

CHAPTER
ONE



Concepts and Theories on Women in Yoruba Religious Sphere

Introduction

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Engendering the Study of Yoruba Religious Traditions

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Gender in Yoruba Culture and Society

Gender has been variously defined in diverse contexts. For this work, however, gender may be defined as capacities and attributes assigned to persons on the basis of their alleged sexual characteristics. Gender, then, is a construct within a people's living experience, embedded in the base of their philosophy and manifesting at the theoretical and pragmatic levels of their polity. Because gender is never independent of other social systems, it would be futile to consider it as a fixed and immutable construct; rather it is a process. Further, gender classifications permeate a people's cosmic perception and may be discernible in their language, wisdom storehouse, and philosophy. It thus presents itself in every sector of a people's

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

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

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

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

Female principles are generally regarded as symbols of coolness (*ero*) whereas male principles are construed as representing toughness (*lile*). This underlines the people's conception of female (*abo*) and male (*ako*). Hence the people say, "*k'odun yi y'abo fun wa o*" meaning "may this year be female for us" (bring us all that the female principle stands for). The converse implication of this is the avoidance of a male year, which by all indications may be tough and unpleasant. This perception also reflects in the people's social expectations for male and female, as recorded in wise sayings and proverbs. An example of this is the expectation for males to succeed their fathers as heirs and the need to offer explanations when this is impracticable. The heir is known as *arole*, and the explanation for exceptions to the rule is recorded in sayings such as, "*bi o ni di obirin ki je ku molu*" meaning, "if there is no special reason, a woman would not be named Kumolu."¹ In Yoruba cultural idiom and practice, this is a name signifying that the family of the female so named has no male heir apparent because all their male children have died. Women who perform feats, especially physical ones are described as *obinrin bi okunrin* meaning "a woman like a man." My point is that gender classifications have always existed among the Yoruba but may be transversely manipulated, as is the case in social structures and the ritual space in religion.

The existence of gender construct among the Yoruba does not translate to notions of oppression and the domination of women by men, because it is mediated by the philosophy of complementary gender relations, which is rooted in the people's cosmic experience.

A complementary gender relation is entrenched at every level of the Yoruba socio-religious consciousness, as both male and female principles are crucial to a smooth living experience. Social, political, and religious structures reflect this perception in both their membership and their modes of operation. It is therefore pertinent that a reconceptualization of paradigms for interrelations be obtained because notions of equality and parity could be at best misleading in the Yoruba context. As noted by Sudarkasa, a neutral complementarity rather than subordination more accurately describes the relationship between male and female roles in various precolonial African societies (Terborg-Penn et al. 1996: 82). This neutral complementarity is here taken to refer not to equality or parity but to cooperation and specified areas of control for the female as well as the male. Therefore, among the Yoruba, the question to ask about the state of sexes is not which sex is dominant, but rather, over which areas do the sexes enjoy prominence. Further, it should be noted that the prominence that one sex enjoys in a particular area of human activity does not make the people of that sexual category independent of those of the other (Babatunde 1998).

Women, Gender, and Religion

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Perspectives on Women and Religion in Africa

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Fieldwork Experience

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

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

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

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

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