled the admission of refugees, regulated the export of certain crops, collected tolls on long-distance caravan routes, and monitored trade activity in the town. In a telling detail, the kings monopolized hospitality to the earliest generation of white travellers (see Clarke 1972). To this day, the foremost market in the town, known as ojaba, or "market of the king," typically rests in front of the palace. Because the kingship maintained its power by monopolizing key foreign resources and connections, it kept immigrant populations within the literal shadow of the palace, in stranger's quarters, and thus also kept them isolated from the populace at large. Peel points out that relations between immigrants and domestic populations were mediated by the view of immigrants as clients of the king. In fact, many of his chief functionaries--administrators, scribes, soldiers, toll-collectors--were foreign slaves. That many of them were eunuchs appears, with equal symbolic significance, to have been a Hausa and Muslim influence. The king's role in regulating the influx of the foreign constituted an essential logistical and symbolic element of his hegemony--all the more so when guns, rather than horses, became the foreign resource of choice. The king derived his power and legitimacy through his exclusive mediation of relations with the foreign (see Peel 1980). Yet, the image of feminized males as mediators of the king's power, like

the recollection of the king's falling off his horse at the inauguration of the state, invokes a complex set of symbolic correlates and homologues to the foreign.

C) The Foreign and the Supernal. Mythologically, the king himself is a foreigner. In two mythic cycles, the primordial kings are said to have come from the sky or from the East. In one cycle, the god Odudua comes from Heaven, by God's order, to found the earth. He then rules from the spot where he creates the land, in Ile-Ife, the origin of the Yoruba people. His various children grow up, move away and found tributary dynasties in lands to which they are foreigners. Henceforth, it would be descent from Odudua and, therefore, from the sky that constituted legitimate rule. In the other mythic cycle, Odudua is an immigrant conqueror from the East, sometimes specified as Mecca. Again, his offspring legitimate their rule over the autochthons by virtue of their origin in a foreign center. Even though all Yoruba consider themselves the descendants of Odudua, it is especially important for kings to be able to trace their ancestry directly to Odudua's sons. Moreover, the relative seniority of royal lines provides the terms of discourse in debate over the rank of each king. Ritually, that seniority and the conception of the kings' foreignness are of a piece. Much coronation rituals and mythic formulations tend to stress the ascending monarch's

entrance by road into the pre-existing town (e.g., see Lloyd 1960). Mythologically, his line generally originates from some great foreign center, like Ile-Ife, Oyo, or Benin and therefore, ultimately, from the supernal Odudua. Conversely, the founders of many dynasties become the chief orisa, or sky gods, in their former worldly domains. Therefore, the Yoruba think of their rulers not so much as newcomers but as dynasties older and nearer in their association with the foreign and supernal centers of power. Likewise, all the orisa come from Heaven, but in geographical terms, their myths tend to attribute to them origins to the north and northeast or in more immediate but nonetheless conceptually foreign centers of power--Ife, Benin, or Oyo. Like royal myths, the myths of Sango, Yemoja, and Sonponnon frequently represent those major divinities as migrants from the Nupe kingdom to the northeast. Esu and the divinities said to have founded various towns are, in these towns, regarded as the deified heads of immigrant dynasties from great centers. Finally, the orisa Ogun combines the immigrant king motif with alternative representations of him as wandering warrior, hunter or blacksmith, in both cases an outsider. Once incorporated as a king, his structural centralness becomes clear. Thus, in the overlapping representation of kings and gods, both are mythically constituted as foreign and supernal relative to their subjects. The process of government, like every investment of power, entails

appropriating the essence of the foreign center in the local vessel. Yet, that essence retains its power only as long as it retains its ultimate association with the foreign.

Over time, Ife had to cede power to Oyo because of the latter's superior trade links and consequent military might. Yet, by virtue of its contacts with the sky, Ife remained a power center and commanded religious fealty from Oyo. The distinctness of spiritual and political centers might cause us to question the absolute homologousness of the directions associated with them--the upward and the geographically beyond. Yet, a careful consideration of the differing contexts of their invocation suggests instead that they are alternative and mutually influential ideological constructs in the appropriation of legitimacy. Oyo and Ife both trace the legitimacy of their power to relations among Odudua and his sons. The son who inherited the Ife throne was senior, say the expositors of Ife superiority. Oyo myth-makers, on the other hand, acknowledge the junior status of Oranyan but insist that since he claimed the land first, his seniors must pay tribute to avoid the humiliation of accepting charity from a junior. As I have demonstrated, alternative tales of the gods' origins represent them as migrants from foreign lands or as natives of Heaven. Manifesting both principles, the orisa Sango, the preeminent orisa and king of Oyo itself, came from Nupeland to the northeast and, after his death, ascended to the sky. That both directional

associations attend claims to legitimacy suggests their equivalence.

Even the fall of Oyo is understood by Yoruba historians (e.g., Johnson 1973) as a function of foreign relations. First, the Basorun, or Prime Minister, of Oyo sought to preempt the power of the reigning Alaafin by cooperating with Fulani jihadists from farther north. The intrigue brought disaster. Next, Oyo had lost some of its southern provinces, Dahomey in particular, because the latter commanded the coastal trade with the Europeans at Whydah. With the guns thus acquired, the Dahomean kings ravaged the southern provinces of the empire.

I do not mean to argue the outdated historiographic dogma that Africans exercised no volition over the events of the European contact but that Yoruba historians, priests, and myth-makers have generally identified authority with the privileged appropriation, encompassment, and domestication of foreign resources. That is, more specifically, with resources originating in distant centers of power, variously the Sky, the east, and ilu oyinbo--the country of the whites.

D) Royal Succession and the Dialectic of Power: Investing, Protecting, and Using It The king's incorporation of the foreign was anything but passive. It was no more a simple matter of foreign domination than his rule was a simple

matter of heredity. Chosen from a number of eligible candidates in the royal lineage or lineages, the brother, son, or kinsman of the deceased king does not automatically possess the full substance of kingship. He must have proven his mettle to other kinsmen and to the non-royal council of the king-makers. Once elected he must incorporate the power of the gods through ceremonies at locally important shrines, he must receive blessings from the holy city of Ile-Ife, and he must eat the heart of his predecessor in a ceremony known as je oba. He thus eats the soul of his predecessor and the soul of his office. Thus, the new king is crowned only partly by virtue of spiritual connections inherent in his person--his ancestral soul places him among the eligible candidates and, through his actions, makes him a worthy vessel of other spiritual forces specific to his office. That he must "eat" (je) those other forces emphasizes his role of active incorporation to them. In fact, the reign of a given oba is known as ijoba, or "eating the oba." Ironically, the whole project of government is known in Yorubaland by the same term, expressing, in this case, not the oba's relation to his office but the people's relation to the oba. Indeed, though I have never heard a Yoruba say so, the term suggests that the people eat the king. Clearly, the Yoruba, unlike many peoples, do not typically identify royal sovereignty with the king's eating his subjects. Tales of the mythic king Ogun recall the involuntary incorporation of the wandering hunter, warrior,

and stranger as the ruler. He represents not only the stranger but the technology of iron-smelting and its use by the road-builder and prototypically foreign conqueror. To this day, he remains popular as the arbiter of relatively foreign technology (see Barnes 1980). He is the patron of taxi-drivers, petroleum industry workers, mechanics, railway workers, and construction workers. Much like the king of post-mythic times. Like the king's eunuchs, Ogun must sacrifice elements of his earlier self to become the repository of power and to be incorporated by the collective. The kings of post-mythic times will make the same sacrifice and will follow Ogun's sacrifice and will follow Ogun's prototype in other regards as well. Ogun shows great ambivalence toward his position. Not only the beneficent lord but the antisocial murderer become elements of this mythic character. The prominence of the dog in his cult might symbolize precisely this juxtaposition. Ogun's devotees, like his mythical subjects, consume both elements in the sacrificial consumption of his canine emblem and traditional offering--the loyal guardian that is also capable of voracious destruction.

Many coronation rituals enact the incorporation of the king from the outside. In some kingdoms, he must enter the capital by the road that brought his mythical immigrant ancestors. On the way, he attends ceremonies at each major orisa shrine, which in such kingdoms are all located on that very road. In many kingdoms the royal candidate is ritually

seized and kidnapped by chiefly representatives of the people. As if being incorporated from a foreign land, he is brought in from outside the town and housed temporarily in the home of a ranking chief. There the king is instructed in the history and responsibilities of his office. He is stripped of all personal property, but he inherits the riches of the kingship, all of which must be used for the benefit of the people. Just as the king personifies his people, so his wealth represents the status and achievement of the town. For the time of his coronation, he is said to "belong to the people." On the coronation day the Alaafin of Oyo wears a necklace called Ejigba--"the chain of office." The Yoruba historian Johnson writes, "Chains they say are for captives, hence they use beads instead." Yet, the very mention of the unlikeness of beads and chains implies their likeness on some grounds. The king is something like a foreign captive. Even his most precious possessions--his children--are appropriated by his affines, following a pattern unknown among Yoruba commoners (see Lloyd 1960). Traditionally the king is veiled and seldom appears in public, his personal identity having been subordinated to that of his office and of his collective constituency. He is forbidden to walk about in the streets by day or to let his mouth be seen open in public. In many kingdoms, the royal dynasty itself possesses no land; the earth being associated structurally with autochthons, all land belongs instead to non-royal and relatively

autochthonous lineages. Yet, the kingship retains ultimate rights of usufruct. If at any point the king fails to satisfy the collective needs of the people, they may require him to commit suicide. The council of chiefs sends him a calabash vessel either empty or containing a number of parrot's eggs. The image of vessels inside vessels is clear, and this ritual formulation suggests various interpretations. We might infer that, like the eggs, he has failed to fill the vessel represented by the people and that since he is poorly suited to that vessel, he will crack and allow another repository to take his place. From another point of view, he himself may no longer remain the repository of supernal powers. As a vessel, he has been ritually emptied. He must die in order for his successor to eat his heart, for his successor to be filled. Thus, in a final indication of the people's consumption of the king, it is only through the dissolution and complete incorporation of his being that he can escape his total duty to them. As in the kingdom of Ado Ekiti, there are cases in which all of the towns subordinate to the king have a role in his ascension and his burial as well--duties whose counterparts would belong exclusively to the family were he an uncrowned commoner. The same structure of events prevails in relation to all repositories of group powers and spirits--socialized individuals, senior lineage members, orisa cult members, and Ogboni members. They all belong, in the strongest sense, to the group that constitutes them--until the part of their

being invested by the group is removed (e.g., see Lloyd 1960). Thus, neither the king's incorporation of the foreign and divine nor the people's incorporation of him as repository of the foreign and divine is a passive process. Like the processes explicitly called "spirit possession," these are simultaneously acts of submission and of consumption; the lower not only submits to but consumes ^{the} higher. Thus, in a sense, the higher has submitted to the lower. There is evidence of both voluntary and involuntary dimensions of the experience in Yoruba polity and worship. Hence the imagery of "eating" and "being eaten," "mounting" and "being mounted." Some combination of these four dimensions constitutes every person and his role.

Whatever the variation in the balance of power in the Yoruba monarchies, the king seldom wielded power in his own name. Nor was he constitutionally his own source of power. Indeed, his relative monopoly of power came only with the ritual and electoral consent of councils representing the ruled lineages--the Ogboni Society and Oyo Misi, the kingmakers in Oyo kingdom in this case. Ogboni, for example, is said not only to represent the populace at large but to be guardian of the Earth and of the political interests of the autochthons. According to some scholars, Ogboni is explicitly understood to represent the interests of the pre-Yoruba inhabitants of the region (for example, see Idowu 1963: 28). This association of features is especially significant when we recognize that the Earth

goddess Onile is Ogboni's object of worship. She is regarded as female and as coeval with, if not prior to Olorun--the supreme sky god from whom the Alaafin derives his authority. By some she is considered as powerful.³ Though the foreign, male, heaven- and orisa-derived legitimacy of the king unites the kingdom and invests it with the force of movement, expansion, and prosperity, it is the autochthonous, female, and Earth-derived capacities of Ogboni that create and regulate the repository of royal authority.

The Yoruba king was traditionally cloistered and stripped of personal identity, but all governmental endeavors were performed in his name. The iconography of the royal crown may shed light on the constitutional implications of the king's isolation. Key issues are the king's relation to foreign and supernal power, and his relation to other potential agents of its incorporation. The bead-embroidered crown (ade) with beaded veil (iboju) regularly adorns the king during public appearances on sacred occasions, that is, at times when his relation to the divine is affirmed. The very structural assumptions behind "crowning" imply the upward, skyward, and head-connected directionality of power. The beads themselves are typically imported from Europe or from distant inland areas, and embroidered patterns may include crosses and Afro-Islamic patterns of foreign origin. From the time of the earliest written reports, the Alaafin and other kings have often

donned these and other foreign-associated goods, like European silks and velvets--confirming the generally observed pattern of symbolically foreign accoutrements in the iconography of kingship. Concomitantly, the use of beads in clothing and regalia is traditionally the prerogative of royal and priestly authority (Thompson 1972: 228). The beaded veil is intended to conceal the king's own face from public view, emphasizing his personal subjection to the institutional role of his office. Moreover, the veil protects the people from the king's "searing gaze," according to Thompson. Yet a standardized and socially wrought face, said to represent the collective identity of the dynasty, faces upward from the cone-shaped structure of the crown. Its eyes are typically staring and prominent, its mouth is open, and its teeth are bared. This image contrasts with the concealment of the king's eyes (behind the veil) and the widespread ritual proscriptions against the king's eating, drinking, or visibly opening his mouth in public. Thus, the iconography of the crown recognizes the greed and aggressive vigilance of kings but commends it to an institutionally defined role. Interpreted alternatively, Thompson identifies the gesture of wide-eyed staring in Yoruba iconography as an indication of the subject's godliness or his possession by a god (1979: 129). Finally, the prominence of the eyes in the representation suggests the role of information in the exercise of power. The

palace institutions devoted to reconnaissance I will discuss momentarily.

The third and final feature common to almost all crowns is the depiction in relief of a hieratic gathering of birds. Depending on the rank of the wearer among the Yoruba kings generally, four or sixteen birds will appear on the superstructure of the crown, all surrounding a single bird that stands above the center of their gathering. Again, such birds are explicitly identified as the familiars of witches, and their defining characteristic is the capacity to devour human victims and thereby grow richer and stronger themselves. Witches are alleged to peck the necks or heads of their victims and drain their blood. Indeed, on the crown, the subordinate birds appear to peck the central vertical structure of the crown. They devour in precisely the manner of destructive witches but their consumption is ordered and hierarchical: the uppermost bird, representing the king, directs them not to eat arbitrarily selected members of the in-group, as witches are wont to do, but to feed from the king's centralized supply of power. The hieratic positioning of the birds, like the upward orientation of the face, imply the upward source of power and the incorporative means of its appropriation. "The king, as master of power [ase], is the second of the gods," says a Yoruba proverb--Oba alase ekeji orisa. Moreover, to assure the survival and prosperity of the kingdom, the king must become "head of the witches" (Babayemi 1982: 10). As

the leader of the witches, he protects the people from other witches and, like those other witches, he eats power from above and from beyond his collective self. But he does so with a collective authorization--through warfare, the monopoly over certain goods and services, and his apical role in the service, and incorporation of, the sky gods. Mythically, the prototypical king Ogun is known chiefly as a warrior, and he is likewise associated with the origin of witches (see J. Gleason 1973). In fact, one of Thompson's informants reports, "from the outset the witches were composed of three major cults--(1)thundergod [Sango] (2)smallpox [Sonponnon, or Obaluaiye], (3) iron [Ogun]," all of whom are described as kings. The priests of these gods are "by definition," says Thompson, "considered to be witches by those outside their cults" (1976: Ch14/4). Like the witches, the kings relish blood, and Ogun, in particular, is capable of turning on the in-group. However, according to some myths, Ogun was first invited to rule the town because he was able to settle conflicts among the townsmen--the chief conditions and causes of destructive witchcraft. The multivalent mythology of kings and witches reveals the varied and complementary potentials of each role. Processes in the incorporation of relatively foreign and supernal power may go awry, either when the witches' behavior escapes the constraints of royal hierarchy, or when the greed of the king, who is compared to a witch, escapes the institutional constraints on his role. As Thompson

(1976) points out, birds like those adorning the royal crown (ade) represent not only royalty but also witchcraft. Beier (1982: 28), in agreement, concludes that the power of the witch and that of the king are the same, although they are typically applied to different ends. Witches, kings, and all relatively chthonic, female, and vessel-like agents must be made to consume power in an orderly and hierarchical way (on crowns, see especially Thompson 1972 and Bertho 1950).

While during periods of imperial expansion and internal upheaval particularly charismatic kings and chiefs personally did hold great sway, the constitutional tendencies of Yoruba kingship render the king a vessel of powers originating beyond his person. Thus, not only do the kingmakers and Ogboni represent a relatively female element that chooses and regulates its male representative, but, relative to the forces invested in him--identified symbolically with the sky--the king himself is female. Thus, from one perspective, male power descends from the sky and other foreign sources, to be invested in the relatively female repository that is the king, and the king's power projects itself into the affairs of the relatively female councils of government. These chiefs are indeed usually males or post-menopausal women, in relation to whom the kin groups and townships they represent and govern are structurally female. From another perspective, it is often the relatively female vessels that in a way create male authority. The containment of power is its efficacy. Or,

in more theological terms, its manifestations are what make its power real and knowable.

It is no accident then that not only eunuchs but the women of the Alaafin's palace--the ayaba, or king's wives--were essential mediators of the Alaafin's power over the people and of his incorporation of the divine. The Alaafin and other kings were the chief executives of all orisa cults. These being the source of royal power and legitimacy. However, the women were always the chief officials of each cult, and not only his subordinates at court. For the king always feared their sanction. Moreover, as many of them had been the wives of previous rulers, they have officially influenced the choice of the present king. They continue to counsel him. The ayaba were also active in the incorporation of the materiel of foreign power. During the 19th century the ayaba were the king's chief commercial agents in the Atlantic-oriented trade, which supplied the firearms that had become sine qua non for effective rule. So, the perpetuation of the king's imperial dominance relied directly on women's and feminized men's acquisition of key foreign resources.

The eunuchs, or iwefa, served not only the king but the ayaba. In some cases, castration was regarded as a punishment, entailing a diminution of the victim's male ability to project his power. Alternatively, the operation potentiates a status elevation, making the subordinate male an appropriate repository of a greater male power than

himself. But they have also been rendered incapable of any generative exchange in their own right. They are not only feminine relative to the oba but are fully submitted to the will of the powerful other. Iwefa are subordinate to the ayaba as well. The iwefa is regarded as the ayaba's son. We must conclude, then, that while the iwefa remains feminine and subordinate in relation to the oba, he is masculine and subordinate in relation to the ayaba. He is simultaneously a palace administrator and a priest. Viewed in another way, he is logically a child to the "marriage" of the Alaafin and his wives the ayaba. It would seem that prominent dimensions of the relation of father to son are--like those of ruler to bureaucrat and subject--homologous to the relation of the male to the female. When we discuss Yoruba conceptions of the soul in patrilineal descent, the full significance of that homology will become clear. As demonstrated in the ayaba-iwefa relation, the relation of male to female is not categorically dominant-subordinate. Among the palace officials there is even a woman known as the oba's "mother," who holds considerable authority over him (Babayemi 1982). Though the public dominance of the male is stressed at the end of the social and spiritual spectrum concerned with kingship, collective power, and orisa, or sky-god, worship, the authority of the relatively female as mediator and receptacle of male power is acknowledged. Actors on the other end of the social-spiritual spectrum are constituted as willful individuals

and the chthonic spirits. There, the authority of the relatively female agent, the unsocialized, and the anti-social is stressed.

Despite their low status relative to other palace functionaries, the ilari are the king's most numerous and most important public representatives. Perhaps for that reason, these messenger/guards are to the greatest extent identified directly with the king. They are particularly exempt from personal accountability for their actions (Babayemi 1982: 17), and their oriki, or praise names, generally consist of the the messages they bear when they act as the king's emissaries--they are but personifications of the royal will. For example, two of the ilari in Oyo are named Oba-Ko-Se-Tan, "The-King-Is-Not-Ready," and Madarikan, "Do-Not-Oppose-Him [i.e., the king]" (Johnson 1973: 61). The closeness of their identification with the king is expressed in a full array of possession symbolism in relation to the king and brings an additional clue to our interpretation of eye symbolism in the iconography of the crown. The heads of the ilari are prepared just like those of the ancient possession priests of Sango, preeminent orisa and early king of Oyo. Their heads are shaved and medicine making the head receptive to the entry of the royal divine spirit (Sango) is rubbed into a series of incisions. Only over these incisions is a patch of hair allowed to grow back. That patch of hair is dyed black with indigo, perhaps denoting its bearer's relative femininity. Likewise, the

feminine underworld, as well as feminine beauty as traditionally conceived (see Baudin 1885: 66-7), are associated with darkness. The ilari must always doff their hats in the Alaafin's presence, like priests awaiting possession, as if, I would argue, to make their heads available for the infusion of the king's power and will. Among the ilari, the king's principal slaves are called olori oba--"owners of the king's 'head'" ((Johnson 1973: 62; Ojo 1966: 137) In the context of the wider significance of the term ori, their possession by the spirit of the king seems an analog to the elegun's possession by the orisa.. The ilari were charged with collecting tolls, gathering domestic and foreign reconnaissance for the king, maintaining an emergency food supply for the palace, and conducting relations between the palace, on the one hand, and other oba, missionaries, and foreign centers like colonial Lagos, on the other. As gatherers of information, diplomats, and viceroys, they were known as ajele, or eyes of the king. And in one instance of a symbolic representation repeated throughout Yoruba society, the Alaafin is known as having eyes all over his body like a perforated pot--a boju lu kara bi ajere (Babayemi ¹⁹⁸²~~1973~~: 24). Thus, these examples render two point. First, the delegation of royal authority is structured according to varied ritual metaphors of male and supernal entry into relatively female and chthonic repositories. Second, the

duties of the king's delegates consist also in gestures of incorporation and penetration.

Among types of knowledge, there is a difference between vulgar knowledge and esoterica (imo ijinle), and the latter is clearly identified with apical authority and skill. It is a containment of power comparable to any other. It too is associated with superior relations to the outside--beyond the head, beyond the palace, and beyond the kingdom. The eye and the opening of a vessel are the repeated icons of such relations. For example, not only is the king a "pot with eyes all over," but the term for desirable "development and enlightenment"--olaju--refers literally to the opening of one's eyes (Peel 1980). The term usually applies de facto to one's degree of exposure to the foreign. The very material resources necessary to the development of the town and state were those generated from outside. The Yoruba states had lively respect for the potency of foreign technique and wanted to appropriate as much of it as possible without undermining the soundness of their authority. Thus, they endeavored to regulate its bearers--Europeans and Muslims; traders, missionaries, and refugees.

Entailed in the imagery of the pot is the issue of retention. Secrecy is the retention of knowledge, associated with the more generally centralized retention and transmission of power. Exclusiveness of knowledge is as critical to the success of the individual as to that of the

kingship and the cults. In Yorubaland, each family possesses a praise name, or oriki, and each family member identifies with a particular variant of that oriki, parts of which are absolutely secret. For if an enemy were to get hold of them, he might call away the person's soul or guardian spirit (emi or ori) and thus murder the unfortunate. Likewise, knowing the secret oriki of a god privileges its priests to invoke the god's power and even to coerce the divine being. Knowledge of the god's rituals and injunctions and of the priesthood's means of hoodwinking the uninitiated invests one with the power to aggrandize or diminish the orisa, to benefit personally from either, or harm the members of the cult. The cult group and ritual practices of a cult are known as awo, which means "the secret." To reveal it would destroy the power of the cult. Hence derives much of the additional symbolic import of feminine containment and, more concretely, of vessels in the iconography of the cult.

In sum, the king is not automatically a vessel of power. His relation to his deputies, or "eyes," is basic to his authority, in that the king is a vessel receiving power from his devotees and in whom he must invest power in order to preserve his authority. The parallels between cults and kingdoms are so great that acts of obeisance to the king and to the orisa are often indistinguishable. People prostrate before and render tribute to both, and the praise poem of a king may, at once, be that of the tutelary god of the

kingdoms (as is the case in Igboho). In fact, some Yoruba have told me that all powerful persons are orisa. Some informants describe the orisa as an original race of beings that "looked broadly over the world with enormous eyes" (Thompson 1979: 129). It comes as no surprise, then, that most orisa were once powerful people. The imagery of the structural femininity of repositories of power and of their structural masculinity relative to wider concentric structures reverberates throughout the ideology of kingship and godliness.

E) Possession Cults and the State Explicit possession was central to the administration of the Oyo Empire. The king himself is known as Olori Awon Iworo, the "Head of the Priests," but the will of the gods ruling him is delivered through divination or through the possession priests of each distinct cult, among which the Sango cult is most important in the Oyo Empire. The king in turn regulates the cults: he must ratify every initiation (Idowu 1963: 135). Possession priests of the Sango cult are known as elesin, or "mounts," of the god. The authority of the "horseman" is famous in Yoruba history and religious practice. Though, as I shall explain, the terms elesin and elegun confound horse and rider, Yoruba art represents the relation between the two elements. The cool and dominant horseman is a common leitmotif in sacred sculpture and elite architecture (see

Illustrations I and II). In Illustration I, note the size of the rider relative to the horse and the apparent firmness of the former's control. Yet in Illustration II, the significance of the structurally female element in this interaction is elucidated. The woman depicted on this housepost is not standing but is seated on a stool--establishing, in Yoruba settings, her own authority over others. In all three human figures and the two horse figures, the head and its skyward projections are disproportionately large and prominently elaborated. The term gun alone suggests that, relative to the rider--who is iconic of the Alaafin and the divinized Alaafin Sango--the elesin is like a horse and a woman.

Among Yoruba possession cults, not to mention their other African and Christian counterparts, most persons who experience possession are women. ^{incorrect} Significantly, in contemporary times the largely male possession priests of Sango, like the priests and priestesses of many orisa, must wear a hairstyle marking them as iyawo, or "brides," of the god. The style, known as agogo was worn in the 19th century by the brides of mortal men as well (Thompson 1969: 166-67; see also Bascom 1980: 10). The god is said to "mount" (gun) or "enter" (wara re) the head or body of the priest, the former being the same term used for riding a horse and the male action in sexual intercourse, while both male and female priests are called the "wives" (iyawo) of the orisa.

They praise male orisa by the title of address proper also to one's husband--okoo mi, "my husband and lord."

As wives and as horses, the priests support the existence of the gods and allow the power of the gods to manifest itself on earth. In turn, submission to the god renders his devotees powerful. Especially powerful are those possessed by the orisa. Even the Alaafin, during his coronation, must pay obeisance to the elesin Sango. The elesin is a slave to Sango and an object of the god's possession, much as the ilari is a slave to the Alaafin. Yet, the elesin and the ilari wield power. Their distinction literally as "owners of the king's ori" is matched by the distinction of the orisa-worshiper as the "owner of the orisa" (oloorisa). Thence derive both the varied "secular" prerogatives of the priesthoods and the power of the ilari to punish people, appropriate goods, and deliver fiats anywhere in the king's domain. Johnson reports, as an appropriate symbol of that power, that the king supplies the ilari with groomsman and the largest of horses. Other subjects as well were privileged to ride the horse when sent on missions by the Alaafin (see Fagg, Pemberton, and Holcombe 1982: 66).

The cults generate revenues and power (indeed called ase) for the state and the king. The functionaries of the palace bureaucracy are collectively much like a cult, responsible for the protection, information, and empowerment

of the king. Their additional duty to perform rituals reinforcing his spiritual power is as key to their institutional role as are their responsibilities to him in the military and economic functioning of the state. Various social and governmental corporations act similarly in relation not only to the king but to the chiefs, and to disembodied spiritual beings. Before I discuss the selection of repositories and the historical correlates of each, I will summarize the general principles we have thus far discovered in the devolution of power in the centralized Yoruba state.

Crudely, the following chart represents the chief structural oppositions posited in the symbolism of Yoruba kingship, marriage, and worship. Each term represents a relative rather than a fixed attribution.

penetrator	<=>	penetrated
supernal	<=>	worldly
worldly	<=>	chthonic
male	<=>	female
foreign	<=>	autochthonous
contents	<=>	vessel
ruler	<=>	deputy
ruler	<=>	subject
deputy	<=>	subject

Diagram I. (|) represents the relation between homologous elements, while (\Leftrightarrow) represents that between complementary opposites.

As a whole, the diagram represents a set of relations rather than a fixed structuring of objects. That is, no referent is simply male or supernal; it is male and supernal only in its relation to a given complement. For example, a king is male and supernal relative to his subjects, but his is female and worldly relative to the orisa. Even human gender is structurally relative. We have seen for example that a male priest is still the "bride" of his god. More surprising is that, while a bride is clearly female relative to her husband, a particularly rich or powerful woman trader may declare in other contexts, "emi okunrin"--meaning, "I am a man." Consider also Illustration XXI at the rear of the text, which I offer as the Yoruba representation of agency among individual and collective actors in the cosmos. Note that agency is seldom exclusively individual; it is collective in its essence. Agents are constituted by the nesting of the structurally male, represented by the left side of Diagram I, in the structurally female, represented by the corresponding element of the right side, thus combining ancestral, royal, supernal agents with the groups of beings who constitute them and allow their existence to continue.

With these heuristic schemata in mind, the reader may more easily imagine the flow and retention of power in Yoruba polity. First, I point out the symbolism of the relatively male injection of power into relatively female vessels. My usage of the term "vessel" is not fortuitous, for I shall further illustrate the significance of vessels in the iconography of Yoruba rite and myth. There is considerable overlap in symbolism and personnel between state and cult hierarchies in the Yoruba kingdoms, making the reduplication of this motif quite understandable. Second, the Yoruba ideology of kingship emphasizes the downward movement of power. Yet, it must acknowledge to some degree--ritually, politically, and economically--the mutually constituting relation between vessels and their contents. Principles of male insertion and female containment necessarily act dialectically in Yoruba polity, reproduction, economy, and worship. Third, in an elaboration of the second point, power in Yoruba ideology always has centers and epicenters, which cyclically lend power to each other. Though they constitute each other's authority, that constitution is not homeostatic. The late 18th and the 19th centuries ushered in a period of desperate competition between center and epicenter and among epicenters seeking new status as metropolitan centers.⁴ Nonetheless, a distinctly Yoruba vocabulary of hierarchy, possession, and structural complementarity seems to have persisted. In the following section, I will consider the

symbolic construction of changing patterns of power investment in post-imperial Yorubaland. Particularly significant is the representation of a new class of paradigmatic agents of power.

SECTION III (PART TWO): THE FALL OF OYO AND THE NINETEENTH-CENTURY WARS: POLITICAL AND RELIGIOUS DECENTRALIZATION

The Alaafin Aole Arogangan was the last Oyo king to rule any domain that might justly be called an empire. After engineering a plan to destroy a disloyal general, Aole's capital was sieged by his own army, whereupon a group of his foremost chiefs sent an empty calabash to the Alaafin, thus demanding his suicide. Before taking his own life, he cursed his betrayers, that their children would disobey and that they would be carried north, west, and east as slaves. Aole then smashed an earthenware bowl on the ground and incanted "Igba la iso a ki iso awo, beheni ki oro mi o se to! to!"--"A broken calabash can be mended, but not a broken dish; so let my words be--irrevocable!" (Johnson 1973: 192). Much of the symbolic and historical weight of this vignette should now be evident, but let us elaborate on the 19th-century transformations that these events purport, in Yoruba oral history, to prefigure.

The fall of Oyo ushered in a hundred years of military chaos, engineered far more by the politics of big men and rampant slave-raiding than by well-regulated, centralized, and ascriptive hierarchy. The reign of Oyo had seen the integration of diverse populations and the establishment of extensive networks of cross-regional and long-distance trade. In the 19th century, competition among the previously subject kingdoms and earlier-independent states dominated Yoruba politics. The mutual raiding of small

states for the slaves, whose sale alone made self-defense possible, generated great mistrust and political reordering. Even within small communities the rivalry of influential men with each other and with constituted authorities re-arranged the hierarchy of established titles. In the extreme case of the new Ibadan Empire, titles ceased altogether being hereditary. In more and more cases, men and women earned their titles by display and distribution of wealth, by using their influence to protect others and intervene on their behalf. Therefore, the power of what English-speaking Yoruba call "big men" depended in the long run on the attention and acknowledgement of their fellows. In most regions, Yoruba society continued to be dominated by an ideology of hereditarily ascribed power derived from supernal sources, but the dynamic impulse in political and religious life is the rise of self-made men and women ready to bypass centralized conduits of supernal power. In the 19th century this impulse was strongly felt. The quickening of the coastal trade and the kingship's loss of orderly control propelled untitled men and women to position and enlarged the positions of some inferior title holders. While priestly hierarchies too tended to be centralized, many have subdivided according to the multiplication of divine forms. A particularly charismatic possession priest may be thought to establish his own distinct form of a particular god, generated multiple forms of one divinity even in a single community (see Beier's A Year of Sacred

Festivals in One Yoruba Town, 1959). Moreover, priests in subordinate power centers now often act independently of the formerly primary centers. For example, Sango priests were all, at one point, initiated at Oyo; now they are not necessarily. In coronations, local priests may now act in lieu of representatives traditionally dispatched directly from cult headquarters in Ile-Ife (see Lloyd 1960).

Amid the strengthening of the political epicenter, competitors for power still invoked the traditional bases of legitimacy as defined by the old centers--relation to the sky, to the foreign, and to central royal lineages. Yet, changes in the balance of power clearly threatened established authorities and generated a widespread fear of internecine kidnapping (for sale at the coastal slave markets), of "medicine" (oogun) as the magical means of destroying one's competitors, and of witchcraft. Other religious forms have apparently grown in prominence. First, the masquerades known as egungun may represent either ancestral spirits or particular big men. In the latter role they may fight ferociously during periodic festivals. Next, in the female domain, the marketplace is symbolically associated with the witches (aje), who elicit great fear and respect among the Yoruba. Witches are spiritually powerful women who cause grievous misfortune to their enemies and competitors, like co-wives and rival retailers. Yet, they also reward their allies. Witches kill undeserving and unexpected victims, especially members of the patrilineal

in-group--like their husbands and the children of co-wives. Like the big men's egungun and oogun, or medicine, the witches are agents associated more closely with Earth (ile) than with the sky (orun). According to Morton-Williams, the ancestors too are more closely associated with the earthly underworld (ile) than are the orisa, who belong to the sky (Morton-Williams 1964: 248-49). The egungun, in both their forms, are said to reside in the earth before they emerge through the sacred groves. Oogun is usually derived from plants and animals, manipulated according to knowledge often said to have been learned from chthonic forest gnomes (aaaja). All three of these chthonic forces represent not power reposed in central authorities but appropriated by segmentary groups or by ambitious, unscrupulous individuals.

The Yoruba tend to image much of their experience of good and bad fortune in terms of such spiritual forces of individual and collective power. Contemporary Yoruba film and popular literature abound with witches and sorcerers, or users of oogun (consider Herbert Ogunde's films, for example). ^{Janyesunmi} IN everyday life, misfortune, accident, and virtually every death provoke inquiries about the supernatural workings of evil-doers and of socially unconnected spirits. The key reasons for membership in the orisa cults are the desire for prosperity and for protection against the myriad forces that would otherwise prey on the individual.

Allegiance to the kingship addresses similar concerns. On one level, the king is expected to regulate the selfish activities of the witches through the ayaba known as Iyale eye, "Women Chiefs of the Birds," birds being, as we have seen, the familiars of the witches. These women also propitiate the god of chance Esu, whose shrine stands in the marketplace. Both he and the site of this shrine are associated with the individualist, the avarice of the witches, and the incorporation of foreign goods and power. The ayaba must, for example, manage to still the conflicts and tensions in the market that allegedly provoke malevolent witchcraft. Where the regulation of trade is centralized, so are the incorporation of foreign power and its disposition for socially integrative purposes. Ritually and economically, the king is expected either to conquer the witches or to coopt their power for the benefit of the collectivity. The iconography of the beaded crown (ade) suggests the participation of female and individualist endeavor at the very focus of state power--the head of the king. When the king is effective at such cooptation, the people are safe and strong. However, witchcraft and individualism remain a continuous threat to centralized authority and collective order.

A) Ambivalence and the Structural Role of the Female. To the witch and the individualist, the aggressive consumption of one's neighbor differs little, qualitatively, from the

consumption of power reposed in sources outside the lineage, kingdom, or empire. We are reminded of Morton-Williams' "relativity of scale." The king consumes an object that is "outside" relative to his socially constituted identity and point of reference; the witch consumes an object that is "outside" her smaller individualistically constituted identity. The king's "self" is simply bigger, and the witch's individualistic "self"-definition usually conflicts with the normative view that she belongs to a larger collective "self." Yet, the intents behind the king's consumption and the witches' remain the same--the accumulation of power. The normative definition of witchcraft as evil and as the source of social chaos comes from the operative out-group. But when the community has safely and collectively enlisted the power of the witches along with that of other spiritual forces, the community is at peace. Yet, witchcraft is essentially threatening because its repositories and beneficiaries are unknown. Though witches, much like the orisa worshipers, join together in groups (egbe), they lack any public representative. They celebrate no festivals to strengthen the repository of their power because they lack a common repository. Each witch stores her own witchcraft substance in her belly or, alternatively, hides it in an earthenware or calabash vessel (Prince 1961). Like the old post-menopausal women who most often become witches, they are independent and lacking in any relatively male and central

directing force. In the iconography of the orisa cults, in which fluid-filled pots represent the relationship of possession, I propose that witches are represented structurally as empty and hungry vessels. Post-menopausal women are described as "bloodless"; that is, their wombs are empty of fluid. And so are their breasts (see G. Beier 1980). Symbolic of their craving to be filled with power is the allegation that they drink the blood of others. Yet, those others are typically within the male-centered social group. Thus, the witches' consumption or incorporation of power is typically viewed as institutionally unregulated, voracious, and malevolent. A Yoruba proverb says, "when the spoon takes a holiday, the spider makes his web in the stew pot" (Alantakun ta 'kun si 'sasun gb'olude). Structurally, the image recommends the spoon as relatively male in contrast to the relatively female pot. Thus, again, the symbolism of the vessel is invoked to suggest, in this context, that when the vessel is not put to use by relatively male directing force, it is prone to disorderly use and abuse. That is, for example, a womb unused goes awry, and the lack of coordination of power and purpose in a people leaves society open to evil and disorder. The basis of any cooperation among people without a center is likely to be clandestine and malevolent, secretly devouring and undirected rather than directed and beneficial to the collectivity. Witches are associated with nighttime and the secret hording of wealth, conveniently in the form of money,

rather than with daytime and the public redistribution of wealth that are associated with seniority, royalty, and the legitimate growth and exercise of power. I must stress that the points of emphasis in the indigenous assessment of witches do not exhaust the qualities they are alleged to manifest, and these condemnatory attributes do not apply to witches alone. The essential denominator of the witch's prerogative remains the same as that of the other icons of the structurally female role--witches, brides, mothers, and market women regulate the flow of value, whether that value be reposed in blood and life-energy, offspring, trade goods, or money. Regardless of its repository, this potential may be put to the service of the state or of the individual. Moreover the mediation of the flow of value, through secrecy and exclusiveness, is also a dimension of royal power; and it remains a threatening species of power. Yet, the king as repository of power, like the wooden effigies in the orisa cults, remains in relatively plain view, and its intents are dominated constitutionally by relatively collective values.

We have seen the constituting values of the structurally female and the contexts of its acknowledgement. Like femaleness, autochthony characterizes vessels of the foreign. The meta-ideological implications of Yoruba worship, economy, polity, and architecture are that, whatever the power associated with the foreign and the above, that power is given form and effectiveness by its relatively autochthonous political constituency. Indeed,

the virtue in the incorporation of the foreign ruler is that his lack of local connections limits his own personal support. He can be defined and, in some ways created, according to the onerous demands of his constituency.

The Yoruba conceptualization of power and the foreign deserves comparison with like formulations in other Sudanic states, such as the Hausa emirates, where Fulani elements identified as relatively foreign appropriate political power without the actively ritualized consent of relatively autochthonous Hausa elements. Perhaps appropriately, the Bori possession cult plays no part in statecraft. On the contrary, it belongs to the least esteemed elements of the population--generally female sexually suspect, relatively autochthonous, and un-Islamized.⁵ Moreover, the cult is associated principally with the healing of affliction. Among West African societies that acknowledge possession phenomena, I hypothesize that, in states where the investment of power in epicenters is ideologically restricted and the incorporation of power is emphasized less than submission to it, the ideology of possession will appear commensurately less important in the devolution of power.

Much of the patriarchal judgment against feminine rebelliousness leveled at the Bori possession cult of the Hausa seems, in Yorubaland, to be projected on the persona of the witch. In some ways the witch is simply the apotheosis of feminine secrecy, as well as the crucial

capacity to contain and regulate contents. Like potting skills, witchcraft is alleged typically to pass from mother to daughter. Socially and ideologically, these female lines are not formalized or constitutional, but they must be acknowledged and categorized by virtue of their effective service or disservice to the central male-constituted structures of government, cult, and compound-- as brides, mothers, or witches. As powerful as mothers but effectively opposite, the witches are associated first, and most often, with malevolent interference in the good fortune and procreation of others. Second, witchcraft is expected principally of old women. Witches characteristically sleep on their backs, with arms spread and mouths open, and send their spirits out in the form of red-beaked birds to devour the blood and bodies of their victims. They act at times in righteous consternation but more often out of petty annoyance, jealousy, and malevolence. Witches are often imagined with beards and white hair--representing age and potency of will. Willfully and easily, they detach their souls, the relatively male element representing power, from the relatively female body. Their nefarious activities are identified with the former--their spirits, which fly about in the night to devour others' blood. Moreover, their facility for structural detachment is, in itself, pathological. Their souls depart through the anus. But more fundamentally, their spontaneous body-shedding contravenes the principle manifest in the fixed integrity of

the igba iwa used in worship. The halves of that calabash are separated only when its owner wishes to die (Epega 1931: 18). Macrocosmically, the universe is regarded as a calabash whose halves are never separated (Ojo 1966: 196). The motif of the soul seeking partition from the body is also associated with abiku children, spirits that have invaded the wombs of pregnant women, only to be born and, soon thereafter, to seek death and reunion with their spirit playmates.

Not only do they identify themselves with a structurally male image of will, but they deny the proper structurally female role. Their breasts are no longer filled and their wombs no longer penetrated or filled. The husbands of old women tend to preoccupy themselves with their fertile young wives while the elder wives rely on their own means, among which are the domination of their sons and the free-ranging participation in trade that often makes them richer than their spouses. Old women are vessels freed of hierarchal direction; age has given them instead the capacity to dominate and devour men along with the social groups and lines of power men constitute. They threaten their husbands, their sons, and the other women party to the continuation of the lineage. Reportedly common among Yoruba men are nightmares about women forcing sex upon them or stealing penises to satisfy themselves. These dream experiences are alleged to manifest the activities of witches, who are voracious and unproductive--more like

*city &
consider
male*

market women than like submissive and fecund wives. Impotence, a common ailment among Yoruba men, is thought to result from the action of witches, but these women are equally capable of making slaves of men. The old woman personifies the capacity of the relatively female and individual social unit (that is, of vessels) to grasp a structurally male power without submitting to the collective regulation it conventionally entails. It is most obvious of witches that vessels are never entirely passive in relation to what penetrates or flows through them. Variouslly, they invite, define, regulate coerce, and devour it.

B) The Rise of Witches and Big Men. When rulers, as focii of divine power, cease to address collective expectations or when enough people's individual aspirations diverge from those represented in any particular focus in the descent of power, that focus loses its power. The dialectic of power in Yorubaland is summed up concretely in a proverb sometimes heard in liturgy: "The person who helps us is the one we help"--Eni o gbani la a gba. As in big-man politics, the orisa whose protection and patronage prove ineffective might be abandoned (Barber 1981). Those who are effective gain recruits and thus gain in power, like successful politicians and businessmen. In the mastery of individual and non-collective action, the actors and mediators of power are often females. Women are witches, the chiefs of the Gelede cult, and the elders who are said

to protect politicians and, explains one informant, "tell them when it is safe [to act]." Seemingly dominant over the structurally male, females of this category are understood to envelop and protect their clients, as if maternally. Yoruba say that every politician must "go about in the night" seeking the aid of such people, lest he be killed supernaturally by his rivals who do. The invocation of nighttime implies the nefariously feminine secrecy and craft that earmarked electoral politics in the early 1980's.

The potency of such individualist and underworld forces is thought to have increased over time, for the priests of the orisa Ifa, who used to protect their clients from the witches by means of the priests' own pre-eminent supernal power, are now said to have to strike deals with the witches and to direct sacrifices to them in exchange for the cooperation of these women (Prince 1961: 799).

As during the hegemony of Oyo, the Yoruba states in the 19th century continued to acknowledge the spiritual preeminence of Ile-Ife, heartland and earthly origin of the nation, but political centralism and imperial peace generally waned. Not only did new and fractious centers of power arise in Ibadan, Abeokuta, Whydah, and a series of new Oyo capitals, but title hierarchies were rearranged or destroyed in the extant traditional kingdoms. In the last two centuries of economic and political upheaval, spiritual and political power have come to reside less in the centralized priesthoods and kingships--more in the self-made

men, the independent and mutually competitive possession priests, and the individualistic forces associated with the dark, female, and autochthonous underworld. Yet, two motifs remain unchanged--the prominence of female mediators of power and the persistence of males as the public face of power. Like the kings, the politicians and big-men are typically male. The principal exception illustrates the key ideological dynamic at the other end of the social and spiritual spectrum.

Only in Gelede, a men's society designed to propitiate the witches and to calm their wrath, is a woman the public head of the group, while men there clothe themselves in female garb. I would argue that the principal objective of this cult is the protection of men and their interests against the antiestablishmentarian capacities of women and the structurally female. Therefore, the active containment or appropriation of men in the protective power of womanhood justifies the dominant role of the single female member and leader. The emphasis on one or another purpose--protection or self-aggrandizement--should then predicate the choice of which spiritual being or social persona--male aggrandizer or female protector--receives the most salient attention. Viewed broadly, the principal historical and symbolic change in the disposition of authority has displaced it from a supernal, male, and ascriptive actor to a chthonic, female, and individualistic one. Yet in the plurality of both types of cases, the men stand out as public representatives of

power, and the woman remains the mediator between the relatively spiritual realm and its worldly public representatives. Women have tended to finance their sons' initiations into the orisa cults, just as they now tend to finance their sons' education in Western-style schools. The female is equivalent not to the passive but to the embracing and the containing. The female members of the sky god cults, like the female palace officials gain power by submitting to divine male penetration, whereas the female forces of the underworld have the pronounced self-sufficient authority to devour that which is relatively male. Etymologically, aje, or "witch," derives from Iya je, meaning "Mother eats." Likewise, the politicians are said to "chop," or eat, the people's resources. Yet, the Yoruba, as I have noted, do not identify such behavior with good kingship. The king, like the gods, exacts prestations from the people, but he is expected to return more. His own obligation is to devour the above, the ancestral, and those things that are foreign and useful to the kingdom. Except in war, his aggressive consumption of the above and of the foreign is less emphasized than is his aggressive penetration of what is below and relatively female. However, beyond the southern borders of the Oyo Empire and throughout Yorubaland in the 19th century, the most evident agents of power were the relatively female and autochthonous Ogboni society (which worships the Earth); urban epicenters of power; and of free merchants, big men, and politicians.

And because intense individual competition is close to internecine strife, the motif of consumption by the relatively female has become a horrific and prominent motif in Yoruba literature and daily discourse.

Though statistical cross-cultural analyses of its kind may in general pose problems of interpretation, one such comparative study has proved instructive in the Yoruba case. As might have been predicted from Lenore Greenbaum's (1973) statistical correlation of social stratification and rigidity with the incidence of spirit possession in sub-Saharan African societies, the incidence of possession in public decision-making is far greater in the cults of the orisa, which are associated principally with the rigid, ascriptive hierarchies of the Oyo Empire and the patrilineal savannah Yoruba, than with the federal and more cognatic systems of the south and the post-imperial systems generally, in which Egungun, Gelede, Ogboni, and herbalist cults.⁶ The patronage of cults associated with the Earth, including witchcraft, corresponds mythologically and geographically to periods of the kingship's loss of monopoly over foreign power and therefore of the popularization and intensification of competition. In turn, Yoruba concerns have come to stress more and more the need for individual protection from multifarious and omnipresent competitors. Therefore, the spiritual phenomenon generally envisaged is something like the obverse of possession--the devouring of the male by the female or the protection and active

containment of the male by the female. The female mediating role between power and its public holders becomes all the more active. Stressed here is the role of the relatively female, autochthonous, socially segmentary, and individual agent in constituting or expropriating the power reposed in relatively male, foreign, and socially unitary agents. While that role is emphasized at the bottom, it is acknowledged subliminally, but repeatedly, at the "top" of the cosmos, where sky gods and kings rule. For example, at the top, Yoruba acknowledge that the gods would die if not fed by their followers, and they speak chiefly through their horses. The god must trust his cult not to spoil his "secret" lest his power be besmirched and destroyed. Likewise, the palace officials and the plebeian councils of chiefs actively constitute and sustain the power of kings. Thus, at different levels in the interaction of spirits and men, notions of possession and of active containment constitute alternative perspectives and conceptions of agency .

C) Undesirable Possession and Affliction. Afflictive possession is commonly associated with periods of dissonance in constituted social structures. Involuntary possession and extraordinary illness accompany the neglect of the orisa cults, unsuccessful rebellion against the political hierarchy, divorce, disloyalty to ancestors, and alienation from one's lineage. The social psychiatrist Raymond Prince

(1966) has correlated increases in afflictive possession with heightened rates of divorce and witchcraft accusation in Yoruba towns. Corollary to social disorder and the abandonment of institutional centers of power are the decentralization of access to foreign power and the diversification of routes to it. Such relatively individual initiative invites punishment from the spirits of collective action. But exceptionally powerful individuals, like witches, are able to wreak havoc, for their own part, on collectivities. However, just as witchcraft can be brought to the service of the kingdom, unexpected possession ceases to be judged punitive or undesirable once individual behavior and aspirations are reassimilated to collectively established ideals of social relations. He argues, after the tradition of Evans-Pritchard and Victor Turner, that the diviners, who determine the source and cause of the afflictions, restore obedience and coordination to fractured social environments. Their message interpreted by the oracle, the possessing gods tend to direct a return to customary practices in ways that reintegrate social, religious, and political institutions. In the next section I will detail conceptions of the directionality of power in relation to various social points of reference and to the symbolism of concentric repositories of power in Yoruba domestic life. We will see how Yoruba actors individually incorporate and invest power.

SECTION IV: ACCUMULATING POWER: THE CULTIC IDIOM OF "SPIRIT POSSESSION" IN ACTION

The dominant processual motif in Yoruba religious ritual is the efficacious and empowering conjunction of structural opposites. Schematized in Diagram I and Illustration XXI, that motif represents the two-way flow of power along constituted circuits, which can be initiated, halted, accelerated, or slowed at any point if the actor possesses the necessary knowledge. Thus, esoteric knowledge (imo ijinle) is the hallmark of authority. The principle of hierarchy itself, based on the selective devolution of power, furnishes a contradictory and therefore dynamic principle: while everyone wants and needs power, not everyone can get it and anyone can lose it. Power is based essentially on the exclusion of most people from it. However, it must be invested in vessels in order to be effective--it must circulate. One aspect of Yoruba ideology, which we expect at the "higher" or more male end of the social-spiritual spectrum, contends that power should devolve hereditarily. Were power thus truly inseparable from its repositories, that is, if power remained forever in certain lineages, it would cease to flow. Power is, by its nature, transitive, but a dynamic tension occurs between exclusiveness of authority and the delegation of power on which all authority depends. Thus, as we will see in the mythology of Yemoja, the deposition of power is ever fluctuating, never static.

A) Variation in Routes to Power: Synchronic and Diachronic

While lines of cult, state, and lineage authority overlap, they are not identical. Though their apical offices are sometimes distinct, they duplicate each other structurally, overlap in membership, and interact institutionally. That is, they represent multiple but mutually referential lines within a constituted social-spiritual hierarchy. The gods and their cults may check the power of kings as well as reinforce it. For example, the Ifa divination cult must approve candidates for the throne (Beier 1982: 17), and important state decisions rely on the diviner's approval. Major cults may impose demands and restrictions on the king because they mediate the will of the gods, who in turn constitute state authority. In the Oyo kingdom, the cult of Sango in particular holds preeminent sway over royal decision-making. Equally, by enforcing the will of the gods, the cults support the king--as agents of taxation, diplomacy, and legitimation. Ideologically, royal authority consists largely in the spiritual powers invested in the king's person by each cult group (see Ibid.: 16-17). Though devotion is usually hereditary, an individual can circumvent lineage hierarchy by seeking power and political representation through the ordinarily inter-familial or kingdom-wide cult group. Therefore, the availability of alternative routes in the descent and appropriation of power has always actively affected Yoruba social theory and

practice. Some lines of power are pyramidal hierarchies, like the state-connected orisa cults and the chain of command linking compound chief, to town chief, to oba, to Alaafin. Other lines are less centralized--like Ogboni, the witches' coven, the Gelede masking society, and those orisa cults splintered by the latter-day multiplication of each particular god's forms.

So, the rapid decentralization of sources of and routes to power--hailed in this century by the transition from gnostic, or initiatory, training and kingship to free public education; from inheritance of chiefly office to the achieved status of civil-service posts; and from royal succession to the competition of political big men under British indirect rule and after independence--is a change in degree, not in type. It has admittedly constituted a vast transformation in the modes of governance, worship, exchange, and residence in Yorubaland, but the conceptualization of fundamental processes in appropriating power is little changed. Possession and active containment remain their key ritual and mythic representations. For example, access to power through the long-distance and overseas trade, through colonial and post-colonial bureaucracies, and through the churches still requires initiation. In the dominant means to power, it is less a concept of naturally utilitarian skill than one of efficient access to the foreign that informs the choice of routes to power. For example, in the 1930's Yoruba leaders protested

vigorously against the proposal to make the curriculum at Yaba Higher College in Lagos "practical" rather than academic. J.D.Y. Peel writes, "the central criterion of educational worth had become its contribution to the ascent of the pyramid of power, wealth and prestige created by the British" (Peel 1978: 150). A similar impetus to foreign access has apparently contributed to high rates of conversion to Islam among the Yoruba. This Yoruba assessment of the foreign has situated them well in the competition for governmental power. Unique among sub-Saharan ethnic groups, Yorubaland possesses three major universities. Peel points out that the Yoruba have produced more graduates than any other Nigerian ethnic group, and have therefore occupied a disproportionate number of "senior service" posts throughout Nigeria, particularly where other states do not preferentially hire their own indigenes. On the other hand, the technical infrastructure of Yorubaland--roads, electricity, and piped water--have received little consistent attention amid the rush for individual access to power.

B) Descent Relations and The Soul As the most fundamental agent in the Yoruba social world, the person is competent and successful to the measure of his spiritual constitution. In spite of much geographical and individual variation, Yoruba generally conceive of at least two souls animating a

person's body--emi, the breath; and eleda, olori, or ori, the ancestral guardian spirit. The second and most important resides in the head, also called ori, and is thus confounded with the physical head. Recall the parallel nominal melding of "horse" and "horseman" in the orisa cults. In the framework of kin relations, ori is associated with Yoruba beliefs about individual destiny and reincarnation. One can feel the breath, but the ori cannot be seen, felt, or heard. Nonetheless, like the orisa, the ori must be fed sacrificially. In return, the ori protects a person and his offspring from dangers in the world and helps him or her to seize opportunities for empowerment. The Ori returns ultimately to Heaven upon departing the body and apparently passes through the Earth on the way (see Morton-Williams 1964). We will see that the orisa do the same. Indeed, each person's ancestral guardian has a counterpart in Heaven, with whose full support a person will live out the full span of life allotted to him by Olorun, God himself. Lacking that support, he will die before his time (Bascom 1956: 402). Implicitly, God has allotted a certain amount of ase to each being and has ordained spatio-temporal limitations on the terrestrial sojourn of the ori--both the body and the world itself being represented as vessels. Witches and other powerful individuals and spirits curtail one's lifespan by diminishing the contents of one's bodily vessel. Exceptional among human beings, witches can thereby augment their own, in violation of supernal

prerogatives over life and death. Ordinary people must simply seek the assistance of the spirits to protect them against the diminution of those contents. With their additional help one can, through procreation and reincarnation, fill other vessels with one's personal spirit.

In this sense, all children are vessels of their parents' ori and emi. Potters compare their pots to children, and mythology--about both Obatala and the heavenly potter Ajala--recommend the view of children as vessels. Prayer and incantation invoke the ori of parents to guide and protect their children. More explicitly, many newborns are thought to be direct reincarnations of a recently deceased ancestor (iponri), usually a grandparent, whose ori has propitiously returned from heaven to occupy a new body. Reincarnations can occur multiply--one iponri may incarnate in descendants across several segments and generations, and each of those descendants will share his particular praise-name. The view that those who know that secret praise-name can call the ancestral spirit away from the body suggests the separability of that spirit from the body, the spirit from the physical head. The clay-working imagery associated with Ajala's manufacture of the head and with Obatala's molding of the child's body in the womb adds further force to the representation of the newborn body as a vessel of the ancestral spirit. Yet, the newborn's identification as a

living actor is conditional on the temporary existential melding of vessel and contents.

Many individuals maintain a shrine to their ori. Known as ibori, this hollow bell-shaped construction of cowries and woven straw receives periodic sacrifice and is fed with the blood of victims and other consecrated substances. A parent places miniature versions of the object, representing his children, within his own shrine, and during sacrifices he prays for his ori to protect his children. Suggested by the geometric configuration of the shrine and its contents is a generally consubstantial relation between the ori of parents and those of their children, as if the latter form subsets of the former's spirit. Moreover, the parental ori seems, in the procreative relationship, to occupy a female role in relation to the children's ori, insofar as the former contains the latter. Yet, the relation remains ambivalent, much like the relation of the world to God--who, in the less anthropomorphic form (as Olodumare), surrounds and, in the more anthropomorphic form (as Olorun), informs everything. But the ideologically dominant dimension of that relation between fathers and children, as within the key social and political groups, is the penetration by male spirit of the vessels that are their relatively female children. For example, the king and other heads of socio-political groups are typically known as baba, or fathers, of those groups. By contrast, the subjects of a kingdom and the untitled members of a lineage are called its omo, or

children. The theoretical relation between a mother's ori and her children's is unclear. Indeed, it protects the children tenaciously, but I hypothesize that in the predominantly patrilineal social order, it may be explicitly inside the children. The ambivalent symbolism of the ibori shrine combines the relatively male and relatively female dimensions of parenthood, but the exegesis of ori and its source tends to stress the lineal relevance of the male line and the protective importance of the female. God combines the same contrasting features--Olodumare surrounds and Olorun penetrates. Like the agents of procreation, the Agent of creation is both the undifferentiated substance and the structure of all forms. To put it another way, the ori, the gods, and the aspect of god that fill and define specific, named aiyes are named anthropomorphically and according to the hierarchal structures by which people order their endeavors. On the other hand, the omnipresent and omnimorphous aspect of the high god fills and defines the all-embracing aiye, and therefore surrounds all the specific aiyes that we know.

Some contend that only the ori of good people are restored to earthly life through reincarnation. After death they remain but transiently in a heaven (orun rere or orun alafia⁷ that is much like earth but where everything is good. Not only is the air fresh, but wrongs are righted and losses restored as in the ideal kingdom. On the other hand, those guilty during earthly life of murder, suicide,

assault, theft, slander and the use of bad "medicine" (oogun) are committed to "bad heaven" (orun buruku), also known as the heaven of potsherds (orun apadi).⁸ In Yoruba mythology, as in the potting industry, pots are known to be fragile, and the departure of spirit forces is associated with their breaking and spilling--marking the end, also, of that spirit's effectiveness in the world. Such persons will never be reborn, and according to some informants, they suffer the punishment of walking in the midday sun. They may become evil spirits (iwin buruku or eburu) and cling to treetops like bats, witches, and the birds with which witches are associated. This ultimate punishment for wrongdoing amount to remaining a spirit unhoused, walking in the open without protection or purpose. Such spirits are not without power, but they are irretrievably malicious, unpurposive, and mischievous--hence their exclusion from society.

Contrasted with evil human spirits, good human spirits return to occupy the heads of their descendants, and the orisa, likewise, are invested in the specially prepared heads, pots, and calabashes of the cult-groups. On the other hand, the spirits of the anti-social exist amid broken pots. These individuals have done harm to the earthly vessels of others and have defiled their own. Apparently in punishment for having broken proper vessels, these beings suffer being denied restoration to vessels. Many people's spirits leave their bodies temporarily, as when they sleep,

but the spirits of witches, in particular, depart their bodies through the anus and fly about causing antisocial destruction. All people have anuses, and are thus implicitly capable of misusing their vessels after the manner of witches. But it is witches in particular whose functions of restraint in incorporation, containment, and retention have gone awry. They have distorted the functions of the vessel by allowing it to open downward and backward ("spillage") rather than upward and forward (regulated "containment"). Momentarily, we will explore the other misuses and disuses of the human vessel associated with these anti-social beings, particularly in light of physiological and metaphysical conceptions about elder women. First, though, let us examine the proper preparation and use of the human vessel in the orisa cults.

C) Vessels and the Orisa Cults. The key motif in myth and ritual is the pot. Yoruba scholars have sometimes interpreted the term orisa to mean "one who has sunk a pot ... in the ground" (Epega 1931: 23). Great people who would later become orisa are said either to have sunk themselves into pots in the earth or to have set a pot in the earth for their followers. Called odu orisa, the pot contained the image of the god and articles for his worship. Variants on this formulation have the would-be orisa simply disappearing into the earth. Symbolically, he has been incorporated in the greatest of vessels just prior to his ascension. The

same is alleged true of ordinary humans, but Yoruba stress the uniqueness and endurance of orisa power with the assertion that gods, like kings, do not die but simply "go away." They had, in the first place, come from outside. In much orisa mythology, the going away of gods from earth is associated with fleeing, the spilling and bursting of vessels, and the flowing away of their contents. The theme of departure is manifest also in the standard West African tale of God's angry departure from earth (e.g., see B.K. Walker and W.S. Walker 1980: 25-26). As I have noted, the earth itself is conceived as a vessel. In the Yoruba-related tradition of vodun-worship in Dahomey, and in the New World Yoruba cults, jars, pots, and tureens are usually where the adepts point when identifying the worldly location of a god. In Yorubaland proper, some of the most important emblems of the gods rest in pots and calabash vessels.⁹ These emblems are known as the ase of the god, for they are the focus of the god's life energy and power. Indeed, the god is often identified with that energy and is sometimes alleged to dwell inside those emblems, which are therefore also containers of a sort. In a brand of semantic ambiguity and reversal noted earlier (and which I will discuss at length in connection with the concept of the olorisa as well), ase also denotes the special infusions applied to those emblems and to other dwelling places of the god, all with the intention of feeding him. Thus, ase refers alternately to the power itself and to its repositories.

Other Yoruba folk etymologists relate the word orisa directly to ori, the head, which is in turn identified as a pot. Not only is the maker of heads in Heaven is known as a potter but the varied quality of human head and good fortune is attributed to his haphazard firing procedures (see Abimbola 1976: 116). There is some literal inconsistency in the identification of intelligence and fate, normally associated with the inner spiritual "head" (ori inun), with the "head" that is like a pot--the physical head that might, with some artificial precision, be called the outer head ori ode. Yet, in indigenous discourse, the distinction between the two is as important as the processes bringing them together.

*Just
Compare
to
body
possessed
by
spirit*

Antithesis and Synthesis in the Relation of "Possessor" to "Possessed." It is precisely in the process of merging vessel and contents that authority becomes a reality in society. The separation or incomplete matching of the two endangers the existence of every social unit. Therefore, for example, ori inun (inner spiritual head) and ori ode (outer physical head) are seldom distinguished in ordinary conversation. When ori is separated from its vessel, as during dreams or disembodied travel, the being they constitute enters a vulnerable liminal state. After death, the fate of good souls is reunion with a proper vessel. Permanently unvesselled spirits, on the other hand, are anomalous, destructive, and troubled. As is expected of the ori inun in relation to the ori ode, the king is identified

with his domain. Indeed, he is its "head" (olori) and personification. It is said that the town or country could not exist without him; it would be fractious, disorderly, and uncivilized. Without him, malicious witchcraft would run rampant. For his own part, were he not ceremonially invested with the spirits proper to his office the appointee would but masquerade as the king. He would be unable to rule, and he would be personally vulnerable to the same spiritual forces that oppose the organic and orderly functioning of the town. At all levels, ori inun constitutes the vessel, and ori ode alone permits ori inun to live.

Yoruba language regularly presents the same confounding. As we have seen, the elesin or elegun of a god is the latter's "mount." The god is said to ride or enter the mount, as if the mount were a horse or a woman. Yet, the term elesin means literally, "owner of the horse," a term which would more reasonably describe the god himself, as would the term elegun, which transliterates to "owner of the mounted one." In another unexpected reversal, the devotees of a god are generally called oloorisa--"lords or owners of the orisa." Devotees of specific gods, like Osun and Sango respectively, are called olosun and onisango--"lords of Osun and of Sango." By contrast, kings and gods are known as the "Lords" or "Owners" of their domains. For example, the king of Ibara is the Olubara, and the God of the Sea is Olookun. Likewise, senior and most highly

esteemed worshipers of a god are known not as "brides" but as "mothers" and "fathers" of the god. However, according to the standard exegesis the gods are ancient ancestors--or "great mothers" (iya nla) and "great fathers" (baba nla)--of mortals. Again, such notions confound the god with his worshipers, the owner with the owned, the possessor with the possessed. Likewise, in oracular poetry (see, for example, Bascom 1980: 451), an orisa may be represented as an afflicted person seeking the aid of the gods. Moreover, much cult mythology describes the gods in human form, prior to their inevitable return to their divine origin (see Appendix: Yemoja as Bride).

In the shrine, if asked where the god is, most priests will point to the image of the god or to the pot containing the god's ase. Only by forcing the inquiry will one elicit any distinction between the image or pot and the god itself. Seldom if ever will orisa worshipers distinguish the possessed priest from the orisa. Her words are obeyed as the words of a god, and she receives appropriate ritual service. She must receive painstaking deference, even outside the context of occasional and ceremonial possession. The priest and all initiates of a god are said to manifest the god's personality traits, eschewing the foods the god avoids, and receiving from others certain privileges due to the god himself. Likewise, children born with the ori of a particular deceased person are often addressed and treated as that person. Parents are known to address the juvenile

reincarnations of a foreparent as Babaa mi--"My Father"--and to treat them with the respect due to such an elder.

The penetrator must conform to its vessel as much as the vessel to it. For example, during coronation rituals, the chiefs instruct the ascending king rigorously, and only then do they prostrate themselves before him. It is seldom clear whether the chiefs control the king or vice-versa in the Yoruba polity. Nor is the relation ever static or unilateral. In the many orisa possession performances, the god answers the call and obeys the beat of the drums. He may thank the drummers and honor them for their services (see M.T. Drewal 1975). Though in the familial context paternity is generally regarded as the key determinant of the child's social identity, mothers are more loyal, protective, key to survival than are fathers, especially in the context of the polygynous home. Mirrors, like fathers, are worthless relative to gold. But mirrors are also the reflectors of that which surrounds them. "Children are the clothes of a man" (^{could be} Omo l'aso eda), says another proverb, implying that a man is judged according to the behavior and appearance of his children. In properly constituted social units, the contents are the vessel. yet, language and historical process bear evidence of how their ultimate separation is manipulated.

The Vessel. The manufacture and use of vessels generally may shed light on these symbolic constructions. In

Yorubaland earthenware vessels come in great variety. For trade and for domestic use, Yoruba women produce palm-oil lamps and some twenty kinds of pots and dishes for cooking, eating, carrying and storing liquids, dyeing, and other daily uses. Professional potters, who are also women, say that a special kind of pot is associated with each of the hundreds of divinities. Sacred pottery is sometimes decorated with sculptural forms representing themes of worship and sacrifice. Characteristically, even the wooden shrine sculpture representing worshipers depicts women holding bowls or prominently displaying their breasts and fecund bellies (see Illustrations III, IV, and XXV). Shrine pottery often duplicates and magnifies these visual leitmotifs. For example, in the cult of Eyinle, a river god, the pots containing the god's ase take the form of a woman. Described as the mythical wife or as a contemporary worship of the god, she may hold one hand on her extended belly and the other on her engorged breast. The bulging belly of the pot itself recasts the central image. In a common alternative, the figure holds in her hands a bowl intended to receive offerings to the god, or she may hold a bowl in lieu of her head (Illustration XXV)--recommending the inference that the breast and the womb represent structurally equivalent variants of the bowl and of earthenware vessels generally. Indeed in the cult of the goddess of women's crafts, Iya Mapo, the goddess' breasts are compared directly to pots.¹⁰ The Eyinle figure's

upwardly oriented coiffure is always well elaborated, adding another dimension to the thematic echo: like the whole pot and the bowl, the womb, the breast, and the head are vessels with a meaning beyond--or, rather, within and above--the visible.

Each of these vessels is understood typically to contain liquids.¹¹ The breast contains milk, the womb blood, the sacred vessel river water. The sacred vessel contains not only river water but alluvial stones, which, like the water itself, are Eyinle's ase. The stones allegedly multiply in the water, and the age of these vessels is indexed to the multiplication and maturation of the worshiper's children (Thompson 1969: 169, 173), suggesting another parallel between the shrine vessel and the bodily vessels symbolizing human motherhood.

As in the example to be explored in Section V, the mythology of the orisa cults and the kingships is replete with the theme of the transformation of people into water (as in Johnson 1973: 37; Frobenius 1948: 222; Thompson 1969: 137). In these instances, the death of a great person is followed by the bursting forth of a river from the ground or from a pot of water or "medicine" that he or she has spilled. Conversely, the aim of worshipers is to restore that power to vessels. Members of the Eyinle cult say the water-filled shrine vessel "brings the power of the river and the sea to the hearth" (Thompson 1969: 137). In the

Yemoja cult, the presence of the goddess and her possession of the priestess are persistently associated with water-filled vessels. And these are often placed distinctly on the elesin's head when the goddess is thought to have entered that head. Thus, just as the spilling of pots marks the departure of ase, the restoration of power to its vessels in the world is associated with the filling of pots. Congruently, Thompson discovered that the filled Eyinle pot is emblematic of the kingship, the model of such restoration in political contexts.

I have emphasized the structurally female role of possession priests and of kings in relation to supernal powers. The female monopoly over the production of sacred pottery and of earthenware generally presents similarities and striking contrasts to the heavenly models of vessel-production. Much like the mythical Ajala and Obatala, women mold vessels by hand, without the use of the wheel, and bake the pots over open fires. On the other hand, Ajala and Obatala are male. In the human world, potting skills are generally passed from mother to daughter. Women are charged likewise with the portage of water, with cloth-dyeing, soap-making, the preparation of vegetable oils, and cooking--all of which feature the prominent use of pots. Iya Mapo, who is also the muse of pottery is thought to be the inventor and protector of many of these vocations (G. Beier 1980: 51). Her name means "Mother Mapo," and her praise poetry describes her as "the Mother of mothers." G. Beier describes

her, furthermore, as "both womb and vagina." Thus, mythically, pots seem to represent characteristically female roles in the division of productive and reproductive labor. A pot is prominently associated with Iya Mapo's veneration, but that pot too is kept full of sacred water. Empty pots in manufacture are compared to the spinning top, which "is a fine performer/Even though it has no head" (G.Beier 1980: 51-2--emphasis mine). In this context, "head" must refer to the intended contents or to the lid of the pot, but, as we have seen in connection with the symbolism of the igba iwa ("calabash of existence"), the lid and contents of a vessel are homologous in their structural maleness and supernality. In light of the global Yoruba construction of sacred event, this "head" must, in either case, be regarded as the complementary male structure within of the fully realized vessel--the inner head of the vessel. In the Iya Mapo cult, this structurally male complement is the sacred water to be deposited in the completed vessel, it is the fluid iconic of supernal power.

Great care is given to the manufacture of religious pottery, and only certain craftsmen may participate. Informants in Ede say that only old "bloodless," or menopausal, women may perform the task. On the one hand, menstruating women might be said to "leak." They fail to contain and retain a substance of power and thereby metaphorically violate the ideal purpose of the shrine vessels. On the other hand, some affirmative relation links

the potter's lack of fluids (or her conceivable voraciousness in incorporating them as a potential witch) to the role of her pottery in containing sacred water (see Ibid.: 48). The menopausal woman not only is without internal liquid but is "headless" insofar as she is independent of her husband. Iya Mapo's praise poetry even stresses the independence of potters generally from their husbands (Ibid.: 52). Moreover, theoretically the bloodless woman is sexually uninvolved with her husband, the glans of whose penis is also described as a head (ori). The state of sexual abstinence and post-menopausal age required of ranking priestesses in many cults seems an implicit requirement for those who make sacred pots as well. Thus, the fitness to contain of power in these cases is explicitly and metaphorically connected to exclusiveness in the gun relationship. The uniqueness of the menopausal woman may subsist equally in either her potential for such exclusiveness or her witch-like proclivity to adopt an active role in incorporating supernal power. Perhaps for that reason, quite unmalevolent priestesses consider themselves aje. The women known as "Mother Eats" (witches) differ only by a predicate from those known as "Mother" (chief priestesses).

Pottery is usually brown or black, but blackware is favored in food service. The sacred pottery of many orisa is likewise regularly blackened with indigo. In their dress, women traditionally wore dark indigo cloths as well.

In 1954, Forde observed that women's cloths were progressively darker toward the inland (1951: 8). Considered in the 19th- and 20th-century context, Forde's observation echoes the symbolic association of lightness with politico-economic centers and darkness with epicenters. Just as women's dress became lighter toward the coastal politico-economic center, the contemporary trend in women's attire favors generally light-colored materials known as "lace." Thus, across geography and class, sartorial style recapitulates the structural symbolism of hues found in Yoruba religion. Light colors, called funfun, are typically iconic of power. On the coast, as among elites, a greater number of women visibly claim immediate access to its sources, Therein, we find a synchronic parallel to the diachronic decentralization of power in Yorubaland generally.

In the context of the cults, several corollary facts are clear. First, while the pots used in worship and feeding are generally black, water is called "white" (funfun) and the alluvial stones representing the power of many gods are also light in hue. Next, the earth goddesses Odudua and Onile are regarded as black, as is the ancient ideal of feminine beauty (see Baudin 1885: 66-7). The supernal spirits and powerful foreigners, on the other hand, are typically regarded, as white, light-skinned, or red. For example, the name of Obatala, the greatest of the orisa, means literally "the Lord of the White Cloth," but the

coterie of divinities he rules is known as the orisa funfun, or "white divinities." While a foreign human being is more likely to be described red (pupa) than as white (funfun), both this color description and term oyinbo suggest a consistent structural relationship.

To this dark/light opposition add the exclusive association of potting with the hot and dry Harmattan season (inspite of the inordinate cracking that results from fast drying during this season--G.Beier 1980: 49), and the fact that earthenware is fired and used in cooking. Conversely, the water placed in vessels and the ideal role of the orisa in relation to the in-group are described as "cool" (tutu). Good kings are described in the same terms. Violence, heat, and the absence of water, in all these cases, are associated with enemies and outsiders, the gods' punishment of their errant subjects, and disruptions in in-group relations. The witch is the representative source of such disruptions.¹² Thus, the structurally male is generally associated with relative coolness, while the structurally female is relatively dry and hot (gbona). The conjunction of the two is what brings fecundity. We might assess the role of the males Obatala and Ajala in vessel manufacture as fertile mediations of these dynamically opposed categories. The prototypical male appropriates and enhances the innately female capacity for containment.

In another type of vessel persistently associated with the orisa cults, Obatala is conventionally represented as the lid of a split calabash, of which Odudua, as a female, is the bottom half. The lid of a vessel is known as its a'de or its ori (head). The upper half, known as the a'de or the ori, is identified clearly with the sky and the lower half with the earth in the Yoruba saying, "A mighty calabash of two hemispheres, never unlidded: the sky and the Earth"-Igba nla meji, ade isi: sanma ati aiye (Ojo 1966: 196).

Like the earthenware vessel, the calabash is among the most important of household utensils. Thus, its preparation for ordinary use is traditionally performed by almost every wife, but its ornamentation as a gift container is the work of male carvers organized in patrilineal craft guilds (Ibid.: 246), in direct contrast to patterns in the devolution of professional potting skills. Because certain weather conditions favor the growth of calabashes, these vessels provide an economical alternative to earthenware pots in the drier northern half of Yorubaland and where suitable potting clay is unavailable. That clay is found only sporadically in Yorubaland. Though available in some parts of the north, it is found more widely in the south (Ibid.: 82-3; 94). Thus, in many ways, pots and vessels are simply functionally equivalent alternatives. Calabashes are used for washing clothes, storing liquids and food solids, ladling, and carrying headloads, including loads of potter's

clay and earthenware for the market--all duties associated chiefly with women.¹³

Ojo believes that the ornamentation of calabashes originated in the service of the orisa and then became associated with kingship, especially in the northern imperial center of Old Oyo. As earlier mentioned, at the enthronement of the Alaafin and of most Yoruba kings, the "calabashes of existence" (igba iwa) are used to divine the future events of the reign. Decorative calabashes are apparently prestige items in palaces and chiefly households, but they also carry potent symbolic meaning in the dethronement of kings. As the reader will recall from Section III¹, an unsatisfactory king, presented with an empty calabash or one containing parrots eggs must commit suicide. Though the production and use of vessels are typically a female domain in Yoruba society, the kingship and the sky-god cults have regularly incorporated its symbolism, for indeed the human role in the assumption of kingship, as in possession by the sky gods, is structurally female.

The pivotal issue in the conceptualization of authority and agency are whether a being has a vessel and whether a vessel has the proper contents. The concentric structure of such relations constitutes the leadership and the membership of all legitimate social units--the world, the

empire, kingdoms, lineages, households, cult groups, and people. Two corollary points follow.

First, each order of social unit implies others, and the processes constituting it also create others. For example, penetration of the body by the ancestral spirit (ori) not only gives its vessel an active and conscious existence but also implies the lineage network into which the individual will be born. Likewise, spirit possession allows the god to manifest himself and carry out his will, but it also strengthens the life and informs the personality of the priest. On such occasions, the god also gives direction to the social group he governs. We may note, however, that each order of possession yields a message and an outcome specific to a particular order of social grouping. That is, the god's possession of his priest symbolizes his "possessing," or constituting, role in a particular cult group and community. Second, all legitimate and socially important units have vessels and are vessels. Most vessels participates as the contents of a greater vessel, while each set of contents is the vessel of other contents. Some actors violate or withdraw from conventional networks of concentricity. But, like the witches' coven and Esu of the open spaces, they are dangerous and destructive.

The vessel has a distinct role in constituting and sustaining that which fills it. A proverb says, "Where there are no people, there are no gods"--Ibiti enia ko si,

ko si imale. Unable to manifest themselves through possession, the orisa would be ineffectual, and if people did not venerate and feed them, they would cease to exist. Conversely, because such acts give the orisa their existence and effectiveness, outstanding possession priests in post-imperial Yorubaland are believed to give rise to their own peculiar forms of the a god--with their own personal attributes, prohibitions, and powers. The priest's personality apparently colors that of the divine being, as does the social group the priest serves. Moreover, if the secret of a god or of any of his variant forms is betrayed, that god or that variant would wither. Indeed, the mythic origin of the orisa as beings submerged in pots recommends the view that their proper containment is necessary for their ascension to supernal and disembodied power. Nonetheless, either some part of an orisa must reside continuously in the world, or he must periodically return fully to his earthly vessels in order not only to strengthen them but to be fed by the social group he informs.

The annual festivals in which the god receives his most massive feast and in which he hands down the most important directives to the community is called ikunle, or kneeling, a term also used for a wife's gesture of obeisance to her husband. In descent ideology, the posture is associated with relations to one's ancestral guardian spirit. In heaven, one kneels to choose one's ori (Idowu 1963: 178). It is associated with both submission and the serving of

food from vessels, in both human marriage and in the relationship of the god's servitors, or "brides," to the god. On one ideological level, a bride both feeds her husband and submits to his will. On another, she thereby extends her influence, secures his favor and his services. In that process, she gains power in the family and in the wider community as a wife and a mother. Motherhood especially, a state resulting directly from the sexual phase of that submission, is marked out in many spheres of Yoruba life as the prototypic position of esteem. The endeavor to self-empowerment through worship is thus specifically likened to the female act of submission to the male. The male gesture of obeisance, known as dobale, or prostration takes a less prominent role in the conceptualization of cult operations.¹⁴

The central features of ritual service to the gods are sacrifice and possession, both of which entail the ritual use of vessels. In sacrifice, the blood and therefore the life-force (emi) of victims is typically offered in bowls or in sacred vessels containing the ase of the god (see also Ellis 1894: 99-100). In the cult of Yemoja, these vessels may be of calabash (in Oyo North) and of earthenware (farther south). Even in southern Oyo regions, however, initiations entail the placement of the lower half of a calabash on the prepared head of the novice. Substances regarded as the god's food (ase) are placed inside. The lower half of the calabash and the action of feeding imply

the novice's relatively female role and the absence of the complementary male agency. Followed immediately by possession, these graphic rituals appear to be an invitation for the god to descend and mount. The most regular ceremonial duty of possessed priests in the water god cults, at least, is to carry calabashes or jugs full of water into the shrine. For that reason, possession priestesses in these cults are called Arotun ("Carriers of Water Pots"--in Abeokuta) and Arugba-Omi ("Carriers of the Calabashes of Water"--in Ibadan). As we have established, the water is consistently identified with the god, and its placement in the vessel parallels the entry of the god into the mythically vessel-like head of the initiate. Under possession, the elesin of Sango, God of Thunder and Lightning, often carry pots of live coals on their heads, apparently reflecting the same symbolic parallel. Alternatively, the elesin may eat fire.

Creating the Mystery, Protecting Its Power. Not just vessels but structural contents require construction. Not even at the uppermost end of the social-spiritual spectrum is structurally male agency always objectified. Barber (1981) argues persuasively that the creation and development of a spirit cult in Yorubaland amounts to this. Everyone faces what seems an empty vessel, but those who share the "secret" invoke an effective force by means of their collusion. A Yoruba student writes, "If something we call 'awo' has nothing in it to frighten the uninitiated, let's

stop calling it 'awo'; but if we put a stone in a gourd and make a couple of taboos to stop people from looking into it, it's become an 'awo'." (Ibid.: 740, 744).¹⁵ Devotees protect "the secret," or "cult," by admitting only the few to the innermost gnosis. They increase its value by attaching to it an exclusive price tag. Of course, no one lacking prior conviction would buy into the cult, but the faith that heavy investment requires also strengthens the cult and the efficacy it is thought to lend to the worldly efforts of its members.

Amorphous power--that is, divinity itself, which is worshiped by no one--reposes in open spaces, among them, marketplaces and crossroads. To the degree that its repository is fixed, central and closed, that power has been socialized and injected into human purposes. Though in Section V I will discuss urban planning as a constituent idiom of Yoruba political discourse, let me use it to illustrate several points here. In northern Yoruba towns, all roads convene at the palace and all settlement radiates out from that center (see Illustration XIII). Within the extensive palace walls, most of the land is open space, and numerous open courtyards focus the architectural structure of the palace buildings. Likewise, the king is made an empty space for the entry of divine power. Yoruba architecture furnishes a graphic instance of a general principle--social units are constituted by the forms they

give to empty spaces, or ,rather, by the spaces they agree upon.

Open and unguarded areas, like the marketplace and the crossroads, are agreed-upon locii of contact with the foreign, but, insofar as they are unguarded, they house raw, amorphous, or chaotic power. Both these unguarded spaces are governed by the orisa Esu, lord of communication between gods and men and of unpredictability. He is fond of turning situations backwards and inside out, for better or worse. Guarded spaces, on the other hand, like the palace courtyard, may also symbolize the portal of structurally foreign forces, but they render those forces orderly and effective for human intents. Likewise, the courtyard of the traditional plebeian dwelling is surrounded by the apartments of the residents. It may house the sacred crocodiles of the compound in some towns, and in some others, the shrines for Esu. It and the contiguous parlor of the patriarch's house are the focii of interaction and hospitality in the compound. They are, architecturally, as central as the father is, socially and politically, to the functioning of the household. They are analogous focii of group identity. The emptiness and relative non-intimacy of the courtyard may also suggest some of the anonymity and discreet distance that a father must maintain to keep an orderly household. Paternity may determine the larger part of ascribed social identity and corporate unity, but maternity constitutes the strongest and most enduring

loyalties--those shared by omo iya, children of the same mother. The Yoruba proverb "Mother is gold; father is mirror" addresses the relative importance of one's parents in many situations.

It is significant to this analysis that, among all the compartments of the compound, the courtyard alone opens to a view of the sky. It also opens first to visitors entering from beyond the compound wall. On the other hand, the surrounding rooms are dark and more fully enclosed, housing the patriarch's wives along with her children. I would suggest that these rooms are female relative to the male courtyard, since the former focuses the activities of the latter, just as does the husband in relation to his wives. The association of the courtyard with the sky and with hospitality to strangers suggests other male contrasts to the feminine darkness and concealedness of the side rooms. That the chief shrine or shrines in the plebeian household, as in the palace, are isolated in selected side rooms suggests further feminine quality of the incorporation, containment, and regulation of divine power. Within the shrine room, the ultimate repositories of divine force are the lidded calabashes and ceramic vessels containing the ase of each major god (see Illustrations IX and X). These, and what is usually a wooden image of the tutelary orisa of the household, contain the power of the god or the god himself (see Illustrations IX and XII). It is through the vessels that sacrifice is offered to the divinity, but priests have

told me that the whole room is filled with its palpable force.¹⁶ Thus, I found in some locales, only men and post-menopausal women are allowed to enter the shrine room, another apparent implication of the structural femaleness of the space. Except in those towns and households that claim privileged access to a given orisa, access to these shrine rooms is nowadays generally unrestricted. On the other hand, access to palace shrines, usually the most important shrines in the town, is usually quite exclusive and is associated particularly with potential physical harm to non-initiates. This exclusivist injunction resonates with the principle that favorable possession entails a degree of fidelity between the god and his initiates. An initiate usually devotes his or her head primarily to one god. Likewise, a wife owes her womb exclusively to her husband, and possession priestesses must generally have abstained from sex with men when they are to be possessed. They are sometimes permanently celibate (see Popoola 1978). Human sexual intercourse on temple grounds is highly antagonistic to some gods. In spite of the requirements of fidelity, the worshiper or wife who finds her lord's services unsatisfactory may choose another lord.

By contrast to the plebeian townhouse, the relatively temporary rural farmhouses are elementary (see Illustration XV). They usually consist simply of a row of square rooms, lacking any courtyard. Some have a minor entry hall, but these houses lack the concentric pattern of the townhouses.

They are, like the farms themselves, satellites to the cities, which Yoruba regard as their real home. Proverb constructs the heaven/world relation analogously: "Earth is market, heaven is home"--Aiye l'oja, orun n'ile. In the life of the spirit, Earth is the relatively feminine domain where food is procured in order to feed and affirm the power of the central and structurally male domain that is "home." Tendentiously, the proverb implicitly diminishes the importance of the market, which is female relative to heaven. However, historically we cannot but note its potential dominance over the home. The market is where the relatively female and individual agent asserts its will independently, typifying a pivotal contradiction in Yoruba society. Indeed, female and plebeian elements have grown wealthy and powerful through trade, especially since the late 19th century. The progressive rise of such elements, like the 19th-century decentralization, has presented a threat to those ascriptive and supernally oriented hierarchies described in connection with the Oyo Empire. When in social life the forces of the relatively female, autochthonous, and individual threaten dominance over the relatively male, foreign, and collective, the earth spirits furnish the salient image of agency. Bear in mind, however, that what distinguishes contexts, or actors, on the social-spiritual spectrum is simply the relative passivity of one or the other opposed element.

D) The Construction of Personhood.

Initiation, Possession, and the Construction of the Human Subject. Fundamental to cultic initiation and spirit possession is an implicit notion of how all material beings are constituted. Even the most rudimentary unit of society, the living human, is constituted by the incorporation of the structurally foreign. The emi, or life-breath, that Olorun (a form of the High God) breathes into a body (ara), originates outside that body, but it is essential and central to the existence of the new creature that is the living human. The ori, or ancestral soul, is foreign to that living human, but, injected into that human's head, it becomes central and essential to an active and socially connected person. As in other cases, explicitly called spirit possession or connected with the ascending king's introjection of collective spirit forces, the spirit fills its vessel and thereby constitutes a new visible being--the person, the manifested god, or the crowned king.

Thus, cult membership and descent are closely connected. Generally, the worship of particular orisa devolves by inheritance, like the incarnation of ancestral spirits. However, worship may link groups of cognatic or affinal kin that correspond to corporate units--namely, compounds and nuclear families. A person normally attends the rituals of the orisa that his own parents follow and

contributes to their cost, but is initiated only if "called" through dreams, sickness, possession, circumstances of birth, or divination. However, if the diviner prescribes sacrifice or submission to a divinity unknown within the kin group, the unawareness of lineal connections to that cult presents no difficulty. People postulate that some unknown ancestor worshiped that divinity. Other special situations also occasion initiation. For example, if a woman troubled by infertility successfully requests the help of any divinity, the child thus conceived will likely be initiated automatically, and, if not, the divinity may trouble or even kill the child.

Initiation into a cult amends and reformulates one's social and personal identity. Traditionally involving a training of several months' duration, initiations have now been shortened to several weeks or a week of seclusion and inactivity. The initiand learns the rituals, emblems, clothing and behavior patterns appropriate to the orisa. She is, moreover, stripped of hair, name, and, the priests claim, of prior character traits. She is then symbolically reborn with aspects of the orisa's personality. The conceptualization of initiation closely assimilates the ideological construction of birth and the reincarnation of the ancestral guardian spirit in a newborn human vessel. In some ways, receiving the orisa is like receiving an additional ancestral guardian soul. Just as likenesses of appearance and personality among kin are explained in terms

of their shared ori, so similarities of the personality and behavior among co-worshippers allude to their shared orisa. Abimbola (1973: 75) writes that every adult who dies becomes an orisa to his own family (see also Eades 1980: 123). And every god is a founder of a family, reports Frobenius in the early 20th century (1913: 189; see also Idowu 1963: 130). But the orisa informs a far larger social group and corresponds to a greater collective will. For even though cult membership tends to be hereditary, several or many lineages tend to claim any given god, and in numerous cases particular gods are tutelary to residential quarters, kingdoms, federations, and empires. Moreover, in effect, affines, cognates, and people assigned only by the oracle often join a cult. Those who share the same ori compose a much smaller category but we must note that neither membership corresponds exactly to other social structural groups, like the sub-lineage, lineage, kingdom, or empire. Yet, the person is constituted by his or her participation in an interlocking variety of social networks. Let us examine closely the ritual imaging and defining one such form of participation. In this ritual process, we will recognize also a metaphor of the political unit's constitution by units of higher and lower order.

Baudin describes an initiation thus in 1885:

...there exists a sort of affiliation...., which varies a little according to the fetich to which the candidate is consecrated, although identical in all the essential points. The candidate is generally a child, a boy or girl of from eight to fifteen years. As

affiliation is expensive, very few can aspire to it. When the child's mother has saved money enough to purchase the happiness of seeing her son affiliated, she goes...to a fetich-priest, who with a band of his brothers goes in solemn procession to a fetich-grove. They begin by offering sacrifices to the gods to whom the aspirant for affiliation wishes to be consecrated....the neophyte's head is shaved, he is stripped of his clothes, and bathed with a decoction of a hundred and one plants (there must be exactly this number); his loins are girt with a young palm-branch, and he accompanies the fetich-priests in procession around the sacred grove. During this procession the assistants remain prostrate with their faces to the ground.

When they re-enter the grove the neophyte is vested in his new clothes. The the principal ceremony takes place. This is to ascertain if the fetich accepts the new priest proposed to him: this acceptance is an indispensable condition. He is consulted thus: the neophyte is seated in the fetich-chair, the priests bathe his head anew with the concoction of herbs and invoke the fetich. This ceremony is repeated three times; they at the same time dance and jump around the neophyte, making a deadening noise with the drums and all sorts of old iron....

At the third invocation the neophyte begins to twitch, his whole body trembles, and his eyes become haggard; soon he becomes so violent that it is often necessary to hold or tie him to prevent his injuring himself or others. Then all the priests and all persons present hail the fetich with loud joyful cries of Oricha o^! ("It is the fetich.") Oricha gun o^! ("He is possessed by the fetich." [Actually, "The orisa mounts."]) Finally, after several hours of frenzied tumult, the fetich retires from him, and he immediately returns to his senses. His violent frenzy suddenly ceases, and is followed by extreme prostration and lassitude. Some remain for quite a time as immovable as if dead. The fetich-priests and the assistants have the flesh of the victims cooked; then follows a great feast in the fetich-grove. When they have thoroughly fortified themselves, the person just affiliated is conducted with dancing and singing to a fetich-hut, where he must remain for seven days in the company of the god of whom he is supposed to have become the happy spouse: during this time he is forbidden to speak. When the appointed period has elapsed, the fetich-priests open his mouth, thus giving him permission to speak; they bestow upon him a new name, and the parents deposit shells at the foot of the fetich-idol, saying, "I buy back my son." They make some more sacrifices,

and the fetich-priest learns at the initiation what things are allowed him and what are forbidden....

At the moment of the important test, if the neophyte is not possessed by the fetich, they conclude that he does not wish to accept him, and then there is no initiation (Baudin 1885: 75-79).

The ritual dramatized not simply the initiand's acquisition of a new identity or role but the conflict among roles in the constitution of the human agent. Human agents and actions arise from the uneasy conjunction of collective forces. Several issues are to be noted for the present purposes. First, the neophyte is stripped alterable features of his persona--hair, clothing, and name. Second, the infusion of leaves in which the neophyte is bathed feeds the god in a manner not unlike the offering of animal blood at the vessels in the shrine--inviting the god's entry and presence in the vessel. Third, as the neophyte submits to the god, he also becomes a repository of the god and thus, in turn, merits the submission of the mortals around him. Fourth, the palm fronds, generally represent peace in the symbolism of the orisa cults, in this case probably represent an appeal for the god to descend gently into the neophyte's head and for the neophyte to manage his newly acquired powers with equal prudence. The palm leaves seem to gird the neophyte's genitalia, his or her own instruments of crucial action in the world. Fifth, the contrast between the initiate's obligatory stillness, silence, and lack of identity, on the one hand, and the tremendous activity occurring in the possession state, on the other, emphasize

the role of the god as source of activity, strength, and direction. In this ritual situation, his identity is subordinated to that of the orisa and he becomes a proper bride of the god (iyaworisa), regardless of his own gender, thus stressing his metaphorically sexual receptivity in relation to the god. He becomes an instrument and container of the divine will. Yet, other contents of the initiand's identity are not obliterated permanently. In the context of distinctly familial relations he remains a child and a son, and as the ritual situation is redefined by the parent's purchase, this identity prevails. Yet, as I have argued and as Baudin's description implies elsewhere, there is considerable overlap among these identities, insofar as constitutions and constituencies of cult group, kin group, and other categories defining the individual overlap. And they all share residence in his head. However, clearly enough, these roles and their spiritual reifications conflict. At the time of an initiate's death, for example, these conflicts surface in the rival claims of kin and cult group to determine the final disposition of the deceased. The circumscription of the king's personal identity suggests the same conflict.

Note again the motif of procreative roles in the symbolism of the initiation. Attention to the bride's organ of procreation is not fortuitous. The outcome of being mounted is as for the maiden, who thus becomes a mother and then a matriarch. In the cult, as in the household and the

state, the transition from iyawo (wife) to iya (mother) represents the standard status elevation for the woman of achievement. The highest female title in the orisa cults is iya orisa, "mother of the orisa." On the other hand, the male etymological counterpart, babaloorisa, "father of the orisa," is a term seldom encountered.

Key to relatively female authority, the capacity to contain may serve constructive or destructive ends. For example, when a person embarks on a risky journey, his well-wishers often say, Ori iya .e a sin .e l.o--"May the ori of your mother go with you [and protect you]. On the other hand, the witches are known as aje (iya je) and iyaa wa, "our mothers"; and the curse uttered by one's mother while touching her vagina or breasts carries ineluctable and fatal force. Her gesture marks the source of a woman's power. Her breasts and her womb alike are vessels and sources of life. Their potency in the creation and nurturing of life seems to result precisely from their capacity to contain. As earlier discussed, the state of that capacity to contain qualifies certain women to occupy paramount offices in the cults and to manufacture the sacred shrine vessels. In a congruent view of women's social behavior, they are alleged to be secretive, in contrast to men, who are public and unreserved. This feminine attribute is viewed with both fear and admiration. The proceeds of a woman's failure to contain--menses--are apprehended with strong affect as well. A menstruating woman can ruin the strongest juju, or magical

object, say informants. A man threatened with a pelt from a woman's menstrual rag will take to his heels, lest he be damned to ill fortune for the balance of his days. A woman whose menstrual rag falls into the wrong hands may never bear children again, traditionally a woman's most grievous disability and the ailment most commonly addressed in the orisa cults today. This affliction is frequently blamed on the retaliation of witches. False pregnancies and uterine tumors are also attributed to witches, who can allegedly prevent a baby from emerging from the womb at the proper time. Thus, the malevolence of witches is associated with retention disorders of two sorts--those causing too much containment and those resulting in too little. These powerful women are alleged to be able to stop others' menstrual flow or to cause an excessive flow. In the iconography of the cults, the power of the female orisa is represented in effigy by large breasts and numerous children. In the art of the male orisa cults as well, not only are the images of female worshipers usually large-breasted and surrounded by children, but in a disproportionate number of cases, they are kneeling figures holding vessels--the conjunction of two classic postures of wifely obeisance, the signs of her readiness to contain and give forth properly (see Illustrations III and XII). Male images in these cults usually represent horsemen, sometimes surrounded by servile attendants. Alternatively, in the Esu cult, the god himself is represented in conspicuously

phallic terms. In keeping with the chaotic quality of his power, his image is not associated with the imagery of its containment.

Uniting all these cases is the principle that effectiveness and purpose concern not only the issue of procreation and not only that of submission. The embracing theme is the dialectical relation between what penetrates and what is penetrated, what contains and what is contained. More dynamically, it is a relation between the vessel and the contents it shapes, between the contents and the container they shape. These relations are located in a wider framework of relations between relative centers and relative peripheries, or epicenters. Neither is always dominant or always subordinate. Symbolically, epicenters are always female relative to centers, but all epicenters are centers and are therefore male, relative to lower-order epicenters. At one end of the social-spiritual spectrum, the dominant ritual process in Yoruba polity, economy, worship, and procreation concerns bringing power from locii that are relatively male, foreign, heavenward, and incorporeal into guarded vessels, which feminize, indigenize, epiphanize, and corporealize. At the other end, dominant processes empower, protect, or consume the relatively male focii of the social unit. Ritual processes vary along other parameters as well--relative to the degree of permanence of the spiritual object in human action (contrast the duration of orisa possession and of ori

"possession"), relative to the size and shared concerns of its supporters (contrast Sango worship and withcraft), relative to its degree of regulatedness (contrast desirable and undesirable possessions), and relative to the seeker's quest for affirmative power or passive protectedness (contrast coronation and the male role in Gelede). These processes may be invoked at any point within the criss-crossing networks of social relations--by kings, big men, traders, mothers, priestesses, witches, sorcerers, politicians, hunters, and students. The normative view of any particular ritual process is determined by the perspective of those benefiting from or threatened by the containment of power at that particular center.

The center of any unit or body--conceived from our vantage as political, social, commercial, or biological--is known as its ori or olori--its head. It is no coincidence then that the orisa cults and the ritual surrounding ancestral guardian spirits center around the body part. Equally consistent are, first, the prominent representation of the head and its upward projections in shrine art and royal architecture (see Illustrations I-IV and XII, in which, typical of Yoruba aesthetics, the representation of the head is disproportionately large and sculpturally elaborate) and, second, the deliberateness of attention to the head in coronation and rituals of religious ascension (see Illustrations XVII, XIX, and XXII). I propose that these phenomena can be understood in terms of the emerging

symbolic scheme. Not only is the head the principle portal of perception, knowledge, and nutrition, and therefore of the appropriation of what is outside, but it is the bodily member closest to the sky. Upwardly oriented hats, crowns, and hair growths stress the skyward directionality of power. Thus, priests and kings are mediators of the above and of the outside alike; the ceremonies preparing them for these roles thus abound with ritual treatments of the pate, structurally the most supernal body part. The word ori itself is an intersection of the two complementary roles I have tried to illuminate--it represents both the physical head (ori ode) that contains one's ancestral guardian spirit, and the guardian spirit itself (ori inun, or inner head). It is the focus of an act of possession that preconditions all human biological and social life. In English, to call this act "possession" would admittedly beg the question. However, Yoruba language unites a whole range of such processes under the term gun. First, the term is usually associated with the alleged occupation, domination, and control of a person by an invading and foreign spirit. However, in the Yoruba conception of personhood, one is not a person (enia) unless that guardian spirit is within him--there are just unconnected souls (emi and ori) and body (ara). I have not heard the term gun used in this connection, but the similarity of processes, as indigenously conceived, is evident. In the occupation of the body by emi (life-breath), we witness an instance of a spirit occupying

a body, not a person. The product is an animated body. This animated body is in turn occupied by an ori. In that sequential process a person, earthly and social, is created. An orisa, on the other hand, possesses a person, and, logically, the outcome is something other than a person--it is the manifested god, the realized "head" of a corporate social body. Just as ori inun (the spirit) and ori ode (the physical head) become one in the first birth, orisa and person become one in the rebirths that are initiation and possession. In each birth, a relative epicenter is actively containing the power of a relative center. The activities of any given unit change, often radically, as the structurally central and structurally peripheral identities it contains come into conflict. For example, the epicentral king is subject to the spirit of both the imperial orisa Sango and the spirit of his own political autonomous royal predecessors. Yet the conjunction of spiritual identities is no less problematic in constituting the person than the conjunction of political identities is in the constitution of political units.

Let us reorient ourselves then to the axis both of Yoruba symbolism and of the present analysis. As the contact point between the person and the above and as the prototypical vessel of divine power, the head is metonymic and metaphorical of the ritual and biological processes of identity and empowerment--the empowerment of bodies, of

persons, of lineages, of compounds, of kingdoms, and of cults.

Take for example the initiations and annual festivals of Yemoja in Ibadan. During the ceremonies, the priestesses' head is prepared with an infusion of leaves nourishing to the god and a half calabash containing other such nourishing substances is placed on top of the head. As in the established patriarchal pattern, the relatively female feeds the relatively male--as ilari feed the king, mothers feed their children, wives cook for and feed their husbands, and the domestic host feeds the foreign guest. This half calabash also recalls the symbolism of the lidded cosmic calabash. As in the latter instance, the half calabash in the former case is structurally feminine and, in its incompleteness, invites the descent of the structurally male Yemoja. Once the goddess descends into the head of the priestess, the calabash tumbles. With empty ceramic water jugs (oru') atop their heads, the possessed priestesses proceed to the River O'gu'n, which is identified with the goddess, fill the jug with river water, and return to the shrine where the water will remain throughout the year. The water embodies the power of the goddess to give strength and cure ills, especially barrenness, when it is drunk. The possessed priestesses may pronounce the the will of the goddess, and they must be obeyed by the worshiping group and, traditionally, by the entire polity, which venerates all such important orisa collectively. The jug is filled,

just as the priestess' head is filled by the bodiless spirit of Yemoja. The priestess herself has gained power through the experience, but, more importantly, so have the cult and the worshipers collectively. Their head has spoken for their benefit. Likewise, Yemoja has gained power by being embodied and, simultaneously being fed. She is fully capable of departing when she is not treated properly, as she does in numerous tales, but were she not regularly received by her possession priests, her will would be felt less on earth and, ultimately she would die. The mythology of Yemoja treats not only the problematic construction of the person but the power relations among political centers and epicenters as well. We have discussed something of the last two centuries' political history in Yorubaland, but before we analyze the orisa mythology, let us outline some concurrent transformations in Yoruba religious ideology.

E) The Rise of the High-God Cults and the Changing Role of Intermediary Authority . The entire world, to the Yoruba, is a vessel of power, or ase, which animates all things inert and in motion. By Pierre Verger's (1966) formulation, the almighty god Olodumare is that divine power or life energy. Without God and, therefore, without that energy, nothing could occur or persist in the universe. His will is usually, from the human perspective, ambivalent and uncontained--he is the ultimate force behind both favorable

and unfavorable events, for nothing can happen if he has not willed it so. He has even given the witches their power to kill. That High God's unspecificity is precisely what makes Him the resort of last appeal when humans pray for help. Informed by Olodumare's power, the orisa usually direct events in the world. The human enshrinement of these repositories of God's power represents man's partial appropriation and regulation of environmental and social forces that are naturally ambivalent and are often out of control. The relative unimportance of the High God in traditional African religious observance has frequently resulted in his being described as "otiose." However, I would argue, along with Idowu (1963), that Yoruba address the orisa more often because they are the immediate and therefore intermediary agents of divine power. I contend that, furthermore, Olodumare is never rendered in image because he represents the ultimate abstraction of power from its vesseled manifestations.

The same formulation may account for the ancient model of kingship in the state. The oba was traditionally secluded, and he did little on the visible level, though every state function was performed in his name. "A king is not seen every week," says one Yoruba adage. In no culturally accurate sense is the king or Olodumare otiose; it is truer to Yoruba political and religious conceptions to say that they silently inform all essential events

respectively in the state and in the world. Yet, being of a lower order in the social-spiritual spectrum, the king is the envesselled and regulated form of Olodumare and the orisa within the state.

The current dominance of the high god cults in Yorubaland makes sense as a continuation of Yoruba modes of representing their social-spiritual experience. With the visceration of centralized, ascriptive authority, a whole category of intermediaries between divine power and man has been replaced by more direct, uncentralized, unexclusive, uncharted, and unregulated routes. I would suggest that the widespread African tale of God's departure to the sky in response to the greedy and willful acts of a woman relates the results of structurally female intentionality and activity in the cosmos--that is, the results of human production and the formulation of specific applications and specialized hierarchies for the appropriation of God's power. In the Yoruba spiritual idiom, the tale suggests that the cycling of ase--from the power center in heaven to various epicenters on earth, and vice-versa--has grown lengthy and institutionally complex. Through history, as God's power grew commensurately more distant from man, most people's power also diminished. Yoruba and other Africans often assert that people were more prosperous and mystically stronger in past times. Now, power is concentrated in exclusive categories of persons and beings. This change since the 19th century is not that Olodumare's power has

grown nearer and more popularly available; it is that access to Olodumare's power is no longer hierarchally constituted or ascriptively restricted.

The contemporary efflorescence of the High God cults corresponds to Yoruba people's turning away from the traditional kingships' ascriptive and hierarchal routes to power and toward the more diverse and less socially regulated routes opened by free trade and competitive politics. Contrary to the prevailing assumption, the High God cult in Yorubaland is not necessarily original to the Near Eastern traditions. Though Near Eastern influence is ancient, the construction of a high god shrine in 1827 by the general Sodeke in Abeokuta seems to reflect an organic political and social situation there. In this new and diverse urban confederation, power accrued to the greatest manipulators and public personalities. The high god cult was not preeminent in popularity, insofar as the constituent quarters of the Abeokuta confederacy aspired to retain the power constituted by traditional and ascribed sectional loyalties to diverse orisa and kings. In the Federal Republic of Nigeria, by contrast, the greatest power comes through direct competition and direct access to distant centers in ilu oyinbo, the country of the white people, whose power is distant but enormous and visible. Geographically, that source of power is associated with the southern coast of Yorubaland, where European trade and British colonialism found its entrepots. Moreover the

historically extra-Imperial peoples, like Ijebu, credited with the greatest success in the new modes of power acquisition. The Yemoja myths will elucidate this theme.

By contrast to the orisa-cult symbolism of gnostic secrecy and exclusiveness, the peoples prominently associated with the High God, along with their systems of initiation, stress the openness and non-exclusivity of information. Knowledge is generally unrestricted, and its power has, according to many of my informants, wreaked social chaos. Some conjecture that if the most powerful of African knowledge were thus released to the public eye it would lose its power or cause the same chaos. Witches and the inventors of machine technology are, to many Yoruba, variant exemplars of the same contemporary spiritual phenomenon--worthily interpreted as individual initiative in appropriating the power of the High God. Competing entrepreneurs and politicians are represented in similar terms--that is, as individualist and symbolically female and chthonic.

The ultimate worldly source of their power receives some elucidation in the Yoruba conception of white people. The term oyinbo actually embraces a whole range of presumptively light-skinned foreigners, but a dark Afro-American or even a Nigerian reared abroad may be termed oyinbo. Echoing the proverbial description of kings, a common Yoruba expression declares, Oyinbo ekeji orisa--"White men are next to the gods" (Johnson 1973: 26).

Literally, the term means not "white person" but "peeled person," framing the problem anew. For the vessel image, this concept substitutes the image of a detachable outer covering. Such a view substantially parallels the descriptions of the body's relation to the spirit (orinun) and of the elegun's relation to the orisa. An oyinbo is one without integument; he is relatively unvesselized. He is also ideally light in color and powerful, both characteristics suggesting his association with the structurally supernal. Thus, the term oyinbo implicitly represents white men as a relatively disembodied power awaiting envesselment, typified perhaps by the relation of the colonial officer to the states he governed after the pattern of Lugard's indirect rule, projecting his will through modified but pre-existing structures of indigenous government and society. The active containment of spirit, as I have argued, occurs not only in the pre-colonial and colonial polity, domestic architecture, and orisa worship but in procreation and the unfolding of lineages. The next section will illustrate and explicate the narrative discourse on the changing disposition of power in Yorubaland.