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Incorporating Divine Presence, Orchestrating Medical Worlds:  
Cultivating Corporeal Capacities of Therapeutic Power and Transcendence  
in Ifá Everyday Practice

by

Amy Harriet Gardner

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the

requirements for the degree of

Joint Doctor of Philosophy  
with the University of California, San Francisco

in

Medical Anthropology

in the

Graduate Division of the

University of California, Berkeley

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Spring 2010

Incorporating Divine Presence, Orchestrating Medical Worlds: Cultivating Corporeal Capacities  
of Therapeutic Power and Transcendence in Ifá Everyday Practice

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by Amy Harriet Gardner

## Abstract

### Incorporating Divine Presence, Orchestrating Medical Worlds: Cultivating Corporeal Capacities of Therapeutic Power and Transcendence in Ifá Everyday Practice

by

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Joint Doctor of Philosophy in Medical Anthropology

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Professor Laurence Cohen, Chair

This dissertation focuses on the cultivation of specialized corporeal capacities of therapeutic power and transcendence among Ifá medical-ritual specialists in Yorùbá communities in contemporary Nigeria (and the resonance and implications of their practices within a global context). Rather than interrogate “medical (and/or religious) knowledge” as the object of inquiry, this project explores the power of *the learning process — as a practice of everyday living* — to cultivate, within student-apprentice and healer-sage alike, a distinctive (sonically and spiritually informed) somatic mode of being-in, perceiving, interpreting, and attending-to-the-world, and thus, to orchestrate Ifá’s distinctive medical and religious life-world. In so doing, this dissertation seeks to redress the historical stigmatization of African and Diasporic religions, subjectivities, and knowledges within the scholarly and popular imaginations and to contribute to recent scholarship on sensuous and sacred ways of knowing.

An ethnography of embodiment, the senses, and practices of everyday living, this work is fundamentally informed, methodologically and theoretically, by a phenomenological approach and the author’s embodied experiences (as a professionally trained dancer; as a physician; and — in her extensive training and continuous, on-going learning process — as an Ifá healer-specialist). Focusing on the embodied and the sensorial as formative principles in, respectively, the mundane and specialized medical-devotional (Ifá) life-worlds of the Yorùbá, this project explores the ways in which the *sonically-informed sensorium* of Yorùbá society — as articulated through common and specialized practices of everyday living — cultivates (and naturalizes) particular ways of being-in, attending-to, and making-sense-of intersubjective experience and the phenomenally given world for the populace at large and for Ifá specialists, in particular.

Specifically, this research claims that in the training and devotional development of Ifá apprentices and priests/esses, embodied techniques of everyday scholarly-devotional practice that cultivate a corporeal resonance with the earth are key. These distinctive embodied practices initially engender shifts and ruptures in the apprentice’s mundane *habitus*, while simultaneously facilitating the gradual incorporation of the priestly *habitus* with its associated sensibilities of “coolness,” permeability, and containment. These practices of everyday living also facilitate conscious, dispassionate communion with Divine Presence, and thus revelatory knowledge (the embodied certainty known as *erí okòṅ*). Gradually, with experience and practice, the healer-priest/ess is able to consciously direct aspects of Divine Presence-as-healing-force for the therapeutic benefit of others. Finally, after years of daily scholarly-devotional practice, these musical-embodied practices are refined and body forth a special — sonic and incorporative — somatic mode of being-in and attending-to-the-world particular to Ifá, known as “a stomach as

deep as a calabash” (*inú t’ó jìnlè bi igbá*), in which Divine Presence is incorporated, as co-presence, within the corporeality and being-in-the-world of the healer-sage. And this particular sonically-informed mode of being-in-the-world is characterized by corporeal capacities of phenomenologically potent therapeutic power and transcendence. Thus, this research proposes that Ifá practice is a *techne* of musical corporeality, wherein the healer-sage consciously and dispassionately orchestrates aspects of Divine Presence for the therapeutic, aesthetic, existential/transcendent enhancement of the individual, the priesthood, and the community.

This dissertation also asserts the primacy of engagement in *everyday scholarly-devotional practices*, over time, in bodying forth wisdom, knowledge, and healing power among Ifá healers and sages; and therefore, claims that the historical privileging of “initiations” of “ritual” and/or ethnomedical specialists in anthropological and religious scholarship is both misplaced and misleading. In West Africa, Ifá specialists are trained *for years* before being recognized or accepted as qualified practitioners. And it is through the individual practitioner’s engagement in *the formative practices of the learning process* — much more than in an overly mystified “initiatory moment(s)” — that Ifá’s specialized life-world, orientations, and corporeal capacities of therapeutic power and transcendence are made real and palpable.

In Ifá practice, the sensuous and affective body is the pregnant nexus from which, and through which, innovative knowledge, healing (regenerative therapeutics) and subjectivity continually emerge. Thus, in contrast to Bourdieu’s (1977) privileging of the conservative and congealing aspects of practice and habitus, Ifá practice highlights (and cultivates) the body’s inherent plasticity and malleability, and its capacity to incorporate — literally to embody — innovation, as sonically-informed sensibilities. This embodied agency has the potential to transform inter-subjective relations in/and the phenomenally given world. In particular, the phenomenological and therapeutic power of Ifá’s healing orchestrations dramatically highlight that, in addition to the technological instrumentality of biomedicine, there are other ways of constituting real and effective therapeutic power. And, given the shifts and flows of globalization as well as the emergence of complementary, alternative, and integrative medicine within biomedical institutions and practices, this has significant implications, theoretically and practically, for the challenges inherent in attending to the complexities of human suffering in the contemporary global moment.

To all those upon whose shoulders I stand  
*Mo Dúpé*

*Òrúnmilà, Mo yín ború.*  
*Òrúnmilà, Mo yín boyè.*  
*Òrúnmilà, Mo yín bosíse-o.*

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## Contents

Dedication	i
Acknowledgements	ii
Chapter I: The Making and Unmaking of The Body, The Making and Unmaking of Medical Worlds: Cultivating Healing Power	1
1. Ifá and the Power of Resistance	8
2. My Introduction to Yorùbá Healing Powers	11
3. Consciously Cultivating the Body: Dunham Technique	13
4. The Making and Unmaking of the Body: Cultivating Other Corporeal Techniques	18
5. The Making and Unmaking of Medical Worlds: Cold Wind	23
6. The Making and Unmaking of the Body, the Making and Unmaking of Medical Worlds: Disrupting Culture Bound Syndromes and Cultivating Corporeal Therapeutic Power	27
7. Sound Therapy?	29
8. Embodiment as the Fertile Ground of Departure	33
Chapter II: Imagining, and Incorporating, Difference. Sociality of Incorporation In(forms) Yorùbá Culture, History and Everyday Life	35
1. A Native of Amsterdam or a “Native” in Amsterdam?	38
2. “New Wife” Coif and “Native” Cloth	39
3. Magic and the Exotic “Other” in Amsterdam	41
4. The Multiple Meanings of a Milo® Can: The Commodification of Culture	41
5. Inventions of Yorùbá “Traditional Religion:” Ruptures in Participation	43
6. The Power of Voodoo	47
7. Transgressive Border Crossings or Topologies of Knowledge Unbound	49
8. Bodies of/and Medicine: Allopathy and Ifá	53

9. The Five Fingers of the Hand: Difference and the Social Body in Yorùbá Culture	54
10. The Topographies of the Yorùbá Imaginary	55
11. Insiders and Outsiders: Difference at Home	56
12. Disciplining Difference, Religious Practice, and Multinational Identity	57

Ìmò at' Ìwà. Knowing as/and Being, Part I.

Chapter III: Cultivating “Coolness:” Rhythms of Everyday Living, Embodied Certainty, and Articulations of Yorùbá Cultural Identity and Being-in-the-World. 61

1. Articulations of Everyday Sociality	61
2. Articulations of a “New Wife” in the Family Compound	61
3. Bean Cakes and The Basics	63
4. The Day of Reckoning	64
5. Back to the Basics: Ways of Knowing in Yorùbá Everyday Life	67
6. Ìwà: Being-in-the-world: “Cool” Rhythms and Sensibilities in Yorùbá Cultural Identity, Embodied Certainty, and Sagely Being-in-the-World	71

Knowing as/and Being, Part II.

Chapter IV: Suffering in/and the Journey of Life. 76

1. Ìyágbà's Legacy	76
2. Suffering for Children and The Curse of Barrenness	77
3. Perseverance Becomes Joy	80
4. Ìyágbà's Relationship With Divine Presence: The Well Spring	81
5. The History of Ìyá's Relationship with Divine Presence: Embodied Certainty	83
6. Ìyágbà's Story and The Journey of Life	85

Chapter V: <i>Ogbón ríbí-ríbí</i> : “Journey”ing of Ifá Healers. The Quest to Cultivate Wisdom and Therapeutic Power	87
1. The Journey of Life, Revisited: Weaving an Exegetical Cloth	87
2. <i>Ogbón ríbí-ríbí</i> . Wisdom and Social Responsibility in Ifá	88
3. Beginnings, Part One: <i>Òrúnmìlà</i> as Primordial Ancestor and Source of the Ifá Community	90
4. Beginnings, Part Two: <i>Òrúnmìlà</i> as the Embodiment of (mastery in) Ifá Practice	92
5. Returning to <i>Òrúnmìlà</i> in <i>Ogbón ríbí-ríbí</i> : Beginning the Journey	94
6. Journeying in Ifá as a learning process of cultural exchange: the life story of Ojo	95
7. Journeying in <i>Ogbón ríbí-ríbí</i> : Rupture and Surrender	96
8. Rupture as Transformative Ordeal	98
9. Health and Integrity Restored	99
10. The Journeying of Ifá Healers, Revisited: The Transformative Power of Ruptures in the Quest for Wisdom and Therapeutic Power	100
Chapter VI: <i>Ìforíbalẹ̀’fá</i> . I Touch My Head to the Ground: Ifá Everyday Scholarly-Devotional Practice and Bodying Forth a <i>Deep Stomach</i>	105
1. “Big Men” and Small Beginnings: Early Articulations of <i>Ìforíbalẹ̀’fá</i>	105
2. The Transformative Power of Body Techniques for Ritual Practitioners	108
3. <i>Ìforíbalẹ̀</i> : Gestured Greeting and Embodied Practice	111
4. Greeting Ifá (in Public)	112
5. <i>Ìkíni</i> : The Practice and Performance of Greeting	113
6. Cultural Competency and Thresholds of Social Belonging	114
7. The Postures	116
8. <i>Ilẹ̀</i> : The Ground, The Earth...The Sacred Vessel of Existence	117
9. Bodying Forth Distinctive Ways of Knowing in Ifá: From the “Ground Up”	119

10. Departures and Returns. <i>Ìforibalẹ́</i> fá as Everyday Practice: the Cultivation of Coolness, Receptivity and a ‘Deep’ Engagement with Divine Presence	120
11. Reflections and Revelations	122
References	126

*Ogbón ríbí-ríbí*  
*Ni a fi gbà ogbón ríbí-ríbí.*  
*Bí a ò bá ní ogbón ríbí-ríbí nínú*  
*Àì kó oògùn ríbí-ríbí.*

*Bí a ò bá kó oògùn ríbí-ríbí,*  
*Àì wò àrùn ríbí-ríbí.*

*Bí a ò bá wò àrùn ríbí-ríbí,*

*Àì gbà owó ríbí-ríbí.*  
*Bí a ò bá gbà owó ríbí-ríbí,*  
*Àì rí nkan ríbí-ríbí gbé se.*

Great wisdom  
Is what we use to acquire profound wisdom  
Without these penetrating sensibilities  
We are incapable of producing potent healing  
therapeutic  
If we lack the capacity to make powerful medicines  
We will be unable to mitigate deep suffering, profound  
illness and destruction  
If we lack the ability to attend to these forms of  
extreme disruption  
We will not achieve wealth and prosperity  
Without wealth and prosperity  
We cannot make significant contributions to the health  
and well being of our community.

Ifá verse (from *Ológbón Méjì*, the source of deep wisdom)

“My deepest concern seems to be the survival of manhood, of humanity, of the spirit, because if these blossom and take hold, the economic, the social, the political injustices will fall for lack of support; or at least so I am obliged to think.”

Katherine Dunham (1972:1)

*Sùúrù l'oba iwà.*

Patience and perseverance are the epitome of moral being-in-the-world.  
Yorùbá adage

“Unless we put medical freedom into the Constitution, the time will come when medicine will organize into an underground dictatorship... To restrict the art of healing to one class of men and deny equal privileges to others will constitute the Bastille of medical science. All such laws are un-American and despotic and have no place in a republic... The Constitution of this republic should make special privilege for medical freedom as well as religious freedom.”

Benjamin Rush MD, Signer of the Declaration of Independence;  
Surgeon-General and subsequently Physician-General of the Continental army; and Ardent  
Abolitionist

## Chapter One. The Making and Unmaking of The Body, The Making and Unmaking of Medical Worlds: Cultivating Healing Power

How are distinctive medical worlds constructed experientially so that they appear singularly convincing, natural, objective, the only way to [experience and] imagine the world? ...How is the '*medical consciousness*' constructed during the time that ... new forms of practical activity, an elaborate language, and new forms of organizing the self in relation to others, are all learned...What are the most significant dimensions of particular medical worlds...phenomenologically?

Byron Good (1993:103-4, emphasis added)

[In] the process of transformation of the novice...how it is that these *transcendental orientations* are embedded in the *consciousness of the initiate*; how is reality transformation and self transformation made real and convincing? ... Perhaps the point is not really the communication of specific information at all, but *experiential upheaval*... a *radical recentering* of experience... the religious reality ...becomes part of the initiate, orienting the preconscious...into a characteristic disposition.... [N]ot just ideas are involved, but a whole orientation of the self.

Evan Zuesse (1979:144 –145, emphasis added)

Merleau-Ponty thus wants our starting point to be the experience of perceiving in all its richness and indeterminacy, because in fact we do not have any objects prior to perception...objects are a secondary product of reflexive thinking... If our perception 'ends in objects,' *the goal of a phenomenological anthropology of perception is to capture that moment of transcendence in which perception begins and, in the midst of arbitrariness and indeterminacy, constitutes and is constituted by culture.*

Thomas Csordas (1990:9, emphasis added)

It is my contention that learning medicine is grounded precisely in 'establishing in which world knowledge is to be acquired,' and that studying how people learn offers insights into some of the *formative practices through which medicine constructs its world*...Entry into the world of medicine is accomplished ...by learning quite fundamental practices through which medical practitioners engage and formulate reality in a specifically 'medical' way.

Byron Good (1994:71, emphasis added)

This ethnography is a phenomenological exploration of the intersection between Ifá, a form of Yorùbá ethnomedicine, and embodiment and the senses. Ifá ethnomedical practice sits at the crossroads of the European categories of (indigenous) religion, medicine, and scholarship.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The crossroads, or *oríta méta* (literally, "the intersection of three [paths]"), is highly significant in Yorùbá experience and imagination. This is particularly so when paths converge in a "T" configuration. Ironically, American popular culture imagines this configuration as a "dead-end." Yet for the Yorùbá, *oríta meta* is the point of convergence and/or articulation of *three (méta* is "three") distinct trajectories, and as such, is the *quintessential* crossroads. First and foremost, *oríta méta* is the (sacred) site of *Eṣu*, the cosmic messenger between the everyday

Thus the queries posed by Good and Zuesse, above, regarding the processes of “reality transformation” — the formation of specialized medical and/or religious (life) worlds — and “self transformation” are exquisitely pertinent to my enterprise. As a practicing physician, medical anthropologist, and *ìyánífá*<sup>2</sup> (female specialist of Ifá ethnomedicine), I strongly agree with Good’s suggestion, in the final quotation above, that by focusing on “how people learn” (1994:71) we can gain unique insights into the creation and naturalization of medical worlds and medical (and transcendent) consciousness. Studying the learning process offers us unequalled access to, and appreciation of, the unique contours of a particular medical world and the “formative principles” through which this world is constructed. The learning process, *as a practice*, cultivates particular and specialized ways of engaging, perceiving, and interpreting the phenomenological and intersubjective world, such that the specialized world and its concomitant “consciousness” and “orientations” are naturalized, and “made real and convincing.” Good assumes that Other medical worlds and practices mirror Biomedicine’s claims of *singular* authority. My engagements – clinically, intellectually, and phenomenologically (*as practices*) — with a variety of culturally distinctive medical worlds strongly suggest that a number of “Other” medical worlds valorize, rather than stigmatize, the incorporation of diverse worlds and practices.<sup>3</sup>

Good (1994:65-87), in his essay “How [Bio]Medicine Constructs its Object,” frames the formative principles of the biomedical world in semantic, discursive and symbolic terms.<sup>4</sup> His foregrounding of representational forms and activities is compelling and, I would add, is a

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life world and the transcendent life world, and thus is important in Ifá practice. Furthermore, the unique configuration of *oríta méta* soundly reverberates with Yorùbá epistemological privileging of triadic relationships, and thus, has particular resonance with Ifá, as Yorùbá ethnomedical knowledge. Briefly, the binary formations in Euro-American knowledge and culture naturalize the reified and discrete — concepts and identities — and privilege oppositional and/or dialectic relations. The trinary foundations of Yorùbá culture and knowledge naturalize permeability and interpenetration — of concepts and identities — privileging the *emergent and the relational*. Somé’s comments regarding Dagar knowledge resonate with my experiences and analysis of Yorùbá privileging of the relational in the production of knowledge and identities. “It seemed to me that Dagar knowledge was liquid in the sense that what I was learning was living, breathing, flexible... [W]hat I was learning...made sense only *in terms of relationship*. It was not fixed, even when it appeared to be so...” (1994:203-4, emphasis added). Yorùbá trinary logic incorporates and transcends the binary. For the Yorùbá, knowledge, like a child, is the creative product *borne of* polarities *through* an engagement of complementarity. For a fuller explication of the privileging of permeability and interpenetration as fundamental Yorùbá sensibilities, see the next chapter. For more regarding *Eṣu*, see Abodunrin (2001), Ogundipe (1978), Pelton (1980), Pemberton (1975). For more on the critical relationship between *Eṣu* and Ifá, see Buckley (1985), dos Santos (1984), Hyde (1998), Witte (1984). Gates’ (1988:14) description of *Eṣu* as the “hermeneut of Yoruba religion,” based on Frobenius’ account (1913), is apt and refers to *Eṣu*’s complementary relationship to Ifá in acts of exegetical interpretation (where Ifá is *afedefeyo*, “the polyglot” or “one who comprehends all languages and cultures”). However, the remainder of Gates’ representation of things Yorùbá is highly flawed, at best, and a problematic *misrepresentation*, at worst. For more on Ifá as *afedefeyo*, see chapter 5.

<sup>2</sup> Ifá healer-sage. *Ìyánífá* (lit. “mother of Ifá”) is the assignation for women. *Babaláwo* (lit. “father of the mysteries”), for men. The term *awo* (lit. “mystery;” as in mystery-teachings; esoterica) is a nongendered term that is typically used to refer to an Ifá apprentice-in-training, but may be used to refer to an Ifá healer-priest/ess as well. For more regarding the participation of men and women in Ifá, see chapter 5.

<sup>3</sup> For more on the incorporation of difference as a fundamental social fact and sensibility in Yorùbá culture, in general, and in Ifá in particular, see the next chapter.

<sup>4</sup> Good (1994:68-9) explicitly builds upon Cassirer’s (1955) notion of “formative principles” and privileging of the symbolic forms in this essay not only to analyze the biomedical world, but also to promote the development of his larger project, in *Medicine, Rationality, and Experience* (1994), of highlighting the semantic, discursive, narrative, pedagogical practices employed cross-culturally to make sense of suffering.

reflection of the privileging of the visual and the textual in contemporary Euro-American and biomedical cultures. My work, in contrast, focuses on the embodied and the sensorial as formative principles in the mundane and specialized ethnomedical life worlds of the Yorùbá.

Specifically, I explore the ways in which the *sensorium* of Yorùbá society — through practices of everyday living — cultivates and naturalizes particular ways of being-in, attending to, and making sense of intersubjective experience in/and the phenomenally given world for the populace at large and for Ifá ethnomedical specialists. As Guerts notes (2002:5), the sensorium, or sensory order, is “a pattern of relative importance and differential elaboration of the various senses, through which [individuals]...perceive and... experience the world...[T]he sensory order... of a cultural group forms the basis of the sensibilities that are exhibited by people ... within that tradition.”<sup>5</sup> Ifá’s distinctive world, like the world of allopathy, is a specialized life world that emerges from, is tied to, and reciprocally (although not evenly) informs the everyday life world and sensibilities — the larger socio-cultural and historical context — to which it corresponds.<sup>6</sup>

Yet, in contrast to contemporary Euro-American and biomedical cultures’ infatuation with and authorizing of the gaze,<sup>7</sup> the Yorùbá sensorium privileges sound and musicality above vision.<sup>8</sup> Simultaneously, and somewhat paradoxically, the dimensions of the everyday life world *revealed* (*fihan*, “to make apparent,” “to uncover or reveal”) by the visual and sonic sensory modes are perceived and imagined by the Yorùbá as complementary and interpenetrating.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> The concept of sensorium was originally proposed by Ong (1991 [1967]). See the edited volumes by Howes (1991, 2005) for a taste of the literature in the emergent theoretical field of sensory scholarship (Stoller 1997).

<sup>6</sup> Here it may be useful to refer to Schutz’s (1962) collection *The Problem of Social Reality*, particularly his essay “On Multiple Realities” (op cit:207-259). In the introduction, Schutz (op cit:xxvii) delineates the everyday life world as follows: “ ‘the common-sense world,’ ‘world of daily life,’ ‘every-day world’ are variant expressions for the intersubjective world experienced by man within what Husserl terms the ‘natural attitude.’” This, then, is the mundane life world particular to a given cultural and historical moment. Regarding the various specialized life worlds, he notes (op cit:230): “We speak of provinces of *meaning* and not of sub-universes because it is the meaning of our experiences and not the ontological structure of the objects which constitutes reality.” Finally, regarding the relationship between the various provinces of experience (and thus meaning), and that of everyday experience, he asserts the primacy of the later: “The world of working in daily life is the archetype of our experience of reality. *All other provinces of meaning may be considered as its modifications*” (op cit:233 emphasis added).

<sup>7</sup> There is a vast literature exploring and critiquing the overdetermined visualism of modern Euro-American knowledge production, in general, and of Biomedicine in particular. For a very small sample, see Foucault (1975), Good (1994:65-87), Howes (2005), Nast and Kobayashi (1996), Noe and Thompson (2002), and Stoller (1989).

<sup>8</sup> Oyèéwùmí, a Yorùbá sociologist, in a critique of the uncritical imposition of Western theories, concepts, and social orders on African subjects notes (1997:14 emphasis added), “A comparative research framework reveals that one major difference stems from which of the senses is privileged in the apprehension of reality — sight in the West and a multiplicity of senses *anchored by hearing* in Yorùbáland. The tonality of Yoruba language *predisposes one toward an apprehension of reality that cannot marginalize the auditory.*”

<sup>9</sup> Ihde’s (1976) “phenomenology of sound” discloses the complementarity of the sonic and the visual. Zuckerkandl’s (1956, 1959, 1973) scholarship on music presents the “realm of tones” and that “of bodies” (materiality) as “two equally real, *interpenetrating* modes of existence, of *the* world that encounters our senses...It is simply that tones open a view that bodies obstruct” (1956:364-66 emphasis added). But the elaboration of these two modes of perception, and the particular life worlds orchestrated by each, as *both* complementary *and* interpenetrating is uniquely Yorùbá. This Yorùbá orientation is most succinctly captured by *igbá iwà*, “the calabash of existence,” a prominent symbolic icon. This perfectly round calabash is divided into two halves that unite seamlessly. The sonic realm is literally ‘above’ the material, highlighting its cultural assignment of existential and epistemological ascendancy. Nonetheless, in this representation there is free and fluid movement between the two halves. I perceive a fundamental imaginative resonance between the Yorùbá icon and the circular symbol commonly used in American popular culture to represent Chi. In the latter, the round whole is transected by a fluid wave distinguishing “Yin”



However, unlike Euro-American culture's valorization of "seeing is believing," the Yorùbá highlight the illusory nature of both the visual and the material,<sup>10</sup> and instead, equate perceptive sensibilities of the *immaterial*, the vibratory, and the sonic, with wisdom and knowledge.<sup>11</sup>

My work argues that these particularities of the Yorùbá sensorium critically inform everyday and specialized (Ifá) somatic modes of attention (Csordas 1993) and — in concert with particularities of Yorùbá history — powerfully influence the fundamental social facts and values inherent in Yorùbá experience, construction of knowledge, and ethnomedicine.<sup>12</sup> Thus, this project explores embodiment and the senses *not only* as culturally elaborated modes of *perception* and, thus, "the existential ground of culture" (Csordas 1990:140), *but also* in the relation to *cognitive* and *imaginative* processes (Lakoff and Johnson 1999, Johnson 1987, Varela 1991)<sup>13</sup> — to the orchestration of distinctive life worlds, or "provinces of meaning" (Schutz 1962).<sup>14</sup>

Ultimately, as noted above, this project focuses on the learning process in Ifá. Similar to Good's analysis of the construction of the biomedical world and its attendant consciousness and soteriological power, my work explores learning in Ifá as a means of elucidating the fundamental processes through which Ifá's specialized life world, consciousness, *and transcendent and healing powers* are engendered. Here we (re)turn to Zuesse's (1979) interrogations of African religious practices and knowledges to point the way. In the quotation above, he (op. cit.:145) speculates that the transcendental orientations and specialized life worlds are *not* engendered primarily through the pedagogical transmission of specific ideas, but rather, through "experiential upheaval[s]" that body forth a "radical re-centering of experience." Zuesse is specifically concerned with, and commenting on, initiatory experience. Yet I propose that his comments are equally relevant to (and perhaps more critical in) the larger learning processes.

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from "Yang" while simultaneously indicating their dynamic, interdependent, and interpenetrating relationship. For more detailed elaboration of the significance of the calabash of existence and on the paradoxical relationship between the material (visual) and the immaterial (auditory) in Yorùbá experience and imagination, see the next chapter. For more detailed analysis of the privileging of the musical and the sonic: (a) in the everyday life world of the Yorùbá, see chapter 3; (b) in Ifá everyday scholarly devotional practice, see chapter 5.

<sup>10</sup> See Hyde's (1998:238-240) presentation of the Yorùbá (and Diasporic) parable of *Eyú* and his tri-colored hat as the prototypical and quintessential expression of Yorùbá impressions of the unreliability of vision as well as their attitude towards those who are overly attached to the visual as a means of authorizing truth.

<sup>11</sup> One example of this is the etymological relationship between the terms for hearing and wisdom in Yorùbá: *ogbón*, "wisdom," quite literally emerges from the capacity "to hear", *gbón*. It should also be noted that these same sensibilities of porosity and permeability operative in hearing, and positively valenced as cognitive and creative capacities can, under other conditions, also be associated with vulnerability and infirmity.

<sup>12</sup> I argue that there is a complex, albeit mutually and reciprocally informing relationship between the sensorium, social values, and embodiment. Through everyday practices, in both the mundane and specialized life worlds, the interdigitation of the sensorial configuration and the social-historical values of a particular culture is re-articulated, more deeply incorporated — made flesh — and thus more powerfully authorized (Bourdieu 1977, 1984).

<sup>13</sup> Csordas (1990:140) makes a point to clearly differentiate his work from that of Lakoff and Johnson (1999). "The argument I am developing about the body as existential ground of culture is to be distinguished from that of Johnson, who analyzes the body as the cognitive ground of culture." I agree with Csordas' concern (1994:20) that Johnson (1987) by positing "that the body and its inherent orientations are 'taken up' into culture...without attempting to account for the reciprocal sense their approach entertains a complex flirtation with reductionism, dualism, and intellectualism." However, *unlike* Csordas, I wish to explore how culturally elaborated ways of attending to the phenomenally given world also *orchestrate* culturally constituted realms of meaning *and* somatic modes of action.

<sup>14</sup> For a different approach to the articulation of the corporeal/sensual, existential, cultural and cognitive, see Geurts' (2003) examination of "culture and the senses" among the Anlo Ewe.

My experiences and research in Nigeria and the Diaspora strongly suggest that the historical privileging of “initiations” of “ritual” and/or ethnomedical specialists in anthropological and religious scholarship is both misplaced and misleading. In West Africa and the Diaspora these specialists are *trained* for months or years before being recognized or accepted as qualified practitioners.<sup>15</sup> For example, the apprenticeship in Ifá is typically reported to average approximately ten years.<sup>16</sup> Thus, I maintain that it is through the novice-apprentice’s engagement in *the formative practices of the learning process* — much more than in an overly mystified “initiatory moment” — that these specialized life world(s) and orientations are made real and palpable.<sup>17</sup>

I applaud Zuesse’s intuitive grasp of the centrality of “experiential upheaval[s]” and their role in facilitating a “radical re-centering of experience,” and propose that these insights speak to *the power of embodied practices in the learning process*. I claim that a fundamental dimension of Ifá’s ethnomedical world is constituted through unique techniques of the body that cultivate a corporeal resonance with the earth. Ifá students and specialists are the *only* ones in Yorùbá culture — with the exception of infants and those in mourning — who sit directly on the ground. Furthermore, significant aspects of Ifá ethnomedical (and devotional) practice are elaborated through postures and gestures that involve direct and extensive physical engagements with the earth. My work indicates that, for the student-apprentice, cultivation of these distinctive techniques of the body initially precipitates a rupture her/his (mundane) embodied habits and practices. With time, as these new techniques are “taken up” and incorporated into the fibers of the apprentice’s corporeality, they body forth a distinctive — sonic and incorporative — somatic mode of being-in and attending to the phenomenological and intersubjective world that I assert is unique to Ifá.

My research reveals that embodied ruptures critically inform the lives and experiences of Ifá ethnomedical specialists in other ways. One of the ways in which individuals enter the study of Ifá is that they are “called” to serve Ifá — and through Ifá, the community — through personal experiences of corporeal crisis: through sudden and/or unusual physical afflictions. Corporeal crises are also often a dimension of the healer’s individual and on-going process of *at-tunement* as an instrument of musical performativity as/and therapeutic power. Finally, corporeal

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<sup>15</sup> I cannot speak definitively about the practices throughout Africa. However, a careful reading of the literature suggests that the training process, often in the form of apprenticeship, is a critical, yet here-to-fore underappreciated dimension of “ritual” and ethnomedical practice and expertise throughout sub-Saharan Africa. See Boddy (1989), Chernoff (1979), DeRosny (1985), Devisch (1993), Evans-Pritchard (1976), Friedson (1996), Rosenthal (1998), Stoller (1987), Van Binsbergen (1991). For a taste of scholarship that explores the learning/training process in a sample of Asian ethnomedical practices, see Desjarlais (1992), Ots (1994), Zarrilli (1984, 1998).

<sup>16</sup> For more on the training in Ifá, see fn. 19 and 24, below.

<sup>17</sup> There *are* radically transformative experiences in initiation as well. But they are *only* seed experiences. In order to flourish they, like most seedlings, need to be grounded in rich soil and cultivated with care. The musical and embodied practices of the learning process provide these nascent experiences in order to develop deep and enduring roots in the corporeality of the novice, cultivate the specialized somatic mode of being-in, perceiving, and interpreting intersubjective experiences and, thus, body forth and sustain the vibrant, specialized life world. Furthermore, in contemporary Nigeria there are numerous, practicing Ifá specialists *who have never experienced “initiation”*, and who are formally recognized by Ifá’s indigenous professional association. And there are others who have experienced the initiatory ritual but are neither Ifá devotees nor practitioners. For an example, see M. Drewal (1992:72-3). The taxi cab driver who she describes went through the initiatory ritual, after which his physical and financial health improved dramatically. Yet his subsequent engagements with Ifá were limited to large public festivities for Ifá. He had *not* become a follower, student, or practitioner of Ifá. Thus, the notion that “initiation” can be equated with expertise as a healer-practitioner in Ifá is *not* supported by the ethnographic data.

disruptions are fundamental to the formation of the “deep stomach” — *inú t’ó jìnlè bi igbá*, literally “a stomach as deep as a calabash” — a referent to the expansive mastery and profound healing power achieved by a small cohort of elder-sages in Ifá.<sup>18</sup>

As alluded to above, the sonic and *immaterial* is privileged in Yorùbá experience and imagination as the source of profound knowledge and power (*ìmò àt’agbára ijìnlè*, literally “knowledge and power that penetrates deeply —as into the depths of the earth”<sup>19</sup>). In Ifá ethnomedicine, unique musical articulations of *performative power* (Armstrong n.d., Austin 1972, Euba 1975, Favret-Sada 1980, Odebiyi n.d., Osunwole 1992, Peek 1991, Vidal 1969) figure prominently in both the learning process *and* the healing practice. For student-apprentice and master alike, Ifá everyday practice — in devotion, scholarship, and therapeutic ministerings — is characterized by a vast repertoire of musical verses (estimated in the thousands<sup>20</sup>) that are articulated in one of five specific performative genres. *All* of the verses and at least three of the performative genres are unique to Ifá.<sup>21</sup> These musical renderings are orchestrated in concert with the distinctive techniques of the body, mentioned above, as a seamless performative whole. Thus, the student-apprentice simultaneously is called upon to cultivate a corporeal resonance with the earth and to cultivate her/his corporeality as a musical instrument of performative force. The latter, in addition to processes of corporeal at-tunement, requires the student to gain competence in the five performative styles and to build a repertoire of verses. Furthermore, my work indicates that the processes involved in incorporating and cultivating Ifá’s musical capacities and practices also engenders disruptions of corporeal being-in and attending-to the phenomenally given world.

Everyday, throughout Yorùbáland, Ifá student-apprentices *as well as their mentors* orchestrate these musical articulations and techniques of the body that are particular to, and uniquely characteristic of, Ifá’s special world. I have coined the expression “everyday scholarly-devotional practices” of Ifá to refer to these musical and embodied techniques. For Ifá

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<sup>18</sup> See chapters 5 and 6 for more detailed exegesis of the formative role of embodied practices and of ruptures in embodied habits in the constitution of the unique life world and orientations of the Ifá ethnomedicine. Ruptures also figure prominently in my bodying forth this text. For more on the relationship between embodiment, ruptures and bodying-forth ethnographic theory and texts, see A. Gardner (2010, in progress) “From Joining In to Writing Down (and Back).”

<sup>19</sup> There are significant associations, linguistically and imaginatively, between the earth, *ilè*, and enhanced capacities of incorporation, intellectually and phenomenologically, as well as the capacity to powerfully impact the human and “natural” worlds. This is discussed more fully in chapter 6.

<sup>20</sup> Both Wenger (1983:75) and Abimbola (1976:19-20) claim that ideally (historically) an Ifá specialist was required *to know at least* 4096 verses (sixteen verses for each of the two hundred fifty six archetypal signatures/fundamental principles in Ifá’s knowledge system). However, Abimbola (*op cit*) notes that most contemporary practitioners know less than sixteen verses for each of the 256 categories. For more on the relationship of verses and texts in Ifá, see chapter 5.

<sup>21</sup> Scholars — primarily, if not exclusively, “native” — have noted the distinctive genres of Yorùbá “oral literature” production and performances, in general, as well as those specific to Ifá practice for more than a quarter century (Abimbola 1969, 1975, 1983; Afolayan 1982; Amherd 2005; Babalola 1966; Barber and de Moraes Farais 1989; Okpewho 1975; Olatunji 1972, 1973, 1982, 1984; Olukoju 1978; Oyesakin 1997). A few have commented on the musical and/or tonal dimensions inherent to these “aesthetic creations” (Euba 1975; Isola 1973, 1975; Lasebikan 1955, 1956; Olatunji 1973; Oyebode 1995; Oyelaran 1975; Vidal 1969, 1971). My work — inspired by Sowande’s scholarship on music as a fundamental presence and *living force* in Yorùbá/African cultures — is the first to seriously explore the power and significance of soundscapes and of the distinctive styles of performance, and their performative power phenomenologically and therapeutically. For more on Sowande’s scholarship (1944, 1955, 1962, 1969) on “the informing life of music,” see fn. 59, below. For a brief discussion of the sonically performative genres in Ifá practice, see chapter 5.

specialists— like their biomedical and academic counterparts in Euro-American culture — the learning process does not end with official confirmation and/or recognition of one’s expertise. And mastery — as in any intellectual, artistic, embodied, and/or meditative practice — is never definitive or absolute, but rather a slippery and, often, elusive object or goal. For once mastery has been attained, the individual cannot rest if s/he wishes to maintain it. Sustaining mastery requires continual re-articulation of, and ever-more-subtle and/or nuanced attention to and refinement of,<sup>22</sup> the practice, incorporating it ever more deeply into one’s daily life and fleshy and sentient being-in-the-world.

“*L’ajò L’ayé*” (“life is a journey”<sup>23</sup>) is an extremely popular adage among the Yorùbá.<sup>24</sup> This expression is particularly germane to Ifá practice because the learning process is an on-going and never-ending journey —and one that often includes journeying, literally, to distant lands and cultures to engage in intellectual exchange.<sup>25</sup> In my experience, as a practicing *iyánifá*

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<sup>22</sup> Once again, corporeal disruptions come into play. In my experiences as a professional dancer, dance instructor, and *iyánifá*, refinement of corporeal techniques always involves ‘breaking down’ specific dimensions of the practice and bringing them forth, once again, into consciousness, so as to effect finer articulation. I find Leder’s (1990) notion of the *dys*-appearance of the body to be a useful way of conceptually articulating this process. For more on the significance and deployment of corporeal ruptures in Ifá scholarly devotional practice and in Ifá’s medical world, see chapters 5 and 6. As noted in fn 18 above, ruptures figure prominently in my bodying forth this text and, I maintain, hold great promise for informing, and enhancing, ethnographic theory and practice.

<sup>23</sup> Actually this expression has deeper layers, conceptually and linguistically, that are significant to this project. *Ayé* is most commonly glossed as “life,” yet it has deeper connotations. It refers to the realm of human experience and meaning that is revealed through the visual: the *material*: the mundane life world. As noted above, the *sonic* and the *immaterial* realm of human experience and meaning — Ifá’s specialized world — is experienced and conceptualized as the well-spring of fundamental truth. Furthermore, *ajò* is an abbreviated version of the word *irinàjò*, also translated as “a journey.” I suggest that the latter is a contraction of *irin* + *àtí* + *ìjò*, or “the act of walking and dancing” (*ì*, nominative + *rìn*, “to walk” + *àtí*, “and” + *ì*, nominative + *jó*, “to dance”). Therefore, the fuller exegesis of this seemingly simple expression is something akin to “the human condition of material existence is a journey that involves both laborious movement, as when trekking over harsh terrain, and joyous movement of dancing.” And thus, the experiences of being-human-in-the-world, and the meanings that emerge and/or are created therein, involve *corporeal* participation in, and attention to, both the mundane (life world) — walking — and to that which is fundamentally orchestrated in relation to the sonic (Ifá’s specialized world) — dancing. Finally, I am struck by the resonance between the underlying privileging of physical labor in, and on, the earth in this Yorùbá adage and Jackson’s (1989:120) exegesis of the historical and etymological relationship between “culture” and “cultivate.” For more on Jackson’s exegetical analysis and its relevance to my project, see the final section of this chapter (entitled “Embodiment as the Fertile Ground of Departure”). For more on the “journey of life” in relationship to cultivating Yorùbá ways of being-in, making sense of, and engaging the world, see chapters 3 and 4; in relationship to specialized cultivating corporeal capacities of wisdom and therapeutic power in Ifá, see chapters 5 and 6.

<sup>24</sup> M. Drewal (1992) focuses on the significance of “the journey” in Yorùbá ritual practices. Although I disagree with aspects of Drewal’s larger argument, her presentation (1992:29-38) of the exegesis of the significance of “the journey” for indigenous elders and scholars offered by *Qsitola*, her primary informant and a knowledgeable Ifá specialist whom I had the pleasure of meeting, is *excellent!* chapter 4 presents more on the “journeying” of elders in Yorùbá culture.

<sup>25</sup> In addition to the lengthy apprenticeship noted above, traveling to foreign lands to study and exchange medical and esoteric knowledge and practices with healers and/or well-known experts has been a fundamental characteristic of Ifá training for centuries. See Abimbola (1976:25; 1983), Bascom (1969:81-90), Brenner (2000). Maupoil (1988 [1943]), Yai (1994). Informal interviews that I conducted in Nigeria over ten years suggest that apprenticeships are often much shorter at present (the notable exception, being for children born into Ifá households) and the aperture for traveling beyond Nigeria’s borders (even locally within the Bight of Benin) is significantly restricted. Nonetheless, the life-long quest for greater mastery and more knowledge is still a fundamental tenant of Ifá practice. See chapter 5 for more on the multi-valenced significance of “journeying” in relationship to the learning process in, and mastery of, Ifá.

and as one who has been engaged in the study-praxis of Yorùbá ethnomedicine and religion for more than twenty years, these scholarly-devotional practices are the embodiment, literally and figuratively, of the critical formative principles of Ifá's specialized life world, consciousness, and orientations. Furthermore, it is my contention that the musical and embodied dimensions of these everyday practices are also the source and well-spring, *orísùn*, of the elder-sage's "deep stomach," the corporeal nexus of Ifá's potent healing powers — of the deep, penetrating and, phenomenologically potent power known as *agbára t'ón jìnlè* (literally, "power that penetrates deeply as into the earth").

### **Ifá and the Power of Resistance**

Ifá is one of a number of Yorùbá ethnomedical practices that interweave ritual, healing, and devotion.<sup>26</sup> And while each of these practices is fundamentally informed by and tied to Yorùbá culture and sensibilities, they have also been powerful transnational forces, locally and globally, for many centuries. Locally, Ifá has been a prominent institution of moral authority among the Yorùbá,<sup>27</sup> and a formidable source of transnational identity throughout the region, since the emergence of the Ifè-centric (Yorùbá) political state in the eleventh century. Later, following the violent ruptures of the European slave trade, the missionaries and the colonial administration, Ifá (and other Ifè-centric ritual and medical practices) emerged as a formidable site of resistance to religious and political oppression — both foreign and domestic — and as a vital source of individual and collective resilience throughout West Africa and the Diaspora.

The European slave trade forcibly catapulted Yorùbá religion and ethnomedicine across the Black Atlantic. Taking up residence and laying down roots throughout the Caribbean and the Americas, these practices quickly emerged as powerful forms of resistance to oppression and crucial wellsprings of resilience.<sup>28</sup> More recently, through the multiple and overlapping

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<sup>26</sup> There is a wide variety of indigenous medical practices in contemporary Yorùbáland, ranging from those which interweave healing, ritual and devotion — such as Alfa (native Muslim practice), Òrìṣà and Ifá — and those in which the healing practice is more discrete — such as traditional bone setters as well as some herbalists and birth attendants. For more on the varieties of indigenous healing practices in Nigeria, see Sofowora (1982:26-53).

<sup>27</sup> Prior to colonial rule, *Ògbóni* (also known as *Òyùgbó*) and *Orò*, the institutions of moral authority and enforcement, served as advisory councils to the rulers of indigenous governance, the official adjudicators of all civil and criminal disputes, and the ones responsible for meting out the penalties for *all* moral infractions, be they committed by ruling elites or by members of the community. *Ògbóni* and *Orò* are also ritual/devotional practices. The colonial administration attempted to suppress the *Ògbóni*, forcing its members to take temporary refuge "underground." And while the organizations are no longer the official legislators, adjudicators or penal enforcers, they still are a critical source of moral authority within Yorùbá society in West Africa. In everyday life these indigenous institutions are more powerful, have more authority, and are more effective in maintaining the moral integrity of the community than the state courts or the local police. In contrast to Ifá, *Ògbóni* and *Orò* are *not* present in the Diaspora. For more regarding these institutions in Yorùbáland, see Drewal et al (1989:38-42) and Wenger (1983:186-87; 191-95).

<sup>28</sup> There is extensive literature on the European slave trade; on Diasporic practices as forms of resistance to oppression; and on the impressive influence of these practices and communities on "new world" social and cultural formations. For a sample, see Abimbola (2000), Barnes (1997), Bascom (1950, 1953, 1980), Bellegarde-Smith (2005), Brandon (1997), D. Brown (2003), K. Brown (1991), Browning (1995, 1998), Clark (1991), Clarke (1997, 2004), Cole (1993) Daniel (2001), Davidson (1961), Dayan (1998), H. Drewal (2008), Falola and Childs (2004), Falola and Genova (2005), Floyd (1995), Gates (1988), Gilroy (1993), Harris (1993), Herskovits (1941), Laguerre (1987), Landes (2006 [1947]), Lewis (1992), Matory (2005), Merrell (2005), Mintz and Price (1976), Murphy and Sanford (2001), Olupona and Rey (2008), Omari-Tunkara (2005), Tishken, Falola, and Akintunde (2009), Verger (1957, 1981), Walker (1980, 2001), Wilson (2001). Yorùbá religious practices, particularly those associated with the Ifè-centric polity of moral governance, have also served as a formidable site of resistance to religious and political

migrations of the twentieth and, now, twenty-first centuries, Yorùbá diasporic practices and communities are now solidly entrenched in mainstream Euro-American culture; richly inhabit global metropolises as well as cyberspace; and can be found, as an emergent, nascent yet growing, presence as far away as Australia and Japan.<sup>29</sup>

As noted above, Yorùbá cultural forms, institutions, and practices have been powerful transnational forces *in West Africa*, from prior to colonial contact through the present moment. The Yorùbá have an impressive history, dating back to at least the eleventh century, of urbanization, a centralized political state, and engagements with foreign cultures.<sup>30</sup> Ilé Ifẹ̀, the first major Yorùbá urban center, also formed the first political state that reigned from the eleventh through the eighteenth centuries (Adediran 1998, Drewal 1989, Obayemi 1979, Ogunremi 1998). Archeological evidence demonstrates that from the thirteenth century onwards, Ilé Ifẹ̀ was involved in the exchange of commercial materials and thus, indirect cultural contact, with Northern and Eastern Africa, and Europe (Davidson 1961, Willett 1980).<sup>31</sup> Beyond its engagements with very distant lands and cultures, the Ifẹ̀-*centric* polity was also extremely influential in the neighboring states throughout pre-colonial Bight of Benin. Early accounts of European slave traders wrote of “a mighty” state, located between Ardrah (Porto Novo) and Benin...[which] is referred to as *Ulkami*” (Kopytoff 1965:309). The Europeans also comment on the wide-spread use of *Olukumi*,<sup>32</sup> the Ifẹ̀-*Yorùbá* dialect, as the *lingua franca* — of commercial, intellectual, artistic, and political interchange — throughout the region (Barbot 1732, Bosman 1705, Dapper 1989 [1686], Snelgrave 1734). Finally, Ifẹ̀-*centric* religious and ethnomedical practices — particularly but not solely Ifá — were widely embraced in the region, infusing

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oppression — both foreign and domestic — *in West Africa*, from the seventeenth century through contemporary times. For more on Yorùbá history and social organization, see the next chapter. Elsewhere I provide a more detailed analysis of Yorùbá religious practices as resistance to hegemony and oppression (Gardner, in progress) Also see Apter’s (1992) study of Yorùbá hermeneutics of power, and Yai’s (2001:246-8) claims regarding these practices as “forces of transnational civil society.”

<sup>29</sup> A recent internet search, on Google®, of the term “Orisha” (the gloss for Yorùbá deities, it is also used in popular vernacular to describe Yorùbá diasporic religious practices and communities), yielded approximately 16,000 hits in less than one second. “Yoruba religion” yielded 105, 000 results; and “Ifa religion,” 11,300. For academic musings on these cyber-communities and practices, see Brandon (2008), Doris (1996). Furthermore, Tsuda (2003) describes the recent phenomena of second generation Japanese Brazilians ‘returning’ to their ethnic homeland, and the resultant infusion of Brazilian sensibilities and cultural practices, such as *carnaval* – and Afro-Brazilian religions — into contemporary Japanese culture.

<sup>30</sup> See Drewal (1989), Garlake (1977), Ozanne (1969), Willett (1967, 1970) for more details regarding the archeological evidence confirming highly structured, walled urban centers and a political state, centered in Ilé Ifẹ̀ — and extending as far west as Ketu and Togo, to the coastal area of Ikeja (Lagos), and as far south as Benin city — that dates back to at least the eleventh century. Other works about the legacy and practice of urbanization among the Yorùbá include Aronson (1978), Bascom (1955), and Krapf-Askari (1969).

<sup>31</sup> The artists of Ifẹ̀ produced exquisite bronze heads, using the lost-wax method, from approximately the fourteenth to the seventeenth century (Drewal 1989:63-4). As Ifẹ̀’*s* political power declined, so too, did, revenues from the taxation of vassal city-states. This impacted the materials used in Ifẹ̀’*s* aesthetic production. The metals used to produce bronze — zinc, lead, copper, and tin — are not indigenous to the region and “ appear to have been carried across the desert from North Africa, if not all the way from Europe...[T]hese supplies seem to have ceased as the tributary kingdoms asserted their independence from Ifẹ̀, ceasing to pay tribute and interrupting the trade. Bronze casting was brought to an end...” (Willett 1980:34).

<sup>32</sup> It is noteworthy that the *lingua sacra* of Yorùbá Diasporic devotional practices in Cuba is known as *Lukumí*. The term is also used in Cuba as an assignation for those of Yorùbá descent (Brandon 1993, Brown 2003, Cabrera 1957, Hagedorn 2001, Mason 1992, Pollak-Eltz 1996).

neighboring peoples (i.e. Igbo, Fon, Ewe Edo) with Ifè -Yorùbá cultural values and practices.<sup>33</sup> Participation in these ethnomedical practices and religious communities engendered an extensive transnational community throughout the Bight of Benin, commonly referred to as the “*ebi* commonwealth” by contemporary historians and Yorùbá scholars (Akinjogbin 1967; see also Adediran 1994, Afolayan 1989, Yai 2001).<sup>34</sup> My reading of this regional history indicates that Ifá was critical not only to the formation and expansion of Ifè -centric governance, but also to the widespread popularity of Ifè -centric religious practices and cultural values throughout the Bight of Benin.<sup>35</sup> And I attribute Ifá’s significance to its unique position as both (a) a leading authority in indigenous religious, medical, and scholarly *practice*, and (b) an *institution* of moral force and authority that was intimately associated with Ifè’s royal court.

The European slave trade was a watershed epoch for West Africa in general and the Yorùbá peoples and polity, in particular. The Òyó-Yorùbá quickly became prominent slave traders, exchanging human cargo for guns and ammunition to arm their cavalry. Òyó military expansion, fueled by the European slave trade, engendered an epoch of terror, crushing Ifè’s political reign and irrevocably rupturing critical aspects of the transnational *ebi* community. At its peak, at “the beginning of the 18th century... Òyó and its *Alafin* [the military and political ruler] could claim an empire encompassing 18,000 square miles and perhaps a million people” (Pemberton 1989:148), all of them living in fear.<sup>36</sup>

Apter (1992) postulates that after Ifè’s political demise, Ifè -centric ritual practices and communities emerged as powerful sites of opposition to the authorizing discourse and harsh oppression of Òyó’s military regime.<sup>37</sup> He frames these practices and practitioners as an “Ifè -centric ritual field” and presents a detailed argument to highlight their continued presence and *power* within Yorùbá society as a vital source of resistance to hegemony and oppression. Apter’s excellent “hermeneutics of power in Yorùbá society” highlights the power of Ifè -centric ritual

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<sup>33</sup> In most cases, Ifè -centric religious and/or ethnomedical practices were embraced primarily by the populace. This was originally true in Dahomey where the *orisa* “cults” were extremely popular among the Fon citizenry. Yet later, King Agaja (1708-1740) — impressed with Ifá’s medical and esoteric acumen and power, as well as its intimate association with centralized political authority — imported and formally installed Ifá into his royal court in Abomey (Herskovits 1938, Zuesse 1979). Subsequently, the royal court of Abomey became an important site, in West Africa, of esoteric and ethnomedical interchange among Muslim and indigenous specialists (Brenner 2000, Maupoil 1988 [1943]).

<sup>34</sup> Akinjogbin (1967:16-18) coined the term “*ebi* commonwealth.” *Ebi* is a Yorùbá word that is commonly translated as ‘family’, yet it is vital to note that the configuration of one’s *ebi* is far more extensive than the nuclear, or even the extended family of Euro-American experience. *Ebi* refers to the large polygynous compounds, extended biological kin, as well as others who, although not directly associated biologically, are considered, and included, as part of the familial network. The notion of membership in a network and community of extended familial relations also pertains to those who join one of the Yorùbá religious communities. Thus this term highlights Ifè -centric cultural values and practices as significant transnational forces in West Africa. For more regarding social organization of Yorùbá families and religious communities, as well as the privileging of inclusiveness — the incorporation of difference — as a fundamental social value and sensibility among the Yorùbá, see the next chapter.

<sup>35</sup> Gardner (in progress) “*Olùkùmi Nation*.”

<sup>36</sup> The hegemonic oppression of the Òyó military was feared throughout the Bight of Benin. According to William Bosman, a British slave trader of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries (1705:397-398 quoted in Afolayan 1989:16) the Òyó would strike “such terror into all the circumjacent Negroes that they can scarcely hear them mentioned without trembling...”

<sup>37</sup> For alternative interpretations of Ifè’s persistent influence in the region, during the pre-colonial era, see Bradbury’s (1967:10) “Ifè dynastic field” as well as Horton’s (1979:118-28) “elder-statesman” theory.

practices as a formidable source of resistance to oppression, from the era of the European slave trade through the present moment.

I would suggest that many of these practices served as a site of resistance and resilience, not only on the continent, but in the global displacements of the Yorùbá as well. Furthermore, in contrast to Apter's privileging of the practices and performances of the "Òrìṣà cults,"<sup>38</sup> I would argue the pivotal significance of Ifá as the well-spring or source, *oríṣun*, of the Ifè-centric ritual field,<sup>39</sup> of its power to subvert, challenge, and/or overthrow domination, and of its continued resilience over time.<sup>40</sup> Finally, I strongly contest Apter's privileging of "histories" as the primary source of power. I assert that the *power* of Yorùbá ethnomedical and ritual practices — both as creative sources of individual and collective resilience [read: health and vitality], as described in the previous section, as well as vital sources of resistance to religious and/or political oppression — emerges through participating in their specialized musical and corporeal orchestrations. Engagement with these techniques of the body, even transiently as is the case for the populace, can be radically transformative. The elders in each of the ritual-ethnomedical practices, through their mastery of the specialized choreographies and orchestrations unique to each tradition, are the quintessential embodiment of their respective, specialized somatic modes of attention. And each of these specialized modes of engaging, perceiving, and acting in and *on* the world are phenomenologically potent, capable of orchestrating profound transformations in — individual and collective — personal, social, and/or political experience.

### **My Introduction to Yorùbá Healing Powers**

I was first introduced to the healing power of Yorùbá and Diasporic practices more than twenty years ago in New York City through the convergence of two streams of experience: my interactions with my patients, as a physician-in-training in the Bronx; and my personal engagements with, and subsequent professional training in, Dunham dance. In 1980, after graduating from medical school in the Midwest, I came to the Bronx for my postgraduate

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<sup>38</sup> Apter focuses primarily on the participation of the "òrìṣà cults" in the rituals of dynastic renewal in contemporary Yorùbá towns. He illustrates how these performances encompass not only the official discourse that authorizes current political configurations, but also, and perhaps more importantly, serve as powerful alternative histories contesting this authority. As he notes, "These histories are literally powerful because they make the unthinkable audible, visible, possible, and when conditions are right, *actual*" (Apter 1992:219 emphasis added).

<sup>39</sup> The Òyó polity was aware of Ifá as the center of this "ritual field." The royal court of Òyó appreciated and utilized Ifá's intellectual and ethnomedical power to its advantage. Yet it feared Ifá's unique capacity as the well-spring of resistance, and thus established a special political position to ensure constant supervisory vigilance of the Ifá specialists. It is also important to note Ifá's unique relationship, historically and at present, as the intermediary between the numerous Òrìṣà communities, on one hand, and the institutions of indigenous governance — from the *Qba*, the crowned ruler, to his councils of ritual, moral, and political advisors (most saliently Ògbóni and Orò noted above in fn. 27) — on the other. Finally, in contrast to the passionate communion with divine presence ("possession;" "trance") characteristic of Òrìṣà practice and practitioners, Ifá, *alone*, is noted for its lack of trance-possession. Ifá practice and practitioners have been renowned for centuries throughout the Bight of Benin as epitomizing cool, dispassionate, moral force, healing power, and intellectual and esoteric scholarship.

<sup>40</sup> For examples of Ifá as a formidable site of resistance to religious and/or political oppression in Yorùbáland from colonial contact through the present, see Akinnaso (1995), ARSADA(1965), Barber (1990), Beyioku (1971), Drewal (1992), Epega (1935), Fabunmi (1971), Falola (1999), Fasogbon (1985), Ferguson (1996), and Peel (1990). Also see the periodical *Orunmila*, published intermittently from 1985-1990, by Orunmila Youngsters International (OYIN), Indigene Faith of Africa (*Ijò Orunmila*), for examples of Ifá as a site of resistance in the late twentieth century. And see Nunley (1987) regarding Ifè-centric ritual practices, including but not limited to Ifá, as an important source of resistance to hegemonic governance among the community of Yorùbá descendants (known as *Aku*, or *Saro*) in Sierra Leone from the late 1700s through the late 1970s.



training in Social Family Medicine.<sup>41</sup> Moving to New York proved to be fortuitous in many ways. As a (nascent) physician in the Bronx, I received excellent supervision in honing my clinical and psychosocial skills. And through my interactions in the local community as well as with my colleagues in social medicine at Montefiore, my engagements with social justice matured, intellectually and practically. Finally, and rather unexpectedly, living in New York afforded me an opportunity to re-embrace dance, my personal passion since early childhood.

One of the salient features of my experiences in Montefiore's program in Family Medicine, beyond the rigorous clinical training and commitment to public health as/and social medicine, was that it enabled me to cultivate long-term relationships with my personal patients in our neighborhood clinic.<sup>42</sup> Most of my patients were first or second-generation Afro-Caribbean immigrants from Cuba, Puerto Rico, and/or the Dominican Republic, many of who participated regularly in Lucumí (Yorùbá Diasporic practices in Cuba) healing rituals. I also had a few patients from Haiti who were members of the local Vodun (Yorùbá and Ewe-Fon Diasporic practices) community. These patients introduced me to the presence and practices of their respective Yorùbá Diasporic communities. Gradually, as my relationship with these patients deepened, they began to share with me their experiences of the healing *power* of these ritual and ethnomedical practices. Over time, my appreciation of this therapeutic power deepened — not only by listening to their narrative descriptions, but also, and perhaps more critically, by witnessing the impact and influence these practices had on their health and on their lives.<sup>43</sup>

In addition to being impressed, clinically, with the effectiveness of Lucumí therapeutic practices for these patients, I also felt personally drawn to the ritual ceremonies and practices in their narrative accounts. Yet I consciously limited my personal engagements with these Diasporic communities. I only attended select public ritual events, and then, with rare exception, I remained on the periphery. Instead, my initial and formative *personal* experiences of Yorùbá Diasporic cultures, techniques of the body, and healing power emerged through my engagements with Dunham dance technique.

From early childhood on, dance (primarily, although not exclusively ballet) had been my passion. But, as a medical student in the Midwest, and then an interning physician in the Bronx, I had relinquished my corporeal engagements of dance for my biomedical and clinical engagements of the body. Once the rigors and sleepless nights of my internship were behind me — and, fortuitously, living in the dance capital of America — I re-embraced dance.

Rather than return to ballet, however, I found myself enraptured with the Haitian and Cuban (Yorùbá Diasporic) inspired movements and drum rhythms of Dunham dance. Immediately, Dunham's unique movement vocabulary and accompanying Diasporic drum

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<sup>41</sup> Montefiore Medical Center was renowned for its unique post-graduate training programs in (a) Social Internal Medicine; (b) Social Pediatrics; and (c) Social Family Medicine. The faculty and administration of the three programs were housed under one roof, and all the residents and faculty worked closely together, forming personal as well as professional ties.

<sup>42</sup> For our entire postgraduate training — for the first year as an intern, and then for the following two years as a resident physician — we were required to spend *at least* two half-day sessions in our clinic in the Fordham neighborhood of the Bronx. This allowed each of us to cultivate our own personal patient panel and to follow our patients regularly over three years.

<sup>43</sup> The effects that I witnessed, among my patients at that time, were primarily improvements in mental health, such as the alleviation of depressive symptoms. However, I did have one patient, a young woman who had been diagnosed as “sterile/infertile” secondary to chemotherapy of breast cancer, and who subsequently became pregnant and delivered a beautiful, healthy daughter. She attributed her conception and successful and uneventful pregnancy to the ritual and therapeutic interventions of a local Lucumí priestess.

rhythms evoked a profound resonance within the fibers of my being that “made my heart sing”<sup>44</sup> and would not be denied.<sup>45</sup> The rhythms and dance form spoke to the depths of my corporeality, and my entire being heard them, responding in a musical conversation. Furthermore, influenced by my formation as a physician, dance took on added significance. Returning to dance not only afforded me a wonderful and sorely missed vehicle of aesthetic expression, but also afforded me a wonderful opportunity to study the body — *my body* — from the “inside- out.”

### **Consciously Cultivating the Body: Dunham Technique**

I am deeply indebted to Katherine Dunham<sup>46</sup> and to her protégée — and my mentor, colleague, and friend — Pearl Reynolds, as my formative engagements with Dunham technique radically influenced the trajectory of my life, personally and professionally. My training in Dunham dance gave me a deep appreciation of the intellectual, corporeal, affective, and existential processes involved in *consciously* cultivating techniques of the body. Also, I experienced healing and regenerative effects through my engagements of Dunham technique, confirming my aforementioned impressions of the therapeutic power of Diasporic ritual and ethnomedicine.<sup>47</sup> In concert, these personal and professional experiences strongly suggested to me that healing in Yorùbá Diasporic ritual and ethnomedical practices — and perhaps other culturally distinctive ethnomedicines as well — is engendered through corporeal participation in specialized rhythmic and embodied techniques.

Pearl Reynolds’ personalized, detailed and pains-taking pedagogical approach to dance was the cornerstone of my incorporation of the particularities of Dunham’s form. More broadly, and of special significance to this ethnographic endeavor, Pearl Reynolds — using Dunham technique as the vehicle — taught me the art and/as practice of consciously cultivating “deep” techniques of the body. And this practice required, first and foremost, that I develop a fundamentally distinctive appreciation of, and relationship to, *discipline*. Through Pearl Reynolds’ pedagogical techniques of the body I came to know, *corporeally*, the ontological and etymologic resonance between *discipline* and *disciple*.<sup>48</sup> The discipline of the body I first experienced in Dunham dance — in wondrously stark contrast to the de-humanizing and

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<sup>44</sup> This is how I described my experience of Dunham dance in an interview that was aired in a 1984 PBS documentary on Katherine Dunham.

<sup>45</sup> It is noteworthy that Dunham also ascribes a primacy to rhythmic resonance. In an interview by VèVè Clark, M. Hodson, C. Neiman, and F. Bailey (Clark and Wilkerson 1978:39), Dunham notes: “I think that fundamentally people are more to be differentiated on the basis of their rhythmic cycles than on the basis of their race or color, or this or that...”

<sup>46</sup> For a wonderful introduction to Katherine Dunham’s impressive legacy as a dancer, choreographer, anthropologist, and social activist, see *Kaiso!: Writings by and about Katherine Dunham* (Clark and Johnson 2006). Other recommended texts include Aschenbrenner (1980, 2002), Beckford (1979), Clark and Wilkerson (1978), Emery (1980), O’Connor (2002), Rose (1990).

<sup>47</sup> Dunham claims she utilized sacred and secular dances from Cuba, Haiti, and Martinique to create her unique movement vocabulary. Yet her acknowledgement of the importance of Diasporan drummers on the development of her exercises, as well as her continued emphasis on the healing and spiritual properties of the technique, speak to her *fundamental inspiration* by Diasporic sacred and ethnomedical embodied techniques (Aschenbrenner 2006:482-485). For more on the therapeutic power of music and dance in Diasporic traditions see Browning (1995, 1998) and Daniel (2001, 2005).

<sup>48</sup> Both words come from the Latin *discip(ere)*, to grasp. See Webster’s *Encyclopedic Unabridged Dictionary*, s.v. “disciple” and “disciple.” Thus the terms speak to a fundamental connection between physical action in the world and comprehension, while gesturing towards the possibilities of transcendence. And, as noted in the previous footnote above, this has particular resonance in the corporeal cultivation of Dunham technique.

oppressive vigilance of biomedical discipline — was (and continues to be) profoundly, and at times ecstatically, liberatory.<sup>49</sup>

Embodied discipline in Dunham dance begins very simply, with attentiveness to the breath.<sup>50</sup> Attending *with* my corporeality *to* the ebbs and flow of my breathing<sup>51</sup>, I began to experience the fullness, fluidity and circularity of the breath, as *rhythm* and as *movement*. Furthermore I gained a heightened appreciation of the breath as both a primary organic rhythm<sup>52</sup> and the wellspring of corporeal movement, even when the body is “at rest.”<sup>53</sup> Gradually, I moved from an awareness *of* the breath to *moving with* and *on* the breath. I realized that corporeal intentions<sup>54</sup> that are centrifugal (extending and/or moving out from the body’s center) resonate with the subtle corporeal expansion engendered by inhalations, and thus are most easily elaborated in concert with inspiration. Conversely, I found that centripetal corporeal intensions are bodied forth with greatest ease when articulated through exhalations.<sup>55</sup> Finally, through moving *with* and *on* the breath I acquired an enhanced sensibility of, and sensitivity to, musical rhythms and their capacity to nourish and sustain the corporeal and the choreographic.

There are minute spaces, or gaps, in every rhythmic pattern. Keil (1987, 1994), a performing jazz musician and ethnomusicologist,<sup>56</sup> has coined the phrase “participatory

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<sup>49</sup> Garth Fagan (1983) choreographed a marvelous piece entitled “Prelude: Discipline is Freedom.” That work beautifully captures how precise detailed mastery and incorporation of the most basic dance movements, such as a demi plié, body forth ecstatically brilliant leaps and exquisitely breath-taking choreography.

<sup>50</sup> It is noteworthy that many movement, meditative and/or martial arts techniques use attentiveness to the breath as the foundation of their practice. However, different styles and/or practices frequently employ distinctive techniques of breathing. For example, in dance one breathes into the chest, expanding it laterally while simultaneously lifting up and out through the sternum; in Hatha Yoga one typically breathes *through* the nose (with the mouth closed and tongue lightly touching the roof of the mouth) *into* the belly expanding it like a balloon, often with sonorous exhalations; and in Pilates, one breathes into the chest expanding it laterally and *inferiorly*.

<sup>51</sup> Note that this process of attending *with* my corporeality *to* another dimension of my corporeal experience is the beginning of an elaboration of a larger somatic mode of attention characteristic to Dunham dance.

<sup>52</sup> The other fundamental organic rhythm is the heart beat. Nonetheless, the newborn’s first cry and the dying individual’s last breath powerfully delineate, phenomenologically and imaginatively, critical boundaries of human living and being-in-the-world.

<sup>53</sup> Breathing creates, and is created by, the expansion and contraction of the lungs. The breath, as a metonymic icon for corporeal movement, points to corporeal movement as the creative product borne of the pairing of oppositional trajectories (polarities) engaged in a relationship of complementarity. Furthermore, the circular character and fluidity of each breath contains and is constituted by the harmonic orchestration of these oppositional impulses *in complementarity*. It is important, therefore, to note the resonance here to the aforementioned (a) Yorùbá imaginings and experience of the universe as presented in *igbá iwà*, the “calabash of existence,” and (b) processes of creative productivity in/of Yorùbá trinary logic. See fn. 1 and 9 above.

<sup>54</sup> See fn 65 below, regarding the resonance between imaginative and muscular intentions.

<sup>55</sup> One may also gloss the movements, respectively, as expansive/outward and contractile/inward. For more on the significance of centrifugal and centripetal configurations and/or forces in other forms of Yorùbá aesthetic composition, see Armstrong (1971, 1975) and Drewal (1987).

<sup>56</sup> Keil’s original (field)work (1979), entitled *Tiv Song*, is a thoughtful and thought provoking exploration of rhythmic patterns and productions and their significance — existentially as well as symbolically — among the Tiv of Nigeria. I admire Keil’s transparency in grappling with critical disjunctures between his phenomenological experience and his ability to represent this to and for his audience. “What is it that I am trying to understand: ‘qualities of experience’...‘ontology of energy’... Perhaps, as a lazy American pragmatist, I am unduly inhibited about coming to grips with Merleau-Ponty... and other artful European thinkers on matters ontological and phenomenological, but ...I know that the Tiv are singing and dancing without their help (‘existence prior to being’...as the philosophers might phrase it)...The aim of this chapter... [is ] to begin constructing a theory about the Tiv expression of vital forces that is at least partially free of Western aesthetic bias...Why play our spatial-visual-

discrepancies” to describe these rhythmic gaps. He claims that these spaces simultaneously “push” the rhythm forward and draw others into<sup>57</sup> the musically creative endeavor — be it corporeally or instrumentally — and, in so doing, create “the groove” of the music.<sup>58</sup> This is particularly resonant in African and Diasporic orchestrations and choreographies,<sup>59</sup> where “[t]he music is perhaps best considered as an arrangement of gaps... rather than as a dense pattern of sound” (Chernoff 1979:114, emphasis in the original).

Based on my experiences dancing to West African and Diasporic rhythms, I would add that these “empty” metric spaces are also vitally important because they create waves of buoyancy that lift<sup>60</sup> the music and dancer alike. By inserting myself into these gaps in the African and Diasporic rhythms my corporeality becomes one with the waves.<sup>61</sup> And riding the rhythm like a surfer gliding effortlessly atop the swelling tides, the fullness of my being is uplifted — affectively, mentally, and existentially.<sup>62</sup>

These early formative lessons in embodied discipline provided me with a deep awareness and appreciation of the vitality, buoyancy, and power of the breath and of rhythm — not only in

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vertical-hierarchical-intellectual games with their temporal-aural-horizontal-egalitarian life energies?...This is, of course, easier said than done, easier spoken than written, obviously better sung and danced than argued” (1979:182-3). I resonate with, and share, Keil’s concerns and intentions.

<sup>57</sup> This capacity of the spaces to “pull one in” may be likened, metaphorically, to the negative pressure of the lungs during inhalation or exerted by a black hole in space.

<sup>58</sup> Thus, critically informing the book’s (Keil and Feld 1994) title: *Music Grooves*.

<sup>59</sup> Agawu (1995) proposes a circular continuum of rhythmic expression in West African cultures. The arc begins with gesture, as “the primordial rhythmic event...the physical manifestation of a more fundamental communicative urge” (op cit:27) and progresses through vocalization (speech then song), instrumental musical production, ending ‘full circle’ in dance (an elaboration of gesture). Other musician-scholars of West Africa/Diaspora, such as Chernoff (1979), Friedson (1996), and Hagedorn (2001) also frame dance as form of musical expression (foregrounding the musical and the rhythmic rather than the corporeal). In contrast, I and other African/Diasporan dancer-scholars (Browning 1995, 1998; Daniel 2001, 2005) take the corporeal as our point of reference and departure, grounding our scholarship in the materiality of the body. And while I appreciate that framing dance as musical and rhythmic expression is informative, I would like to suggest that it may be equally informative to consider music as a co-presence. As Zuckermandl (1956:68, emphasis added) notes: “The nonmaterial ‘being in’ of the meaning in the tone is no mere ‘being signified;’ it is complete, actual *presence*.” Sowande (1969:29) elucidates the particular resonance and relevance of this framing to African and Diasporic studies: “Meaningful research cannot but yield itself willingly...to informed and determined attempts to discover those inward forces that have made traditional African Music a living thing for the traditional African for untold centuries...Here lies the role of traditions of African Music in the World of Today...Here lies the goal of research.”

<sup>60</sup> See Feld’s work (1990, 2000) on the “lift up and over” quality of music making among the Kaluli, and on sound worlds, respectively. Also see Schafer’s (1977, 1993) groundbreaking elaboration of the concept of “soundscapes.”

<sup>61</sup> Note the resonance with Freud’s (1963:iv) “oceanic feeling.” Yet rather than gesturing towards the infantile sensation of at-one-ment with the mother’s breast, I would argue that the “oceanic feeling” bodied forth through African and Diasporic music and dance refers to communion with Divine Presence. In *Òrìsà* ritual and ethnomedical practice this communion is often engendered through the passionate ecstasy of “possession-trance.” In Ifá practice, communion emerges only through conscious and *dispassionate* union, while awake, or revelatory experiences in dreams.

<sup>62</sup> Friedson (1996), an ethnomusicologist and performing drummer, offers a provocative and compelling argument for the therapeutic significance of these rhythmic gaps in Tumbuka ethnomedicine. He claims that the drummers’ precise elaboration of specifically patterned rhythmic gaps (in two’s and three’s) in concert with the healer’s “musical sensitivity to [these] gaps or empty spaces in the musical texture” engender therapeutic power. Of particular resonance — with my experience and for this project — he notes, “it is not so much the resultant pattern that is important for the construction of a [healing] mode, but *the spaces created by the rhythmic motto...and how those spaces get filled in* (op cit:149, emphasis added).

dance, but also in life. Furthermore, these experiences — bodied forth specifically through my intimate engagement with Yorùbá Diasporic rhythms in/and techniques of the body — also engendered in me a *participatory sensibility* that many musicians and scholars claim is characteristic of West African music (Chernoff 1979, Floyd 1995, Sowande 1969, Wilson 1974, 2001), ritual (Daniel 2001, Drewal 1992, La Pin 1977), and everyday life (Agawu 1995, Ajayi 1998, Sowande 1971, Yai 1989). As Chernoff (1979:23) notes, participation is “the most fundamental aesthetic in Africa: without participation, there is no meaning.”

My enhanced corporeal attentiveness to the breath as originary rhythm and the well-spring of movement fostered an intimate participation with musical rhythms as/and presence.<sup>63</sup> Attending to the breath as an embodied technique was/is also the fundamental point of departure (and perpetual return) for moving deeply in dance.<sup>64</sup> Cultivating the breath enabled me to consciously access and inhabit the fullness of my corporeality. Cultivating the other bodily techniques particular to dance, especially those specific to Dunham dance, enabled me to move *from* an unparalleled depth of interiority *with* enhanced conscious intention.<sup>65</sup> Furthermore, Dunham technique engendered my initial embodied awareness of, and intimacy with, the earth.

In dance, the physicality of one’s “center” and “core” is located in the space<sup>66</sup> delineated and contained by the concave contours of the pelvic floor below, and the diaphragmatic canopy above. Movement, for *all* professional dance forms, is anchored in this “core.” And *each* movement emerges from this center, produced by the harmonious orchestration of two simultaneous and oppositional internal impulses. Thus, each and every movement in dance — like the circularity of the breath, the iconic “calabash of existence” in Yorùbá culture and the trinary logic of Yorùbá epistemology (see fn.1 and 9 above) — powerfully articulates and reiterates that *creative expression* is bodied forth *from polarities through* engagements of *complementarity*.<sup>67</sup>

Dunham’s movement vocabulary, strongly informed by Yorùbá Diasporic techniques of the body, engenders unique techniques of the body and sensibilities not found in other contemporary dance forms. Unlike ballet, jazz, many forms of modern dance, or tap, Dunham technique consciously cultivates a powerful relationship between the dancer’s foot and the earth. As in African and Diasporic dance, one dances barefoot in Dunham technique. And both the barre work and basic floor routine engender focused attentiveness to the feet and toes that culminate in a distinctive, seamlessly fluid gait — the Dunham walk<sup>68</sup> — that moves forward and

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<sup>63</sup> Thus, through attending to the breath, in Dunham technique, a somatic mode of attending to music(al presence) is elaborated.

<sup>64</sup> And for deeply moving others. Movement that emerges from, and is articulated through, the dancer’s deep interiority projects an emotive and evocative quality that moving “from the surface” is unable to create.

<sup>65</sup> Here I wish to playfully and self-consciously bring to the reader’s attention the linguistic and phenomenological resonance between mental and corporeal intentionality. As Jackson notes (1989:207) “The Latin stem *intendere* consists of *in* plus *tendere*, *tensum*, the latter meaning ‘to stretch’.” Thus both mental and corporeal intentionality involve reaching and thus stretching toward something.

<sup>66</sup> Note the resonance here between “gaps” in the musical fabric and a space of the dancer’s physical interiority.

<sup>67</sup> This is an expression of the cognitive and imaginative processes that are, quite literally, bodied forth through my engagements in the somatic modes of attention cultivated through Dunham dance (in concert with those cultivated through my Ifá practice). By attending *with* my corporeality *to* the embodied techniques of Dunham dance, I experienced these resonances corporeally *and* imaginatively.

<sup>68</sup> For a description of the barre work and the progressions across the floor, including the Dunham walk, see Rose (1990).

gently rises and falls through the meticulous articulation of continuous undulations of the dancer's foot caressing the floor.

In Dunham technique, the impulses “behind” any corporeal movement — the forces of energy “pushing” the movement forward<sup>69</sup> — originate simultaneously in the depths of the earth and in the dancer's corporeal center. In concert, these impulses create a circular circuit of energy. And the precise articulation of the feet in the Dunham walk is an expression of this reciprocal and ongoing energetic exchange. The dancer taps into the earth's pulsation through contact between her foot and the earth. The impulse moves up the dancer's lower extremities to her<sup>70</sup> pelvis and core, and from there radiates outward in concentric waves washing over and engulfing the dancer's entire physicality. Complementing these waves of upward and outward pulsations is the dancer's (opposing) intention/in-tension of pressing her foot down into the ground and her repeated articulation of small, self-contained circles.<sup>71</sup>

The smooth articulation of this continuous undulating form by the feet simultaneously roots the dancer to the earth and is the foundation of movement in Dunham dance. These gentle waves, repeatedly and seamlessly articulated by the feet, echo the continuous and eternal movement of the ocean. They are also a holographic incorporation of the sinuous undulations of the spine, torso, and upper extremities characteristic of Yanvalou, a powerful and beautiful Vodun dance.<sup>72</sup> Using Yanvalou as a foundational template, Dunham dance cultivates a special corporeal sensitivity to, and relationship with, the earth and the ocean, and engenders a palpable resonance with their respective rhythms and vitality. In this way Dunham technique provided me with a corporeal capacity to ride the waves of the musical rhythm *through* riding the telluric rhythms.

My cultivation and subsequent incorporation of Dunham's techniques of the body simultaneously engendered a distinctive somatic mode of attending to, being in, perceiving, interpreting, and acting in the phenomenally given world. Thus, through my engagements with Dunham technique (as well as her anthropological research and scholarship<sup>73</sup>) I was introduced to practices in which one's intellectual and corporeal engagements of the body are mutually and

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<sup>69</sup> This characteristic of the telluric impulse is echoed by the gaps in music described above. Again, my experience of this resonance is corporeal/phenomenological as well as imaginative, and was engendered through the elaboration of modes of attention specific to the cultures of Dunham dance and Ifá ethnomedicine.

<sup>70</sup> Although I am consciously using the feminine pronoun, these assertions apply equally for men and women.

<sup>71</sup> Thus we have a reiteration of the creativity bodied forth from the harmonic convergence of centrifugal and centripetal forces.

<sup>72</sup> Yanvalou, according to Deren (1953:60) “means ‘supplication’ in the speech of the Whydah, the people of the Dahomean seaport of that name.” In Haitian Vodun practice it is the dance invoking the presence of the “deity” *Damballah*, or *Da*, to manifest for the benefit of the community *through* the corporeality of a devotee (in “trance-possession”). *Damballah* is represented by the rainbow and by serpents, and is noted for his affinity to water and/as the source of water that emerges in natural springs. As Brown notes (1991:273), “*Da* is a spirit...that represents what might be called the life force, or perhaps more accurately, the coiling, sinuous movement that is life's movement.” *Dá* in Yorùbá, means “created” and is often associated with the supreme Creator, *Èlédá*. For more on *Damballah* see Brown (1991:272-307), Courlander (1960:78-9, 83), Deren (1953:115-119), Herskovits (1938, vol 2). For more on Haitian dance, see Dunham (1983).

<sup>73</sup> I consider myself part of an imaginary lineage in which Dunham (1971 [1946], 1983 [1947], 1994 [1969]), and her contemporary, Hurston (1938, 1963 [1935]), and her disciple, Deren (1953), are among my anthropological foremothers. These women were pioneers, not only in their in-depth participation in Yorùbá Diasporic ritual communities, but also in that each boldly situated herself within her scholarly narrative(s) more than a quarter century before the discipline's “self-reflexive turn.” And finally, each woman used her artistic and scholarly productions to promote social justice (Clark 1994, Hernandez 1995, Johnson 2006, Osumare 2006, Thomas 1978).

reciprocally edifying. Beyond informing me intellectually and creatively, Dunham technique has also nurtured me emotionally and physically. This suggests that the therapeutic power of Yorùbá/Diasporic ethnomedicine can be attributed, at least partially, to the individual's musical and corporeal participation in these practices. Finally, and of greatest significance for the methodological and theoretical elaboration of this project, as well as for me personally, Dunham technique catapulted me into deep and enduring engagements with Yorùbá and Diasporic culture, music, rhythms, ritual, and healing. Less than two years after I began training as a Dunham dancer, Ifá “stepped on me,” ritually marking me as a disciple and as one destined to become an Ifá healer and scholar.

### **The Making and Unmaking of the Body: Cultivating Other Corporeal Techniques**

In this simple yet powerful ritual, I formally crossed the threshold entering the global community of Ifá devotees, priests, intellectuals, and healers.<sup>74</sup> Less than a year later I was voraciously devouring texts on Ifá, in particular, and on Yorùbá culture, religion, and aesthetics, more globally. I was also, slowly but surely, cultivating my personal engagement with Ifá devotional practice. I was fortunate to have Baba B,<sup>75</sup> a knowledgeable and trustworthy male Ifá specialist, a *babaláwo*, to mentor me in my Ifá study and devotional practice.<sup>76</sup> Although Baba B lived in Northern California, he traveled extensively throughout the US, coming to New York at least a few times each year. A few years after beginning my engagements with Ifá I moved to Los Angeles. As Baba B similarly frequented Southern California, I was able to continue to work under his tutelage.

Baba B suggested texts for me to read and served as a guide in my ritual and devotional engagements. And we spoke regularly, discussing Yorùbá ethnomedical, religious, and esoteric concepts, experience, and practice in detail and from a variety of conceptual perspectives. Aware of my particular interest in and resonance with Ifá medical therapeutic, he recommended Buckley's work (1985), *Yorùbá Medicine*,<sup>77</sup> which we subsequently discussed in a series of

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<sup>74</sup> It is important to note that this ritual emerged in response to a brief episode of transient, yet severe physical suffering that I had experienced earlier that year. My work strongly indicates that in Ifá ethnomedicine *suffering* is framed as the ontological *shared ground* of human experience, and as such, is the fundamental point of departure, and of perpetual return, of the healer's practice. This is explored in more detail in chapter 5. Also see chapter 4 for a presentation of personal suffering in relation to bodying forth a spiritually informed (and attuned) way of being-in-the-world in Yorùbá culture.

<sup>75</sup> This is a pseudonym.

<sup>76</sup> Baba B was my first Ifá mentor. I began studying under his guidance and tutelage in 1984, and continued studying with him for more than ten years. He was the first African American *babaláwo* who had been trained exclusively in Nigeria, living and studying Ifa in Western Nigeria for seven years. He was also unique because he had not entered Ifá through a Diasporic practice, but rather began his engagements with the Diasporic communities *after* returning from Nigeria. Furthermore, he had an impressive personal relationship with indigenous Yorùbá intellectuals and scholars, including but not limited to Adedeji (1979, 1980), Beyioku (1971, 1973), Epega (1948, 1965), and Sowande (1955, 1965, 1966, 1969, 1971).

<sup>77</sup> Using interviews of healers as his primary ethnographic source, Buckley represents Yorùbá ethnomedicine as an indigenous knowledge system. Limiting his study to “simple” illnesses, he notes that herbal medicines are the dominant therapy, and claims that health is equated with (a) containment — of “germs” and/or “worms” within particular spheres of corporeal interiority; and (b) the harmonic balance between three fundamental humours (activating, cooling/nourishing, and protective). Although Buckley's study is limited to “simple illnesses,” I am impressed by his appreciation of the fundamental sensibilities of permeability and containment in relation to health; and of a shared trinary logic — represented symbolically as “red,” “white,” and “black” — informing Yorùbá ethnomedicine, society, and religion. For more on cultivating this specialized way of knowing, and “life world” in

conversations and debates. In our discussions of Ifá medicine, Baba B noted that there were important resonances between Yorùbá ethnomedicine and Chinese Traditional Medicine, Ayurveda, and homeopathy, and suggested some introductory texts in the latter.<sup>78</sup>

He also noted that in the 1960s and 70s, during the economic boon and cultural renaissance of the nascent independent nation state of Nigeria, a small group of Ifá medical specialists had initiated a forum of intellectual exchange with Chinese and Indian (Ayurvedic) healers. Starting in Nigeria and then extending to Asia, the participating healers in each country hosted regular conferences to dialogue with their international colleagues. For more than a decade these indigenous healers met and discussed (a) the resonances in their paradigmatic approaches to health and healing; (b) the challenges of creating a national healthcare system that integrates indigenous and allopathic (“Western”) medical practices; and (c) the successes and/or failures encountered in specific countries.<sup>79</sup> Baba B’s assertions regarding the resonances between Yorùbá ethnomedicine and Chinese Traditional Medicine,<sup>80</sup> in concert with these organic forums of intellectual exchange, piqued my curiosity. And within a few months, I had matriculated in Emperor’s School of Oriental Medicine in Santa Monica.<sup>81</sup>

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Ifá, see chapter 6. For other works on, or related to, Yorùbá ethnomedicine see Adekson (2003), Ademuwagun (1978, 1979), Ady (1994), MacLean (1971), Makinde (1988:87-107), Pierce (1986), Simpson (1980), Sofowora (1982), Verger (1995).

<sup>78</sup> In particular, my mentor encouraged me to familiarize myself with homeopathy’s framing of “vital force” — a fundamental immaterial dimension of human being-in-the-world that is characterized by “having formative intelligence...pervading the material substance...creating order [harmony] in the body, belonging to the realm of quality rather than quantity (the realm of degrees of fineness)...and being constructive” (Vithoulkas 1980:74) — and its Law of Similars — “any substance which can produce a totality of symptoms in a healthy human being can cure that totality of symptoms in a sick human being” (op cit:98). Also see Kent (1979 [1900]). Regarding Chinese traditional medicine and Ayurveda, Baba B emphasized that the concepts of harmony and balance critically inform (a) their interpretation of suffering — as *imbalance* of fundamental immaterial dimensions of human being-in-the-world — and (b) their therapeutic interventions — as action to facilitate movement *toward* the idealized state of harmonious equilibrium. See Kaptchuk (1983) regarding the principles informing Chinese Traditional Medicine. Also see Whitmont’s (1993) presentation of the principles informing acupuncture and homeopathy. Baba B claimed each of the principles or dimensions noted above resonate with aspects of Yorùbá ethnomedicine.

<sup>79</sup> See Ademuwagun (1979:165-170), Makinde (1988:103-107) and T. A. Lambo (1971) for more on the challenges of an integrative national health system in Nigeria. Also, over the past decade, new on-line forums of international intellectual exchange regarding African, Indian, and Chinese “Traditional Medicines” — typically involving “traditional medical practitioners”, biomedical scientists, public health specialists (and occasional biomedical practitioners, anthropologists and policy makers) — have emerged. For two examples, see the African Journal of Traditional, Complementary and Alternative Medicines at <http://journals.sfu.ca/africanem/index.php/ajtcam> and African Networks on Ethnomedicine at <http://www.africanethnomedicines.net>. Each site publishes research papers that explore various aspects of ethnomedicine predominantly (but not exclusively) from Africa and Asia. Furthermore, each forum has editors from numerous countries in Africa (particularly western and southern Africa) and Asia (particularly India, China, and Pakistan), as well as from Brazil and the USA.

<sup>80</sup> T.A. Lambo, a psychiatrist and early proponent of ethnopsychiatry, worked collaboratively with indigenous mental health specialists in Abeokuta in the 1950s and 1960s before leaving Nigeria to work at the World Health Organization. Years later, after returning to Nigeria, he established a popular clinic in Lagos that offered acupuncture. I had the pleasure of visiting this clinic, and of meeting Dr. Lambo, in 1990. It is noteworthy that Dr. Lambo attributed his patients’ acceptance of acupuncture and the popularity of the clinic to fundamental resonances between Chinese and Yorùbá ethnomedicine.

<sup>81</sup> At the time of our conversations I was already using acupressure selectively in my biomedical practice. I had incorporated this technique into my therapeutic repertoire after completing an elective clinical rotation in acupuncture in the acupuncture clinic at Lincoln Hospital in the South Bronx during my final year of postgraduate training. This clinic had gained acclaim for its highly successful detoxification program for heroin addicts. Equally



Over the following year I took courses in the fundamental theoretical and philosophical principles of CTM,<sup>82</sup> basic Chinese pharmacology, meridians and acupuncture point location. These classes afforded me a valuable intellectual framework in Chinese ethnomedical concepts and therapeutic.<sup>83</sup> Yet what proved to be most informative — and transformative — was my exposure to and engagement with medical Chi Gong, under the tutelage of Zhi Yu Wong, a medical Chi Gong master who had recently emigrated from China.

Prior to becoming a medical Chi Gong practitioner, Zhi Yu had been a moderately successful director of popular martial arts films in China.<sup>84</sup> Yet, when a large tumor in her neck — diagnosed as a malignant lymphoma and otherwise untreated — disappeared completely after three sessions with an elderly Chi Gong master, Zhi Yu abandoned her film work. She *and her* primary care, *biomedically trained, physician*, enrolled in a newly initiated training program in medical Chi Gong at a large local hospital.<sup>85</sup> After completing her training, Zhi Yu practiced and taught medical Chi Gong in Beijing. Departing China for the U.S., she left behind an entourage of student- apprentices and clients.

I met Zhi Yu when she gave small public demonstration of “soft Chi Gong” for interested students during my first week at the school of Oriental Medicine. The quiet lyricism of her movements appealed to my aesthetic sensibilities, and I immediately decided to take her class (a private group class to be held in the home of another student, not far from my apartment). In Los Angeles as in New York, I was participating in Dunham, African and Diasporic dance classes regularly at least three to four times each week. However once on the West Coast, I had decided to take a hiatus from performing. This left me with additional time for cultivating the body. I wanted to explore culturally informed techniques of the body — in addition to those of West Africa origin and/or inspiration — that facilitated and/or enhanced personal health. I had briefly tasted Tai Chi and Yoga. And although “Medical Chi Gong” was unheard of at that time in American popular culture, I was curious to experience how the body techniques of Chi Gong might inform or enhance my personal health and/or my study of Chinese Medicine.

Over the next two years I cultivated a daily practice of Chi Gong. And although my study and practice of medical Chi Gong ended when I left Los Angeles in 1989, Zhi Yu and I remained in contact for many years thereafter. Initially my engagement with Chi Gong was limited to attending group classes once a week, and practicing “the form”<sup>86</sup> intermittently at home on my own. Given my training and experience in dance, I was already proficient at synchronizing the execution of any movement with my breath, an important dimension of Chi Gong. Yet the breathing techniques<sup>87</sup> *and* the physical alignment of Chi Gong were radically distinct from those

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impressive was the clinic’s popularity among the Latina *abuelitas* (lit. “grandmothers”) for managing their diabetes, hypertension, arthritis, and reactive airway disease.

<sup>82</sup> An acronym for Chinese Traditional Medicine.

<sup>83</sup> This intellectual framework complimented and enhanced my previous clinical exposure to, and limited use of, acupuncture and acupressure.

<sup>84</sup> See, for example, “Yao’s Young Warriors” (Wong, 1983). An English version is currently distributed through Hong Kong.

<sup>85</sup> Naval hospital in Beijing.

<sup>86</sup> A formulaic series of movements.

<sup>87</sup> In this particular style of medical Chi Gong one imagines the corporeal root and center, two fingerbreadths below the umbilicus, drawing in the breath. Each inhalation expands first the abdomen and then one’s entire corporeality into a buoyant imaginary sphere.

of Dunham, West African, and Diasporic dances, and from those of my Ifá daily devotional practice.

Thus not only did my practice of Chi Gong facilitate my conscious incorporation of a new set of body techniques, it also required that I body forth a distinctive corporeal flexibility.<sup>88</sup> For while there were subtle distinctions between the fundamental techniques in (a) the various West African and Diasporic dance forms and (b) my nascent devotional practice, their somatic resonances were more pronounced than their variances. But the formative body habits that constitute Chi Gong practice were significantly different. Therefore, in order to participate in these multiple, culturally diverse, corporeal techniques, I was forced to cultivate an ability to shift from the habits (and *habitus*) of one— African-inspired dance; Ifá devotional practice; or medical Chi Gong — to another.<sup>89</sup>

All three practices cultivate the conscious<sup>90</sup> elaboration of techniques of the body. And both the African-inspired dance forms and medical Chi Gong foster an intimacy between the individual's *feet* and the earth.<sup>91</sup> Yet the corporeal center of gravity or “core”, the dominant trajectory of the body weight *through the feet*, and the corporeal relation with the earth and the phenomenally given world — the somatic mode of attention — cultivated in medical Chi Gong were/are sufficiently distinct from those I had incorporated through Dunham and African/Diasporic dance.<sup>92</sup> As a result, I initially felt off balance whenever trying to articulate the Chi Gong form.<sup>93</sup>

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<sup>88</sup> By “corporeal flexibility” I am referring *not only* to mundane physical suppleness such as that which athletes consciously cultivate, for example, by stretching and “warming up” prior to competition. I am also, and *more importantly* referring to a capacity to fluidly and consciously shift between various embodied habits and the *habitus* they engender. And while the capacity itself, when realized, is characterized by conscious intention, in my experience it was *not* consciously cultivated, but rather emerged as a *practical exigency* as I struggled to negotiate the shifting contours of my “corporeal” terrain.

<sup>89</sup> In Peek's (1991:193-212) essay on African systems of divination, he grapples with a shared capacity among African “diviners” (read: ethnomedical specialists) to shift back and forth between, what he glosses as “normal” and “non-normal modes of cognition.” Based on my experiences, noted above in the text, I would suggest that a more fruitful analysis would be rendered by reframing this as a capacity to shift between distinctive *somatic modes* of attending-to and making-sense-of (interpreting) the phenomenally given world.

<sup>90</sup> Unlike the forms of Chi Gong practice described by Chen (2003) and Ots (1994) in which trance states are evoked, there is *no trance* produced by, or in association with, the form of *medical* Chi Gong that I practiced and am describing here. It is also important to reiterate that there is *no trance* in Ifá practice.

<sup>91</sup> I propose that a fundamental dimension of the learning process in Ifá is the cultivation of a global corporeal intimacy with the earth. My work strongly indicates that for apprentice and healer alike, Ifá everyday scholarly-devotional practice constitutes an on-going practice of attunement of the practitioner's corporeality (a) with the earth and (b) as an instrument of musical performative force. This is presented in more detail in chapters 5 and 6.

<sup>92</sup> In Chi Gong one's center of gravity is lower, smaller and more posterior than in Dunham, African and Afro-Caribbean dance forms. This engenders a distinctive foundation for one's movements and bodies forth a unique *habitus* as well. In the basic stance of Chi Gong the legs are parallel, hip width apart, with knees gently bent. The torso and spine are erect, with the center of gravity in the low abdomen, two to three fingerbreadths below the umbilicus. The fundamental trajectory of the body weight (and focus) is *down* through the center of the body and the core of the lower extremities, and *back* through the heel (+/- the sole) of the feet. In contrast, in the basic stance in Dunham dance the knees, hips, and shoulders are ‘stacked’ in alignment atop the metatarsals, and the body weight (and focus) is *forward*, with the harmonic orchestration of the oppositional impulses of *lifting up* through the sternum *and rooting down into* the earth (through the articulations of the feet unique to Dunham technique described in the previous section).

<sup>93</sup> Initially in the Chi Gong stance I felt as though I was going to fall backwards onto my buttocks. This sensation was exaggerated in an exercise given to beginning students to help them experience and incorporate critical aspects

Gradually I came to appreciate and enjoy the distinctive corporeality engendered by Chi Gong as well as its distinctive relationship with the earth. In Dunham technique I experienced the buoyancy and undulating forward impetus engendered through corporeal resonance with the telluric rhythms. In contrast, my practice of medical Chi Gong bodied forth a corporeal resonance with trees. I felt a particular affinity to the weeping willow with its roots firmly anchoring the solid, yet flexible base as well as the light, whimsical extremities, enabling them to dance lyrically with the wind, the rain, and the sun.

In this particular form of medical Chi Gong, there was very limited movement of the feet. Rather, the vast majority of the choreography was articulated by the arms and hands, accompanied by gentle shifts in the torso, and occasionally, the legs. The feet were firmly planted, supporting solid yet flexible lower extremities, softly bent at the knees. As noted above, the basic trajectory of the body was down and rocking back gently on the heels.

After learning to shift my balance onto my soles and heels I began to experience an ever-expanding energetic network spreading down and out from my body into the body of the earth. I had the sensation that small shoot-like channels of energy had sprouted from the soles and heels of my feet. As I began to articulate the form regularly each day, these channels grew stronger and extended further into the depths of the earth, pulling my body down. I also experienced (complementary) impulses emanating from the earth. They rose, as percolating sensations bubbling up through the center of my legs, into the orb-like Chi Gong core in my lower abdomen, warming and expanding my spherical corporeal core. Rather than using the telluric rhythms to “push” and nourish musical and corporeal movement,<sup>94</sup> Chi Gong practice consciously cultivated the *containment* of these impulses within the core. Nonetheless, smaller finer pulsations radiated out from the Chi Gong core, through my torso, and then back to the core in a circular circuit.

In Chi Gong my corporeal base, like the weeping willow, was firmly planted in place, anchored through these roots. The choreographic interplay of polarities in medical Chi Gong was not engendered through the simultaneous harmonizing of oppositional impulses. Instead, the choreographic articulations of the arms and torso emerged from, and followed the very fine internal pulsations, noted above, as they washed out from, and then receded into, the core. The fluid waves of telluric impulses circulating from the earth through the individual’s corporeality, engendered an ongoing cycle of alternating centrifugal and centripetal motions, each one gently pushing and nourishing the next. Riding these alternating impulses my arms and torso bent and moved softly, lyrically playing with the air and sun like the willow’s trunk and branches.

The articulation of these willowy movements bodied forth a distinctive sensitivity to the buoyant viscosity and presence of the air. I also laughed at how, like fish in water, our mundane habits inculcated a glaring insensitivity to our deep reliance of the air. Suddenly I had a profound corporeal appreciation of being constantly bathed in, pushing through, and being nourished by the atmospheric ethers. The techniques of medical Chi Gong also engendered sensibilities of porosity and exchange, not only in my feet, as in Dunham and African/Diasporic dance, but also in distinct points in my palms, my chest, my abdomen, my back and my head. Some of these corporeal apertures corresponded to points along the meridians of Chi in Chinese medical

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of the stance. In this exercise the student attempts to “sit” erect, yet relaxed, on an imaginary stool in the middle of the room, resisting the tendency to either tense multiple muscle groups or to fall backwards/down.

<sup>94</sup> Part of this distinctive experience of the telluric impulses may be attributed to the relatively stationary stance of this particular Chi Gong form and to cultivating the sole of the foot (and to a lesser extent the heel) as the primary aperture of corporal resonance and relationship with the earth.

therapeutic, others did not. Nonetheless, they would begin tingling whenever I articulated the form, often humming for quite some time thereafter.

In less than two months I had incorporated Chi Gong into my everyday practice (complementing my limited, yet daily, articulation of Yorùbá devotional practice). Zhi Yu noted my enthusiasm for the practice, as well as the ease and proficiency with which I was incorporating the techniques. Within a few months, she asked me to assist her in leading the class and in helping other students, individually, with details of the form. Zhi Yu appreciated my interest in diverse modalities of healing, and valued my expertise as a medical doctor. I quickly became her favorite (and most dedicated) student and was “adopted” by her as kin, socializing regularly with her and her family.

Over the next year and a half, I took private lessons with her to more finely tune my practice, and our collegial relationship as well as our friendship grew and matured. I continued to assist her in the group class and occasionally we gave joint public presentations regarding the personal healing effects of medical Chi Gong practice. The lyricism of Chi Gong pleased me aesthetically and affectively, providing me with a shot of quiet joy (in addition to that which I gained from my devotional and dance practices). I also noted that I had not experienced any colds or flu-like illnesses since I began practicing Chi Gong regularly. This was unusual for me. As a clinician I was exposed to viral illnesses every week and I usually experienced at least one or two viral infections each quarter. Curiously, I had also noticed that my visual acuity had *improved* over the past year. Not only was my vision sharper, but colors also appeared more vibrant and intoxicating. Like my experiences of African and Diasporic ethnomedicine, this suggested to me that by participating in the corporeal techniques of medical Chi Gong, an individual could enhance and/or improve her/his health.

This was the extent of my experience and my interpretation of the power of culturally informed techniques of the body to engender therapeutic power. I had heard Zhi Yu’s personal account of being healed by a Chi Gong master and was aware that she had a thriving practice as a Chi Gong medical practitioner (treating predominantly though not exclusively Asian and Asian Americans).<sup>95</sup> Yet I had not witnessed nor experienced that dimension of Chi Gong ethnomedicine. Until the day Linda, one of my dance colleagues, came to my apartment for a Chi Gong treatment, and I was called upon, much to my surprise, to be Zhi Yu’s assistant.

### **The Making and Unmaking of Medical Worlds: *Cold Wind***

Linda was an avid dancer and performer. She taught a weekly West African dance class that was extremely popular<sup>96</sup> and performed regularly as one of the primary dancers in a local Senegalese dance troupe. And yet, when she came to my apartment that Sunday evening in the spring, she had not danced at all for almost two months. In fact, when I answered the doorbell to let her in, I was shocked to see Tep, an artist and mutual friend of ours, carrying Linda in his arms. She was thinner and paler than usual and her arms and legs dangled limply like a rag doll. “I can’t walk, it hurts too much” Linda whimpered apologetically, turning her face into Tep’s chest. Zhi Yu and I

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<sup>95</sup> Similarly, I had patients in the Bronx who asserted that they had been healed through the therapeutic intervention of a Yorùbá Diasporic ethnomedical specialist. I imagined that this therapeutic power was engendered through indigenous pharmacological treatments and/or ritual practices. And while Chinese medical doctors often use herbal treatments in conjunction with acupuncture, I knew that medical Chi Gong practitioners used neither acupuncture nor herbs.

<sup>96</sup> Her class regularly filled the local auditorium with a minimum of thirty to fifty students and six to ten drummers. It was always a lively, jamming, scene!

ushered them swiftly into my guestroom<sup>97</sup> and Tep gently placed Linda atop the double bed. Then, after inquiring how long the treatment would last, Tep excused himself, promising to return in an hour at the end of the session.

Linda had called me less than a week earlier. She said she had heard that I was studying a special form of “energy healing” with a woman from China and asked me if it was true. Yes, I said, I had been studying medical Chi Gong with Zhi Yu for about fifteen months. She asked me a few cursory questions about Zhi Yu and then asked if I could help arrange for her to have a treatment session with Zhi Yu. She said she wanted to see if this could help relieve the pain and swelling in her legs.

Linda then told me that her right knee and left ankle had been painfully swollen for months, progressing from mild and intermittent discomfort to constant pain and swelling. She also described the lengths to which she had gone in her attempt to obtain a definitive diagnosis and effective treatment for her condition. In addition to being evaluated by her trusted primary care practitioner of many years, she had seen numerous physicians — including an orthopedic specialist, a rheumatologist, and a pain specialist at a prominent local teaching hospital — and an acupuncturist. She had endured a comprehensive battery of diagnostic tests,<sup>98</sup> all of which were normal. Unable to reconcile the lack of discernable “pathology”<sup>99</sup> with her prominent physical findings and progressive symptoms, and frustrated by her “resistance” and her unresponsiveness<sup>100</sup> to aggressive anti-inflammatory medication and acupuncture, the physicians had advised Linda that the only remaining alternative was to add stronger pain medications to her regimen. But, she said to me, choking back tears, she wanted more than temporary relief of the pain. She wanted her legs back. She wanted to *dance*.

I cautioned her that I was not sure whether or not medical Chi Gong treatments would help her. She insisted that she wanted to try it. Ending my phone conversation with Linda, I called Zhi Yu. She eagerly agreed to see Linda and suggested that Linda come to my apartment that Sunday in the early evening, shortly after Zhi Yu and I finished the weekly class session in a nearby neighborhood.

Thus, although I knew from our phone conversation that Linda had been unable to dance for more than six weeks, I had not expected to see her hanging sadly in Tep’s arms that night. I escorted Tep to the door and then returned to my guestroom to speak briefly with Linda and then observe the treatment. When I entered the room, Zhi Yu was sitting next to Linda on the edge of the bed, holding Linda’s hands in her own and gazing softly at Linda’s countenance. Linda was unusually quiet. She smiled tentatively, her face stained by the faint streaks of a few tears drying. Normally Linda’s skin was a rich mahogany hue, smooth and glistening. Yet that night her skin was dull and dry, pale and markedly ashy. Her right knee and left ankle were swollen to about three times their normal size. Zhi Yu nodded for me to come and stand next her. She gently

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<sup>97</sup> When Zhi Yu and I had spoken earlier in the week, with the aid of her daughter Ning Ning’s translation on the speakerphone, we had agreed that Zhi Yu would use the bed in my guestroom for the treatment session.

<sup>98</sup> Linda recounted in detail the various blood tests, radiographic evaluations, and the painful knee-tap and the results and/or official interpretation of each.

<sup>99</sup> For an interesting phenomenological exploration of embodiment in/and the biomedical encounter see K. Young (1997). For a small sample of various interpretative approaches regarding the infelicities and/or dilemmas produced when there are radical dysjunctures between the patients’ lived experiences and biomedical/official interpretations, see Cohen (1992, 1998), Das (1994), Good (1994:116-166), Fadiman (1997), Kleinman (2000), Ramphela (1993), Sacks (1984, 1985), Scheper-Hughes (1992:221-247), Schweder (1991:313-331), Taussig (1992:83-109).

<sup>100</sup> This is but one example of biomedical practice as a powerful disciplinary regime. See Foucault (1975, 1980).

cradled each of Linda's hands between her thumb and middle finger. And as Linda and I spoke briefly, in hushed tones, I noticed Zhi Yu close her eyes softly. A minute or so later, Zhi Yu quietly stood up, gingerly placing Linda's hands on the bed.<sup>101</sup>

I turned to go and sit in the comfortable upholstered corner chair adjacent to the head of the bed, but Zhi Yu touched my arm and motioned for me to follow her to the foot of the bed. She stood facing Linda's left leg (and orange-sized ankle) and positioned me in front of Linda's right leg (and grapefruit-sized knee). Zhi Yu began gently massaging Linda's left calf and gestured for me to do likewise on the other leg. I placed my hands ever-so-softly on Linda's right leg and mirrored Zhi Yu's soft superficial kneading motions. Zhi Yu smiled and nodded. "Good" she murmured quietly.

We worked silently in tandem, lightly massaging Linda's legs. Within minutes, Linda's body relaxed noticeably. Eyes closed, her breathing became deeper and fuller, and her features softened. In response, Zhi Yu stopped the kneading movements and, using only the pads of her fingertips, began soft, wispy patterns atop the skin of Linda's calf. I followed Zhi Yu's lead. After close to an hour of gliding and whisking our fingertips on Linda's body, Zhi Yu paused for a moment and I thought the session had ended. A moment later, however, Zhi Yu raised Linda's left toes slightly off the bed's surface, exposing the underbelly of the foot. Zhi Yu cupped her right hand softly a few inches in front of the center of Linda's sole.<sup>102</sup> Then very slowly and smoothly, she pulled her hand and fingers back an inch or two, followed by a slight recoil, repeating this simple sequence of undulating pulsations over and over again. After allowing me to observe her motions briefly, Zhi Yu gestured with her eyes and head, encouraging me to follow suit with Linda's right foot.

Linda's foot felt a bit like soft, warm clay in my hands as I repositioned her foot. Then, suspending my cupped right hand comfortably a few inches in front of her sole I began imitating the small undulating movements with my palm and fingers. I looked to Zhi Yu for reassurance and she smiled and nodded. No more than a few minutes had passed when *suddenly, to my great surprise*, I felt a frigid, bone-chilling stream of air coming out of the bottom of my friend's foot. A steady gust of air was coming directly out of the center of Linda's foot, as though an invisible, miniature elf with pursed lips, ice-cold breath, and unending lung capacity was trying to blow my hand away.

I grappled with the seeming impossibility of the experience. I shook my head, attempting to jog my mind, yet the jet stream gushing forth from Linda's interiority continued, growing colder and more forceful! This air was as chilling and searing against the palm of my hand as the

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<sup>101</sup> This "hand holding" practice was Zhi Yu's unique diagnostic technique. She did not use the standard diagnostic procedures of Oriental medicine of taking the pulse or examining the tongue. Instead, Zhi Yu simultaneously, and to most patients imperceptibly, palpated the same acupuncture point (Large Intestine 4) on each of the patient's hands. She once confided in me that when she did this all the meridians of the patient's body became visually perceptible to her as luminescent channels, and any obstruction along a meridian looked like a blocked dam. Zhi Yu said she also experienced visceral impressions *within her own body* of the quality and strength of the Chi in each of the meridians as well as any tumor formations. Shortly after the treatment session described above, Zhi Yu detected an ovarian malignancy in an asymptomatic middle-aged Chinese woman through this form of embodied consubjectivity (Daniel 1991).

<sup>102</sup> The center of the sole is a very important and powerful point in acupuncture. It is Kidney 1, the first point on the kidney channel. Very briefly, Chinese Medicine perceives/interprets the Kidneys not only as material organs involved in the cleansing of the blood and the production of urine, but also, and perhaps more importantly, as the wellspring of fundamental forms of Chi — some of which provide essential links with one's ancestry (biological inheritance), while others are the source of critical dimensions of one's personal vitality and longevity. See Kaptchuk (1983).

liquid nitrogen I commonly used to perform cryosurgery (in my biomedical practice). The flow was constant, unwavering and pressurized, reminding me of a gas station air pump inflating an inner tube or a tire. The hairs on my arms stood on end and an involuntary shudder rippled across my body.

Not wanting to frighten my friend (even though I was rapidly coming unglued), I furiously elbowed Zhi Yu and muttered under my breath “Cold Wind! Cold Wind!” My eyes were bulging in alarm! Zhi Yu was neither surprised nor concerned. Instead, she appeared mildly pleased. “Ah. G-o-o-d,” she said, the ends of her lips turning up ever-so-slightly as she nodded twice, “Do more.” Nonchalantly she turned her attention back to Linda’s left foot. Taking a few deep breaths, I did my best to calm myself and to focus my attention and my attentiveness, once again, on relieving Linda’s pain and suffering. I continued the drawing motions with my hand and fingers and *eventually* — less five minutes later, although it seemed like an eternity — the flow of air gushing from Linda’s sole diminished, sputtered, and then, stopped. Shortly before the jet stream blowing against my hand died out, I noticed Zhi Yu stop her pulling undulations. Out of the corner of my eye, I watched as she gently pressed her thumb and then the palm of her hand into Kidney One on Linda’s left foot. Then Zhi Yu quietly left the room. I could hear her washing her hands in the adjacent bathroom. As Zhi Yu walked back into the room the frigid air stream from Linda’s right foot abated. I continued the drawing motions a few seconds longer, to avoid prematurely ending the treatment. Then, assured by the quietude and restored solidity of my friend’s foot, I repeated Zhi Yu’s finishing motions, “closing” and “sealing” the sole of Linda’s foot with my thumb and palm. Linda remained deeply relaxed. The treatment completed, I looked up and saw Zhi Yu beaming at me with an impish twinkle in her eyes, nodding her head in satisfaction.

I left the guestroom to wash my hands and face in cool water. When I returned, Linda noted, her eyes still closed, that she wanted to lie there quietly for a few more minutes. I took this as my cue and pulled Zhi Yu gently by her sleeve into my bedroom. “Zhi Yu,” I said looking at her directly in the eye, “Cold wind! Cold wind!” I touched the sole of my own foot and then, placing my cupped hand in front of my mouth, blew emphatically a few times, in mock demonstration. Zhi Yu looked at me, obviously a bit perplexed by my heightened emotional state. “Aha,” she replied in a matter-of-fact tone, “Cold Wind.” Then she smiled reassuringly at me, shrugged her shoulders, and returned to the guestroom. Still rattled by this experience, I stood there shaking my head.

The doorbell rang and I opened the door. I smiled at Tep and commented that his timing was perfect, as we had just ended the session. Entering the guestroom, Linda was sitting up in the bed cupping her hands around Zhi Yu’s. Her eyes looked a bit brighter, her face less distressed. “Thank you both,” she said.

Over the next week Linda called me every one to two days. By the end of the week she giddily reported that the swelling in her ankle and knee, as well as her leg pain, had diminished significantly and that she was walking easily without assistance. Linda had two more sessions, at Zhi Yu’s home in Pasadena, over the next month, neither of which I was able to attend. Linda continued to phone me regularly, keeping me informed of the treatments (similar, by her accounts to the first) and her progress. I noticed that with each subsequent call Linda was gradually directing more of her attention, and our conversation, back to the larger social world. As her physical conditioned improved and her spirits lifted, she increasingly wanted to talk about dance, our mutual friends, local and/or current events. I noted with pleasure that she was laughing again. After the second treatment, she told me that all traces of swelling in her knee and

ankle had vanished. She was able to ambulate and had returned to her day job. Less than a fortnight after receiving her third treatment from Zhi Yu, Linda was teaching and performing her beloved Senegalese and Guinean dances again. Once more, beautifully articulating the intricate choreographies of poly-rhythmic movements and energetic leaps, Linda embraced her passion, inspiring students and the public alike.

### **The Making and Unmaking of the Body, the Making and Unmaking of Medical Worlds:<sup>103</sup> Disrupting “Culture Bound Syndromes” and Cultivating Corporeal Therapeutic Power**

The night I assisted Zhi Yu in therapeutically attending to Linda, the world as I had previously known and experienced it, cracked. This fault line clearly demonstrated that there is much more to the phenomenally given world and to human corporeality than meets the eye. The taken-for-granted solidity and materiality of “the body” — my own and others’ — had been rent asunder. I knew that Chinese Medicine texts spoke of “cold wind” as one of the various forms of “evil chi” that can enter the body, but I had always interpreted this as a metaphoric description of “humours” in/and the body. Yet my experience of that chilling gust issuing forth from the sole of my friend’s foot indicated otherwise.

My personal encounter of *Cold Wind*, coupled with Linda’s complete and enduring recovery,<sup>104</sup> dramatically altered my life. In order to accommodate these phenomenological ruptures in my previously seamless life-world, I was forced to drastically expand my imaginative horizons. From that time forth, the medical world of my biomedical training and clinical experience could no longer claim an exclusive hold on my imagination. I now knew that the biomedical world was but one of many, partial, and simultaneously, universal medical worlds.<sup>105</sup> Similarly, “the body” of my anatomy, biology, and physiology classes and my biomedical clinical training was but *one* of numerous, possible, and equally powerful experiences and interpretations of human corporeality as/and being-in-the-world. Furthermore, and perhaps most significantly for this project, I realized that in contrast to the technological instrumentality of biomedical diagnostic and therapeutic approaches, other culturally distinct medical worlds cultivate phenomenologically potent (diagnostic<sup>106</sup> and) therapeutic power as a corporeal capacity of the healer.

The constellation of Linda’s bodily suffering, like that of so many patients I have encountered throughout my years as an allopathic practitioner, did not conform to the biomedical

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<sup>103</sup> My framing of “the making and unmaking of the body, and the making and unmaking of the world” is a conscious reference to, and elaboration of, the title of Elaine Scarry’s book (1985) *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World*. Other scholars (Good 1994, Leder 1990, Scheper-Hughes 1992, Scheper-Hughes and Lock 1987) have also explored different aspects of the “making and unmaking” of individual and/or collective bodies in *pain and suffering*. My project, in addition to considering this dimension of suffering, also explores the ways in which corporeal ruptures in the cultivation and mastery of specialized somatic modes of attention, among Ifá healers, “make and unmake” their individual bodies as well as the contours of Ifá’s medical world. In other words, I posit that corporeal ruptures are critical to the cultivation of Ifá corporeal healing power and the orchestration of its medical world. This is the focus of chapters 5 and 6.

<sup>104</sup> As noted earlier, we have a small cohort of shared friends. I actively kept abreast of Linda’s condition for approximately five years after I left Los Angeles (more than six years after her treatments) and she was in excellent health and continued to dance.

<sup>105</sup> This suggests the possibility of an additional dimension to Lock’s (1993) concept of “local biologies.”

<sup>106</sup> See my description of Zhi Yu’s corporeal diagnostic practice in fn. 101 above. The corporeal engagement between healer and client is also elaborated, in the formalized Chinese and Siddha ethnomedical practices, in the diagnostic practice of palpating the patient’s pulse. See Daniel (1991), Kuriyama (1999).



categories of embodied experience.<sup>107</sup> Her corporeal being-in-the-world and her experiences of suffering were/are considered unruly and rebellious, resistant to biomedical logic, discipline and therapeutic. And yet her corporeal constellation of suffering *did* resonate with and respond to categories and therapeutics that have, respectively, been historically been glossed, and frequently marginalized or dismissed, as “culture bound.”

In Chinese ethnomedicine (Kaptchuk 1983:118-119, 206-7), “cold wind” is considered a hybrid of “wind pernicious influence” (or *feng-xie-zheng*) and “cold pernicious influence” (or *han-xie-zheng*). Linda’s distress began as intermittent pain in her legs. As Kaptchuk (1983 :207) notes “The pattern of wind penetrating the meridians mobile is recognizable by mobile soreness...in the limbs.” Yet within a few months, Linda experienced constant pain and progressive joint swelling in her legs. This description resonates with one of the patterns of “cold pernicious influence” known as “cold blockage.” Again, I refer to Kaptchuk (1983:207): “The pattern of Cold Blockage is characterized by severe pains in the joints.”

Linda’s experiences transgressed the boundaries of the biomedical world, yet were contained within the domain of meaning making and therapeutic of the Chinese ethnomedical world. It is *not* then, that a given syndrome is “culture bound,” *nor* that biomedical categories are more “real,” phenomenologically, than the categories of experience and suffering of other medical worlds.<sup>108</sup> Particular forms of suffering “out run” the cultural categories and/or logics of embodied experience<sup>109</sup> of one medical world yet more fully resonate with, and thus are more readily appreciated and accommodated — categorically and therapeutically — by, a culturally distinct medical world.<sup>110</sup>

Although I was aware that *Cold Wind* was a cultural category associated with suffering, I was not familiar with the details of these distinct patterns of corporeal suffering in Chinese ethnomedicine. It was only by *attending with* my corporeality *to* Linda’s embodied pain that the *presence* of these dimensions of the phenomenologically given, and specialized Chinese

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<sup>107</sup> As a practicing biomedical clinician, my engagements with individuals whose corporeal and lived experiences of suffering do not resonate with biomedical categories of distress present a profound moral and ethical dilemma. For while I am personally and professionally compelled by their distress and want to provide succor for their suffering, I also feel duty bound to honor their corporeal experiences and existential conditions. Physicians are taught to selectively edit, erase, and/or silence patient responses that are deemed “superfluous” or otherwise do not conform with biomedical patterns of distress. This unconscious, yet coercive manipulation of the patient’s experience of suffering is motivated by a desire to provide the patient with “treatment.” Sometimes this biomedical editorial process is fruitful and the patient’s suffering is significantly and/or completely relieved by the therapy. However, in my professional experience, as often as not — and as illustrated by Linda’s experience — the physician’s authorial erasure does *not* engender transcendence from suffering, but rather *compounds* the suffering, as an act of structural violence. Thus, the importance of distinctive medical worlds for enhancing healthcare delivery in a globalized, post-colonial world.

<sup>108</sup> Here I am alluding to the “illness-disease” debate (Eisenberg 1977, Kleinman 1980, Schweder 1991). As a practicing physician and a medical anthropologist I find the uncritical acceptance of biomedical primacy and hegemony inherent in this debate — Schweder (1991) and Good (1994) being notable exceptions — to be extremely problematic.

<sup>109</sup> Csordas (1993:149-152) claims that indeterminacy, as fundamental dimensions of (embodied) perception and practice, is “an inevitable background *condition*” of analyses that foreground embodiment. My interpretation of Linda’s experiences of suffering — as well as my experience of the power of specific techniques of the body to engender corporeal capacities of therapeutic power — suggest that embodied indeterminacy can also be framed as an existential capacity of corporeal experiences to “out run” cultural categories.

<sup>110</sup> Furthermore, the authorization of a specific constellation of suffering, within a given medical world, is also historically, and politically informed. For an illustrative example see Young’s (1995) presentation of the historical and political formation of the PTSD.

ethnomedical, worlds were revealed to me.<sup>111</sup> By engaging in the Chi Gong techniques of the body as a practice of everyday living I had cultivated a distinctive somatic mode of attending to others and the world with my body. Furthermore, and most critical for this project, this particular mode of attention had bodied forth corporeal healing power and in so doing, revealed previously unappreciated contours of the phenomenologically given world, constituting a distinct medical world.

My experiences of Dunham technique and the techniques of Chi Gong powerfully impressed upon me the critical role of embodiment and the senses as fundamental formative principles in the orchestration of a given life world, mundane or specialized. My engagement in the musical and corporeal techniques of Dunham dance bodied forth a unique Yorùbá/Diasporic somatic mode of being-in, engaging, perceiving, and making sense of the world; enhanced my individual health and well-being; and simultaneously revealed a *sonically informed lifeworld*. My participation in the everyday practice of Chi Gong cultivated a distinct somatic mode of perceiving, apprehending, and interpreting the world. More importantly, my engagement with the corporeal techniques of medical Chi Gong also cultivated a specialized somatic mode of *acting on* and *transforming* the world by *therapeutically attending* to the suffering of another!

Thus, although the stream of cold wind that emerged from Linda's foot that night was only a few inches in diameter, it blew my world apart. And those torrential ruptures were both disruptive and constructive. Like a tornado, those winds blew holes in many of my previous intellectual configurations, disrupting their seamless integrity as well as creating new apertures that allowed fresh air and new light to enter. The disruptions were discomforting, yet they afforded me opportunities to reconfigure new, and more expansive, imaginative structures. And these expanded sensibilities — corporeal and imaginative — enabled me to more fully apprehend and make sense of a therapeutic “ritual” I witnessed a few years later.

### **Sound Therapy?**

A young woman, otherwise in excellent health, had begun experiencing intermittent episodes of mild, yet annoying tremulousness in her upper arms. These fine tremors — emerging unexpectedly and lasting anywhere from a few seconds to several minutes — were, more than anything, a source of embarrassment. A complete physical and neurological examination, including diagnostic studies — except for the occasional quiverings of the woman's arms — were completely normal. The physicians' only suggestion was that she discontinue any/all consumption of caffeinated beverages. The young woman readily and faithfully complied, yet the tremors persisted.

I was that woman. Although the tremulousness did not progress, neither did it abate. Rather these unintentional and unwanted quiverings persisted, continuing to annoy me. I was no longer living in Los Angeles nor did I know a skilled medical Chi Gong practitioner or Chinese medical practitioner in the area. Pleased that my biomedical colleagues could find no bio-physiological locus of pathology, yet dissatisfied with my persistent symptoms, I went to a reputable Ifá healer (*babaláwo*).

Typically in the Ifá medical encounter, the client witnesses, and is an active participant in, both the diagnostic and therapeutic enactments.<sup>112</sup> Yet on that day I was admonished to sit

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<sup>111</sup> Some accounts claim that the Chinese medical world, particularly the phenomena of vital energy, chi, and of the meridians, or channels, of chi within human corporeality, emerged from (were revealed through) Daoist and Buddhist practices of Chi Gong. See K. Cohen (1997) and Chen (2003:6-13).

<sup>112</sup> See the descriptions offered by Adekson (2003:82-86), Bascom (1969:37-60), Drewal (1992:51-88).

immediately outside the small room (with the door closed) where the healer and his assistant performed these rituals. Thus, although I could not *see* the proceedings, I could *hear them*. From behind the door, the healer also actively engaged me to participate in select musical articulations during both the diagnostic and therapeutic proceedings.

I sat on a small cushion, facing the door, comfortably relaxed while mindfully attending – and contributing intermittently – to the sonic contours of the therapeutic event. Except for my awareness that this was not the usual configuration of intersubjective experience in an Ifá therapeutic encounter, and my occasional curiosity regarding what I could not *see* but only *hear* and *imagine*, the experience unfolded uneventfully. The musical articulations of Ifá verses — both the solo performances of the *babaláwo* and those rendered by him in concert with his assistant and myself — were aesthetically pleasing, but neither more nor less affectively evocative or corporeally compelling than usual.

The one noticeable exception was one rather long, musically lyrical verse that the *babaláwo* performed alone. The articulation stood out from the rest, not only as a solo rendition (the *babaláwo* articulated a number of solo performances over the course of this therapeutic encounter), but musically, it had an unusual texture. The verse was noticeably more lyrical and sweet than the rest, and immediately I found myself smiling as it wafted through the closed door. I also noticed that the contours of the music had a softly undulating quality, gently rising and falling, like the tide quietly lapping at your feet as you walk along the sandy oceanfront.

The musical rendering of this verse was also remarkable because of my body's involuntary corporeal response. At one point in the performance, my tremulousness emerged. Yet rather than disappear within a few minutes, as had been the pattern, the tremors persisted throughout the rendition. Also, shortly after they emerged, the quiverings began to swell and recede in concert with the musical texture. I felt no discomfort, and so I patiently observed my arms flutter about in a twittery dance in my lap. And once the musical articulation of the *babaláwo* ended, my arms suddenly came to rest, and remaining quiet for the remainder of my repose outside the door.

Upon completion of the proceedings, the Ifá specialist gave me a short verse<sup>113</sup> to include in my everyday devotional practice, and advised me to return in a few days for a medicinal black soap.<sup>114</sup> Although I had definitely noticed my arms' unique response to the *babaláwo*'s musical

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<sup>113</sup> All the various regional dialects of Yorùbá language, as well as the “esoteric” or specialized dialect of Ifá, are musical, using a pentatonic scale, and prior to colonialism, *all* the dialects were completely nonscripted. Ifá practice still strongly resists the ontological violence of being “reduced” to writing. For a historical overview of the process of transcribing and officializing Yorùbá language, see Ajayi's (1960) essay “How Yorùbá was reduced to writing.” For writing on the musical dimensions of Yorùbá language and oral literature see fn 21.

<sup>114</sup> *Qse dúdú*, “black soap” is an indigenous Yorùbá soap made from palm kernel oil (*àdín*). Yorùbá ethnomedical specialists commonly pound medicinal ingredients and the soap together in a mortar, creating a medicinal soap. The use of soap as a technique of incorporating medicine into the client's corporeality reiterates the sonically informed sensibility of porosity, in the Yorùbá mundane lifeworld and *habitus*. For more on the use of medicinal soap in Yorùbá ethnomedicine, see Buckley (1985:44-5, 155-6). For more on the sonically informed sensibility of permeability and porosity of the individual and collective (social and political) bodies in Yorùbá mundane and medical worlds, see chapter 2. Finally, there is a wonderful adage that uses *ose dudu* as the vehicle through which to speak to express the sensibility of porosity, and the associated value of incorporating difference, in Yorùbá culture: *Bí ewé bá pé l'ara ose, yìò di ose*. “If the leaf [which is used to wrap the soap] remains a long time atop the soap, it will become soap.” (my translation). As Peel (2003 [2000]:248) notes: “This common proverb alludes to the fact that the soft black soap which [is] manufactured by the Yoruba from ash and palm oil [is] kept wrapped in leaves which [will] over time gradually dissolve into the soap itself. It [the adage] is used to indicate how people will adapt to the circumstances they are placed in, gradually taking on the characteristics of the new environment.” Yet what

articulation, I assumed that the soap — a concrete “medicine” — was the primary therapeutic intervention. Yet within less than two days, *before* I had an opportunity to return for the soap, my tremulousness ceased entirely!

And while I did eventually use the medicinal soap, I did not begin using it as immediately as I had imagined, nor did I bathe with it as faithfully as instructed. Unexpectedly, it took almost a month, rather than a few days, for the healer to prepare the soap. Even without the soap, once the tremors ceased my body remained quiet. My arms, once again, *only* moved when *I wanted* and in the ways *I intended*. The integrity of my bodily being-in and the gracefulness of my bodily moving in and through the world had been restored.

Gradually, over those first few weeks, I continued to incorporate the musical verse in my daily practice. The normalcy of my arms, which had been so expediently restored, endured *sans soap*, and I began to entertain the thought that there was a relationship between the musical and sonic techniques of articulation and Ifá’s therapeutic power. The expanded imaginative and corporeal capacities that had been engendered through my encounter with *Cold Wind* years before helped me to appreciate, somatically and intellectually, this musical performativity (Austin 1972, Butler 1997) of therapeutic force in Ifá’s medical world.

After some reflection and (re) consideration, I was left with an enduring impression that this orchestration of therapeutic power had been engendered both by my daily re-iteration of therapeutic musical articulations<sup>115</sup> and by the musical force that had I experienced — making my arms twitter and dance in response — during the therapeutic encounter. Furthermore, I strongly suspected that there was a fundamental resonance between the therapeutic force engendered by the *babaláwo*’s musical recitations and the therapeutic power of Chi Gong practice in my transformative ministering to Linda’s suffering years earlier. I sensed that the *babaláwo*, through his engagement in the bodily techniques of Ifá’s everyday practice, had cultivated enhanced musico-corporeal capacities of therapeutic power, and that, as my nascent devotional practice deepened, I would experience more of this sonic specialized world of Ifá. Thus, even then, I appreciated that, similar to Chi Gong, *engagement in the techniques of the body particular to the pedagogy and practice of Ifá, cultivates a corporeal mode of therapeutically attending to suffering that is unique to, and simultaneously orchestrates, Ifá’s medical world.*

### **Embodiment as the Fertile Ground of Departure**

Michael Jackson (1989:120, emphasis added) thoughtfully reminds us that the word *culture*, “the common ground of the social sciences...may be understood not only as an abstract noun but in a verbal sense as well. And it not only covers a domain of intellectual life; it also demarcates a *field of practical activity*.” He then provides a brief exegesis of the etymological and historical association between *culture* and *to cultivate*, noting that “In its original usage, *culture* (from the Latin *colo*) meant to inhabit a town or district, to cultivate... the land... and generally to look after one’s livelihood especially in its material aspects such as clothing and adorning the body, *caring for and attending to friends and family...the gods, and... the cultivation of correct moral and intellectual disciplines*” (ibid, emphasis added).

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Peel fails to recognize is that *both* the leaf and the soap are transformed by the dance of incorporating difference... Initially, the dry leaf will become moist and more supple from incorporating aspects of the soap. If left longer, the leaf will dissolve into the soap, and in so doing, changing the soap.

<sup>115</sup> My musical participation included that of the therapeutic encounter as well as my daily musical articulations of the specific (therapeutic) verse given to me by the healer.

These historical and linguistic associations between *culture* and *to cultivate* are particularly relevant to my project. Culture, then, can be re-imagined as a sphere of shared practical activity and values characterized by individual and collective cultivation. And cultivation here implies not only the conscious nurturing of moral and intellectual development, but also refers to bodily practices of attending to, and *caring for*, oneself and others — affectively, corporeally, and even, therapeutically. This rendition of culture resonates beautifully with Schutz’s (1962:233) articulation of both the mundane life world — “[t]he world of working in daily life” as/and an inter-subjective domain of meaning making — and of the specialized life worlds as “its [the everyday life world’s] modifications.” Orchestrating Jackson’s exegetical presentation and Schutz’s phenomenological frames, then, leads us to and supports my initial claim. I propose, as articulated through the ethnographic descriptions and interpretations presented above,<sup>116</sup> that life worlds — mundane and specialized — and their attendant consciousness and orientations are bodied forth and orchestrated through the *cultivation* of particular somatic modes of attention (Csordas 1993).

To study these processes of corporeal and imaginative cultivation, as is evidenced by my presentations of Dunham dance, medical Chi Gong, and Ifá above, I use embodiment as both fundamental methodological practice and my primary theoretical analytic. Methodologically, I use my own corporeality engaging in these practices and processes of cultivation. My work, then, clearly resonates with Jackson’s (1989:135) advocacy for “joining in” in ethnographic practice, as well as with his assertions (ibid) that “the embodiedness of our being-in-the-world is... a common ground... [for elaborating interpretative analysis that] remains grounded in a field of practical activity and thereby remains consonant with the experience of those among whom one has lived.”<sup>117</sup>

Furthermore, as is apparent throughout this introduction, Csordas’ (1993, 1994) framing of embodiment, particularly his notion of “somatic modes of attention,” figures very prominently in my ethnographic practice and in my theoretical analysis. Yet my methodological engagements and theoretical elaborations of embodiment both differ from, and extend, Csordas’ formulation in a few critical ways. First, given the prominence of sound and musicality in Yorùbá (and Diasporic) everyday and specialized life worlds, my project foregrounds the *sensorium* (Classen 1993, 2000; Geurts 2003, 2005; Howes 1991, 2005; Seremetakis 1994, Stoller 1989, 1997). For while Csordas (1993:139 emphasis in the original) notes the senses in his framing of somatic modes of attention — “Our concern is the *cultural elaboration of sensory engagement...culturally elaborated attention to and with the body in the immediacy of an*

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<sup>116</sup> I also use this frame of analysis in my interpretation of Good’s (1994) project regarding the elaboration of the biomedical world.

<sup>117</sup> Given my use and study of Chi Gong to promote both my methodology and my fundamental theoretical assertions, I feel it is also apt to note Ots’ (1994) advocacy for embodiment — using the German term “*lieb* [to] refer to the living body, to my feelings, sensations, perceptions, and emotions” (op cit:116) — as the methodological ground of his study of Chi Gong in China. Ots (op cit:134) goes on to claim that “the *lieb*...must first be experienced” and suggests that research of “*liebly* processes” requires one to “[go] beyond participant observation [to engage, instead, in] ‘experiencing participation.’” I feel compelled to note that, while I wholeheartedly agree with Ots’ position, the form of Chi Gong that he studied differs from the medical Chi Gong practice with which I am familiar. Trance, a prominent characteristic of the practice Ots studied, is noticeably absent in the “soft” medical Chi Gong that I practiced. Finally Chen’s study (2003), like Ots’, examines the cathartic, trance-inducing form of Chi Gong that is currently part of popular culture in China, although she employs a distinctive methodological approach and theoretical analytic.

*intersubjective milieu*” — the senses are not sufficiently elaborated theoretically or methodologically in his work.

Also, Csordas (1990:5) frames embodiment, as the “existential ground of culture,” and clearly distinguishes his project from others, such as Johnson (1987), Lakoff and Johnson (1999), and Varela (1991), who explore the cognitive dimensions of embodied experience. Csordas consciously demarcates his framing of “somatic modes of attention” as a project in the phenomenology of *perception*.<sup>118</sup> Yet, as illustrated in my preceding presentations of Dunham dance, medical Chi Gong, and Ifá therapeutic, my ethnographic and embodied engagements compel me to extend Csordas’ framing of corporeal modes of attending to the world to include the imaginative. I maintain that culturally elaborated somatic modes of being-in, engaging, and perceiving the phenomenally given and intersubjective world also *body forth* particular — corporeal and imaginative — sensibilities, schemas and orientations to *make sense of* the world.

Furthermore, these somatic capacities for attending to and/as interpreting the world, in turn, influence the formation and transformation of life worlds — as domains of meaning making — and cultures — as larger spheres constituted by corporeal and imaginative *practices* (cultivation). This power of the interpretative corporeal capacities to inform larger social phenomena highlights two additional, and inter-related dimensions of corporeal being-in and attending to the world that are critical to my project yet absent in Csordas’ work. They are (1) the inherent somatic capacities of *innovation*, which, in turn, contribute to (2) *embodied agency*.

Csordas recognizes the body’s inherent capacity to “out run” confinement by, or containment within, linguistic, logical, cultural and/or categorical frames. Yet he frames this capacity as a “notion of indeterminacy” and locates it as “an inevitable background condition” of embodiment as analytic (1993:148). My experiences, corporeally and ethnographically, of shifting from one set of bodily techniques and somatic modes of attention to another — as methodological exigency *and* within Ifá’s medical world — force me to foreground this indeterminacy as a fundamental corporeal capacity that merits further methodological and theoretical attention.<sup>119</sup> Furthermore, the unique innovative sensibility that, I maintain, is cultivated through Ifá’s corporeal practices compels me to elaborate this dimension of embodiment.

Therefore, I propose that embodiment — the fleshy and sensuous, vibrant and pulsating corporeality — is a *wellspring of innovation*. Corporeal being-in-the world not only has immense capacities to engage, turn to, apprehend, and perceive the world that resist being completely captured by our linguistic and/or imaginative frames, but this corporeal unruliness and overabundance also critically influences the formation and transformation of life worlds. The inherent corporeal and imaginative plasticity, to stretch and extend beyond the taken-for-granted boundaries of a (culturally, historically, and sensorially) given life world is a vital and ever-present resource for *bodying forth* change — in corporeal, imaginative, social, and/or political practices.<sup>120</sup>

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<sup>118</sup> See the quotation by Csordas in the epigraph of this chapter.

<sup>119</sup> Also, the body’s capacity to “out run” cultural logics and categories of suffering is exquisitely important here. This phenomena also raises critical questions — from a theoretical as well as pragmatic/public health perspective — regarding the necessity of finding innovative ways to more fully attend to the health care needs of our increasingly global society (an abiding concern of mine for many years).

<sup>120</sup> Lyon and Barbalet (1994:560) also posit *embodied agency* as a critical force in the production of social institutions: “Emotion is precisely the means whereby human bodies achieve a social ontology through which

This embodied agency can take many forms. For the purposes of this project, I am most concerned with the culturally elaborated somatic modes of acting on the world, therapeutically, in Ifá — locally in West Africa and globally. Thus, I focus on Ifá’s cultivation of corporeal capacities of therapeutic attention and their orchestration of medical world(s), transcendence, and transformation.

The fundamental claim of this thesis is that musical and embodied techniques of Yorùbá and Diasporic ethnomedicine body forth a unique somatic mode of being-in, apprehending, engaging, making sense of (interpreting), and acting on — *therapeutically attending to others in* — the world. And engagement in these sonic and embodied techniques —for both healer and client (although in radically different degrees of magnitude) — bodies forth healing and orchestrates a medical world. More importantly, the sonic and corporeal techniques unique to Ifá’s scholarly-devotional practice of everyday living *cultivate corporeal capacities*, in the practitioner, of phenomenologically potent *therapeutic power*.

Thus, in contrast to Bourdieu’s (1977) privileging of the conservative and congealing aspects of practice and habitus, Ifá practice highlights and cultivates the body’s inherent plasticity and malleability, as sonically-informed sensibilities. Furthermore, this embodied agency has the potential to transform inter-subjective relations in/and the phenomenally given world. In particular, given globalization as well as the emergence of complementary, alternative, and integrative medicine within biomedical institutions and practices, the phenomenological and therapeutic power of Ifá’s healing orchestrations dramatically highlight that, in addition to the technological instrumentality of Biomedicine, there are other ways of constituting real and effective therapeutic power. And this has significant implications, theoretically and practically, for the challenges inherent in attending to the complexities of human suffering in the contemporary global moment.

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institutions are created.” However, I disagree with their inordinate privileging of the emotions, which is both at the expense of, and erases, the corporeal.

## Chapter Two: Imagining, and Incorporating, Difference. Sociality of Incorporation In(forms) Yorùbá Culture, History and Everyday Life

Certain exotic words are charged with evocative power. Voodoo is one. It usually conjures up visions of mysterious deaths, secret rites — or dark saturnalia celebrated by blood-maddened, sex-maddened, god-maddened negroes.

Alfred Metraux (1972:15)<sup>121</sup>

The image, the imagined, the imaginary – these are all terms that direct us to something critical...in global cultural processes: *the imagination as social practice*...[T]he imagination has become an organized field of social practices, a form of work...and a form of negotiation between sites of agency (individuals) and globally defined fields of possibility.

Arjun Appadurai (1996:31)

The dancer in a state of orixá's<sup>122</sup> incorporation [possession] is not a writer of that dance but rather becomes the text, written by the orixá... [I]ncorporating orixá energy does require an acknowledgement that we don't fully determine our own significance in the world.

Barbara Browning (1995:50-51)

*Marasa* is a mythical theory of...relationships based on the Haitian Vodoun sign for the Divine Twins, the *marasa*...Generative readings of the sign also include the child born sequentially after twins<sup>123</sup>...symbolically represented as a unit termed the *marasa trios*...*Marasa* states the oppositions and invites participation in the formulation of another principle entirely...[and rather than offer] resolution of seemingly irreconcilable differences...the *marasa* sign...has another more 'spiralist' agenda in mind. *Marasa* consciousness invites us to imagine beyond the binary.

VèVè Clark (1991:42-3)

This chapter explores the construction of difference in Euro-American and Yorùbá social imaginaries. As noted previously, this dissertation is a phenomenological ethnography of ways of knowing and healing particular to Ifá ritual-devotional practice among the Yorùbá, in southwestern Nigeria. Metraux's words, above, serve as a reminder that any project concerned with an African or Diasporan religious and/or healing practice faces the challenge of overcoming the exoticization and stigmatization of African cultures, subjects, knowledges, and practices within the popular (Euro-American) imaginary: the ways in which African humanity and

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<sup>121</sup> Voodoo/Vodun is a Diasporic — Yorùbá and Dahomean — religious practice.

<sup>122</sup> *Orixá* are the Yorùbá deities of Brazilian Candomblé. In Nigeria, they are the *Òrìṣà*. See Verger (1957, 1981) for a wonderful, and exhaustive, photographic and linguistic documentation of the continuities in *Orixá* worship and ritual practice between Yorùbáland, Bahia, and Cuba (Lucumí).

<sup>123</sup> In Yorùbá culture, twins (*ibéjì*) are sacred and venerated. Furthermore, the child born after the twins is always named *Ìdòwú*, and, similar to *Marasa* phenomena within Vodun culture, *Ìdòwú*'s presence, by definition, includes the presence of the twins. The three children represent a unit and give voice to the trinary logic that informs Yorùbá culture, religious practice, and esoteric knowledge.



intelligence are denied, eradicated by fantastic inventions of quintessential otherness.<sup>124</sup> In contrast, Browning notes that participation in Yorùbá and/or Diaspora ritual practice – specifically through the act of *incorporating Otherness* – dramatically influences the imaginative process. Clark’s formulation of “*Marasa consciousness*,” the germinative seeds of which are above, expands theoretically on these observations, asserting that the intellectual and imaginative processes that are grounded in, and arise from, Yorùbá and Diaspora ritual practices have profound liberatory potential.<sup>125</sup>



Early in the summer after my first year of residence in Nigeria,<sup>126</sup> I stopped for a few days in Amsterdam en route to America. While in Nigeria, I had lived in Ilé Ifè, the renowned “birthplace of Yorùbá culture.”<sup>127</sup> I had spent the vast majority of my time — typically from morning to night (and for certain events, throughout the night) six to seven days a week — intensively immersed in the specialized ritual, medical, and divination practice, known as Ifá, as an apprentice to a group of local specialists. Approximately six weeks prior to this brief “holiday” in Amsterdam, I had undergone, and completed, the ritual initiation (*itèfá*) in *igbó Odù*, the grove consecrated to Ifá (literally “the grove, or bush, of Odù<sup>128</sup>”) heralding my formal inclusion in, and recognition as a member of, the Ifá priesthood.<sup>129</sup>

<sup>124</sup> Laguerre’s (1987) discussion of African and Diaspora ethnomedicines as “rejected knowledges” is a germane example of the dismissive stigmatization of African-informed healing traditions. For more on the stigmatization of African therapeutic traditions, see fn. 181, below. For other scholarship that consciously challenges these racialized misrepresentations, see Buckley (1985), Gbadegesin (1991), Hallen and Sodipo (1986) and Makinde (1988).

<sup>125</sup> In elaborating her theory of “*Marasa consciousness*” Clark (1991) provides a provocatively insightful analysis of the power of embodiment in, and the trinary logic of, Yorùbá Diasporic ritual practice to body forth radical ways of being-in and interpreting the world. Given Clark’s personal engagement with Diasporic ritual-devotional practice, one can argue that this theory is a living example of the ritually informed imaginative processes noted by Browning as well as of *Marasa consciousness* itself. Furthermore, the powerfully enduring and transformative impact of this theory on Diaspora studies strongly supports Clark’s claims of the liberatory potential of Yorùbá/Diasporic ritual and imaginative practices.

<sup>126</sup> For more than ten years, I have considered Nigeria one of my places of residence (in contradistinction to a “field-site”), and from the beginning, Nigeria similarly embraced me, granting me legal status as an alien resident.

<sup>127</sup> In the popular local and global imaginary, the Yorùbá peoples and their diasporic descendants are all tied to Ilé Ifè as their historical site of origin. “Auto-ethnographers,” as Ferguson (1996) refers to popular (non academic) Yorùbá ethnographers, such as Ademakinwa (1958), Fasogbon (1985) and Fabunmi (1971, 1985), as well as Yorùbá academic historians such as Akinjogbin (1967, 1978/9), Adediran (1984,1998), and Olaniyan and Adebayo (1998) also claim a precolonial, Yorùbá state system and shared cultural identity among the various “subgroups” – the Ifè, Òyó, Ègbá, Ijèsa, Ondo, etc. – with common origins of their ruling elite to Ilé Ifè. However, other historians, such as Johnson (1976 [1921]), Law (1977) and Atanda (1973) and anthropologists such as Bascom (1969b) and Ferguson (1996) respectively argue (a) against the primacy of Ilé Ifè (among the former) and (b) against the notion of a shared precolonial cultural identity (among the latter). Ferguson (ibid) proposes that this “invention” (Hobsbawm 1983, Ranger 1983) of Yorùbá tradition and culture is a form of cultural resistance and decolonization in which contemporary African agents “talk back” and “write back.” Chapter 1 includes a brief presentation of the contested history of a “Yorùbá” ethnic and national identity.

<sup>128</sup> For more on the fundamental, and complimentary, relationship between Ifá and Odù, see chapter 5. For more on initiation of the Ifá priesthood, see Abimbola (1976:21-25) and Drewal (1992:63-88).

<sup>129</sup> It is important to reiterate that, prior to living in Nigeria, I had been engaged, for more than ten years, in Ifá study and basic ritual/devotional practice, under the tutelage of an African-American *babaláwo* (Ifá priest) who had trained (for seven years) and been initiated in Nigeria. This is presented in the previous chapter. For more on the complicated and contested role of initiation in Ifá and Òrìsà practice (locally in West Africa and globally), see the section entitled “Inventions of Yorùbá ‘Traditional Religion’” later in this chapter.

A fortnight after this initiation was completed I suffered a serious bout of malaria, with fevers to 106° F, intermittent delirium, jaundice, and coffee-colored urine which I assumed was hematuria<sup>130</sup> secondary to impending renal failure. During a brief moment of lucidity I called to one of the other students living in the adjacent house in my compound and told him that I believed I had black water fever (a serious complication of malaria, involving renal failure, which has a very high mortality rate) and needed to go the hospital. As with my first bout of malaria, the year before, in which I had significant neurological symptoms initially interpreted as ominous evidence of central nervous system involvement of the infection, but which eventually proved to be secondary to my antimalarial medications, my awareness, as a physician, of the significance and potential gravity of my symptoms only heightened my anxiety and discomfort. Two of the neighboring students transported me to Obafemi Awolowo University Hospital, and although the attending physicians there did not notice my jaundice due to their lack of experience with Caucasian patients, they did, however, share my concerns of possible renal involvement, and its associated poor prognosis, and promptly hospitalized and medicated me. Fortunately, my kidneys were not affected. Furthermore, their medication was quite effective and within a few days the fevers abated completely and I was discharged.

A few weeks later, although my physicians declared me to be completely and officially recovered, I was still too weak to deal with the labor-intensive demands of mundane daily living, such as carrying pails of water from the well to the bathroom or washing and wringing everything, including my towels and bed linens, by hand. Even with additional assistance for many of these chores, I was perpetually exhausted. Also, my body had suddenly developed a surprising, and pronounced, aversion to the afternoon sun<sup>131</sup> as well as a marked intolerance of the hot stillness of those evenings (at least two to three times per week) in which the fan in my room stood mute because we had no electricity. And, although I continued my ritual work and study, it, too, had to be modified to accommodate my diminished endurance for heat and/or physical exertion. Finally, after due consideration, and consultation with my ritual teachers and colleagues, my academic sponsor and a travel agent, I decided to return to America approximately one month ahead of schedule. Having recently received notification that I had been awarded a Fulbright fellowship to continue my work for another year, I saw this trip to the US as a brief hiatus to expedite my recuperation. Staying in America for a few months would ensure that I regain my strength, energy, and endurance, enabling me to return to Nigeria refreshed and invigorated, for more in-depth study of Ifá pedagogy and practice. My travel itinerary included, just as it had the year before when coming to Nigeria, a few days in Amsterdam, en route, both as a brief “holiday” and to assist me in adjusting to the differences in rhythms of daily living between rural Nigeria and urban Northern California.<sup>132</sup>

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<sup>130</sup> Hematuria means blood in the urine. As it turns out, the change in my urine’s appearance was attributable to the excessive hemoglobin being filtered through my kidneys due to the marked hemolysis (break down of red blood cells) of the malaria.

<sup>131</sup> Whereas before I had enjoyed the intense sun, after this bout of malaria my body literally cringed in the afternoons and I was a bit shocked to find myself scurrying for shelter. I was equally, if not more surprised, when I learned that ethnomedicine, locally and in Haiti (Farmer 1992), attributes malaria to over-exposure to the sun, recommending additional protection and/or avoidance of the intense afternoon rays during post malarial convalescence.

<sup>132</sup> See chapter 3, for more on rhythms of daily living in relation to Yorùbá being-in-the-world and cultural identity. For more on the inherent interplay of shifts and ruptures in the dance of incorporation of bodily habits, orientations, sensibilities, and capacities: (a) in Yorùbá culture, see chapter 4; (b) in Ifá, chapters 5 and 6.

## A Native of Amsterdam or a “Native” in Amsterdam?

Returning to Amsterdam early that summer, at just under five feet tall and 115 pounds, I was a bit weaker and ten to fifteen pounds leaner than I had been during my first holiday the year before. My skin, normally milky and opaque, was now warmed with a gentle bronze hue and a splattering of freckles. In many neighborhoods in Ilé Ifè, particularly the one where I lived and the one where my ritual mentors lived and worked, I had come to be known, affectionately, as “*Òyìnbó Òrúnmilà*,” or “Ifá’s white person<sup>133</sup> or foreigner<sup>134</sup>.” Many years earlier, in Venezuela, my fair complexion (and head full of bouncy dark curls) had earned me the affectionate pet name “*la cucaracha de la panaderia*” (lit. “the cockroach who lives in the bakery;” her body, covered with flour, is stark white, in contrast to her black spindly legs). Walking around Amsterdam, the year before, these same phenotypical features caused me to be frequently mistaken for an indigene by Dutch natives and vacationing foreigners alike. Sporting blue jeans and a shirt or sweater, and my hair smartly cut in the latest style, I was stopped at least a few times a day by someone making an inquiry in Dutch (to which, I responded incomprehensively, “I’m sorry, I don’t understand Dutch.”) or by tourists asking directions, usually, but not always, in English.

Thus, during this, my second, stay in the Netherlands, I would not have stood out, physically, amidst other travelers or residents in Europe, had it not been for my attire and coiffure. I wore loose African dresses, tie-dyed in blues, greens, and gold, usually covered by a simple, fitted, royal blue silk jacket (a gift from my mother a few years earlier) to warm me against, what I experienced, in relation to the warmth of Nigeria, as Amsterdam’s cold air. My usually thick and copious dark brown-black hair was compacted in rays of tiny cornrows taut

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<sup>133</sup> Yorùbá language is nongendered. Had they wanted to specify me as Ifá’s white woman, it would have been linguistically cumbersome, and come out, instead, as “the white woman who worships Ifá” (*Obìnrin Òyìnbó t’ó sìn Ifá*). Unlike English’s gendered normative “man” or “human,” the normative gloss in Yorùbá is *èniyàn*, which translates as “a person” (lit. “the chosen one,” from *èni*, “the numeral one,” + *yàn*, “to chose”). The vast majority of personal names are nongendered as well. Furthermore, third person gendered nominatives, such as “he” and “she” in English, and their associated possessive pronouns (“his,” “her”), do *not* exist in Yorùbá. Rather, there is a singular, nongendered noun, and possessive pronoun, *òun*, and *rè*, respectively. These forms are applied universally for animate and inanimate subjects alike and possess *no* gendered connotation or assignation. Yorùbá language does, however, privilege distinctions of social seniority, differentiating between social seniors — in both second and third person nominative forms as well as their possessive pronouns — and those of equal or lesser social status as the speaker. This privileging of seniority and lack of gender is also reflected in terms used for offspring, and between relatives (with the exception of parents and grandparents, who are referred to as the “Mother or Father of X” and “the mother/father of my mother/father” respectively). There is no term for “son” or “daughter,” in Yorùbá, only a nongendered “child” (*òmá*). And distinctions between siblings, and other familial relations, are made *only* on the basis of age, and are *not* gendered. *Ègbón* denotes an older relative (sibling, aunt/uncle, niece/nephew, cousin, etc), *àbúrò*, a younger one. See Oyèwùmí (1997:31-43; 158) and Fólárín-Schleicher (1993:chapters 1&2) for the lack of gendered distinctions and the prominence of those of seniority, in Yorùbá language. For more on the value afforded seniority in Yorùbá culture, see the section entitled “Insiders and Outsiders” later in this chapter.

<sup>134</sup> *Òyìnbó* literally refers to someone whose skin has been peeled off by the harsh Harmatton winds. Originally used as a gloss for the white Europeans, it now is a gloss for *all* foreigners, regardless of race. Thus, both my African American friends and acquaintances, regardless of hue, as well as a Korean colleague were also called *Òyìnbó* (much to their mutual consternation). Also, there are many albinos (*àfín*) in Yorùbáland, and the term *Òyìnbó* is *never* used to describe or address them. Their coloration, as well as that of Europeans is described as *pupa* (red), NOT white (*funfun*); and that of all other Africans as *dúdú* (black). Furthermore, once, when in the company of two chocolate toned African American colleagues, I was the one who the locals thought was a “Black American” (not my friends!). And on a different occasion, in a small rural village, when I was dressed in a traditional wrapper, blouse, and head wrap (covering my dark, curly hair), I was mistaken for a local albino. This suggests that there are differences in racial categorization, and in the assignation (not perception) of color, between Americans and the Yorùbá.

against my scalp which, radiating back from my hairline, converged at my crown in a small bun-shaped cluster of thin braids. This hairstyle, common in Nigeria, is popularly known in Yorùbá as *iyàwó titun*, or “new wife.” In Nigeria, friends and strangers alike had literally showered me with complements, telling me that this particular style “fit” me very well, showing off my [pretty] face and eyes.<sup>135</sup> Furthermore, a number of my Yorùbá colleagues enjoyed joking with me<sup>136</sup> that donning this “new wife” style would attract a husband to me, my hair thus curiously and comically converted to a visual and tactile invocation.<sup>137</sup>

### “New Wife” Coif and “Native” Cloth

The choice of my coif was, in fact, somewhat surreptitious. I had attempted, early on in Ilé Ifè, to get my hair cut by a local barber who, allegedly, was familiar with both contemporary Euro-American styles and Caucasians’ hair. When he began jumping around my head wielding his shears and snipping haphazardly, leaving my bangs and the front of my hair as though a mischievous toddler had sheared them, I quickly and very carefully stood up, thanked and paid him, and left before he could do any more damage. After that incident I decided that I would simply allow my hair to grow. And grow it did, becoming a thick wild mass of curls! Eventually, due to the unwieldy nature and heat of my curly mop, I asked a young friend of mine to cornrow my hair, to get it out of my eyes and for a cooler, and easier to manage, hairstyle. After sitting on a low stool (*àpótí*) between her knees for three hours, I was surprised to find that the style she had selected looked good on me. From then on, every two weeks I looked forward to my woman time. Sitting on a straw mat or the low lying stool in my friend’s small tailoring store-front, leaning against her knees and thighs as she deftly moved her fingers through my thick tresses, I would play with a neighborhood infant who was frequently left in her care, while I listened to, and occasionally entered into, the discussions of interest to my friend and the neighboring shop keepers and market women. This became a coveted time of non-ritual, socializing with the local women and children. It was one of my few “down times” and I enjoyed the relaxed environment, the warmth and familiarity of female fraternizing and joking (which could be quite raucous), and the simple affection.

Donning “native” cloth,<sup>138</sup> in Nigeria as well as in Amsterdam, was a conscious choice. My initial decision to adopt local fashion, in Nigeria, was methodological, signifying my respect for, and interest in, local customs and tastes.<sup>139</sup> I began with a few simple cotton wrappers, each

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<sup>135</sup> “*Ó léwà gan an. Ó sì nwù ojú ‘rè.*” Translation: “It [the hairstyle] is very pretty and it fits your face and eyes.”

<sup>136</sup> Joking is a renowned aspect of Yorùbá cultural practice. For a brief discussion of this important dimension of Yorùbá sociality, see M. Drewal (1992:16-23).

<sup>137</sup> Whether attributable to my hairstyle or not, I did meet and marry a Yorùbá man, in America, a few years later.

<sup>138</sup> “Native” is used by Nigerians to designate indigenous fashion designs for both men and women and is used in contradistinction to either “ready-made” and/or “English-style.” “Ready-made” refers to garments that are mass-produced, in factories. Thus, although most of my bubas and batik dresses were already made at the time of purchase, they were *not* considered “ready-made,” as they had been individually produced by local tailors or seamstresses.

<sup>139</sup> This choice was consistent with M. Jackson’s (1989:135) admonition that, in order to understand the bodily practices and embodied knowledge of cultural others, “it is necessary to adopt a methodological strategy of joining in without ulterior motive and literally putting oneself in the place of other persons: inhabiting their world.” For more on my engagement with body techniques in Yorùbá everyday living and the ways of knowing and being-in-the-world these practices engender, see chapters 3 and 4; with practices of everyday living, and the specialized ways of knowing, healing and being-in-the-world, particular to Ifá, see chapters 5 and 6.

with matching blouse, the daily wear of the overwhelming majority of women in town.<sup>140</sup> I was surprised how the bell shaped sleeves captured the refreshing afternoon breezes and funneled them, tickling, up my arms and round my torso. However, I did *not* like, and felt perpetually bothered by, the repeated unraveling of the wrappers. I quickly abandoned them, as daily-wear, adopting loose, straight, cotton batik dresses in their stead. These colorful shifts were also common local casual wear. They were cool and comfortable, inexpensive and much easier to wash and wring dry, by hand, than the lengthy and cumbersome wrappers. With time, the latter feature proved to be more important to me than the others, combined. My work and study, as an *awo'fá*, was frequently quite dirty and/or dusty. Each day, I spent many hours on a straw mat on the floor observing and/or participating in divinations and/or other ritual enactments as well as in the preparation of medicines. I also participated, regularly, in ritual sacrifices, holding and/or tethering the animal, assisting in the sacrificial slaughter and the ritual offering of blood, and helping to clean the animal's carcass, butcher the meat and prepare the sacrificial meal.<sup>141</sup> Due to their comfort and ease, both for my everyday ritual practice as well as my weekly laundering labors, the loose-fitting batik cotton shifts became the mainstay of my wardrobe — regardless of whether I was on campus or in town, in Ilé Ifè, or visiting U.S.I.S, the U.S. embassy, or my few American friends, in Lagos. I typically reserved my wrappers and bubas for special social events such as funerals and naming ceremonies, and important ritual ceremonies. The bubas were also very popular among the Americans in Lagos. Thus when attending a formal activity, among the expats in Lagos, I either wore a buba or one of my American dresses.

My decision to wear these colorful batik dresses and bubas, rather than my jeans or American dresses, when traveling from Nigeria to the US, arose, in part, from a shift in my tastes (Bourdieu 1984),<sup>142</sup> but was predominantly motivated by longing and desire. Although the weakness of my body demanded that I leave Nigeria, my heart had felt otherwise. Wearing the batik dresses and bubas was a tactile and intimate way of carrying a bit of Nigeria with me. The patterns, as well as the dresses themselves, were big and bold by Euro-American fashion standards. Bright and a bit explosive, they reminded me of the bustling outdoor markets and the animated market women where I had purchased them, lifting my spirits and bringing a smile to my face. The rich brilliance of their royal blue hues reminded me of the deep indigo dye used for ritual enhancement and protection. Their smell — an odd combination of the clean, yet mildly biting scent from the green bar of local laundry soap, lightly laced with lye; the scratchy, sawdust scent from the wooden shelves of my closet; and the faint, yet distinctly acrid undertones of mildew — immediately transported me to my flat in Ilé Ifè. Mostly, however, it was the feel of

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<sup>140</sup> This refers to some of the distinctions between the “town” of Ifè and the “campus.” The town is populated by local people who predominantly speak the Ifè dialect (of Yorùbá). Women in town generally wear cotton wrappers with matching blouse and simple head-tie. The campus, a fortified expanse at the edge of town, is, in contrast, a self-contained cosmopolitan oasis. Students and faculty come from throughout Nigeria, as well as from foreign countries, and English is the lingua franca. Students wear jeans and other imported fashions, and men and women of the staff and faculty are equally divided between clothing of various “native” styles and European style slacks, suits, skirts, and dresses.

<sup>141</sup> This is bloody, sweaty, labor-intensive work. Occasionally the blood was not only from the animal. Once, after stubbornly ripping off a dead rooster's feathers without the aid of scalding water to loosen their follicular anchorings, I was shocked to discover that I had completely torn off the skin on the finger pads of my right thumb and forefinger.

<sup>142</sup> After spending the better part of a year living in rural Nigeria, I no longer found form-fitting clothes appealing or attractive. I had, it seems, incorporated the local sensibility that finds tight clothes distasteful. For more on the incorporation of local rhythms and sensibilities: (a) of Yorùbá culture and everyday life, see chapter 3; (b) in Ifá, see chapter 6.

my body nestled within the cocoon of softly flowing contours that I found so comforting. This was exaggerated in the wondrously billowing folds of the bubas that I wore for the two flights. Walking in such large gowns required an upright posture and a more relaxed pace so as not to trip over, or get entangled in, the clothes' expanses. Wearing these bright, flowing gowns I enveloped myself, a little longer, in the familiar smells, sounds, rhythms, and texture of Southwestern Nigeria.

### **Magic and the Exotic “Other” in Amsterdam**

Here in Amsterdam, in the same family-run bed and breakfast hotel that I had felicitously discovered the year before, the owners, an American man and his Dutch wife, both in their mid-sixties, as well as their daughter and son-in-law, were extremely warm and hospitable. They, as well as a number of the other hotel guests, tourists from Europe and America, also commented that my hairstyle, and the shades of blue in my attire, highlighted and drew attention to the blueness of my eyes. However, in contrast to these compliments at my hotel and the universal praise and appreciation which I had received in Nigeria, the overwhelming response which I received while walking casually around Amsterdam was markedly ambivalent, expressing an odd mixture of curiosity, fear, excitement and, occasionally, repugnance. The contrast between my blue eyes and fair skin — obvious signs of White-ness — on the one hand, and my African cloth and coif — pointedly “Other” — repeatedly drew unabashed second glances and stares as well as unsolicited comments and/or inquiries by Dutch passersby. Oddly and impressively consistent among my Dutch interlocutors, was the uniform convergence of “Africa” and “magic,” voiced with titillating, wide-eyed fascination floating buoyantly atop an ill-concealed, jagged edge of anxiety laced with fear.

This wild exoticization of Africa<sup>143</sup> was mirrored in many of the African art shops in the city as well. In one gallery specializing in African carvings, the owner was extremely excited about my coif. He hurried to show me a book from West Africa illustrating various popular hairstyles for women (proudly pointing out that my own style was included) as well as a recent full-page newspaper clipping, from a local press, which he had saved, covering the “magic” of “black Africa.”

### **The Multiple Meanings of a Milo® Can: The Commodification of Culture**

I, on the other hand, was fascinated by, and laughed at — until my sides hurt — a display in the window of a chic African boutique in the center of Amsterdam. There, in the spotlight, a Milo® can — converted into a hand-held kerosene lamp — from Nigeria was priced at slightly over

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<sup>143</sup> This exoticization of Africa and Africans, as the quintessential, primitive, wild “Other,” is based upon, and a reflection of, a deeply naturalized and endemic racism within dominant Euro-American culture that violently, albeit often quite subtly and deftly, dehumanizes Africa and Africans. Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (1994 [1902]) epitomizes, in his literary virtuosity, this bestialization of the continent and her inhabitants. For eloquent and illuminating analyses and critiques of the pervasive racism in this work in particular, as well as in Western/Northern social histories and literary imaginaries more generally, see Achebe (1989), particularly the essays “An Image of Africa: Racism in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*” and “Impediments to Dialogue Between North and South.” And for a refreshingly playful and seemingly innocent, yet powerfully disarming, Bakhtinian inversion of normalized racist, exoticized representations historically used by Europeans to describe Africa/ns (such as “dark,” ignorant, and “uncivilized”), see Simi Bedford's (1991) *Yoruba Girl Dancing*. Here, the main character, a small African child sent by her affluent and highly educated family to a boarding school in England, innocently, comically, and all the more potently, turns these misconceptions on their heads. For more on racialized hierarchies and the social and academic imaginaries, see the section “Transgressive Boundary Crossings” later in this chapter.

three hundred Guilders (more than one hundred and fifty US dollars at the current rate of exchange)!!!<sup>144</sup> I laughed again, imagining my Yorùbá friends' and acquaintances' disbelief, and probable disappointment, that "civilized" Europeans could possibly find any value in a (doubly) used tin! For, among my Nigerian interlocutors, even a cheap plastic "torch-light"<sup>145</sup> would be considered far more valuable – both for the quality of illumination it produces and the status associated with it – than a kerosene lamp made from a used Milo® can.<sup>146</sup> I laughed a third time – a bitter and angry laugh with a tear in my eye – at this ironic icon in the heart of Amsterdam. For if one were to assign *any* value to this recycled tin lamp, in Nigeria, it would be as an emblem of the legacy of poverty, suffering, and *underdevelopment* which the longstanding history of power relations between Europe and Africa – from colonialism and imperialism to the IMF and the contemporary, post-colonial state – has bequeathed common Africans (Rodney 1970).

The tin lamp evoked, momentarily, the presence and appalling "normalcy" of the hordes of malnourished children I had seen throughout Nigeria – their stunted statures, spindly arms and legs, and tattered clothing – as well as the similarly tattered, withered and emaciated elderly. For them, the Milo® can is only accessible once its original contents – claiming to provide nourishment, strength and energy like that of the smiling, robust soccer player emblazoned on the can's surface – have been consumed *by someone else*. Then, as an *empty and used tin*, it is creatively transformed to illuminate the night, to help one find his/her way safely (avoiding snakes and scorpions) to a shit hole in the dark. This particular can looked new and unused – at least as a lamp – for it was shiny, unstained, sterile-looking. Thus, here in Europe, this Milo® can-turned kerosene lamp-turned art object was being celebrated, in the spotlight, as the centerpiece of chic African imports for the discerning and trend-conscious consumer.<sup>147</sup>

Sobered by this irony, I pondered the tin in silence and found myself recalling times of ritual performance in which we had used (mostly glass and handmade clay, although occasionally tin) kerosene lamps as sources of illumination against the pitch black night. My lips gently curled into a soft smile and a mild melancholia rose in my chest as I felt myself temporarily overcome and transported by these memories.<sup>148</sup> Standing there, on a cobblestone street in central Amsterdam, I was, nonetheless, experiencing their subtle, yet provocatively

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<sup>144</sup> Milo® is a powdered malt drink marketed by Nestle® throughout the developing world. It is extremely popular in Nigeria, although not as accessible as it once was due to the deteriorating economy. Nonetheless, the hand-made kerosene lamp, made from a Milo® tin, is a common item in poor urban and rural households. Filled with kerosene, it is used at night, rather than a candle or flashlight, to provide illumination when there isn't any electricity. At the time, the Milo® tin-kerosene lamp would have sold, in Nigeria, for approximately N150, the equivalent of approximately one and a half US dollars at the typical rate of exchange.

<sup>145</sup> A flashlight.

<sup>146</sup> There is an ascending hierarchy of illumination, with – starting at the bottom – any and all forms of kerosene lamps (uniformly associated with the most extreme poverty), followed by candles, "torch lights", gas lamps, and – the ultimate sign of status – personal generators. Kerosene lamps, synonymous with poverty, are stigmatized in comparison to the other forms of illumination.

<sup>147</sup> See C. Steiner (1994, 1995) for a detailed description and discussion of the phenomena of inventing/ creating West African objets d'art for consumption by international art dealers and their clientele. Also see Appiah's essay "The Postcolonial and the Postmodern" in *In My Father's House* (1992:137-157); Stoller's essay "Spaces, Places, and Fields" in *Sensuous Scholarship* (1997:93-118) and Appadurai *The Social Life of Things* (1986).

<sup>148</sup> See Serematakis (1994) for her exploration of the interplay of the senses, memory, and modernity in everyday living and experience. For an intellectually dazzling array of other sensorially-informed analyses, see Classen (1997, 2000, 2005), Drobnick (2004, 2006), Geurts (2003, 2005), Howes (1991, 2003, 2005), Ong (1991), Paterson (2007).

sensuous presence: the peculiar and biting odor of the kerosene; the gray-black vapors curling up from the edge of a flickering flame; the mild irritation of the kerosene fumes inside my nose and against my eyes; the muted and limited light which a hand-held kerosene lamp provides. I even felt the soft, yet mildly eerie gray-white/yellow glow it casts closely round itself, like a translucent orb or halo, ending precipitously in total darkness. More memories of night-time ritual work enveloped me: musical invocations; divination in the shadows; the laughter and sweat as we — myself, my ritual teachers, and other participants — cleaned and butchered the carcass of a sacrificially slaughtered goat, guided by the flames of a small fire and a sputtering candle; the smell of raw meat and bile; the squishy slipperiness of the goat's small intestines; quietly and carefully carrying small ritual offerings into the night, guided by the soft glow of a candle or kerosene lamp.

The memories released me, and as I focused my attention once again on the Milo® can before me, I was acutely aware of its exquisite embeddedness within multiple and overlapping webs of social, cultural, and historical networks and meaning as well as within the powerful sensuous pastiche of everyday ritual, and mundane, living *in Nigeria*. Yet here, in a European display window, those dark nights and villages without electricity, the hunger pains of marginalized millions, and the pithy aromas and sensuous songs of ritual and mundane daily life; those brilliantly contrasting threads of contextualization were completely disrupted — sterilized, sanitized, silenced. Torn from its vital social, historical and sensuous participation in everyday living, the Milo® can in the window was flat and hollow. It was a disquieting caricature of African, and Yorùbá, “culture:” eviscerated and commodified. Suddenly I felt these multiple disruptions and erasures, viscerally, as small, yet violent, assaults tearing my flesh. And when I looked at the tin again, all I saw was a haunting emptiness glaring forth like a vicious and taunting smile. Closing my eyes, I consciously called forth, once more, the pungent and provocative, sensuous memories of kerosene lamps in daily (nightly) ritual living in Nigeria and reveled in the sense of wholeness, akin to a warm and comforting embrace, which they evoked within me. Then, after holding on to and quietly savoring the satisfaction of this fullness for a few moments, I opened my eyes and walked away...

### **Inventions of Yorùbá “Traditional Religion:” Ruptures in Participation**

Even now — in California, at the end of the first decade of the twenty-first century — writing about the Milo® tin stirs sweet and satiating synesthetic impressions, full of powerful presence, from my intimate engagement in the rich night-time rituals in Ilé Ifè. Yet it is a bitter-sweetness. For now, although the terrorism of the military dictatorship which haunted Nigeria has been eradicated and the current civil government is less corrupt than its predecessors, there is more hunger and poverty in Nigeria than ever before. The underdevelopment of Nigeria (Rodney 1970) and the suffering of her masses continue.<sup>149</sup>

Furthermore, that brief moment in the heart of Amsterdam when I stumbled upon the shiny tin, as a celebrated *objet d'art* ripe for Northern consumption is now a prominent and provocative dimension of my memories in its own right. During the interim between that summer and the present moment, my perception of the tin, in that fleeting encounter, as an innocent and cursory coincidence has been profoundly and irrevocably transformed. Recalling the Milo® tin in Europe evokes a profoundly violent sense of loss and a deep and melancholic

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<sup>149</sup> According to World Bank statistics, per capita gross national income in Nigeria fell below \$1 per day since the last decade of the twentieth century. This is compounded by spiraling inflation in excess of 300% over the past twenty years (Ogbaa 2003:31).



heaviness in my chest. Now I see (the creation and valorization of) that sparkling, vacuous tin can as a prophetic icon heralding the virulent emergence, since the late 1990s, of the popularization and commodification of “Yorùbá culture” and “tradition” (Appadurai 1996; Hobsbawm 1983) for global markets — the viciously sterile reification of vibrantly animate and animating, mundane and ritual, practices of everyday living. Yet, while Northerners emptied the Milo® lantern of its local and historical significance in their creation of the chic, albeit faux, representation of “African culture” as a fashionable adornment for their living rooms, it is Africans themselves who erase and eliminate the creative, nourishing and sustaining “deep” power (*agbára t’ó jinlè*) of ritual practices of everyday living, in their crafting of Yorùbá “traditional religion,” as a social and spiritual addition for Northern lives.

Beginning with (a) the fetishization of mundane objects, such as the Milo® can; (b) the reconfiguration of mundane practices, such as pounding yam or going to market, as constituting “culture;” and (c) the production, and marketing of faux antiquities, ritual implements, and sacred artifacts;<sup>150</sup> this phenomenon of seemingly insatiable appetites has exploded, insidiously attempting to rapaciously cannibalize ritual life and practices as well. Most disturbing is the burgeoning consumption — predominantly by Americans — of ritual initiations in Yorùbá “traditional religion.” Over the past ten to fifteen years, a wildly expanding market of “spiritual tourism” has emerged wherein Northern spiritual pilgrims travel to Nigeria, for no more than a few weeks, in order to be initiated into the elite priesthood of Ifá<sup>151</sup> or into the sacerdotal service of one of the many Òrìṣà (plural, Yorùbá deities).<sup>152</sup> Spiritual “seekers,” anxious for transcendent and transformative experiences — and, often, power, prestige, and enhanced social and cultural capital — travel in small groups to one of a handful of recently created “cultural centers” in Nigeria.

Typically such groups are led by a middle-aged, affluent, well-educated Yorùbá man, with a personal history of global citizenship and mobility. Serving as the guide, cultural broker and translator for the entourage, he orchestrates all exchanges — linguistic, ritual, and financial — between the spiritual pilgrims and the “traditional” Yorùbá religious leaders who perform the various ritual enactments.<sup>153</sup> These tours — often replete with hotel accommodations, guided visits to cultural and historic sites of interest, and the option of a videotape documentation of the initiatory experience — are becoming increasingly popular and more common with each passing year.

Whether promoting cultural artifacts or spiritual tourism, these global markets cater to Northern popular/secular and ethnic/spiritual imaginaries and tastes which fetishize, respectively, African “simplicity” and “primitiveness” on the one hand,<sup>154</sup> and a timeless, apolitical, and

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<sup>150</sup> The practices are similar to those in Niger, as described by Steiner (1994, 1995). One of the most common techniques for giving new carvings the appearance of antiquities is to bury them for at least four to six months. When they are unearthed they are termite-pocked, dirty, and weathered.

<sup>151</sup> Ifá is an *Irunmole* (lit. “a Being of light”). This form of divine Presence is more rarified than that of the deities, the Òrìṣà (pl.).

<sup>152</sup> These are the two fundamental “genres” of priestly practice, within Yorùbá religion — those of the Òrìṣà, where trance-possession is a critical dimension of sacerdotal service; and of Ifá, the esoteric and ethnomedical sages who *never* enter trance.

<sup>153</sup> The vast majority of ritual specialists are conversant, *only*, in Yorùbá, and most of the tourists, inversely, in English; thereby necessitating the presence of an intermediary for all significant exchanges between them.

<sup>154</sup> For an example of this, see Europe’s “discovery” of, and enrapture with, “primitive” African art in 1919 (Mouton: 1994).

unchanging “purity” and “tradition” on the other.<sup>155</sup> Furthermore, both consumer groups idealize — whether demonically or romantically — a mystical notion of “magical power” as an *inherent* investiture or attribute of African ritual and religion. The Diasporic Yorùbá religions, particularly Cuban Lucumí/Santería, and to a lesser extent Brazilian Candomblé, have also become sites of African Diasporan “purity” and “tradition,” possessing rites of magical transformation, within Northern imaginaries, generating similar phenomena of spiritual pilgrimage/tourism (D. Brown 1995, Falola and Genova 2005, Hagedorn 2001, M. Mason 2002, Olupona and Rey 2008).

These are complicated and intriguing phenomena, the scope of which transcends the present enterprise. Nonetheless, they are fraught with tension and slippery slopes. Particularly troubling is the way in which *years* of *daily engagement* in a vibrant, active “dance of participation”<sup>156</sup> — which is characterized by a rich melodic repertoire, subtle rhythmic variations, and fluid, ever-changing choreography — is frozen, as a still-life photo. Profoundly transformative processes and sensibilities, engendered through intimate participation in, and incorporation, over time, of, the rhythms and (sonic and) sensuous practices of everyday ritual living, become reduced and reified; condensed and commodified; as a solitary, defining — and, purportedly, magically and instantaneously, transfiguring — event: “initiation.”<sup>157</sup> Playing upon the aforementioned mystification of ritual performance in the popular imaginary (the idealized notion of inherent magical powers of radical and spontaneous transformation), “initiation” becomes a highly prized commodity.<sup>158</sup>

Thus, for “Northern” (non-Yorùbá) spiritual seekers, the richly aromatic, sweet sounding, tremendously tactile, and supremely sensuous pastiche of on-going, intimate and organic engagement in everyday ritual practices — themselves deeply woven in a vibrant web of local, cultural and historical, practices and meanings — gets dangerously erased. While among the Yorùbá, every day sees the emergence of greater numbers of self-proclaimed teachers, leaders, titled chiefs and/or spiritual sages, eclipsing and exploiting the less commercially sophisticated elders and priests as they vie for a lion’s share of this explosive cottage industry that reaches all

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<sup>155</sup> Afrocentrism (Nobles 1984; Asante 1987) epitomizes this phenomenon.

<sup>156</sup> Chapter 3 explores how gentle, relaxed rhythms of everyday living fundamentally inform Yorùbá being-in-the-world (and cultural identity). For more on the process of bodying-forth spiritually-informed and sagely being-in-the-world, in Yorùbá culture, see chapter 4. And for more on the life-long journey of cultivating powerful ways of knowing, being, and healing, particular to Ifá, as well as the particular daily dances of participation and incorporation, see chapters 5 and 6 respectively. These transformative processes require the individual’s *full* and daily participation over a *life-time*, enabling the organic unfoldment, over time, of specialized mode of being-in, perceiving, interpreting, and acting on the world. This organic development can *not* be artificially shortened or commodified.

<sup>157</sup> Mason, in his book *Living Santería* (2002:32) also “speaks back” to these misconceptions: “It is important to note that neophytes who undergo rituals are not somehow miraculously transformed by some inexplicable and awesome power.” Ironically, shortly thereafter he claims (op cit:34): “Santería must be understood as an initiatory religion; initiations punctuate the changes and elevation of a person in the tradition.” It is unfortunate, in this author’s opinion that Mason foregrounds and overemphasizes initiatory experiences at the expense and erasure of the everyday, and in so doing perpetuates the myth of the initiatory moment. As he himself notes, ritual ceremonies “punctuate” transformation in the individual’s social status within the religious community, but it is the consistent engagement in body techniques of *everyday* ritual-devotional practice that bodies forth distinctive, spiritually-informed ways of being-in and attending-to the world. For other examples of the transformative power of everyday bodily practices in healing and/or religious traditions, see Fields (2001), Levin (1985), Varela (1991). For other writings on the impact of globalization on Yorùbá and Diasporic practices, see Falola and Geneva (2005), Murphy and Sanford (2001), Olupona and Rey (2008), Tishken et al (2009).

<sup>158</sup> For example, one site on the internet offers ritual initiation into Ifá — in America, which many consider to be less powerful, “authentic,” and prestigious than in Nigeria — for \$16,000! And, if you like, you can pay by credit card.

shores of the Black Atlantic (Gilroy 1993). The newcomers aggressively compete with one another for the social and material capital of this lucrative foreign market, seeking to marginalize, economically and socially, the genuine and knowledgeable elders. The ruptures of these (re)inventions of tradition, like that of the Milo® tin and the faux ritual carvings, silence and sterilize the social and the sensuous. Furthermore, they are significantly poised to threaten and/or disrupt the rhythms and contours of everyday practices. This is particularly relevant when considering the new forms of *faux* participation inherent in the commodified ritual initiations of the spiritual tourism trade. New “initiates,” christened with Yorùbá names, return from their spiritual pilgrimage to Nigeria laden with sacred pots<sup>159</sup> and ritual implements and paraphernalia. These African treasures undoubtedly have intense personal meaning and emotional significance for these Americans, forming the foundation of their personal shrines and new social personas, as “priests” and “priestesses” of “Yorùbá traditional religion,” and frequently yield immense social gains. Yet all too often they are as vacuous and hollow as the Milo® can.

For example, an African American woman who traveled to Nigeria with a group of spiritual seekers, under the guidance of a cosmopolitan “big man,” was “initiated” to one of the Òrìṣà in Nigeria, receiving the ritually prepared pot of her Òrìṣà. In Nigeria, in addition to large communal shrines, and often groves, dedicated to the worship of a given Òrìṣà in each municipality, there are also personal and/or familial shrines to the Òrìṣà located within the compounds of devotees, contemporary members of the priesthood, and families who, although not currently worshiping the Òrìṣà, pertain to his/her priesthood lineage. In each of these shrines, the pot (frequently a calabash<sup>160</sup>) “houses” the Òrìṣà and is the material focal point to which everyday ritual practices, such as prayer and offerings, are directed. The pot is also an important material nexus through which communion and/or communication with the Òrìṣà’s Presence occurs. Although this American woman, now afforded the status of an Òrìṣà priestess, in America, possessed the pot of her Òrìṣà, she did not know what to do with it. In Nigeria she received no instructions as to its ritual care or the cultivation of her relationship with the Òrìṣà through everyday ritual practice. Returning to the US, she queried priestesses of Diasporic traditions, with whom she was acquainted, for guidance and instruction. Yet the Cuban and Brazilian practices differ significantly from those of Nigeria,<sup>161</sup> and these priestesses were unable to assist her, urging her, instead, to contact the Yorùbá man who had taken her to Nigeria.<sup>162</sup>

This woman is a middle aged, highly educated professional whose work requires critical thinking. Nonetheless, she was surprised that her “initiation” had failed to magically provide her with understanding of ritual praxis or with the “deep” sacred knowledge from which it emerges.

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<sup>159</sup> The pot is the sanctified vessel in which (a) the sacred palm nuts, the *ikin’fa*, of Ifá or (b) the sacred stones of the Òrìṣà are “housed” and through which their respective emanations of divine Presence may emerge. See next paragraph for more details.

<sup>160</sup> This points to the fundamental resonance between these sacred containers and *igbá iwà*, “the calabash of existence,” and their iconic (and phenomenological) associations with the earth *ilẹ̀*, “(Mo)the(r) earth.” For more on the resonance between pots, the calabash of existence (as well as pregnant bellies) and *ilẹ̀*, see chapter 6.

<sup>161</sup> First of all, the contents of the pot for a given Òrìṣà, aspects of its ritual preparation and activation, and its ritual care, differ in each of these sites and traditions. In Brazil, the sacred pots of the Òrìṣà (pl.) are not given directly to the new initiate. Instead, they remain in the *terreiro* (communal shrine) of the initiating elder for at least seven years. Thus more emphasis of everyday practice is situated within this ritual family/community, in Brazil. In the Cuban/Lucumí practice, it is unheard of for an initiate to have only the pot of his/her Òrìṣà. When one is “made” as a priest/ess of the Òrìṣà in the Cuban tradition, s/he receives the sacred pots of at least seven principal Òrìṣà, including that of his/her “ruling” deity. Everyday ritual Lucumí practice is therefore, orchestrated in relationship to this specific configuration of Òrìṣà (plural). See M. Mason (2002:57-83; 115). Also see D. Brown (2003).

<sup>162</sup> Personal communication, P.C. 2002.

She was unusual in her honest and rather public admission of ignorance. I am familiar with others, particularly men “initiated” to Ifá, who albeit similarly lacking in training and/or participation in Yorùbá everyday ritual practice, presume that the initiatory rite magically sanctions them to concoct their own hodge-podge practices and “tradition.” These situations highlight how deeply misconceptions regarding the mystical and spontaneous transformative powers of African ritual initiation rites have penetrated, as unquestioned and naturalized framings beyond critical interrogation, within the popular Western imaginary.<sup>163</sup> It also suggests that many of the Yorùbá cultural brokers and self-proclaimed spiritual teachers, either by omission or commission, consciously misdirect Northern would-be adherents away from the sacred and sensuous scholarly traditions of Yorùbáland, the vibrant rhythms and practices of everyday ritual life. In Nigeria, these practices are the vital and pregnant — innovative and transformative — wellspring from which and through which Yorùbá sacred and (w)holy sensibilities, perceptions, and ways of being-in-the world unfold. Yet this current wave of spiritual tourism, commodifying Yorùbá “traditional religion” for global consumption by those accustomed to fast food and magic bullet medicine, propagates vast ruptures in everyday ritual and cultural participation. Violently annihilating the cultural, sensuous, and sacred contextualizations of the sanctified vessels, it creates, instead, “empty barrels”<sup>164</sup> and empty pots.<sup>165</sup>

### **The Power of Voodoo**

At the end of my three-day “holiday” in Amsterdam I repacked my bags and went to Schipol airport expecting a quiet and uneventful last leg of my homeward bound journey. Wearing a long, flowing royal blue buba adorned with miniature appliquéés of the Ifè royal bronze heads,<sup>166</sup> hand-painted in pink and yellow, beneath my short silk fitted jacket, I carried a moderate sized cloth bag slung across my shoulder. This bag contained my ritual implements for Ifá divination as well as numerous gourds containing medicines. Many of these ritual implements and gourds had obviously been “fed.” That is, they had received animal sacrifices. This was apparent by the smears and splatterings of dried blood covering them, as well as the matted feathers — and on one particular gourd, a furry, bloodied animal pelt — clinging to their surfaces.

When passing through the final X-ray machine and metal detector, at my gate of departure, I was informed by one of the guards that there was a suspicious metal object inside the bag and that they needed to inspect its contents. He told me, motioning behind his back and to the left (away from the stream of passengers), to take my bag over to a table off to the side where two women guards were standing in attendance. I was surprised and a bit disbelieving, as the bag

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<sup>163</sup> These misconceptions — of the “magical powers” of transformation of African and Diasporic initiatory rites — are naturalized within scholarly imaginaries as well. Thus Mason, speaking about an initiatory ritual in Cuban Diasporic communities, informs his readership “It is important to note that neophytes who undergo rituals are not somehow miraculously transformed by some inexplicable and awesome power” (2002:32).

<sup>164</sup> An “empty barrel”, in Nigeria, is someone who, in American vernacular, is “full of hot air.”

<sup>165</sup> For other discussions of the tensions between participation and commodification: (a) in music, see Feld (1995) and Keil and Feld (1994); and (b) in the phenomena of tourism in Africa, see Bruner (1994).

<sup>166</sup> These are exquisite bronzes from the thirteenth century, which Bascom (1939) used as the basis of his argument, radical for the time, that African art was sophisticated, *not* primitive. Bascom removed said antiquities from Ifè, under questionable circumstances in 1938. Colonial authorities in Nigeria mounted a protracted campaign criticizing his actions, which ultimately led to the return of these priceless works of art, in December 1950, to the Nigerian government (Tignor 1990). Currently, the heads are housed in the museum of antiquities, on the grounds of the Ooni’s palace, in Ilé Ifè (Eyo and Willet 1980).

had not caused any alarm in any of the numerous check points since my departure from Lagos, yet I did as he requested and walked over, placing my bag atop the edge of the table. Before taking the strap off my shoulder, however, I opened the flap of the bag, intending to reach inside to bring out those ritual implements made entirely, or in part, of metal. Immediately the attendants became animated and hostile and lunged toward me as if to grab my hand and/or the bag. “NO!” one of them commanded (with a Farsi, or Persian, accent). “YOU can NOT do it! WE must search it OURSELVES!” Immediately two male guards joined us, flanking me. Their responses startled me. I had, merely, and innocently, wanted to help. I removed my hand from the bag’s mouth, allowing the flap to fall back over, covering it. Calmly, I tried to explain that the bag contained sacred objects that I would prefer to handle. Notwithstanding, I promised, I would gladly show them everything and anything inside the bag they wished to see. Again they insisted, “NO! Only WE can search it.” So I removed my arm from beneath the shoulder strap, placed the bag securely on the table in front of me, and stepped back a bit.

There was now quite a buzz in the line of passengers who followed me in the queue, as they passed behind us, entering the inner sanctum of our gate and, shortly thereafter, boarding the plane. I could hear their chatter and feel the curious scrutiny of their gazes. But I focused, quietly, on the four guards — the two men and two women — who were surrounding me, intent on executing their search. One of the women — petite and middle-aged (with the Farsi accent to her English commands) — I took to be an Iranian immigrant; the other, a stocky blond in her twenties, looked Dutch. The men also appeared to be twenty-to-thirty-something and Dutch. The men, it seemed, were watching me, while the women — specifically the older, Iranian one — would be responsible for examining the contents of my bag. She opened the flap, and carefully reached inside with one hand. A few seconds later she brought out one of the small (approximately 3.5 inches in diameter) unfed gourds and placed it on the table. The mouth of the gourd was corked with a wad of old, scrunched newspaper. She pulled out the newspaper (stained at the edges with black chalky soot —the medicine) and peered inside. No weapon. She clumsily, and unsuccessfully, attempted to stuff the paper corking back into the mouth of the gourd. Then she reached into the bag again. This time she withdrew a much larger gourd, reddened, with dried blood smeared across one side of its belly, and furry, with a bloody pelt firmly attached to the other. She was startled and aghast! Immediately there was a flurry of animated exchanges, in Dutch, between the guards. The content of this flurry was completely unintelligible to me, except for *one phrase*, which was being repeated by the four guards — emphatically, with a tinge of panic and urgency, and with crescendoing volume and punctuation — bouncing back and forth between them like a hot potato being tossed from one to the other, too hot to touch: “Frau Voodoo,” “Frau Voodoo!” “FRAU VOODOO!!”

“Yes!” I interjected confidently, stepping closer to them and to the table. I felt my chest rising and my presence expanding, growing larger and more impressive. “I am,” lightly pressing my right index finger, twice, into my sternum, “a Frau Voodoo.”

The guards immediately became still and silent, their eyes fixed on me. “Now, would you like *me* to handle the bag’s contents?” Quietly they exchanged glances, then nodded together in silent agreement. I placed my hand in the bag, felt around amidst its familiar contents and withdrew the metal implements (wrapped in a bloodied white cloth) which I assumed had caught the attention of their x-ray eyes. Holding this blood-stained package in the palm of one hand, I partially unwound the cloth with the other, exposing two small metal anthropomorphic images — each ending in a tapered, blunt point — nuzzled together amidst feathers, pods of alligator

pepper and pieces of cola nut.<sup>167</sup> I offered them to the attendants for further inspection, but no one wished to handle them. Hands clasped behind their backs, they now quietly, but firmly, insisted that I not remove anything else and urged me, politely, to quickly return the few items that had been removed, back inside the bag. I was free to go ahead and board the plane.

I simply and unceremoniously rewrapped the metal implements and returned them to the belly of my bag. Then, after securing the paper plug in the mouth of the small gourd, I placed the large, furry gourd on the bottom of the bag, and the smaller, simple gourd atop it. After I had returned all the items inside the bag and closed the flap, the Iranian guard nervously approached me. "Please," she pleaded, "I was only doing my job."

"I understand," I responded sincerely. "It's OK."

"But I *touch*ed them." She was very worried. "I'm *so* sorry!"

"It's OK, really." I tried to re-assure her.

"Are you *sure*? I *touch*ed them!" She wasn't convinced; there was dread and fear in her eyes. "Please, it's my job. I'm really sorry." She was pleading again.

"Look," I said in a matter-of-fact tone, while trying sincerely to put her at ease, "I'm a medical doctor, too. There are good medicines and bad medicines. These are all *good* medicines." I reached out and gently held her right hand in both my hands, "I promise, you don't have worry..."

She peered deeply into my eyes, perhaps to search [for] my soul. Then, apparently convinced that she was not in immanent danger, let out a long sigh of relief, and smiled feebly. "Thank you." She said quietly, quickly withdrawing her hand.

I rushed to board the plane.

### **Transgressive Border Crossings or Topologies of Knowledge Unbound**

I often wonder how this scene would have played out had my bag contained, instead, my stethoscope and some syringes, or some African musical instruments and dancing paraphernalia.<sup>168</sup> How would the security guards have responded, had their penetrating vision and disciplinary interest been directed not at me, but, rather, at an African physician, wearing a conservative European suit, with a stethoscope, syringes, and vials of injectable pharmaceuticals in the bowels of her/his bag; or an African cleric — a nun or priest, in traditional habit or collar — carrying a large metal crucifix and a sacrificial chalice concealed within her/his clothing or carry-on baggage? Very differently, to be sure. And, yet, I consider them equally plausible and similarly valenced.

Some of the tensions and anxiety expressed by anthropology over "going native,"<sup>169</sup> like the current wave of xenophobia within American/Northern popular culture, are disturbingly

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<sup>167</sup> Aframomum Melegueta and Cola Acuminata, respectively. Both are common ritual offerings.

<sup>168</sup> I also try to imagine, occasionally, how the guards would have reacted to the metal objects in my bag, in light of my coif and my attire, had this incident occurred after 9/11/01.

<sup>169</sup> For a refreshing, and intellectually rigorous, reconfiguration of the *value* of the anthropologist's multiple identities to enhance the power of ethnography (and inform his framing of the "social critic"), see Rosaldo's (1993:168-195) essay "Subjectivity in Social Analysis." As he so aptly notes (op cit:194), "More a busy intersection through which multiple identities crisscross than a unified coherent self, the knowing person not only blends a range of cognitive, emotional and ethical capacities but her social identities...The social analyst's multiple identities at once underscore the potential for uniting an analytical with an ethical project and render obsolete the view of the utterly detached observer who looks down from on high...Rather than work downward from abstract principles, social critics work outward from in-depth knowledge of a specific form of life. Informed by such conceptions as

reminiscent of the endemic and institutionalized resistance I experienced, in the 1980s, as a woman seeking entry and equal citizenship — in a position of authority, as a physician, not a nurse — in the hallowed halls of Allopathic Medicine.<sup>170</sup> Each of these phenomena is a manifestation of significant discomfort, often deeply visceral, over transgressed borders and misplaced — and threatening — persons. And they all implicitly, and unquestioningly, embody, and thereby naturalize, particular mappings and hierarchies of culture, location, race, knowledge/power, and subjectivity. Furthermore, it is significant that this nervousness (Taussig 1992) is generated only through *unilateral migration* at certain borders and/or conjunctions, where it is framed, and perceived, as contaminative transgression (Douglass 1991) and/or miscegenous or monstrous<sup>171</sup> hybridity. What is crucial, here, is the obfuscation of the constructedness of these mappings and the historical, socio-economic, political, racial, and gendered dimensions of their making, as well as the implications of their visceral and unreflexive incorporation within the individual habitus and the larger social body.

In the actual scenario at Schipol, as well as the various alternatives which I have proposed, this naturalized cartography first locates Allopathy and Christianity as “Northern” forms of knowledge, practice and subjectivity, situating them hierarchically “above” those of “Southern” medicine and religion. Examining the contours of this imaginary Northern landscape reveals finer mappings of normative hierarchies. In the center, dominating the terrain, looms a range of majestic mountains. These are the impressive peaks of knowledge and scholarship, rich in disciplinary diversity. The practice of Christianity, Judaism, and Islam — the self proclaimed “world religions” — are found spread along the shores of a lush riverine valley that runs along the periphery, and in the shadows, of the domineering heights of knowledge. Meanwhile, the many varieties of theology and metaphysics occupy a precarious and slippery middle ground between the lowlands of faith and the scholarly pinnacles. Farms and municipalities dot the valley and plateaus, as well as the outlying borderland regions, the sites of quotidian and domestic knowledge and practices. Aesthetics are more diffusely scattered throughout the landscape, from the wild bush to the spectacular summits. Their wellsprings, however, are atop a series of plateaus overlooking the valley. In every locale — except, perhaps, around these springs and at individual hearth fires — there are gendered and class distinctions, always positioning women and peasants inferiorly and at the margins.

For the purposes of my project, it is important to note that in this normative Northern topography, religious practice and knowledge, as well as metaphysics and theology, were not always mapped as distinct from, or lower than, the heights of academic scholarship and subjectivity. So, too, for aesthetics and domestic crafts. Looking to ancient Greece, we find the sages, such as Pythagoras and Plato, promote a *philo-sophia* that emerges from a unified and sapiential (or sacred) knowledge, *sophia* (Nasr 1981:34-5). Furthermore, the Greek *techne* reveals vital links between artistic production, including craftwork, and sapiential knowledge. As

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social justice, human dignity, and equality, they use their moral imagination to move from the world as it actually is to a locally persuasive vision of how it ought to be...”

<sup>170</sup> Biomedicine, or “Western” medicine.

<sup>171</sup> Donna Haraway (1991:180, 248) reminds us of the relationship, etymologically, between “monsters” and “demonstrate,” how both gesture towards borders and boundaries of normative, modern identity. Inversely, Rosaldo, in his essay “Border Crossings” (1993:196-217), looks to Gloria Anzaldúa’s framing of *la mestiza* (a person of mixed heritage) as representative of the cultural blending of contemporary experience and as the iconic vanguard for cultural identity and ethnographic practice in the twenty-first century. It is unfortunate, in the author’s opinion, that the critical value of *mestizaje* (cultural blending) has yet to be widely recognized and embraced in social science theory and/or practice.

Heidegger (1977:13) notes, “[T]echné is the name not only for the activities and skills of the craftsman, but also the arts of the mind and the fine arts. *Techné* belongs to bringing-forth, to *poiesis*; it is something poetic... From earliest times until Plato the word *techné* is linked with the word *episteme*. Both words are names for knowing in the widest sense... Such knowing provides an opening up... *Techné* is a mode of *aletheuein*.<sup>172</sup> It reveals whatever does not bring itself forth and does not yet lie here before us.” Thus, it is the progressive desacralization of knowledge, in Northern imaginaries and practices<sup>173</sup> — the secularization of the cosmos, language, and reason — which produced the topographic cleavages and slippages wherein ratiocination is sanctified, sacred ways of knowing are banished, and aesthetic production is devoid of moorings in a sacred cosmos or sapiential revelation.

And, although, by definition all Southern terrains are below the central and normative North, there is also a long-standing hierarchy of stratification within “the South,” differentiating the status of each of its constituent places, cultures, and subjectivities. In this cartographic historiography, the invention of Africa (Mudimbe 1988, 1994) is consistently the most marginalized and stigmatized. From the stratifications of “cultures” and civilizations of the 19<sup>th</sup> century (Tylor 1871; Frazier 1964), through the invention of topologies mapping an inverse relationship between cranial and genital measurements onto evolutionary schemas of culture and (intellectual) capability (Stocking 1982; Wynters 1984; Comaroff 1992), through the insidious persistence of the “rationality debates” (Horton 1970, 1993; Wilson 1970; Good 1994), Africa remains the “heart of darkness” (Conrad 1994 [1902]) in Northern imaginaries, discourses, and enterprises — political, economic, and intellectual (Mudimbe *op cit*). A Jungian analysis (1979/1964) would posit that this “darkness” is but a projection of a collective (Northern) sociocultural shadow. As such, Africa, its inhabitants and practices, are fetishized as the quintessentially exotic Other — ranging from a site of bestiality<sup>174</sup> and madness (Conrad *op cit*) to one in which “magic” and “pre-logical mentality” reign (Levi-Strauss 1963, 1966; Mauss 1972; Levy-Bruhl 1985).

Given this history, it is not surprising that Allopathy and Christianity penetrated Africa and other Southern lands and cultures, as modes of discipline and domination, deploying discourses of salvation (Comaroff 1985, 1992; Vaughn 1991). Furthermore, viewing Allopathy and Christianity through the grid of gendered topographies, a claim can similarly be made that these practices and their associated discourses were/are also used to dominate and discipline women — in both Northern and Southern societies. This is particularly relevant when discussing Africa, in general, and Nigeria, in particular. Numerous scholars of African culture and history

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<sup>172</sup> Heidegger claims that *aletheia* — which is Greek for “revealing” — is translated by the Romans as *veritas*, “truth.” This is particularly relevant when discussing the conscious deployment of musical genres to reveal (*fihan*) divine Presence in Ifá pedagogy and practice. See chapter 5.

<sup>173</sup> See the first chapter in Nasr’s *Knowledge and the Sacred. The Gifford Lectures, 1981* (1981:1- 64) for a historiography of the desacralization of knowledge in the West. According to Nasr, “[t]he unifying vision which related knowledge to love and faith, religion to science, and theology to all the departments of intellectual concern is finally lost [in modernity], leaving a world of compartmentalization where there is no wholeness because holiness has ceased to be a central concern, or is at best reduced to sentimentality” (1981:48).

<sup>174</sup> Chinua Achebe states it thusly (1989:23): “In confronting the black man, the white man has a simple choice: either to accept the black man’s humanity and the equality that flows from it, or to reject it and see him as a beast of burden. No middle ground exists except as an intellectual quibble. For centuries Europe has chosen the beastly alternative which automatically has ruled out the possibility of a dialogue. You may talk to a horse but you don’t wait for a reply!”



claim,<sup>175</sup> as Oyèèwùmí's (1997) title — *The Invention of Women*<sup>176</sup> — suggests, that gendered discourses and hierarchies were not indigenous to many African cultures prior to colonial contact. Regarding Nigeria, in particular, Oyewumi (ibid) and Amadiume (1987) utilize extensive linguistic, cultural, and historical data to support their arguments that gender did not exist, respectively, in precolonial Yorùbá or Ibo society, and was solely the result of European — Christian and colonial — influence and power.<sup>177</sup>

When Northern knowledge, practice and/or subjectivity — forms of discipline (Foucault 1972, 1977, 1980) — are embraced by Southern subjects, the phenomenon is normalized, even valorized. The inverse, however, — for Northern subjects to embrace Southern knowledge, practice, and/or subjectivity — is strongly pathologized, and for many, inconceivable.<sup>178</sup> Evidence of the former is blatantly obvious in the imaginary cartographies of the South. The contours of the North, described above, are mapped onto each of the various Southern terrains, as a normative micro-topography, situating Northern knowledge, religion, and practice in the South above their respective indigenous forms. In these cartographic inventions, given the history of stigmatization of African culture and subjectivity noted above, the localized topography of Africa has some uniquely distinctive, and troubling, dimensions. First, African forms of indigenous knowledge are generally erased. African knowledge, including but not limited to African medicine, and African religion are typically confounded (see, for example, the ethnophilosophy debates<sup>179</sup>) and then collapsed into the categorical islands of “ritual” and “magic”(Maclean 1971, Simpson 1980),<sup>180</sup> thereby excluding them from any relational mappings onto, or within, their respective Northern domains and disciplines even in their own homelands. Banished to these islands of the wild, African knowledge, medicine, and religion are isolated and imprisoned on the shores of distant and undomesticated wastelands far beyond the boundaries of normative knowledge, practice, and subjectivity (Evans-Pritchard 1937, Turner 1968, Stoller & Oakes 1987, Rosenthal 1997). Given this topography, even African music and dance — under the rubric of aesthetics — are more highly valenced (or at the very least, less stigmatized) than African medicine and religion. Furthermore, healing traditions of other Southern continents and/or cultures such as China, India, and/or Southeast Asia are currently framed, within Northern intellectual enterprises, and popular imaginaries, as forms of knowledge and scholarship (Laderman 1991; Leslie 1992; Farquhar 1994, 2002; Kuriyama 1999). Similarly, Asian religious practices are, in general, more highly regarded, and their practitioners, represented as sages rather than witchdoctors, more esteemed. Yet African (and Diasporan) forms of healing and

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<sup>175</sup> Most of this scholarship revolves around the phenomena of female husbands. Oyèèwùmí is a notable, and noteworthy, exception. She presents a detailed argument that social seniority, *not* gender, was the primary organizing schema of Yorùbá society prior to colonial contact.

<sup>176</sup> Note: the complete title is *The Invention of Women: Making an African Sense of Western Gender Discourses*.

<sup>177</sup> The core of Amadiume's argument (1987) hinges on the phenomena of female husbands, supported by linguistic data. The phenomena of female husbands has been noted in many precolonial, and some modern, African cultures, raising the possibility that the construction of gender was/is a product of colonial contact. See Evans-Pritchard (1951), Gluckman (1950), Herskovits (1937), Huber (1969), McCall (1996), O'Brien (1977), Oboler (1980), Riviere (1971), Talbot (1932).

<sup>178</sup> This moral lesson is powerfully conveyed by Conrad (1994 [1902]) in *Heart of Darkness*, through the horrid death of Mr. Kurtz.

<sup>179</sup> Masolo (1994) provides a fairly comprehensive presentation of the history, scope and dimensions of the debates regarding what constitutes “African philosophy” and whether or not it exists.

<sup>180</sup> Maclean's (1971) *Magical Medicine, a Nigerian Case Study* is a particularly vivid example of the conflation of indigenous medical practice as/and “magic” in Africa. Simpson's (1980) *Yorùbá Religion and Medicine in Ibadan*, albeit less virulent, is also illustrative of this phenomena.

religion are persistently glossed as “ritual”, placing these practices, paradigms, and epistemologies at far remove from the sanctified territories wherein knowledge reigns (DeRosny 1985, Stoller 1989, Turner 1992; Devisch 1993; Friedson 1996).<sup>181</sup>

### **Bodies of/and Medicine: Allopathy and Ifá**

Thus, Allopathic knowledge is represented in official discourse, in Nigeria as well as in America, as a universal and timeless truth<sup>182</sup> — rather than a form of locally and historically situated knowledge (Haraway 1991, Laqueur 1990). And the practice of allopathic medicine operationalizes, while concealing, its taken-for-granted premise that there is only one, singular and universal, human body. Recently, there is a tension, in allopathic medicine, between those studies and practices based within this historical framing of one universal body and those which, through the construction of “gender specific medicine,” stress the distinctiveness between the male body and the female body (Legato 1997, Clarke 1999, Fausto-Sterling 2000). Nonetheless, both framings continue to naturalize and mystify Allopathy’s transcendent erasure of the possibility of multiple bodies; of socio-cultural, historical, and perhaps performative differences, to name a few (Scheper-Hughes & Lock 1987; Butler 1997).

Ifá knowledge and practice proudly assert their cultural and historical origins (Sowande n.d.; Abimbola 1976; Yai 1993) claiming precedence, locally, over Islam, Christianity, and colonialism (Barber 1990). Informed, and heavily influenced, by a unifying cosmology (read: epistemology), Ifá assigns primacy in the human experience of being-in-the-world to a singular and universal framing of the immaterial dimensions of human being.<sup>183</sup> Considered most important, among these immaterial aspects, is the *orí inú*, or the “inner head,” for it is critical, both as the determinative patterning and/or underlying architecture of individual subjectivity, as well as in the development or experiential unfoldment of one’s personal history, over time.<sup>184</sup> Surprisingly, in contrast to this unifying frame, Ifá simultaneously maintains the possibility of multiple human bodies (Ogundele, p.c.1996), acknowledging cultural and historical differences in human physicality — resonating with Margaret Lock’s notion of local biologies (1993).

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<sup>181</sup> Laguerre (1987:11), framing his study of Afro-Caribbean ethnomedicine as “sociology of rejected knowledge,” is careful to remind his readers that the marginalization of this knowledge and practice “relies more on questions of power than on standards of truth and effectiveness.” He also suggests that the oral, nonscripted transmission and performative character of these forms of ethnomedicine, as well as their intimate connections to sacred traditions of knowing, contribute to their stigmatization. For more on the oral and performative dimensions of Ifá practice, see chapters 1 and 5. For more on the contested history of power relations that inform(ed) discursive framings of Ifá, for more than a century, locally in West Africa, and globally, see chapter 1 and Gardner (2004).

<sup>182</sup> The battle for this discursive ascendancy, in West Africa, was intimately linked to the missionary project. As Nunley (1987:21) notes, “Underscoring African music and masquerade was an unshakable faith in the healing power of the Yoruba gods. As early as 1837 the missionaries realized that to win the battle for Christianity the flock would have to be convinced of the superiority of Western medicine.”

<sup>183</sup> The popular adage “*Ayé l’òjà, òrun n’ílé*,” which translates as “The realm of material phenomena/existence is the market place, the invisible dimension is home,” points to the ephemeral and transient nature of materiality and the fundamental, essential character of the immaterial/vibratory in Yorùbá epistemology (and, I argue, lived experience). The saying “No condition is permanent,” found colorfully plastered, as decals, on taxis and buses also points to this (as well as offering hope for better socio-economic and political conditions). For a brief discussion of the relationship between the material and immaterial, or vibratory, dimensions within the Yorùbá social imaginary and everyday experience, see the section “The Topographies of the Yorùbá Imaginary,” later in this chapter. For a more detailed discussion of Yorùbá epistemology, see chapter 3; of Ifá epistemology, chapter 6.

<sup>184</sup> For a more on the relationship between the *orí* and the individual’s life path, see the discussion of Iyagba’s life story in chapter 4. For more on *orí*, see Abiodun (1987), Adedeji (1980), Sowande (1966), Wenger (1983).

Through interweaving the singular, immaterial, dimensions and diverse physical bodies, Ifá practice claims to be capable of affecting, and effective, universal healing (Ogundele *op cit*).

Northern imaginaries naturalize Allopathy's claims of universal healing, yet they scoff, in disbelief, at Ifá's similar claims. African forms of knowledge are marginalized and disparaged. Feared for their (imagined) mystical magic, they are still perceived as tainted and contaminating, not healing or regenerative. In Euro-American discourse and practice, African (and Diasporic) sacred knowledge and ethnomedicine are "rejected knowledge" (Laguerre 1987:9).<sup>185</sup>

### **The Five Fingers of the Hand: Difference and the Social Body in Yorùbá Culture**

In the Yorùbá and Nigerian popular imaginaries, however, neither Allopathy nor Ifá claim hegemonic ascendancy. Popular culture, in Nigeria, comfortably accommodates both, recognizing and appreciating that there are important distinctions in the "power" (*agbára*) of each perspective and approach, as well as in their respective shortcomings, and that each offers something of value to the community (Simpson 1980, Buckley 1985, Ady 1994). And although the official discourse of the Christian church, in Nigeria, strongly disparages any form of "traditional" or "pagan" devotion, church officials as well as parishioners commonly come to Ifá priests for "medicines"<sup>186</sup> and/or ritual interventions. Furthermore, and more to the point, it is extremely common for a Yorùbá who is a practicing Christian or Muslim to also have a personal shrine to an Òrìṣà in his or her compound. Official Northern discourses, part of the colonial legacy, discount and vilify indigenous medical and religious knowledge and practices. However, local social imagination and practice demonstrates a distinctive orientation to difference.

This is beautifully encapsulated by the common Yorùbá adage, "The five fingers of the hand are not the same."<sup>187</sup> The Yorùbá imaginary, first and foremost, *situates difference in relation to the vitality, productivity, and continuity of an organic whole*. The five fingers — each one entirely different from the others — are the critical constituents of the hand. The hand symbolizes human labor, productivity, including imaginative creations, and sociality, as in "joining hands" or "lending a helping hand."<sup>188</sup> The health, integrity, and proper functioning of the hand, and thus, of the social body, are dependant upon difference in collaboration.<sup>189</sup> The Yorùbá imaginary, unlike its Northern counterpart, *values difference* as a critical foundation for social well-being.

Furthermore, contrary to the tenacious persistence, within popular Northern imaginaries, of African culture as static and traditional, as diametrically opposed to the modern, African academics, such as Yai (1994) and Akinnaso (1995), as well as European and American counterparts with extensive and intimate familiarity with Yorùbá culture, such as Waterman (1990), Drewal (1995), Barber (1990, 1991), and Hallen (2000b), demonstrate the "inherently

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<sup>185</sup> See fn. 181, above.

<sup>186</sup> Nunley (1987:68) aptly reminds us, "The term medicine as we use it is perhaps too narrow to be applied to the African concept of *juju ... or ogun (oogun)*...The wielding of power or the ability to effect change in both the natural and supernatural realms might better describe what 'medicine' *does* in the African sense."

<sup>187</sup> *Ìka kò dógba*. (lit. "the fingers are not equal").

<sup>188</sup> Similarly, to "assist" in Yorùbá is, literally, "to offer a hand" (*rànlówó*) and there is also a common saying "*a gbájo owó l'a fi í sòyà*." Literally, it translates to "by joining our hands together we can beat our chests [in a gesture of strength and confidence], and has the connotation of "unity is strength." The second line to this saying is "*owó kan kò gbéru dé orí*" which is "one hand can not place a load atop the head," implying the critical importance of reciprocal sociality and assistance.

<sup>189</sup> Waterman (1990:376) adds a twist to the interpretation of this adage, relating it to "the imaginative modeling of Yorùbá society as a flexible hierarchy anchored in communal values."

incorporative nature of Yorùbá cultural forms” (Akinaso 1995:235) in the past as well as the present. As one popular musician (J. Olufemi, cited in Waterman 1990:378) phrased it “Our Yorùbá tradition is a very modern tradition.” Innovation, through the incorporation of difference, is, and has been, a fundamental and defining aspect of Yorùbá culture and practice.<sup>190</sup>

### The Topographies of the Yorùbá Imaginary

The social universe, in both the popular and official Yorùbá imaginaries, is constituted as a series of concentric, interpenetrating, spheres. The smallest unit is the family lineage (*ìdílé*) and compound (*agbo ilé*).<sup>191</sup> Then, expanding outward, in ever larger and more inclusive (and more diversified) wholes are: the municipality (*ilú*); the ethnic group;<sup>192</sup> the nation; and the global community.<sup>193</sup>

Ultimately, in the Yorùbá imaginary, the material realm of human sociality, *ayé*, the dimension of dualistic tension (self/other, day/night, etc.), is envisioned as the lower (physically, intellectually, and existentially) half of the “calabash of existence” (*igbá ìwà*).<sup>194</sup> The upper half, *òrun*, is often translated as “the other world” or “heaven,” reflecting Northern social and imaginative practices of distancing the sacred or transcendent, as “other,” banishing them to an unreachable anti-terrestrial void.<sup>195</sup> I maintain that both of these glosses are misleading and untenable, preferring to frame *òrun* as the musical, or vibratory realm, or the dimension of spiritual Presence.<sup>196</sup> *Òrun* is considered the well-spring of existence, the source of manifestation (material as well as circumstantial),<sup>197</sup> and as such, is afforded some ascendancy, as noted above.

In the Yorùbá imaginary, and, I argue, in ritual practice and thus lived experience, the spiritual dimension and the material dimension are interpenetrating and, to a degree, co-determinous. Movement in one dimension has consequences in both. The human community, in the Yorùbá imaginary, is composed of those who are currently living, ancestral presence, and the unborn. Spiritual presence, in various forms, inhabits the earth. This is powerfully brought home when one recognizes that *igbá ìwà*, the “calabash of existence,” the ultimate and all-

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<sup>190</sup> Yai (1994:113-114) enhances our appreciation of innovation as an inherent aspect of Yorùbá culture, through an explication of *àṣà*, the Yorùbá word for “tradition.” He highlights the fundamental link, etymologically and socially, between “conscious choice,” *ṣà*, and “tradition,” *àṣà*. “Innovation is implied in the Yorùbá idea of tradition. The verb *ṣà*, from which the noun *àṣà* is derived, means to select, choose, discriminate, discern...Something cannot qualify as *àṣà* which has not been the result of deliberate choice (*ṣà*) based upon discernment and awareness of historical practices and processes (*ìtàn*)...And since choice presides over the birth of *àṣà* (tradition), the latter is permanently liable to metamorphosis.”

<sup>191</sup> These are typically patrilinear. See Bascom (1969:42-46); Oyèwùmí (1997:44); Afolayan (1998:21).

<sup>192</sup> This refers, again, to the various ethnic groups (*Òyó*, *Ifè*, *Ìjèbu*, *Ègbá*, etc.) which constitute the larger Yorùbá cultural whole.

<sup>193</sup> Afolayan (1989:21-5) presents a similar description, as the foundational schema of the socio-political organization (including indigenous political hierarchy and authority, as well as legal and civil administration) characteristic of, and indigenous to, the Yorùbá peoples prior to colonial contact. See also Akinjogbin’s (1967) framing of a social theory of *ebi* commonwealth among the Yorùbá/Aja peoples in precolonial Bight of Benin.

<sup>194</sup> See H. Drewal (1989:14-16) for a description of *igbá ìwà*.

<sup>195</sup> See Soyinka (1990/1976:1-5) for his critique of the “anti-terrestrialism” of European religion and metaphysics

<sup>196</sup> This framing is based upon my ethnographic material, and supported by Sowande’s (1962, 1969) work on music in Yorùbá and African cultures as well as writings of phenomenology of sound (Ihde 1976) and music (Zuckerandl 1956, 1973).

<sup>197</sup> As noted earlier (fn. 63, above), a common refrain is “*Ayé l’òjà, òrun n’ilé*.” The material realm (vibrant, colorful, and sensuous) is ephemeral (like the outdoor marketplace, ‘vanishing’ at day’s end), the invisible realm of spiritual Presence is home. See the previous chapter for a more detailed discussion of Yorùbá cosmology as epistemology.

encompassing sphere, is none other than the earth, *ilẹ̀*. The earth incorporates the material and the immaterial, form and presence. Phenomenologists of music (Zuckermandl 1956) and sound (Ihde 1976) remind us that music points to an unseen, vibrant and dynamic dimension *inherent* to the phenomenally given world. Similarly, Yorùbá imaginary and ritual practices suggest that *òrun* is a dynamic and fundamental dimension of existence on earth.<sup>198</sup>

### **Insiders and Outsiders: Difference at Home**

Returning to the most basic social sphere of Yorùbá culture, the family lineage and compound, it becomes obvious why incorporating difference is considered vital for the health and longevity of the social body: You cannot marry someone from your own family. In order to sustain and perpetuate the lineage, outsiders must be embraced and incorporated. In Yorùbá culture, when a man and woman marry, it is customary for the woman to leave her natal compound and move to her spouse's natal compound. And although the couple's future offspring will be included in both the maternal and paternal lineages, the primary affiliation of every child is to his/her natal compound. Furthermore, in the case of divorce, the children, by law and in practice, remain with the father, thereby ensuring the vitality of the patrilineage.

The particularities of the inclusion of outside others, in the family compound, reveal additional dimensions in Yorùbá imaginings of, and practices relating to, difference. As previous studies of Yorùbá society (Johnson 1921, Bascom 1969, Eades 1980) have noted, “the primary principle of social organization ...[is] seniority, defined by *relative age*.” (Oyèèwùmí 1997:31, emphasis added.) In the ideal case, seniority is equivalent to chronological age. As Eades (1980:53) notes: “Many older Yorùbá do not know when they were born, but they do know precisely who is senior or junior to themselves because being older confers respect and deference.”<sup>199</sup> However, in the family lineage, and compound, relative age is a bit more complex. Here chronological age is subordinated to age within the lineage or compound.

All the women who marry into the compound are known, collectively as *aya ilé*, the *aya* of the compound. They are differentiated from *omọ ilé*, natal members of the lineage (literally, “the offspring of the compound”). A woman, upon entering her spouse's compound, is called *aya*. Her spouse, as well as all other natal members of the lineage born before the time of her in-marriage — her spouse's siblings (both junior and senior), children previously born to any other co-wives of her spouse or to the partner of any other man of the patrilineage — occupy the position of *okọ* in relationship to her. The common translation for *aya* and *okọ* are “wife” and “husband” respectively. However, I find Oyèèwùmí's (1997:43-50) argument — to reframe these terms as “outsider” and “insider” — compelling. The common glosses inordinately privilege gender at the expense of indigenous criteria of organization and status. An *okọ* can be

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<sup>198</sup> *Ayé*, *òrun*, and *ilé* — the material realm, the vibratory realm, and the all-encompassing earth — are a fundamental trilogy within Yorùbá sacred epistemology and practice. Furthermore, they highlight an important orientation within Yorùbá culture: trinary logic. See Morton-Williams (1964:243-61) for his interpretation of this fundamental tripartite configuration of ‘the cosmos’, and Clark (1991:46) for her presentation of this trinary logic in the Diasporas and the possibilities it offers for “imagining beyond difference.”

<sup>199</sup> Seniority, of chronological age (and thus lived experience and knowledge), is extremely valued within Yorùbá society. Yet even here, within this social category of paramount importance, difference is appreciated as demonstrated by this oft-cited adage “*òwọ́ omọde kò tó pepẹ, ti àgbàláàgbà kòwọ́ kèrègbè*” which is “the child's hand cannot reach the rafter [to get what is stored there] and the elder's hand can not reach inside the long, thin neck of the keregbe calabash [to pull out its contents].” In other words, although seniority is very important, everyone has special value [to the group].

male or female, chronologically older or younger than the *aya*, and yet the *aya* is a social junior to all her *okò*.

The *aya-okò* relationship is, per Yorùbá schemas, one of seniority. What determines the seniority is the length of membership within the compound. Even among the *aya ilé*, seniority is based upon relative length of inclusion within the compound *not* chronological age. Thus outsiders, incorporated into the fabric of the domestic social body due to their value to the continued revitalization of the lineage, must accumulate status over time. For the young *aya*, even her own children can have more social capital, within the patrilineage, than she. Achievement of full “citizenship” is reserved only for the *omò ilé*, the creative legacy of the an outsider’s collaboration with an “insider.”

The social capital of an “outsider” *within the compound*, is enhanced through her productivity within the lineage (bearing children), “age” within the compound, as well as through her status in the larger social spheres. Thus, an *aya* who is a successful market woman, a prominent priestess of Ifá or of one of the Òrìṣà, or a professional, such as a physician or a university professor, is afforded additional respect within the compound. Furthermore, those *aya* who live long achieve significant power and status, both within the compound and in the larger society. Elderly women are simultaneously feared and venerated in Yorùbá culture.<sup>200</sup> And it is very common to see compounds in which the senior males have died, leaving the old mothers and the grown sons as the most powerful members of the lineage. Furthermore, an *aya* may choose to return to her natal compound,<sup>201</sup> in which case, as an elder she may become the most senior *okò*, the one with the most authority, within her familial compound (Oyèéwùmí 1997:47-49).

Finally, whenever a woman returns to her natal compound, to socialize and/or for ritual events, she retains her status, there, as *omò ilé*, as well as an *okò* in relation to those *aya* who entered her natal compound after her birth. When she enters the public sphere, her status is determined by her seniority in age, her status as a parent (conferring “adulthood” in Yorùbá culture), as well as her social position, as noted above. This highlights a final, and important, aspect of difference in Yorùbá imaginaries and practice: it is fluid and relational.

The aforementioned practices of the family compound iterate that Yorùbá culture values seniority and difference, privileging the incorporation of “other-ness” and the continual production of new hybrid formations and innovation. Furthermore, difference, in Yorùbá imaginary and social practice, is both defined by, and situated within, a larger social sphere. Identity and status, therefore, are not fixed, but dynamic and context-dependant. Finally, the *aya-okò* relationship suggests that Yorùbá society may also deploy incorporation as a means of disciplining difference. This disciplinary power, however, is mitigated with time, diminishing as seniority and other social capital are accumulated.

### **Disciplining Difference, Religious Practice, and Multinational Identity**

This disciplinary dimension may contribute to the renowned resilience of Yorùbá cultural forms and practices in the Diasporas (Welch 1985; Mason 1992; Browning 1995; Wilson 2001) as well as the precolonial dispersion of Yorùbá religious practices and identities throughout the Bight of Benin (Bascom 1969, Zuesse 1979, Yai 2001). Whether or not this principle will also play a

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<sup>200</sup> The *Gèlèdè* ritual festivities, communal ceremonies honoring, and placating, the power of the “great mothers,” attest to this. See Drewal and Drewal (1990 [1983]), Ibitokun (1993), and Lawal (1996).

<sup>201</sup> The phenomenon of married women returning to reside in their natal compound is referred to as *ilémosú*.

prominent role in the emergent globalization and commodification of “Yorùbá traditional religion” remains to be seen.

The Yorùbá people have a long history of contact with cultural Others. Long before the slave trade<sup>202</sup> or colonial contact, they had a centralized form of governance, both within each city-state, and uniting all city-states under the central authority of a crowned ruler (Akinjogbin 1967, Adediran 1998, Olaniyan and Adebayo 1998).<sup>203</sup> And their economy, prior to colonial contact, as well as their aesthetic productions, were well developed and diversified (Lander 1832; Stone 1899).<sup>204</sup> Travel and commerce extended well beyond the boundaries of Yorùbáland to the neighboring ethnic nations in the Bight of Benin. So too, did, religious affiliations. As Olabiyi Yai notes (2001:246):

Religions based on [Ifá, the] Orishas and/or Voduns<sup>205</sup> were freely exchanged from one state to the other throughout the area...One important religious feature or practice that has not received the critical attention that it deserves...is the existence, permanence, and indeed cultivation of the phenomenon of double or multiple religious and cultural loyalties — across geopolitical entities...It was, and still is, mandatory for the devotees of an Orisha or Vodun to learn the language, the history, the cuisine, and other mores of the birthplace of their respective spiritual beings and, indeed, to regard themselves as citizens of that city-nation. This sacred rule applies to devotees irrespective of their place of birth or residence...This belief in double nationality is made evident in the Fon ritual sentence *E yi Ife'* (He has gone back to Ife) pronounced at the death of a diviner [Ifá priest]...A Fon diviner [a citizen of the contemporary nation-state of the Republic of Benin] thus conceives of himself as a citizen of Ifè, regardless of his birthplace.

When an individual embraces the worship, as a devotee or priest/ess, of Ifá or an Òrìṣà, s/he joins the compound pertaining to that particular spiritual being/divine Presence, and, like the *aya* in familial compounds, becomes a junior member of the (ritual) lineage. In fact, the priests/ess of the Òrìṣà are “referred to as the *aya* of the particular Òrìṣà” (Oyèéwùmí 1997:47)<sup>206</sup>. Thus, as a religious *aya*, one is situated within an additional set of *ilé- ilú*-nation concentric spheres.

In the Yorùbá social imaginary, Ifá and the Òrìṣà (plural) are powerful and important social agents, “bigger” (with more social status) than the biggest “big men.”<sup>207</sup> Being the birthplace of an Òrìṣà, therefore, confers significant prestige upon the town, often conflating the

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<sup>202</sup> Both the Arabic and European slave trades.

<sup>203</sup> Originally the locus of centralized political authority was Ilé Ifè, from as early as 800 A.D. through the seventeenth century (Willett 1967:104; Drewal 1989:47-9) when Òyó gained military and political ascendancy. The ‘Òyó Empire’ peaked in the late eighteenth century (1780) and ended around 1830 (Law 1977), shortly after which the missionaries penetrated Yorùbáland (Ajayi 1965; Ayandele 1965).

<sup>204</sup> This resilience of farming, trade and aesthetic works is all the more noteworthy given the legacy of economic devastation which four centuries of European slave trading had bequeathed to the Bight of Benin (Davidson 1961). As one missionary noted, in the early 1800s, “I walked through the Badagry market [near Lagos]...my admiration was unbounded; every conceivable article of native food and produce was there exhibited; artisans laboured at their stalls...and all bespoke a busy, active, thriving people, as far as such a state could advance amidst the degrading horrors of the slave trade” (T. B. Freeman, MMS, quoted in Kopytoff 1965:58).

<sup>205</sup> The deities of Dahomey.

<sup>206</sup> See also Matory (1994).

<sup>207</sup> See Barber (1991:183-247) for a wonderful discussion of the phenomenon of “big men” in Yorùbá society,

identity of the deity and that of his/her birthplace. For Ifá, the situation is inverted. Ilé Ifẹ̀, the birthplace of Ifá, is also the “birthplace” of the Yorùbá people, and, in the Yorùbá imaginary, the originary site of the world. Thus, in this particular case, the birthplace enhances the status of Ifá, as well as that of the members of the Ifá “compound” and lineage. In joining the ritual lineage of Ifá or the Òrìṣà (singular), the priest/ess simultaneously becomes, respectively, a citizen of Ilé Ifẹ̀, or a citizen of the Òrìṣà’s (singular) city of origin. By incorporating outsiders’ of other nationalities, the ritual lineage and compound, the town, as well as the Yorùbá nation, experience enhanced power and vitality.

As the popular adage reminds us, “Without humanity, the deities perish.”<sup>208</sup> This is particularly true for the Òrìṣà, for only through “mounting” a ritual “horse” — possessing the physical vessel of a priest/ess, in trance— can an Òrìṣà manifest and interact directly with the larger human community. Ifá, on the other hand, does not manifest through trance. However, I assert, in this dissertation, that conscious and *dispassionate* communion with divine Presence is a fundamental dimension of everyday ritual practice for Ifá priests/esses.<sup>209</sup> In both instances, there is a mutual incorporation of difference, or “otherness.”

In the first case, the spiritual being, or divine Presence, of the Òrìṣà clothes itself in the physical form of the human priest/ess, embodying itself in his/her flesh and inhabiting his/her consciousness. The Òrìṣà, a being of presence without form, has incorporated — from the Latin *incorpor(are)*, (to) embody<sup>210</sup> — the form and consciousness of an Other, the human priest or priestess. The priest/ess, in a complementary movement, contains the expansive presence of the Òrìṣà within the limited confines of his/her physicality. In this passionate union, the priest/ess relinquishes conscious control over mind and body, and, transiently *becomes* the Òrìṣà. Browning, a devotee of the Òrìṣà, in the diasporic tradition of Brazilian Candomble, describes the passionate communion with divine Presence thusly (1995:51):

[P]articipation in candomblé is not passive submission to a violent force of “possession” but involves study and commitment to an ethos. Still, incorporating orixá energy does require an acknowledgement that we don’t fully determine our own significance in the world.

One of the major claims of this dissertation is that committed participation in ritual practices of everyday living, in Ifá practice, bodies forth the realization of conscious, dispassionate communion with divine Presence. Ifá priests/esses commune with the Presence of Ifá, as well as with the Presence of the Odù (pl.). They are Irúnmolè (plural), a class of divine Presence that is distinct from — more archetypal and rarified than — and which give birth to, the Òrìṣà (pl). Furthermore, communion, in Ifá, is a practice of subtle incorporation requiring, as well as continually refining, emotional tempering, in the priest/ess. And through this practice the priest/ess, ideally, comes to epitomize “an aesthetic of the cool” (Thompson 1966, 1974).<sup>211</sup>

<sup>208</sup> *Bi kò s'èniyàn, imàle ò si.* See Soyinka (1990[1976]:10) and Barber (1981).

<sup>209</sup> The argument is developed in the core of this text, chapters 3 through 6.

<sup>210</sup> *Webster's Encyclopedic Unabridged Dictionary*, s.v. “incorporate”

<sup>211</sup> “Coolness” is a fundamental sensibility in Ifá. As Zuesse notes (1979:201) the Ifá priest is “the very embodiment of “coolness” and “freshness”...[he] cultivates tranquility.” In chapter 6 I argue that embodied techniques of Ifá everyday practice facilitate an intimacy with the earth which, in turn, engenders sensibilities of coolness and receptivity in the Ifá priest/ess.



The closest approximation, in everyday experience, to communion with Ifá, is the mother's experience of pregnancy. The co-presence of a distinctly "other" consciousness-being temporarily shares, and in so doing, transforms, the woman's physicality, tastes, orientations and perceptions, and her being-in-the-world. It is an experience of mutual exchange (between a "self" and an "other") and mutual transformation (of the "self" and of the "other"), through incorporation, which bodies forth revelatory insights and sacred knowledge for the benefit of the "self," the "other," as well as the social body.

Thus in the religious realm, the Yorùbá principle of incorporating difference bodies forth a porosity of being-in-the-world, as well as a porosity of national and personal identity. We return to Yai (2001:248, latter emphasis added)

[T]he Orisha and Vodun [and Ifá] communities have, as a rule, consistently functioned as, in today's parlance, *forces of transnational civil society*...[G]iven the double/multiple nationality ethos...it is little surprise that many citizens were plurinational'...*Alterity was inscribed, so to speak, in the very idea of nation, as well as in personal identity*...These [were] defining traits of the concept and practice of nation in West Africa.

Northern imaginaries (and practices) distance themselves from others on the basis of difference, vigilantly reinforcing the integrity of their national borders and identities, to "protect" and "defend" themselves from contaminative contact. In contrast, the Yorùbá imaginary and social and religious practices *cultivate a porosity of being and borders* and a flexibility of social status and national identity *as a means of ensuring the health and vitality* of the society. In this schema, the incorporation of difference — on an individual level, as in the sacred communion of sacerdotal and sagely practice, as well as communally within the social body and the nation — is essential to, and reinforces, the integrity of the organism, enabling it to flourish and thrive. This explains, at least partially, why, in contrast to the horror and angst which my presence, as "Frau Voodoo," provoked throughout Amsterdam (and, possibly, evokes for some of my Northern readers), I was widely and affectionately referred to, throughout Ilé Ifè — until my marriage to an Ifè indigene — as "*Òyìnbó Òrúnmilà*," or "Ifá's white other." And why notice of my marriage to an Ifè man, in 1998, and thus my incorporation into his *agbo ilé*, was met, universally with spontaneous singing and dancing, jubilantly, for "*aya wa*," "our wife."

## ***Ìmò at' Ìwà. Knowing as/and Being, Part I.***

### **Chapter Three. Cultivating “Coolness:” Rhythms of Everyday Living, Embodied Certainty, and Articulations of Yorùbá Cultural Identity and Being-in-the-world**

#### **Articulations of Everyday Sociality**

Formalized embodied greetings constitute a fundamental everyday practice of sociality among the Yorùbá.<sup>212</sup> For the moment, let it suffice to say that a toddler’s enactment of embodied greetings is considered an important developmental milestone as well as a critical threshold in social identity. And engagement in this practice by older children and adults is perceived and interpreted as evidence of the individual’s cultural and psychological competency.<sup>213</sup>

In its most basic form, junior members of each family are expected to formally greet the social seniors of the household and/or compound every morning. When encountering his/her mother, father, any of the co-wives (in a polygynous household), elder siblings, or other social seniors, a boy is expected to prostrate himself on the floor and a girl to kneel with downcast eyes. In these positions of deference they utter a formulaic greeting such as “*E Kààrò, Sà/Mà! Sé dáadáa lé jí?*” (“Good morning, sir/madam. Did you wake refreshed?”) The senior then responds either through a simple reply or more extensive conversation. Once the social senior signals that this salutatory interchange is completed, the social junior is “released” to take his or her leave.

The practice of embodied greetings is not limited to the family compound, nor to enactment by children. In their articulation of this everyday practice of sociality, teens and adults enjoy more variety and flexibility of the gesticulations and/or postures as well as the privilege and opportunity for greater creativity in their linguistic engagements. And as mentioned in chapter 1, Yorùbá social identity is fluid, not fixed. An adult may be a social senior in one situation and a social junior in another. Regardless of the situation or circumstance, one is expected to demonstrate respect and deference towards familiar social seniors through the appropriate linguistic and embodied articulations.

#### **Articulations of a “New Wife” in the Family Compound**

By the time I had “married Ifẹ̀” I was quite proficient in greeting practice. And shortly after our marriage, I received a fellowship to return to Ifẹ̀ to continue my research for another summer. Unfortunately my husband was unable to accompany me. Nonetheless I was welcomed into the family and the family compound with open arms. And during my stay with them that summer, my skills and proficiency in this everyday practice proved to be a source of pride and joy for my family in-law.

Prior to my arrival, the elders of the family conferred and decided that I would stay in the home of Bàbá G, an uncle in my husband’s matrilinear compound. The elders felt that his house offered both the safest location as well as the most comfortable accommodations.<sup>214</sup> There I was

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<sup>212</sup> Greeting practices and their social significance are discussed in more detail in chapter 6.

<sup>213</sup> Conversely, failure or refusal, generally, to participate in this fundamental form of sociality is interpreted as pointing to mental incompetence, “madness,” or an anti-social personality. The isolated failure to greet a *particular* social senior, be it by omission or commission, is taken as a serious offence (an infraction committed *by* the junior and/or an insult *to* the senior).

<sup>214</sup> During the four years of my earlier residence in Nigeria I had not been overly concerned about personal security. However when I returned in the summer following my marriage, armed robbery had become a disturbingly common phenomenon. Also a surge of serious armed conflict emerged (again) between Ifẹ̀ and Modákéké, a neighboring community. Furthermore, M.K.O. Abiola’s sudden death (under suspicious circumstance), a few weeks after my arrival, sparked intense civil unrest, especially among the university students. Thus, for my in-laws, security (both

given a large “self-contained unit” — a bedroom with its own private bathroom — complete with air conditioning and running water, amenities far beyond the simple flat at the edge of town where I had lived, previously, when I was single.

Every morning in this comfortable and spacious home, after taking my cup of instant coffee, bathing, and dressing in the quiet luxury of my room, I searched the common living areas in order, first and foremost, to greet Bàbá G, as he was the head of the household. Usually I would find him in the sitting room, where he was attending to a never-ending stream of visitors seeking his advice and counsel (as well, oft times, some financial assistance). If I did not find Bàbá G in the sitting room, then I would usually find him in the kitchen where he was joking with his children, nieces and nephews, and any other family members or close friends who had dropped by.

Regardless of whether he was with visitors or the family, I would go before him and kneel, then wait for a pause in the conversation, signaling acknowledgement of my arrival. “*È Káàrò, Sà! Sè dáadáa lé jí?*” (“Good morning, sir. Did you wake refreshed?”) I would inquire respectfully, eyes averted. Bàbá G sincerely appreciated my deference to him and my respect for his culture, and usually responded by engaging me in a jovial and animated discussion.

If/when visitors were present I would respectfully greet them as well, occasionally showing off my prowess by embellishing and particularizing the greetings, a common and valued form of social repartee.<sup>215</sup> The visitors were astonished that a foreigner, an *òyìnbó*,<sup>216</sup> was not only fluent in their challengingly tonal language, but, more importantly, was culturally competent! “*Ah-ah!*” a surprised visitor would respond jaw dropped and eyes widened. “*Ah! Omó dáadáa ní! Ah! Ó gbó Yorùbá jù awa lo!*” (Oh my! What a good child! She knows Yorùbá [language/culture] better than we do!”)

Bàbá G thoroughly enjoyed this and would frequently go out of his way to have me meet (and thus greet and shock) new and unsuspecting visitors. It was his special private joke (and he loves joking). He always relished watching their mouths drop open in disbelief. And each time he glowed with pride as the visitors praised him and the family for having a “child” (my husband, a “child” of the family compound) who had chosen such a “good wife.” Nodding in agreement, Bàbá G would modestly boast that I was also a physician and an anthropologist and

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mine and their own) was an ever-present concern throughout my stay that summer. Lastly, just a few days before I left Nigeria, several U.S. embassies in Sub-Saharan Africa were bombed by terrorists. In an ironic, and for me enraging, twist, when my in-laws and I arrived at U.S.I.S. in Lagos on the day of my departure, the guards, who were on heightened alert, initially refused to allow my in-laws — the ones who had safeguarded me — to enter the building!

<sup>215</sup> Greetings can be constructed around large and impersonal conditions such as the weather, social events, or political situations. They can also address, compliment, and/or comment on the other individual’s dress, stature, appearance, family, home town, profession, personal history, etc. It is common to compliment an individual who is working for a job well done (“*È kúsé!*,” literally “I greet you for overcoming work”). One can also greet another for sitting, resting, dancing, studying, etc. There are special formulaic greetings that are offered to celebrate a child’s birth or to acknowledge recovery from a significant illness or the loss of mourning. To be skilled and creative in one’s greeting repartee is highly valued, for it demonstrates linguistic and imaginative abilities as well as interest in the members of the social body. For more on greetings, see chapter 6.

<sup>216</sup> Literally, “one whose skin has been peeled”(and thus, is fair-skinned or white). As already noted in the previous chapter, *òyìnbó* is a gloss used for all foreigners regardless of their race or hue.

that I was conducting research on, and was quite knowledgeable in, the “deep” wisdom (*ogbón ìjìnlẹ̀*, literally deep or penetrating wisdom<sup>217</sup>) and practices of Ifá.

My in-law’s social capital, as well as that of my husband and the family, was enhanced by their incorporation of a “new wife” from Àmèrìkà who knew, honored, and appreciated Yorùbá cultural practice. Yet it is important to note that Bàbá G, as well as other members of my husband’s family were already quite renowned, locally and/or nationally. My husband’s matrilinear compound, the one to which Bàbá G pertains, has been a particularly prominent social force, locally, for generations, and also has one “son” (senior to Bàbá G) who was a leader in national and international politics for many years.<sup>218</sup> The patrilinear compound has numerous intellectuals and professionals, most of whom now live in Lagos, Abuja, or abroad. Therefore, my incorporation into the family, although valued, was in all likelihood seen primarily as a reflection of, and testimony to, these lineages’ impressive legacies of honor, social service and prestige.

### Bean Cakes and The Basics

I hadn’t always appreciated the value or importance of greeting practices. As noted above, during my residence and research in Ifẹ̀ prior to my marriage, I lived alone in a flat at the edge of town. Granted, I visited my Ifá mentors almost every day and also met regularly with colleagues and/or with my sponsor on the university campus. Yet during my initial months in Ifẹ̀ I only had a vague sense that people enjoyed the verbal interchanges and interplay of salutations. I did not yet appreciate the significance of greeting as a critical practice of everyday living and sociality. That is, not until one unsuspecting morning, a few months after my initial arrival, during that first Harmattan season,<sup>219</sup> when I was hurrying to campus.

Within my first week of arriving in Ifẹ̀ I was befriended by a lovely middle-aged woman who made and sold *móin-móin* in a small stall next to the entrance to my neighborhood from the “main” (paved) road. *Móin-móin*, also known as *òlẹ̀* or *òlẹ̀lẹ̀*, is commonly translated as “a bean cake.” It is made from a puree of black-eyed peas, onions, and hot peppers mixed with oil and a pinch of salt. The contents of each cake are wrapped in banana leaves that are folded in the shape of a small pyramid. These packets are then steam cooked in a pot. *Móin-móin* is very popular, and is eaten with a white cornmeal pudding (*ẹ̀kọ*) or fresh bread, as a meal or for a snack.<sup>220</sup>

*Mòmí* (“Mommy”, a term of affection), as I soon called her, made the most delicious *móin-móin*. And she was a kind and endearing person who immediately took an interest in me,

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<sup>217</sup> *ìjìnlẹ̀* means literally, “that which goes a long way into the ground” (*ì*, nominative + *jìn*, “deep,” “penetrating,” + *ilẹ̀*, “the earth”). The cultivation of deep wisdom (*ogbón ìjìnlẹ̀*) is one of the main focuses of chapter 5. For more on the relationship between the ways of knowing particular to Ifá, and the earth, see chapter 6.

<sup>218</sup> For example, my spouse’s maternal great-grandmother, Òní, was an extremely successful cocoa trader and the first woman in Ifẹ̀ to purchase a car. Her elder daughter, Omilajú, the senior sibling to my husband’s maternal grandmother, was also a successful trader. Omilajú’s only son was a prominent leader in the national military, then a diplomat, and now is an acclaimed, international businessman. Òní’s younger daughter (my spouse’s grandmother, Ìyárémọ̀) was one of the most powerful and influential constructors in Ifẹ̀. Bàbá G, her eldest son, inspired by his mother’s industriousness, now holds this prestigious title. For more of Omilajú’s personal history, see the next chapter.

<sup>219</sup> Harmattan is a season distinctive to Sub-Saharan Africa that typically begins in October or November and lasts until January or February. It is named for the haramattan winds, dry dust-filled gusts arising in the Saharan dessert that leave *everything* covered in a veil of red dust. The season is also hallmarked by schizophrenic diurnal swings in temperature — from near freezing temperatures in the early morning, to stark white, scorching dry heat well over 100 degrees Fahrenheit in the afternoon, and then cool to cold, dry, whistling wind-filled evenings.

<sup>220</sup> They also come with crawfish in the mixture or with an egg in the center.

offering me regular words of encouragement and advice. She was also extremely patient. She smiled while enduring those interminable pauses as I racked my brain trying to recall a word or phrase or while I painfully struggled to construct a complex sentence. And she was equally pleasant when repeating a phrase or sentence over-and-over, slowly and carefully articulating each syllable, adding gestures or miming as needed, until I finally understood her and was able to respond.

Within a few months *Ìyá Mòin-mòin* (literally, “the mother of mòin-mòin,” someone who makes and sells mòin-mòin<sup>221</sup>) and I were conversing with ease and enjoying each other’s company. She had “adopted” me as a daughter. Every morning on my way to the main road, where I could catch public transport, I passed by her stall. A few times each week I would sit at the solitary rickety wood table next to the stall and enjoy hot, fresh mòin-mòin with a handful of bread for breakfast while we joked and talked.<sup>222</sup> On the other days I would stop in front of her stall for at least a few moments to say good morning and exchange amenities. That is, until one fateful morning.

### **The Day of Reckoning**

It was 8:30 in the morning and I was walking as swiftly as I could down the dirt road that led from the front of my compound towards the main road. I was off to an unusually late start that day as I had, surprisingly, overslept. I didn’t use an alarm clock and hadn’t needed one. The sounds of the neighborhood stirring, in conjunction with the brisk winds slipping in between the window slats and the morning light streaming behind, had proved sufficient to rouse me. Until today. Of all days! I had a meeting with “Prof” — my academic sponsor, a moving force in the Institute of Cultural Studies, and the chair of the History Department<sup>223</sup> — at nine. Usually I would have had enough time to enjoy a leisurely breakfast with *Ìyá Mòin-mòin*, catch a bus to campus, and *still* have time to peruse the shelves of the campus bookstore before making my way to his office. But now, as I was scurrying down the road backpack in tow, my mind was racing. By this time there would be a queue for the buses to campus and I would most likely be late.

“Prof” was an extremely affable gentleman; a hard working and unusually dedicated scholar (both to his scholarship and to his students); and had recently been appointed to chair the History Department. I admired his academic vigor, his exceptional devotion to the education of the youth of Nigeria, and his cheerful personality and helpful disposition. I knew he was extremely busy and did not want to keep him waiting.

Rounding the corner where “my” road met the shorter, equally dusty, entrance road that led to and from the paved thoroughfare, I quickened my pace as I glanced at my watch. And rather than stopping in front of *Ìyá Mòin-mòin*’s stall to greet her and inquire about her family, as was my custom, I hurried by. Casting a backward glance, our eyes met and I smiled as I hurled a short but none-the-less formal greeting in her direction. I was so shocked by her response it’s amazing that I didn’t trip over my own feet and fall flat on my face.

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<sup>221</sup> This is a common linguistic construction used to denote one’s profession — *ìyá* (or *bàbá*) +/- ní [to have] + what one makes or sells, i.e. *ìyá lójà*, literally “the mother who has market,” meaning a woman who sells in the market.

<sup>222</sup> Often *Ìyá Mòin-mòin* refused my money insisting upon “dashing” the food to me as a gift. I would respond by bringing her a loaf of bread, a fresh pineapple, or a nice yam from the market or, by dashing her a fifty naira note (now worth less than fifty cents; but mòin-mòin at that time were less than five naira each) every now and again.

<sup>223</sup> At Obafemi Awolowo University.

Initially Mòmí was bending over her huge round-bellied pot, carefully taking out those neatly wrapped delicacies and placing them in a black plastic bag for one of her regular customers. When our eyes met I expected my smile to be greeted in kind. Instead Mòmí closed her eyes briefly as her face recoiled ever so subtly. Then, opening her eyes WIDE as though recovering from a sudden and unexpected slap, she stood up abruptly and rather rigidly. Anger was not only all over her face, it was exuding from every one of her pores! In a few short seconds, her normally maternal and relaxed demeanor had evaporated, boiled away completely by the heat of her ire, just as the flames beneath her huge iron pot had boiled the water under her mountain of mójin-mójin into vaporous steam. The tall, handsome woman gathered herself up to the full and impressive length of her almost six foot tall stature.

“Ah! Ah!” I could hear her tongue clicking on the roof of her mouth, an ominous sign, as she shook her head, side-ways, back and forth.

Then, adjusting her head-wrap sharply with a jerk of her left hand, she shouted angrily at me while stabbing her right index finger emphatically up and down, like a knife slicing the morning air in front of her, “Ifátólú, wá’bì! Wá-o!” (“Ifátólú, come here! Come!”).

My jaw dropped and I stopped dead in my tracks. I had never seen Ìyá Mójin-mójin this enraged. All the other market women in the near-by stalls stopped what they were doing, as did their customers, and looked accusatorily in my direction. Shocked and confused, I scurried back up the dirt road and stood immediately in front of her.

“Níbo nlo?!” (“Where are you going?”), she demanded, glaringly.

“Mo nlo sí kampùs. Mo ní ìpàdé kan pèlú ògá mi nìbè nísì-nísì. L’ ààrò yì mo ti pé jù latí jí...” My speech was as hurried as my gait had been earlier. (“I’m going to campus. This morning I overslept and I have a meeting there with my mentor right now and...”)

“Dúró!” (“Stop!”) She cut me off mid-sentence, with a penetrating glare and a wave of her hand. “Kíl’ó dé ó ò kí mi?! Kíl’ó selè?!” (“Why didn’t you greet me?! What’s the matter [with you]?!”)

Stumbling over my tongue, fumbling for words, I tried to respond. Feebly, I protested “Mo ti kí èyin. Mo ní ‘Ìyá Mójin-mójin!” (“[But] I did greet you. I said ‘Ìyá Mójin-mójin!’”).

“Ah-ah!” Again she clicked her tongue ominously and shook her head. “Kò dára-o!” (“This is terrible!”) “S’ó ò mọ́ látí kí eniyòn?! Sé eranko ni’wo? Abi omọ́ t’ eniyòn bí?!” (“Don’t you know how to [properly] greet someone? Are you a wild animal [from the bush] or the child of a human being?!”) Ìyá Mójin-mójin’s voice was BOOMING and she was shaking her arms to the skies and looking right past me as if I was invisible. She was truly beside herself with rage.

And then she directed her gaze back at my face. My absolute bewilderment, tinged with a hint of fear both of her rage and of the magnitude of my unknown and unintentional offence, must have been as apparent on my face as the ire was on hers. Seeing my face, really looking into my countenance, she gasped ever-so-slightly, stopped her tirade abruptly while simultaneously dropping her arms to her side. Then she let out a small sigh as her face and energy subtly softened. [I even recall a vague upturning of the edges of her lips, but of this I can’t be sure.]

She lowered the magnitude and volume of her voice, and I heard a hint of the familiar maternal undertones returning. Her eyes were no longer blaring. Pointing to the ground emphatically she said, “Kúnlè!” (“Kneel down!”)

I felt a small urge of protestation swelling in my chest and throat, but I swallowed it as I lowered my knees to the dirt and rocks beneath me. I looked up at her face, now towering even

higher, for some sign of approval and reprieve. “Wò lólè!” (“Look at the ground.”) her voice was stern but the ire had disappeared.

“Kí mi. Kí mi dáadáa-o!” (“[Now] greet me. And do it well.”)

I began tentatively, “E Kààrè, M̀à! Sé dáadáa lé jí?” (“Good morning, Ma’am. Did you sleep well?”)

“Mo dúpé.” (“Yes thank you.”) Her voice was dull and disinterested.

“Ara ilé nkó? Sé àlàáfíà l’ó wà?” (“And your family? Are they well?”<sup>224</sup>)

“Mo dúpé.” (“Yes thank you.”) Ìyá was still curt and cold.

I squirmed a bit and started to look up, but Ìyá M̀oin-m̀oin gently and ever so fleetingly put her hand on my shoulder, simultaneously signaling me to stay put while offering, in its gentleness, some encouragement. Under her breath she whispered softly, “Kí mi sí.” (“Keep going/Continue.”<sup>225</sup>)

“Sé isé nlo dáadáa abi díè díè?” (“Is your work going well or hardly going?”) this sentence involves a play on words through a play with sounds. It is similar to the American expression “Are you working hard or hardly working?”)

My use of this expression with its conscious word-play as/and sound-play, something the Yorùbá enjoy, took M̀ómí by surprise and she laughed. “Dìde!” (“Stand up.”) she said, motioning me to get up, still chuckling. “Ó nlo dáadáa. Bè̀eni, isé mi nlo dáadáa, omò mi dáadáa. Mo dúpé.” (“It’s going well. Yes, my business is good and you are a good child. Thank you.”) She helped me to my feet and gave me a warm hug.

Then she led me, gently, by the hand to the small room in the back of her stall. There she privately explained to me that I should never be in such a hurry as to disrespect my elders as it was considered a serious and significant offence. Elders watch out and shepherd their charges, providing for and protecting them. Juniors should humble themselves ever so slightly as a means of acknowledging their seniors and an expression of appreciation. Furthermore, she noted, to fail to respect one’s elders brings shame on one’s parents and family because it means that they did not provide an example of ethical and moral behavior in the home. She ended by saying that she knew that I was a good and honorable person and that she did not want others to think unkindly of me because of my unfamiliarity with local custom and practices. Furthermore, she noted that in the future I could curtsy rather than fully kneel when greeting her and most other seniors.

Opening the door and going back outside, she quickly gathered a handful of m̀oin-m̀oin and some èkò (pudding made from white corn meal) and placed them in plastic bag. “Gbà!” (“Take this.”) “Bá mi fún un ògá r̀è ni kampùs. Kó sò fún pé ‘E má bínú.” (“Give these to your mentor on campus and implore him not to be angry.”). Then, giving me another quick hug, she pushed me gently towards the main road, “Maa lo!” (“Go!”) she said cheerily. “Ó dábo.” (“Good bye”, literally “until you return”)

“Ó dábo.” I replied sunnily and rushed off to catch a bus to campus.

Although I arrived more than an hour late, my academic sponsor generously rearranged his schedule slightly to accommodate me. His secretary reassured me that he wasn’t the least bit annoyed by my tardiness, as he, too, had been unexpectedly delayed. Entering his office, I knelt down (as I had just done earlier that morning) and greeted him profusely, including a sincere apology for being late. After completing the formal salutations, I sat down in a chair across from the professor’s impressive desk. He smiled and commented approvingly that I was quickly learning the culture. I couldn’t resist his entrée, and so I proceeded to recount the details of my

<sup>224</sup> ‘Sé àlàáfíà l’ó wà?’ literally translates as “is there peace there [amongst them]?”

<sup>225</sup> Literally, it means “Greet me more.”

delay. My story left him doubled over with laughter. He found my lessons in etiquette and humble pie totally amusing. “Getting back to basics,” he said when he finally recovered.

From that day forth I have *never* forgotten to stop and greet Yorùbá elders whom I know whenever or wherever I encountered them, even in the US. And later that year, probably no more than a month after my lesson with Ìyá Mòin-mòin, I received another lesson in everyday practices of embodied greetings. This time, however, it was in the context of the everyday scholarly-devotional practice of the Ifá priesthood. Bàbá Dáyìsí,<sup>226</sup> a babaláwo (Ifá priest) and one of my early mentors, taught me the basic articulations (linguistic and gestural) used to ritually greet Ifá every morning. It, too, is a practice that I have continued to this day.<sup>227</sup>

### **Back to the Basics: Ways of Knowing in Yorùbá Everyday Life**

Throughout this dissertation I argue that knowing and being-in-the-world are intimately and inseparably intertwined for Yorùbá elders and sages. And I assert, for all of these elders and sages, but most importantly for those in the Ifá priesthood, embodied practices of everyday living play a vital role in this process. In order to understand this more fully, let us first examine how “knowledge” and “being” are framed within the Yorùbá imaginary and experience.

Barry Hallen and J.O. Ṣodipo conducted an unprecedented experiment in philosophical research and scholarship in which they explore the use of, and distinctions between, *imò*, “knowledge” and *ìgbàgbó*, “belief” in “Yorùbá-language discourse and thought” in comparison to the framings and use of these fundamental concepts in English-language discourse and practice. (1986:60-85). At the time of the book’s original publication, both Hallen and Ṣodipo were professors of philosophy in Nigeria. Hallen, an American, had lived for more than ten years in Nigeria, and Ṣodipo was a native Yorùbá. Over a period of nine years in the same rural community, they worked collaboratively with a group of indigenous Yorùbá intellectuals — primarily, albeit not exclusively *onísègùn* (herbalists)<sup>228</sup> — discussing and analyzing various abstract ideas and concepts, as an “analytic experiment in African philosophy” (the subtext of their book’s title).

Hallen and Ṣodipo thoughtfully explain their choice to engage these particular individuals in this intellectually reflective and dialogic exercise. They note that both *onísègùn* and *babaláwos* “represent and exercise a level of understanding and analysis of Yorùbá life and thought that is more critically sophisticated than that of the ordinary person. In fact it is the ordinary person that they spend much of their time advising... [Furthermore, as it is] part of [their] professional task...to offer clients explanations that are connected to and yet exceed the ordinary, it is reasonable to expect that their understanding of the theoretical concepts involved will also be connected to and exceed the ordinary” (1986:10-11).

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<sup>226</sup> A pseudonym.

<sup>227</sup> This practice, known as *ifóribalè’fá* (lit. “the act of touching one’s head to the ground [to greet] Ifá”), is a fundamental aspect of the everyday (personal) scholarly-devotional practice of *Ifá* adepts, healers, practitioners, and their student-apprentices. The practice of *ifóribalè’fá*, its resonance with (mundane) embodied greetings in popular Yorùbá culture, as well as its significance in cultivating the specialized way of knowing, being in the world, and attending to suffering in the world unique to Ifá, is the focus of chapter 6.

<sup>228</sup> The transliteration of *onísègùn* is “the one who owns, or whose profession is, the preparation of medicines” (from *oní*, prefix signifying ownership or professional affiliation + *ṣè*, “to make, prepare” + *oògùn*, “medicine”). Also, it is important, as my work focuses specifically on Ifá, to highlight that although Hallen and Ṣodipo often use the gloss *onísègùn* to refer to their indigenous collaborators, there were both *onísègùn* and *babaláwos* (Ifá priests) in their group.



Based upon many years of observing and assisting numerous babaláwos in-and-around Ilé Ifè, I wholeheartedly agree. It should also be noted that babaláwos often consult one another to discuss and/or debate aspects of the diagnosis and/or therapeutic intervention for a client. Furthermore, certain babaláwos, onísègùn, and/or *olórìsà* (*òrìsà* priests/esses) are widely recognized as experts in specific areas such as women’s health, children’s health, mental disease, etc. It is not uncommon for clients to travel great distances to be evaluated and treated by one of these specialists. Indigenous healers also come from far and wide either to consult about a challenging case or to study with a specialist.<sup>229</sup> During the first year of my apprenticeship, for example, a babaláwo came from Ìjèbu (close to Lagos, about 100 kilometers from Ifè) twice a month to study for a few days under the tutelage of my mentor, Bàbá Dáyíísí.

Aware of these dialogic and collegial practices among babaláwos and onísègùn, Hallen and Sodipo embarked on a collaborative project with these indigenous intellectuals. They describe this collaboration as follows (1986:124):

By the word ‘collaborative’ we mean to emphasize that the onísègùn, explicitly, deliberately, and without being ‘led,’ participate in the piecemeal analysis of their conceptual and thought system...Both we and the onísègùn participate in the process of analysis. They are men of keen intellect as well as of extraordinary practical skills. This is the basis upon which we work with them, and this is the sense in which we refer to them as our traditional colleagues.

The study reveals critical differences between the framing and constitution of *ìmò/ìgbàgbó* and “knowledge”/“belief” in their distinctive discourses and practices. Following Hallen and Sodipo’s lead, let us begin with a brief overview of the contours of this terrain in English-language discourse and thought (which hence forth I will gloss as English-LDT). In the hierarchy of the power, or “truth validity” of knowledge claims in English-LDT, “knowledge that” or knowledge received from second-hand experience — for example, the written testimony of books or the spoken testimony of “experts”— is typically attributed with the most “truth-validity” and thus is most highly valued. “Knowing how”, first-hand knowledge that is associated with practical skills and/or with embodied performance or proficiency (“knowing how”), is considered less powerful and thus, is less esteemed. And “belief” — regardless of whether it is belief (a) *that* a proposition is true, (b) *what* an individual claims, (c) *in* a person or (d) *in* a religious sense — is regarded as the most subjective, the least reliable, the most controversial, and also, the least powerful.

Yorùbá-language discourse and thought (henceforth, Yorùbá-LDT) shares the overarching hierarchy that situates *ìmò* — “knowledge” writ large — above *ìgbàgbó*, “belief.” *Ìmò* (“knowledge”) similarly enjoys the most powerful truth validity and certitude — *òtítító ní*, “it is the truth” (op cit:62, 72). And *ìgbàgbó* (“belief”) is considered to be more suspect, uncertain, and potentially, unreliable. Yet, beyond this point the two epistemologies and practices diverge. The way in which Yorùbá –LDT configures and deploys these two fundamental concepts varies significantly from English-LDT.

Starting with *ìmò* (“knowledge”), two conditions must be met in Yorùbá –LDT in order to make such a powerful claim. First, an individual must have personal, first hand experience. As one of the traditional collaborators notes (1986:60): “‘ You see (*rí*) it before you *mò* it.’” Then

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<sup>229</sup> For more on this aspect of the (on-going) learning process in Ifá, see chapter 5.

there is “the witnessing of the *okòn* (*èrí okòn*). This is the second condition that must be fulfilled in order to have *imò*” (op cit:61).

*Okòn*, while physically located in the heart, is usually glossed as “heart-mind” by Yorùbá and non-Yorùbá alike. This nomenclature points to indigenous notions regarding the manner in which certain perceptions, thoughts and/or emotions are expressed. For the moment, let it suffice to say that both the *okòn*, or “heart-mind,” as well as the *inú* (literally “insides” this may be used to refer to the stomach and/or the womb) are experienced and perceived as sites involved in emotion and (distinctive modes of) mentation.<sup>230</sup>

Hallen and Sodipo gloss *èrí okòn* as “comprehension” and “judgment.” Yet, their collaborators speak to something deeper than that. For example, one elder notes (op cit:61-2):

You can be invited to go and visit a person... Your *èrí okòn* tells you not to go. And if you get dragged there, and it happened that there is a quarrel, you will say that you did not want to come, that your *èrí okòn* told you not to come there. It is your *èrí okòn* which tells you whether something is good or bad, and this is more important than accepting advice from someone. If your *èrí okòn* speaks with you, it will be difficult for another person to persuade you from doing what you want to do.

My long-standing, personal and in-depth engagement with Ifá’s scholarly-devotional and healing practices and with Yorùbá elders and sages, including but not limited to those in Ifá, has convinced me that *èrí okòn*, “the witnessing of the heart-mind”, is a form of *embodied certainty* associated with revelatory, or intuitive, knowing. *Èrí okòn* is a way of knowing that emanates from the depths of your bodily being-in-the-world<sup>231</sup> and which ritual and/or devotional practice may enhance.<sup>232</sup> And, as I argue throughout this text, it is a capacity that is actively cultivated in Ifá through the scholarly-devotional practices of everyday living.

Thus, unlike “knowledge” in English-LDT, *imò* is *limited exclusively to first hand knowledge*. This flies in the face of long-standing academic preoccupations regarding “primitive mentality” (Levy-Bruhl 1985[1910]; Levi-Strauss 1963; Goody 1977) and questions of “rationality” (Horton 1970, 1993; Wilson 1970; Good 1994) particularly among Africans in/and their healing practices (Turner 1967, 1968; Evans-Pritchard 1976; Peek 1991; Evens 1996) and philosophy (Tempels 1959; Hountondji 1983; Mudimbe 1985, 1988; Makinde 1988; Masolo 1994).

*Ìgbàgbó* means, literally and figuratively, “the act of accepting that which is heard” (*ì*, nominative + *gbà*, “to accept;” “to grab or hold onto;” “to agree” + *gbó*, “to hear”). Yorùbá language is tonal, musical. Prior to colonialism Yorùbá language and culture were exclusively oral (and aural), and Christian missionaries were the first to “reduce” this musical language to a transcribed form.<sup>233</sup> In contemporary Yorùbá-LDT the “range” of *ìgbàgbó* extends beyond

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<sup>230</sup> Deep thought as well as pensive reflection, of emotions or thoughts, is referred to as *ìrònú*, literally, “the stirring [and/or thinking] inside [one’s stomach]” (from *ì*, nominative + *rò*, “to stir or agitate” as well as “to think” + *inú*, “inside/stomach.” *Ìfokònbálè*, literally “placing one’s heart-mind on the earth,” refers to “peace of mind” [necessary for clear thought].

<sup>231</sup> See discussion of *ìwà* as well as the section on embodied certainty later in this chapter.

<sup>232</sup> For more on this embodied certainty as a spiritually-informed mode of being-in, engaging, and making sense of the world, see the next chapter.

<sup>233</sup> This is a conscious allusion to Ajayi’s (1960) oft-cited essay, entitled “How Yorùbá was Reduced to Writing.”

purely oral testimony and includes the acceptance of written claims. Thus *ìgbàgbó*, unlike “knowledge” or “belief” in English-LDT, encompasses *all* second-hand testimony.

Furthermore, in their collaborative discussions and analysis of *ìgbàgbó* the “traditional colleagues” highlighted important conditions influencing whether one accepts, or agrees with, another’s testimony, *gbàgbó*, or not (*kò gbàgbó*). When one knows (*mò*) through first-hand experience that another’s assertion is a lie, the matter is simply rejected. When one does not possess such certitude of the facts or claims, then first-hand knowledge — *ìmò* — of the moral and ethical dimensions, or “character,” of the individual or individuals involved becomes a critical and determining factor. In the case of a member of the community, regardless of whether his/her account is spoken or written, the moral and ethics of the individual, as well as of his/her compound — for the Yorùbá agree that “the acorn never falls far from the tree” — will strongly influence whether or not it is accepted (*gbàgbó*). When the individual is a “foreigner” (not a member of a local family compound) who is presently residing in the community, s/he will be engaged in a face-to face interchange or interrogation. Then, after assessing the stranger’s moral values as well as his/her perceptual and intellectual capacities, the testimony will be accepted, *gbàgbó*, or rejected, *kò gbàgbó*. What of books, the press, the media?

Most Yorùbá are acutely aware of the strong political allegiances of the local and national news media in Nigeria. Many, if not most, also realize that an individual must surmount significant economic, socio-cultural, and/or political barriers in order to have his or her work considered, let alone published, by a commercial publisher. This is particularly true in Nigeria. Historically, the only major publishers were CMS, the Christian Missionary Society, and a few university presses. The former, in particular, *only* published works promoting their ideological (and religious) perspectives. Currently there are no substantial publishing establishments in Nigeria. The vast majority of contemporary publications in Nigeria, scholarly or otherwise, therefore, are published in very limited numbers by small local printing firms. Typically the author provides the funds necessary to print the book or pamphlet, hoping to recover his/her investment after publication is completed, by donations, when the work is “launched.”<sup>234</sup>

These complex socio-political conditions, alone, generate significant ambivalence about print media in terms of *ìmò* and *ìgbàgbó*. On the one hand, there is a general awareness of the social capital of “book learning” in contemporary society, at home and abroad. Professionals such as professors, lawyers, physicians, nurses, teachers, and engineers are highly appreciated, as is their potential for traveling outside of Nigeria to live and work in a country with more socio-political stability and greater economic prosperity.<sup>235</sup> Nonetheless, the majority of the populace, especially those with little or no “book learning” and the indigenous intellectuals, regard printed material as little more than the equivalent of our “hear-say.” They perceive these texts as testimonies made by anonymous individuals with unknown moral values and motives as well as perceptual and cognitive capacities. And while it is assumed that the primary motivating force of local printers is economic survival, foreign publishing houses are associated with questionable political and/or ideological motives as well as unfamiliar moral values. Therefore, although print

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<sup>234</sup> A “book launching” is a public affair promoting the book’s publication. Many people, especially influential and prosperous members of the community, are invited. Those who come to the event are expected to make donations to help defray the cost of the affair as well as the costs of publication.

<sup>235</sup> According to World Bank statistics, per capita gross national income in Nigeria fell below the equivalent of one (US) dollar in the late 1990s. This is compounded by spiraling inflation in excess of 300% over the past twenty years (Ogbaa 2003:31).

media affords foreigners and *omo ikóòwé* — those habituated to book learning<sup>236</sup> — opportunities for enhanced social and financial success, it is viewed by indigenous intellectuals with immense skepticism.

According to the Yorùbá-LDT configuration of *ìmò* (“knowledge”) and *ìgbàgbó* (“belief”), books, like other sources of information based upon second-hand experience, are by *definition* disqualified as a source of “the truth.” *Ìmò*, “knowledge” within Yorùbá epistemology and indigenous intellectual practice, comes *only* from that which has been personally witnessed and/or experienced *and* which is associated or imbues one with embodied certainty. As stated above, for Yorùbá intellectuals and sages knowledge and being are intimately intertwined.

### **Ìwà. Being-in-the-world: “Cool” Rhythms and Sensibilities in Yorùbá Cultural Identity, Embodied Certainty and Sagely Being-in-the-world**

Let us turn our attention to the notion and experience of “being” in Yorùbá culture. First, as noted in passing in the previous chapter, Yorùbá language is *nongendered*. English language (and Euro-American culture) deploys terms such as “man,” “mankind,”<sup>237</sup> and/or “he” as universal and/or generic references for human beings. In so doing, male gender is privileged as the norm and center, while female gender and identity is marginalized on the periphery as “other.” In contrast, the normative term used in Yorùbá language and discourse is *èniyàn*, which translates to “a person” and/or “people.”<sup>238</sup> Furthermore, third person *gendered* nominatives in English (“s/he”), and their associated, gendered, possessive pronouns (“his,” “her”), do not exist in Yorùbá. Rather, there are non-gendered nouns and possessive pronouns, such as *òun*, and *rẹ̀*, respectively.<sup>239</sup> These terms are applied universally for animate and inanimate subjects alike and possess no gendered connotation or assignation. In Yorùbá, third person nominatives and possessive pronouns are differentiated into two classes based on social seniority: (a) those signifying familiarity, which are used for someone of the same or lesser age or social status, as in the examples above; and (b) those denoting formality and respect, which are used for social seniors.

Similarly, familial relations in Yorùbá — with the exceptions of parents and grandparents — are differentiated on the basis of age and/or seniority, not gender.<sup>240</sup> There is no term for “daughter” or “son,” merely *omọ*, “child.” One uses the gloss *ègbón* to refer to any/all senior members of the family lineage or compound, such as an older sibling, an older cousin, an aunt or uncle, etc. The alternative, *àbúrò*, refers to any/all familial juniors. It is noteworthy, and not uncommon, that my husband, and many other Yorùbá immigrants with whom I am familiar, continue to differentiate individuals on the basis of their age and/or social seniority. These global, and often educated, Yorùbás find gendered terms, such as *he*, *she*, *his* and *hers* to be awkward and a minor yet recurrent source of linguistic as well as cultural foibles and faux pas.

Another term that is germane to our discussion of the human and cultural experience of being within Yorùbá society is *ìwà*, the transliteration of which is, “the state of being and/or existence” (from *ì*, nominative + *wà*, “to exist;” “to be”). *Ìwà* is typically translated as

<sup>236</sup> The literal translation of *omo ikóòwé* is “the children or offspring of the practice of reading books.”

<sup>237</sup> Even “human,” with its literal incorporation of the gloss “man,” has gendered undertones.

<sup>238</sup> The transliteration for *èniyàn* is “the chosen one(s),” from (*àwòn*) adjective denoting more than one + *ení*, “one” [as in counting in a series] OR *ení*, “a singular person” + *yàn*, “to choose.”

<sup>239</sup> This third person noun and its associated pronoun denote familiarity. To denote formality for social seniors, one would use *ẹ̀yin* and *yin* respectively. See below.

<sup>240</sup> As noted in chapter 2, parents are referred to as “the mother [or father] of A” and grandparents as “the mother/father of the mother/father of A.”

“character.” Yet it is my opinion that this gloss reflects the aforementioned historical influence of Christian missionaries in scripting and translating Yorùbá language. I propose that a more accurate, albeit cumbersome, gloss for *ìwà* is “being-in-the-world.”<sup>241</sup>

Before proceeding with my argument, let me acknowledge that the gloss “character” highlights one vital aspect of *ìwà* not implied through the use of “being-in-the-world:” morality. Many have argued, and I would agree, that morality is a primary value in Yorùbá culture.<sup>242</sup> And in his book entitled *The Good, The Bad, and The Beautiful: Discourse about Values in Yorùbá Culture* Barry Hallen (2000:13-35) extends this further by claiming that Yorùbá society has, and is guided by, a “moral epistemology.” Furthermore, the popular adage, *ìwà léwà* — usually translated as “character is beauty” — affirms that the Yorùbá perceive an individual’s moral being-in-the-world to be more valuable and enduring than his/her physical attributes. Using this interpretation, the adage also points to a fundamental relationship between moral values and aesthetic production in Yorùbá culture.<sup>243</sup> A powerful example of this is seen in the extreme (some would argue *supreme*) aesthetic value afforded “coolness,” qua patience and emotional temperance (“cool-headed”) among the Yorùbá, memorialized by Thompson (1966; 1974; 1989) in his assignation “an aesthetic of the cool.”<sup>244</sup>

The aphorism “*Ìwà léwà*” enjoys wide currency among Yorùbá people throughout the world, regardless of their location, age, class, gender, educational background, or religious affiliation. In Nigeria it is typically used as a way of recognizing and praising someone whose being-in-the-world is felt to be exemplary. More recently this adage has become common currency throughout the globalized world as a means of proudly asserting one’s unique identity as a Yorùbá. Confronted by others considered to be less “cultured”<sup>245</sup> — be it in Lagos, New York, Johannesburg, London, or Berkeley — Yorùbás often invoke this adage as a hallmark of their identity and to differentiate themselves from those whose being-in-the-world they perceive as less morally grounded and/or in-formed.

This brings us to another, equally vital dimension that is implied by *ìwà* in the Yorùbá imaginary and which supports my use of the gloss “being-in-the-world.” Implicit in *ìwà* is the notion of being *grounded* — morally, sensuously, phenomenologically — *in the world*. In Yorùbá language and discourse the word *ìwà* is only used in conjunction with one verb, *hù*, which means to “sprout” or “grow”, as in grass sprouting or hair growing. *Hù* refers to the growth or unfoldment *only* of something that is rooted. Being-in-the-world is rooted in the sensuousness and matter of the bodily experience. Moving through life, one experiences new techniques of the body and/or incorporates new bodily habits of everyday life. In so doing, one’s bodily being-in-the-world and the sensibilities, orientations, and perceptions engendered therein, change, unfold, and are, perhaps, refined.<sup>246</sup>

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<sup>241</sup> Abimbola (1975:393), in passing, suggests that “[t]he original meaning of *ìwà* can therefore be interpreted as ‘the fact of being, living, or existing’”. And Abiodun (1990) claims that the glosses “being” and/or “essence” capture the intended meaning of *ìwà*, particularly in reference to aesthetics.

<sup>242</sup> See Abimbola (1975); Hallen (2000) and Ogundele, et. al. (2001). Hallen’s book, in particular, offers a detailed exposé of the value of morality among the Yorùbá, particularly in relation to philosophy, knowledge, and aesthetics.

<sup>243</sup> Roland Abiodun, a prodigious scholar of Yorùbá aesthetics, offers a different interpretation of this aphorism: “Beauty arises from the expression of the things’ unique (ontological) essence” (1990, cited in Hallen 2000:127).

<sup>244</sup> The intimate relationship between coolness and Yorùbá being-in-the-world and cultural identity is explored in the following pages.

<sup>245</sup> Typically this critique is expressed: “*Ó ò l’asà*” (literally “S/he does not have any culture”).

<sup>246</sup> For more on shifts and ruptures in the dance of incorporation of new embodied habits (and capacities), see chapter 4 and chapter 6.

But, as my encounter with Ìyá Móin-móin suggests, moving too rapidly one may overlook and/or miss important lessons and/or experiences. A given rhythm of bodily being can either facilitate and enhance or obstruct and impede one's engagement with a particular practice. The adage “*sùúrù l'oba iwà*” speaks to this, while offering additional insight into the relationship between aesthetics, morality, and being-in-the-world among the Yorùbá in general, and Yorùbá elders and sages in particular. *Sùúrù* means “patience” and is synonymous with coolness (*otútù*), calmness and gentleness (*jéé- jéé*) in Yorùbá discourse and practice.<sup>247</sup> In the latter, it refers both to a “gentle demeanor” as well as a “gentle pace.” People frequently advised me, throughout my many years of living and returning to Nigeria, to “walk gently,” to take the road, literally as well as figuratively, slowly and carefully (*jéé- jéé, jéé- jéé ní*, “gently, gently”).

The transliteration of this aphorism, “*sùúrù l'oba iwà*,” is “patience (*sùúrù*) is (*ní*, contracted to *l'*) the ruler (*oba*) of existence or being (*iwà*).” It points to the supreme value of emotional temperance or detachment (“cool headedness”), as well as a cool pace and rhythm, in one's everyday being. In Yorùbá culture patience is considered more than a virtue, it is valued as a guiding principle in living life everyday. And as Ìyá Móin-móin generously informed me, rushing is read as “foreign”, “uncultured”, and “offensive.”<sup>248</sup>

This was painfully elucidated to an African American colleague of mine, Jay, whose final six months of ethnographic research in Ifè overlapped with the first six months of my stay. He was perplexed and disappointed that the locals insisted upon referring to him as *òyìnbò* (“white person”, “European”, “foreigner”). No one, young or old, recognized him as a “son of the soil.” No one gave him the pet name *Qmowálé* to signify that he was “their child” and “had come home.”<sup>249</sup> Finally, one day, as Jay and I were traveling with a local professor to an academic conference in neighboring Ìbàdàn, he could contain himself no longer. He asked the professor, a Yorùbá, *what was it* that told others at a glance — without speaking to him, without knowing him — that he was *not* their brother? What gave him away as a foreigner? His skin tone was fairly light, but there were many Yorùbá who were fairer than he. And he wore native cloth almost every day. So, *what was it*? The professor didn't hesitate a moment, blurting back his response immediately without taking his eyes off the road, “The way you walk, of course! You walk too fast to be Yorùbá!” Then, a few minutes later, after some reflection, he added, “And your hair's a bit too soft, maybe they notice that too.” A cool and gentle pace, in everyday living, as well as in the manner in which one engages life and others, is seen as quintessentially Yorùbá.<sup>250</sup>

The incorporation of *sùúrù*, as coolness and a relaxed pace, is considered (and read as) fundamental in constituting and defining Yorùbá cultural identity (*iwà*). This was reiterated during my most recent stay in Ilé Ifè. It was the second time that my husband and I had returned, as a couple, to visit the family and the local Ifá community. We were enjoying ourselves, albeit on heightened alert due to the accelerated economic deterioration and concomitant increase in armed robberies since our previous visit the year before. Yet, ironically, on *multiple* occasions my husband was mistaken for a foreigner! He was surprised and hurt, initially, to be so grossly mis-read! This was *his home*! Now my husband's complexion is a dark chocolate, his hair is *not*

<sup>247</sup> Frequently *sùúrù* also implies the notion of perseverance.

<sup>248</sup> Imagine the implications for multi-tasking at cybernetic speeds!

<sup>249</sup> *Qmowálé* is a name used by the Yorùbá. As it means, literally, “the child has come home” locals commonly bequeath it to visiting African Americans as a means of affirming their historical connection through the slave trade.

<sup>250</sup> Interestingly, I can recognize Nigerians in Europe and America, be they Yorùbá, Ibo, or Hausa, with amazing accuracy *by their gait*. See Deren (1953) for her description of the graceful rhythm of Haitian gait.

“soft,” and his facial features are the quintessentially Yorùbá. Looking at his face one sees the large almond-shaped, wide-set eyes, the full lips, and the rounded forehead characteristic of Yorùbá sculptures. And if you look closely, you will even notice he has small, fine scarification marks on his cheeks, marking him, literally, as Yorùbá.<sup>251</sup> I, too, initially was surprised. But then one day, one of his brothers complained with some bitterness that his *ẹgbón*, (social senior — my husband) had become an *òyìnbò*, always rushing, rushing! Then he laughed, and said, “That’s why they [meaning the people in town] think he’s not from here!” Coolness *constitutes iwà*, Yorùbá being-in-the-world.

Among elders and sages this coolness is elevated to an art form, not only in Nigeria but throughout the world. For those unfamiliar with Yorùbá sages, imagine the Dalai Lama’s countenance and presence. Similarly, the wise elders and sages in Nigeria whom I have had the honor and pleasure of knowing emanate a profound coolness and peace. The serenity of being in their presence is indescribable. These Yorùbá elders, moving slowly and deliberately through life, often spending most, if not all, of their lives engaged in ritual and devotional practice, embody coolness and profound wisdom and epitomize moral and ethical being-in-the-world.

The power of this gentle “coolness” characteristic of Yorùbá elder-sages is beautifully expressed in the proverbial adage, “*Jéé- jéé l’égún àgbà njó.*” (“Gently, graciously [in a tempered and stately manner] is the way an elder performs the ancestral masquerade dances.”) The Egúngún dances are annual public rituals honoring important Ancestral spiritual presences and invoking them to protect the welfare of the community.<sup>252</sup> Charged with significant ritual and social responsibility — and bearing the weight of extensively layered full-bodied costumes that cover their bodies and faces entirely — the dancers’ identities are completely concealed. Yet, as this adage points out, elder-sage dancers are easily distinguished from their younger counterparts. Moving elegantly, gracefully, and fluidly, these elders embody, quite literally, Ancestral Presence. Their performances emanate a palpable power and presence that is notably absent in the more frenetic yet unidimensional ritual dances of the youth.

Through these observations of the ritual performances of elders, this proverb also serves as a metaphor about life. Sagely being-in-the-world — with its cool headedness, moral depth, and presence — bodies forth the evocative power to heal, govern wisely, lead and mentor; the power necessary to care for the community. This “cool” and powerful mode of being-in and attending-to-the-world is cultivated, with time, and through patience and perseverance. Thus, the proverb highlights the value of moving gently and gracefully in life, as a means of cultivating “deep” knowing as/and being with its heightened capacities for serving the social good.

Being-in-the-world is both rooted and in a state of constant unfoldment. *Ìwà* refers specifically to Yorùbá being-in-the-world. *Ìwà* is grounded, simultaneously, in a moral universe and in the sensuousness of bodily existence, and unfolds “gently,” patiently, and consistently over time. Knowing as/and being, in the Yorùbá imaginary and experience, is a primary and embodied experience that incorporates a gentle rhythmicity. And, unfolding gradually over time, through one’s social interactions as well as through one’s sensuous and embodied engagements

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<sup>251</sup> Facial scarification is no longer routinely used. It is a practice that allegedly arose with the slave trade as a means of identifying one, from infancy, as pertaining to a specific ethnic sub-group (i.e. *Ègbá, Ìjèbú, Ifè, Qyá*). Thus Yorùbá slave raiders and traders could avoid enslaving members of their own group. The practice persisted through the early years of the nation-state, but now it is uncommon to see a child so marked. See Johnson (1976 [1921]:104-9) for detailed description and examples of the distinctive marks.

<sup>252</sup> For more on Egúngún ritual performances, see Babayemi (1980), M. Drewal (1992:89-104). For a selection of photographs of the elaborate, and weighty, costumes – some *in motion* – see H. Drewal, Pemberton, and Abiodun (1989:24, 177, 179, 180, 183-186) and M. Drewal (1992:105-108).

with the phenomenologically given world, this particularized mode of knowing and being-in-the-world bodies forth, in the elder and sage, serenity, power, and embodied certainty.



## Knowing as/and Being, Part II. Chapter Four. Suffering in/and the Journey of Life.

*O l'ógbón, (sugbon) o ò jìyà?*

*Taní olùkó rẹ̀?*

You have wisdom, (but) you haven't suffered?

(Then) who is your teacher?

Yorùbá adage

### Ìyágbà's Legacy

The matriarch of my husband's maternal compound died recently. Since her husband's death almost thirty years ago, Ìyágbà (lit. "the ancient or elderly mother"<sup>253</sup>), as we tenderly and respectfully called her, was the most senior member of the family compound, a living example of the sociality of incorporation presented in the previous chapter. Ìyá was approximately 115 years old when she passed.<sup>254</sup> And up to and including the day of her death, she was vibrant, alert, active, and extremely generous. Every morning she woke at dawn, swept the floors and made "stew" (*obè ata*, lit. "pepper soup," the mainstay of Yorùbá cuisine)<sup>255</sup> for the day. She made the soup not only for herself, her great-grandchildren and their cousins and friends who were living with her, but also for any hungry children from the neighborhood who might come by during the day. Every day for more than fifty years Ìyá had been feeding neighborhood children. As the years passed, the perimeters of her neighborhood quietly yet consistently expanded until, eventually, the neighborhood contained the entire city of Ilé Ifè.

For the swarms of hungry neighborhood children who would straggle across her doorstep, a few at a time throughout the day, Ìyágbà provided a warm, nourishing meal (perhaps the only one they would consume that day). Often, she also gave these children money for their school fees at the beginning of each term.<sup>256</sup> For the children pertaining to her spouse's

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<sup>253</sup> From ìyá, "mother,"+ àgbà, "elder."

<sup>254</sup> Ìyá's exact age was unknown. She was born and died at home, as is customary throughout much of Nigeria, and there were no formal records of her birth. However, extrapolating from her pregnancy history (see below), she would have been in her mid to late thirties when her daughter Ìyá Lati (lit. "the mother of Lati") was born. Given that Ìyá Lati was seventy-eight to eighty years old at the time of her mother's death, one hundred fifteen years is a conservative estimate of Ìyágbà's life span.

<sup>255</sup> *Obè ata* is a tomato-based stew made with onions, spicy peppers and flavored with fish, beef, chicken, goat meat, or "bush meat." It is typically eaten at both the afternoon and evening meals. Ironically, though, the Yorùbá define a given meal *not* by the stew, nor by its protein component (beef, chicken, etc), but rather, by the carbohydrate with which it is consumed. Thus, eating the same soup with rice at noon and with pounded yam (*iyán*) in the evening is perceived as two radically distinctive meals – the first, "rice," and the second, pounded yam. Finally, while it is quite common practice to prepare one's own rice and/or soup, carbohydrates such as *èkó* ("corn pudding"), *iyán* ("pounded yam"), or *amala* (carbohydrate made from dried, rather than fresh, yam) which are much more labor intensive, are generally purchased, freshly made, from a local vendor. For more on the practice of using the starch as a metonym for a meal in many cultures throughout the world, see S. Mintz (1996).

<sup>256</sup> At Ìyágbà's death, many "big men" and "big women" throughout Nigeria and the world, purchased cows to be slaughtered and made into soup for the funeral festivities in her honor. This responsibility is typically reserved for members of the familial compound. Yet, consistently, these individuals insisted, saying that Ìyágbà had been like a mother to them. Were it not for her unfailing kindness and generosity, they would not have finished school or become successful members of society.

compound (an extended family indeed from a Euro-American perspective),<sup>257</sup> Ìyá not only provided money for their school fees, but also frequently paid for school supplies, shoes and uniforms. In the mornings when they would leave for school Ìyá would also “dash” each child of the house with money for an afternoon meal. And for her favorites, including my husband when he was a boy, she would secretly place an additional special treat, such as a tin of milk<sup>258</sup> or some biscuits, inside each of their school bags.

Even as an elderly woman, Ìyágbà was constantly surrounded by youth of all ages, her sweetness seemed to attract them as bees to nectar. She was perpetually doting on this one, soothing that one, joking with the teenagers, fixing a toddler’s hair or tending to his/her skinned knee or bruised feelings. Adults, young and old, also frequently came to visit with her, seeking her advice and counsel. She would listen patiently to their concerns and then respond thoughtfully without harshness or cynicism. If she had a critique, she couched it in a friendly joke or a metaphor whose point was nonetheless clear. With her fragile frame, soft-spoken demeanor, and unending gentleness, Ìyágbà emanated softness and a quiet wisdom. Just to be in the presence of this frail diminutive white haired *mama* was calming and uplifting. Her being-in-the-world exuded an indescribable tranquility that was all the more impressive given her history of hardship as a younger woman.

### **Suffering for Children and The Curse of Barrenness**

For the first twenty years of her marriage Ìyágbà *suffered* as she tried doggedly, albeit unsuccessfully, to have children. Because she did not have any children of her own, Ìyágbà continued to be addressed, as is customary, by her given (or childhood) name.<sup>259</sup> In Yorùbá society parenthood alone confers complete adult social status. This is equally true for men and women. Once an individual has a child, s/he is no longer addressed publicly by her/his childhood name, but is known instead by the appellation “mother [or father] of A.”<sup>260</sup> Calling Ìyá by her childhood name signified that she was not considered a full adult and served to remind her on a daily basis of her failings.

Ìyá’s given name was *Omilajú*, which means, literally, “water opens [her] eyes.”<sup>261</sup> It is important at this juncture to mention that naming a child, even among the most modern Yorùbá, is much more than the reflection of the personal fancy and/or preferences of the parents. Furthermore, a child often has multiple names: the name by which s/he is commonly known and addressed in public, as well as special names known only within the family. The latter include one’s personal *oríkì*, or spiritually empowered praise name, as well as other names that allude to

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<sup>257</sup> Ìyá affectionately called all the juniors of her husband’s compound *omomi* (lit. “my child/ren”), including those of us, such as myself, who entered the compound through marriage. However, in the text above I am specifically referring to the minor children — from toddlers through university students — of her deceased spouse’s patrilineage.

<sup>258</sup> Milk is a luxury commodity in Nigeria, available *only* in tin cans, as condensed milk or in powdered form. The former is imported from Europe and the latter typically produced locally, yet both are expensive and well beyond the means of the average family. The main reasons cited for the lack of fresh milk (and the high cost of powdered milk) is the high incidence of sleeping sickness among cattle in West Africa. Most Nigerian children’s consumption of milk is confined to their first two years of life when they are breastfed. This probably contributes to the many skeletal deformities, and stunted growth, I noticed among children.

<sup>259</sup> This was the name given to her by her parents.

<sup>260</sup> Note: Social and family intimates may still use the childhood name in private.

<sup>261</sup> From *omi*, “water,” + *là*, “to open” or “to clear [of obstructions]” (as in *là ọna*, “opening the road;” “clearing a path”) + *ojú*, “eyes,” “aperture” [can also signify “face”]. Thus, the name *Omilajú* also implies that water somehow cleared the path, opening the way for the birth of this individual to occur.

intimate family history and/or extremely personalized spiritual attributes. Yet even the common name has special significance and is carefully selected to highlight (and, perhaps, to remind the developing child of) important dimensions of the child's social and/or spiritual identity.<sup>262</sup>

Most infants' names are not formally decided until the naming ceremony. This is a large social event, ideally held within two weeks after the child's birth,<sup>263</sup> wherein the infant is introduced to society and through which family elders and other social seniors offer suggestions and insights regarding an appropriate name. Yet some infants' names are known before the ceremony. Unique circumstances in the infant's presentation at birth — such as a child borne within the amniotic sac, one borne with the umbilical cord wrapped around its neck, breech births, multiple births (twins, triplets),<sup>264</sup> etc. — are read as vital signatures through which critical aspects of the child's character or temperament are revealed. Many are also perceived as signifying that the child has a special resonance with, or relationship to, one of the *òrìṣà*. For example, twins are said to have special allegiance to Ifá (and *Ṣàngó*<sup>265</sup>), while those borne in a caul pertain to *Òrìṣànlá*, the deity “of the white cloth” and a fundamental force in the molding of humanity. Children whose delivery is marked by any of these special circumstances are said to carry their names with them<sup>266</sup> from *òrun*, the vibratory/musical dimension of spiritual presence and the source, or *orìsùn*, of existence.<sup>267</sup> Thus, regarding the aforementioned circumstances, all Yorùbá twins are named *Táyé* (“the one who tasted the world,” considered the younger of the twins, s/he ventures out, at the bidding of her/his senior twin, to taste the world and report back, by ushering forth a cry if the world tastes sweet) and *Kehinde* (“the one who follows behind,” considered the elder in Yorùbá culture, s/he waits to hear from the junior twin before venturing forth),<sup>268</sup> and those borne completely contained within the caul, *Òké*.

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<sup>262</sup> As noted immediately below, family elders and other social seniors, often attributed with spiritual insight, are consulted during the naming ceremony in an effort to select a name that reflects these critical dimensions of a child's inner being. Some parents will also present the infant to Ifá, for a special ritual ceremony — *figsentayé* (lit. “placing the [infant's] foot on the world”) — through which said spiritual/ritual affinities and/or obligations are revealed. See M. Drewal (1992:48-62).

<sup>263</sup> Historically, the naming ceremony for a daughter was/is held at seven days of age; for a son, nine days of age. This had ritual significance. In contemporary practice and popular Nigerian/ Yorùbá culture, the date of the ceremony is much more flexible and nongendered. Regarding the traditional naming ceremony practices, see Bascom (1969:56); M. Drewal (1992:52-55) Johnson (1976 [1921]:79); Sowande (1966:9-11). For some more contemporary engagements and practices, see M. Drewal (1992:55), Orr (2006:247-8).

<sup>264</sup> The Yorùbá have a long-standing history of the highest, naturally occurring (i.e. without the use of reproductive technologies of any sort) twinning rate in the world. One study of Yorùbá fertility, conducted by Yale University and the University of Benin, found they have “the highest rate of multiple births in the world, with 41.6 twin births per 1,000 deliveries” (PANA 1998). Another report claimed that “Twins account for about 3 percent of the [Yorùbá] tribe's births, compared with 1.7 percent for other blacks, 1 percent for whites and .5 percent for Asians.” (Begley et. al, 1987)

<sup>265</sup> *Ṣàngó* is the deity associated with lightning. He is a vibrant source of vitality, at times aggressive, but also a firm enforcer of mercy and justice. For more on *Ṣàngó*'s (historical and contemporary) presence and influence in West Africa and globally, see Pessoa de Barros (2008); Falola and Childs (2004); Tishken et. al.(2009).

<sup>266</sup> These names are *Orúkò àmútòrunwá* (literally “the names that are carried here [to the visible, mundane world] from ‘òrun”). In their book bearing this special gloss as its title, Sowande and Ajanaju (1969) provide extensive information, in Yorùbá, on these names and their significance. Much of this can also be found, in English, in an earlier publication by Sowande alone (1966: especially 114-150). Also see Oduyoye (1982:85-86).

<sup>267</sup> See the description of *igbá iwà*, “the calabash of existence” in the first chapter, as well as in chapter 6, for more on the relationship between the vibratory realm, *òrun*, and the visible, material realm, *ayé*, in Yorùbá epistemology and ritual practice.

<sup>268</sup> This reflects, and reiterates, the valorization of social seniority (and the lack of importance assigned to gender in relation to social status, hierarchy and organization) in Yorùbá culture.

Other names, although not revealed through the child's physical emergence into the world, are known prior to the naming ceremony due to special circumstances surrounding the child's conception and/or pregnancy. This was the case with Ìyá. Her name, Omilajú ("water opens her eyes"), acknowledges that she was conceived and came into the world due to the intervention of the *òrìṣà* (deity) *Òsun*. *Òsun* is the mother of the rivers and a powerful healing and procreative force. The name Omilajú also suggests that from birth, Ìyá was considered a "child of *Òsun*." In other words, due to the circumstances of her conception and birth, Omilajú was marked as a devotee of *Òsun*. Similarly, Omilajú's mother would have also carried ritual obligations and/or indebtedness to *Òsun* for having provided her with this (special) child.

Omilajú married as a young woman and she was her husband's first wife. (Later, he took four more.) He was a hard working farmer and she, an industrious trader. As a middle (wo)man, she bought cocoa and cola nuts from farmers and sold them, respectively, to international and local traders. It did not take long before both she and her spouse had achieved financial success. Yet they remained childless, with one difficult pregnancy after the next.

Over the course of the first twenty plus years of her marriage Omilajú conceived eighteen times, and eighteen times the fullness and/of expectancy turned to death and despair. Each pregnancy ended in miscarriage, stillbirth, or the death of a young infant. Eighteen pregnancies, eighteen graves!

My husband and I experienced two miscarriages, the second of which plummeted me to unfathomable depths of despair. It is beyond my imaginative capacities to comprehend the extreme physical disruption and emotional turmoil that Ìyágbà/Omilajú endured and where and how that small soft-spoken woman found the courage and conviction to continue, time after time, against all odds. And her situation would have been even more stressful because of the extreme value that Yorùbá culture assigns to children. For, in addition to conferring adult status on the parents, children are considered the *ultimate* source of wealth, honor and prosperity among the Yorùbá. To be barren is to be without joy. Material wealth without children is perceived as a failing of extreme proportion. Some consider it to be a form of divine punishment or a cruel cosmic joke.<sup>269</sup> Without a child/children upon whom to lavish one's money and material possessions, financial prosperity is transmuted from a blessing and source of joy into a constant reminder of what is lacking in one's life and home, and thus, a source of deep and abiding pain.

When I lived in Ilé Ifè during my Ifá apprenticeship prior to knowing my spouse, there was a prominent businessman in town who, despite all his efforts, great wealth, and numerous wives, had no children. The plight of this "big man" and the misery for him and his family were common knowledge. Whenever his name came up in conversation people would invariably cry out "*Ó mase-o!*" ("What a shame! What a pity!") followed quickly by formulaic prayers invoking God to end the man's interminable suffering; to change his curse to a blessing by providing him and any/all of his wives with a healthy child. And then, abruptly, the subject would be altered. The prayers and invocations, beyond requesting divine resolution of a formidable dilemma, were also deployed as powerful spiritual brooms sweeping away any possible contagion. Barrenness, in addition to bringing immense personal pain and suffering, is also highly stigmatizing and shameful for the community. The curse had to be swept away.

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<sup>269</sup> "Barrenness is viewed with disrespect, and regarded as a misfortune and divine curse...attributed to women" (Ogunbile 2001:195). Also see Ady (1994); Hallgren (1988).

## Perseverance Becomes Joy

This is what Omilajú, the young wife, and her husband endured for more than twenty years. Twenty years of burying one tiny corpse after another in the back yard. Twenty years of shame and stigma. Twenty years of physical, mental, and emotional strain. Ìyá was, nonetheless, relentless in her efforts. She continued to try, continued to open herself physically and psychologically to the hope of new life, of procreative productivity. Each time, and despite the ever-mounting weight of her personal history, Omilajú tried anew. She went to extreme lengths, traveling far and wide to consult various *onísègùn*, indigenous herbalists,<sup>270</sup> *olórìṣà*, priests/esses of the different òrìṣà (deities), and *babaláwos* ( Ifá priests), taking their (often bitter) medicines and participating in challenging rituals. She persevered. *Sùúrù náà ní*. Patience and perseverance.

Finally, she returned to the deity *Òsun*, her spiritual “source” and a prominent òrìṣà in her spouse’s compound. As noted above, *Òsun* is a riverine deity. She is also the patron deity of *Òsogbo*, a city not far from Ilé Ifè and the capital of the state bearing her name.<sup>271</sup> One of *Òsun*’s *oríkì*, or “praise names,” is *Òsun Olómoyóyòyó*, “*Òsun* the mother of numerous children,” a reference to *Òsun*’s renowned ability to provide children for barren women. Another *oríkì* speaks to the potency of her waters: *Àròmitútù ṣòd̀gùn àg̀àn, àròmitútù ṣòd̀gùn àbíkú*, “The one whose cool water is used (as a medicine) to cure infertility and to prevent infant mortality.” As D. Badejo (2001:138-9) notes:

[T]he *olórìṣà Òsun* [priests/ess of *Òsun*] are revered for their ability to assist with fertility problems and childhood diseases. Their specialty is obstetrics and gynecology referenced by the term *àgbò*, the healing waters...*Agbára àgbò* can be transliterated as powerful water that flows gently causing erosion, an obvious allusion to the power of *Òsun*’s medicinal waters [to clear any obstructions impeding the smooth and easy emergence of new life].<sup>272</sup>

*Òsun*’s powerful healing waters opened the road for Omilajú, just as they had done years before in her own conception and birth.<sup>273</sup> Ìyágbà/Omilajú bore two beautiful, healthy children – first a girl and then, seven years later, a boy – both of whom lived and grew to adulthood and had families of their own. Perseverance turned to joy.

Her son went on to become one of the first commanding officers in the Nigerian Air Force and, later, an ambassador to the United States. And, as is customary in Yorùbá culture, he provided for Ìyágbà financially throughout her old age, lavishing her with a home, a car replete with a personal driver, beautiful clothes and fine jewelry. Yet, truth be known, Ìyá was never captivated by the glitter of the material. To her dying day she remained a simple woman. And while she took great pride in her son’s accomplishments in Nigerian society, she continued to sweep the floor every morning and to attend to the physical and emotional needs of the many children — of all ages — who came to her.

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<sup>270</sup> The literal translation of *onísègùn* is “the owner, master, or source of making medicines.”

<sup>271</sup> Ilé Ifè and *Òsogbo* are both located in *Òsun* state.

<sup>272</sup> This refers to the water’s power to erode any obstruction in its path. Also see the discussion of *Òyígyìgì* in the next section.

<sup>273</sup> For more on the medicinal and regenerative powers of *Òsun*’s waters, see other essays in the volume on *Òsun* edited by Murphy and Sanford (2001), particularly those by Ogunbile (2001) and Sanford (2001). Also see Ady (1994), Badejo (1996).

Her legacy continues throughout the world in the hearts and minds of the hundreds of children whose bodies, minds and spirits she nourished and tended. She lives on in them and through them, their families and their contributions to the world. Throughout the entirety of her adult life — both during and after those years of intense personal pain and suffering — Ìyágbà remained, consistently, a generous and giving spirit without the slightest taint of bitterness, anger or self-pity.

### Ìyágbà’s Relationship With Divine Presence: The Well Spring

I find it hard to describe the experience of being in Ìyágbà’s presence. She radiated a tranquility, a being-at-peace-with-the-world, which was constant and infallible; it could neither be shaken nor disrupted. Being with Ìyágbà was to be quietly and deeply moved by a palpable peace that flowed unceasingly from her, touching all those around her regardless of age, gender, ego-personality, or circumstance. She was like a well-spring from which flowed an unending stream of pristine spring water gently and steadily caressing all the stones and pebbles in its path, smoothing their edges, polishing their surfaces, and leaving them glimmering translucently, like stars in the sky. And we, Ìyá’s “children,” were the rocks on that riverine floor, soothed, cooled, refreshed, and enlightened by her emanations.

In Yorùbá ritual practice and epistemology, stones are intimately associated with (emanations of) divine presence.<sup>274</sup> The ultimate rock formation iconically and metaphorically is referred to as “Òyígíyìgì” and is frequently associated with the All-Mighty. In this case Òyígíyìgì is represented as a huge boulder whose surface is absolutely smooth and flawless, an immovable, timeless, and awe-inspiring presence. Another aspect of Òyígíyìgì, as stones from a river or other body of water, is revealed in the following song:<sup>275</sup>

Òyígíyìgì, <i>ota omi o</i>	Òyígíyìgì, the stone in/of the water
Òyígíyìgì, <i>ota omi</i>	Òyígíyìgì, the stone in/of the water
Àwa di òyígíyìgì	We can become (like) Òyígíyìgì
A ò kú m <sup>ón</sup>	We will not die (we shall be immortal)
Òyígíyìgì, <i>ota omi</i>	Òyígíyìgì, the immortal and unmovable. <sup>276</sup>

Through immersion in this deep watery realm, the stone has been smoothed to a state of translucency, signifying that it now contains and transmits divine light. And as a vessel containing divine presence, the stone has become imbued with everlasting vitality — the same immortality of Òyígíyìgì the immovable Almighty. Finally, the song tells us that human beings can undergo a similar transformation. This alludes to the psycho-physico-intellectuo-spiritual transformation of devotional practice<sup>277</sup> and the possibility of deification that, in the Yorùbá

<sup>274</sup> The ritual pot or calabash, the focus and matrix of rituo-devotional practice, for the vast majority of òrìṣà (deities) contains a stone, which resonates with and has been ritually consecrated to that specific òrìṣà. For more on the significance of the consecrated stones, as well as the substitution of the calabash by porcelain tureens and other “vessels of domestic use” in Lucumí Diasporic practice (where the former are known as *pedras sagradas* and/or *fundamentos*; the latter, *soperas*), see Bascom (1950), Brandon (1993:155-157); D. Brown (2003:75, 77-79, 166-171; 192;254; 260-271); Cabrera (1975); M. Mason (2002:60, 62, 68-72).

<sup>275</sup> Note: the song is derived from, and is part of, an Ifá verse (from *Irosun Oturupon*).

<sup>276</sup> This is my own translation.

<sup>277</sup> And as the song implies, this process is grounded in, and begins with, changes in one’s physical being-in-the-world. One’s body and/or bodily habits, like the rough surface of the rock, are worn down and transformed. Shifts and ruptures in bodily being are, therefore, critical and fundamental to the formation of priestly being-in-the-world.

imaginary, is open to any/all humans. *Ènìyàn lè di Òrìsà*: “Anyone can become a deity” (Sowande 1966:56-68; n.d:310-12).<sup>278</sup>

Òyígíyìgì, as the stones consecrated in and by the water, also refers to the sacred stones of Òsun (Wenger 1990:69).<sup>279</sup> In Yorùbá iconography, devotional practice, and cosmology as/and epistemology, the depths of the ocean symbolize the spiritual dimension of the soul, the realm of the immortal and timeless. *Olódokun* (from *oníl oló*, “the owner or source” + *òkun*, “the ocean”) is the divine emanation contained within the depths of the ocean, and s/he is intimately associated with Ifá.<sup>280</sup> Rivers are associated with deified ancestral presence as well as with particular qualities, or forms, of divine presence. Many Yorùbá, particularly but not solely devotees of Òsun, believe that all rivers emanate from Òsun, as expressed by the common refrain *Odò gbogbo l’àngbo*, “All rivers are (Òsun’s) medicine.” Furthermore, as Murphy and Sanford (2001:2) note:

“Òsun’s name means source. It is related to the word *orísùn*, the source of a river, a people, or of children. The word Òsun can be glossed as that which runs, seeps, flows, moves as water does. Òsun is the perpetually renewing source of life, modeling in *sélèrú*, the appearance of sweet water from dry ground, a mode of hope and agency in new and difficult situations, a way out of no way that has made life possible...”<sup>281</sup>

Ìyágbà the elder was deeply connected to a source of spiritual presence, particularly to those sweet, nourishing, and sustaining qualities associated with Òsun and with her healing and regenerative waters. In Yorùbá cosmology, Òsun is simultaneously a deified ancestor *and* a feminine emanation of divine presence that is intimately tied to Ifá. She is a powerful maternal force and the essence of her sweetness and nourishing properties are contained in, and symbolized by, one of her favorite foods: honey. Òsun’s spiritual presence dwells in the river of the same name in Nigeria and is most concentrated at the river’s edge in the city of Òsogbo, the site of her sacred grove, as noted above.

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For more on shifts and ruptures, see chapters 5. For more on body techniques and practices in the cultivation of corporeal capacities of transcendence and therapeutic power in Ifá, see chapter 6.

<sup>278</sup> The expression “*Ènìyàn lè di Òrìsà*” (“Anyone can become a deity”) is part of an Ifá verse (from the *Odù Eji Ogbè*). For the entire verse in Yorùbá, see A.R.S.A.D.A. (1965:17). For an English translation see Sowande (1966:61-2). The (ideal/ized) life journey of the Ifá sage epitomizes this process of transformation and potential deification. Chapter 5 focuses specifically on this life long process of learning and personal transformation in Ifá.

<sup>279</sup> For more on Òsun’s sacred stones, see Ogunbile (2001:199-201).

<sup>280</sup> Both Òsun and *Olódokun* are intimately associated with Ifá. In her feminine manifestation *Olódokun*, like Òsun, is referred to as Ifá’s “wife,” one of the feminine aspects or dimensions of Ifá—as-archetypal-emanation-of-divine-presence. In the masculine manifestation *Olódokun* can be said to be equivalent to Ifá-as-deified-ancestral-presence (see chapter 5, for further explication of Ifá as Ancestral Presence). Furthermore, both *Olódokun* and Òsun are perceived as vital sources of the practice of *merindinlogun* (lit. “sixteen”) which uses sixteen cowries for diagnostic divination. *Odù* is another aspect of the Divine Feminine that is intimately associated with Ifá. Unlike Òsun and *Olódokun*, *Odù* does not pertain to the water element. Nonetheless, *Odù* is the primordial source and well-spring of Ifá healing and divination practice and of its transcendent and therapeutic power. For more on *merindinlogun* practice, see Akalugo (1992) as well as Bascom’s book (1980) entitled *Sixteen Cowries*. For more on *Odù*, see Maupoil (1988 [1943]) and Sowande (1966).

<sup>281</sup> Pemberton and Afolayan (1996:26) further explicate *orísùn* as follows: “The Yorùbá term *orísùn* means ‘source, origin, the place of beginning.’ It carries the connotation of a spring from which a stream flows, which in turn becomes a river. It is closely associated with ancestry, the emergence of a people, a group, a state, a society, an identity.”

I have visited this grove numerous times. The river there is still and peaceful, and to be in the grove is exquisitely calming and refreshing. Even the animals there, including the usually raucous and rambunctious monkeys, are quiet and reserved, touched by *Ọsun*'s powerful presence. Sitting on the river's edge I invariably entered a sweet meditative state, the quieting essence of which would linger within my consciousness and being for days thereafter.

At the end of her life *Ìyágbà* radiated a soothing, peaceful divine presence that "tasted" like that which I encountered at the river's edge in *Ọsogbo*.<sup>282</sup> *Ìyágbà* the matriarch was *deeply* connected to her source, the watery *orísùn* ("wellspring," "source") of *Ọsun*. In the morning of the day she died, *Ìyá* told the children in the house to call her son and her daughter, as she saw death. Word spread quickly among the family members throughout the town. *Ìyá* spent the day giving her last loving words of advice to the young and old of the compound, after which she called once again for her son. She asked him to embrace her. And then, looking up at him peacefully, she took her last breath and died in his arms.

### **The History of *Ìyá*'s Relationship with Divine Presence: Embodied Certainty**

Looking at *Ìyá*'s history, it is apparent that even as a young woman she had a powerful relationship with divine presence. *Omilajú*'s incredible perseverance in the face of relentless and overwhelming circumstances point to an interminable spirit and inner knowingness that inspired and sustained her well beyond the point where others would have lost hope and, perhaps, their physical and/or emotional integrity. Her determination and persistence, as a young (and then middle-aged) woman, was not that of the clenched fists, fighting stance, and bruised body of a boxer or armed warrior fighting against all odds. Nor was it that of an embittered and/or troubled survivor of "trauma."<sup>283</sup> It was the quiet persistence and gentle resilience of the wellspring. Regardless of external climatic conditions, but most critically during times of draught, the wellspring is a constant and dependable source of the cool, refreshing waters that sustain and nourish life.<sup>284</sup> And as these waters issue forth they move forward steadily and consistently, despite the impediments of the jagged terrain, knowing that the rough edges of the rocks will eventually dissipate allowing for free and unhampered flow.

*Omilajú*'s inner conviction arose neither from a rational choice nor an emotional response, but rather from her intimate relationship with the divine. She possessed an embodied certainty in the depths of her being-ness that she *would* bear healthy children who would outlive her. And so, enduring great pain and suffering, she followed her inner promptings and stayed the course, patiently, persistently, and without bitterness. I have found that, among *Yorùbá* elders and sages, this embodied certainty is referred to as *ẹ̀rí ọ̀kò̀n*, or "the witnessing, or act of seeing, of the heart-mind."<sup>285</sup> In *Yorùbá* epistemology as well as lived experience the *ọ̀kò̀n*, which is

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<sup>282</sup> See the discussion of sapiential knowing in the next section of this chapter (as well as the etymological presentation in fn. 35, below) for a greater appreciation of the relevance and significance of my description of the resonance between *Ọsun* and *Ìyágbà* in terms of "taste."

<sup>283</sup> As in the popular and clinical representations of contemporary PTSD (Young 1995; van der Kolk 1996).

<sup>284</sup> This is particularly relevant in Nigeria given its climate of extreme heat.

<sup>285</sup> Some instances of the embodied certainty of *ẹ̀rí ọ̀kò̀n* might get glossed in contemporary Euro-American discourse as "intuition." As I noted in the previous chapter, my findings concur with Hallen and Sodipo's (1986) assertion that *ẹ̀rí ọ̀kò̀n* is one of two requisite conditions necessary to make a knowledge claim (*imò*) among *Yorùbá* indigenous intellectuals. However, I reiterate that their glossing of *ẹ̀rí ọ̀kò̀n* as "judgment" is misleading and lacks the critical dimensions of revelation and embodied certainty. Furthermore, the Christianized gloss of *ẹ̀rí ọ̀kò̀n* as "conscience" used by some *Yorùbá* (and some scholars of the *Yorùbá*), while capturing the moral foundation of indigenous sacred knowledge, similarly lacks the critical and characteristic dimensions *Yorùbá* elders/sages use to



located within the physicality of the heart, plays a crucial role in both mentation and emotions, thus the common usage of the gloss “heart-mind.”<sup>286</sup>

*Èrí okòn* is the deeply visceral knowing-with-unmitigated-certainty. It is revelatory knowing. Nasr, a scholar of the history of philosophy, science, and religion, (1981:130-131, emphasis added) claims revelatory knowledge is “knowledge of an immediate and direct nature which is tasted and experienced, the sapience.”<sup>287</sup> And he describes the experience thusly:

The truth descends upon the mind like an eagle landing upon a mountain top or it gushes forth and inundates the mind like a deep well which has suddenly burst forth into a spring. In either case, the sapiential nature is not the result of man’s mental faculty but issues forth from the nature of the experience itself. *Man can know through intuition and revelation* not because he is a thinking being who imposes categories of his thought upon what he perceives but *because knowledge is being*.

Expressed differently, communion with divine presence leaves subtle yet deep impressions in one’s physicality and consciousness.<sup>288</sup> These impressions are experienced as mental images or concepts of extreme clarity that are colored, emotionally and sensuously, by a visceral quality of deep rootedness. In English, this is illustrated by the expression “I know it in my bones.” The skeletal frame is a deep, fundamental structure, and the individual bones of our bodies, as well as their unique configuration are specifically characteristic of *human* physicality and being-in-the-world. Furthermore, the core of these bones produces red and white blood cells, which in turn provide the nourishment and (immune) protection essential to existence. Knowing “in one’s bones” points to an absolute certainty that transcends linear logic and/or rational thought and which is fundamental to, and existentially rooted in, human being-in-the-world.

The phenomenon of *èrí okòn*, as revelatory-knowing-with-embodied-certainty, is not limited to indigenous sacred or devotional practices. Christian *wòlì* (seers or prophets) and

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describe this experience. As noted in the remainder of this section of the chapter, I assert that *èrí okòn* is the embodied certainty of revelatory knowing that emerges from communion with divine presence; the way of knowing as/and being which characterizes sacred-scholarly traditions. Therefore, it is my position that that which has been glossed, historically, as Yorùbá “cosmology” within the academy is rather, an epistemology founded upon, and which emerges from, the embodied certainty of revelatory knowing. Finally, I maintain that the musical and embodied dimensions of Ifá everyday scholarly-devotional practices actively cultivate and refine the individual’s capacity for conscious and dispassionate communion with divine presence, and thus revelatory knowing. For more on embodied certainty in Ifá practitioners, see the presentation of *Òrúnmìlà*’s journeying (to *Ilá*) in chapter 5. For more on the everyday practices and the cultivation of specialized ways of knowing in Ifá, see chapter 6.

<sup>286</sup> It is noteworthy that in Yorùbá lived experience and epistemology, the “brain” is primarily associated with social skills and awareness, with rote memory, and with “book-learning,” or foreign forms of knowledge. For a more detailed discussion of (a) indigenous distinctions between belief, knowledge, and wisdom, see chapter 3; (b) the centers of the human body in relation to emotion, mentation, and communion with divine presence, see chapter 6.

<sup>287</sup> Etymologically, “sapience” comes from the Latin *sapient*, “to be wise”, which in turn is derived from *sapi-*, “to taste.” *Webster’s Encyclopedic Unabridged Dictionary*, s.v “sapience.” Furthermore, it can be argued that the gloss *homo sapiens*, or “wise man” in Latin, suggests that such “tasted” and direct (revelatory) knowing is fundamental to human being-in-the-world.

<sup>288</sup> For those familiar with the techniques of Ifá divination, these impressions resonate with the *babaláwo/iyánifá*’s pressing down of his/her fingers in the powder atop the divination tray, tracing the signature of the particular form of divine presence being expressed, known as *Ifá títè* (marking Ifá , through pressing down). For details of the mechanical techniques of Ifá divination see Bascom (1969:26-59) and Abimbola (1969:26-40). For more on the experience of conscious communion with Divine Presence, see chapter 6.

Muslim *alfas* (clerics whose divination practice strongly resembles Ifá) are extremely common in contemporary Yorùbá society and their revelatory pronouncements are taken seriously regardless of one's ethnic or religious affiliation. Furthermore, this framing of sacred and/or revelatory knowing among Yorùbá elders and sages as a “witnessing of the heart-mind” (*èrí òkòṣin*) is not unique. Many religious and esoteric traditions speak of the “eye of the heart” as “the eye of the intellect.” Returning to Nasr, he notes (1981:150-152):

The seat of intelligence is the heart and not the head...[is] affirmed by all traditional teachings. The word *heart*, *hrdaya* in Sanskrit, *Herz* in German, *kardia* in Greek, and *cor/cordis* in Latin, have the root *hrd* or *krd* which, like the Egyptian Horus, imply the center of the world or a world. The heart is ...the center of the human microcosm and therefore the ‘locus’ of the Intellect...In the Quran both faith and intelligence are explicitly identified with the heart, while in Hinduism the Sanskrit *sraddha*, which is usually translated as faith, means literally knowledge of the heart...That intelligence which is able to attain to the knowledge of the sacred is already sanctified and rooted in the center of the human state... What tradition opposes is not the activity of the mind but its divorce from the heart, the seat of intelligence and the location of the “eye of knowledge,” which the Sufis call the eye of the heart...It is this eye which transcends duality and the rational functioning of the mind...

Although a young woman, Omilajú was able to maintain her attitude of gentle perseverance because of this deeply embodied certainty that defied and transcended linear thinking and rationality. She had *seen*, in her heart-mind, that she *would* have healthy children, and she *knew* positively that this inner vision would, with time and patience, come into being. Ìyágbà's embodied certainty, as well as the subsequent coming to fruition of her inner vision, show that even as a young woman she had an intimate and powerful relationship with divine presence.

### **Ìyágbà's Story and The Journey of Life**

Life, in Yorùbá culture, is most commonly glossed and perceived as a journey. *L'ajò L'ayé* (lit. “life is a journey”). The human condition is characterized (and experienced) as a journey full of challenges and struggles as well as pleasures and sweetness,<sup>289</sup> and one that does not end with death. As Margaret Drewal (1992:47) notes: “In Yorùbá consciousness...the human spirit is always coming into the world and returning in one unending cycle. On the other hand, since nothing ever repeats itself...there is always change and transformation...” For Yorùbá elders, these changes unfold, gradually, within the individual's *ìwà*, her/his being-in-the-world, through conscious and dispassionate attentiveness in/and the sensuous and sacred engagements of everyday living. Knowing as/and being in the world, intertwined, and contained within the gentle currents of spiritual presence, are nurtured, sustained, and buoyed along in the journey of life. As an Ifá verse proclaims:

*Omò ilé tí a gbà gbé l'óri ení, yí ó já bó.*      An infant that we have placed on a mat [on the ground] suddenly fell while crawling

<sup>289</sup> “*Ogun l'ayé*,” literally “life is war” is also a very common adage. “*Ayé dùn*,” literally “life is sweet.” The latter expression has much less currency than the former.

Òkè l'eyẹ̀ fò wún.  
A díá fún àwọn àgbàgbà,  
Tí wón ti ikòlè òrun bọ̀ wá ilé ayé.

Wón ní kíni wón nlo se?  
Ènyìn òrò, níbo ló nlo?  
À nlo wá imọ, òtítító, at'òdodo.

Kádàrá àyànmò,  
L'óri òke  
Àti pètélè.  
À nlo sí ààfín oba réré.

A ó dé ilè mínmò.  
A ó sí dé ilè tó l'èwà.  
À n wá imò sí l'ójo júmó.  
Ìmò kò ló'pin.

A bird soars high above  
Cast Ifá for the elders  
When they were preparing to leave òrun to come to  
the world  
They said, “What are we going to do?”  
They inquired, “Where are we going?”  
We are going to search for knowledge, truth, and  
justice  
In accordance with our destiny  
On the heights of the mountain peaks  
And on the lowest lying plateaus.  
We are going to the palace of the good *oba*<sup>290</sup>  
[to a place where moral governance and  
the sociality of incorporation reign]  
We will come to lands of knowledge  
We will also know places of great beauty  
We will search for knowledge everyday  
Knowledge without end.

Elders spend their entire lives searching up and down for knowledge. At times they falter, stumble and/or fall, even in the face of a seemingly easy task, and must endure pain and/or suffering. As when the infant, crawling on a mat, totters at the edge and falls flat, striking his face on the ground. At other times they soar easily and gracefully like an eagle high in the sky. The allusions, above, to moral governance and the sociality of incorporation signifies that these elders are uniquely Yorùbá. Yet the verse also speaks to the universality of this human endeavor, for the elders, in the course of their journeying, travel to *many* lands filled with sages and intellectuals and encounter numerous places of natural and man-made beauty. Finally, we are subtly reminded of the centrality of everyday experience and practice, as the individuals engage this endeavor “*l'ójo júmó*,” consistently, “every day.” Life as a journey — a quest for “knowledge without end” — although rendered in terms specific to the Yorùbá is a human experience open to anyone. An arduous and challenging, yet beautiful and rewarding process, knowing as/and being-in-the-world unfolds gradually through the ups and downs, pains and joy, of everyday living.

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<sup>290</sup> *Oba* is the title given to the rulers of indigenous governance established originally in Ifè around 800-1000AD. See Adediran (1998), Drewal (1989), Obayemi (1979), Ogunremi (1998) for more regarding the history of the Ifè-centric polity.

## Chapter Five. *Ogbón ríbí-ríbí*: “Journey”ing of Ifá Healers. The Quest to Cultivate Wisdom and Therapeutic Power.

[The healer-sage] must first have sacrificed [her/]his individuality at the altar of what Jung terms “individuation,” through which “[s/]he becomes not only an individual but also a member of a collectivity, and the wholeness [s/]he has achieved is in contact, through consciousness and the unconscious, with the whole world. The accent is not on [her/]his supposed individuality as opposed to [her/]his collective obligations, but...on the fulfillment of [her/]his own nature as it pertains to the whole.” How [s/]he does this, [s/]he must find out, for [s/]he is [her/]his own initiator, no one can help [her/]him; no one will ever know the price [s/]he has to pay for achievement; but equally, no one can filch from [her/]him the peace which passeth understanding that comes with achievement. But [s/]he will not travel in an air-conditioned car on tarred roads; it is not a journey to be undertaken, and perhaps only a sense of compulsion that drives one on regardless of aught else will ensure success.

Fela Sowande (1967:54-5, emphasis added)

### **The Journey of Life, Revisited: Weaving an Exegetical Cloth.**

The journey of life, as a quest for “knowledge without end” (*imò kò ló'pin*), resonates deeply for those who are called to serve as an Ifá healer and/or sage. The learning process in Ifá is an ongoing (never ending) quest to cultivate wisdom, knowledge, and healing power. Furthermore, *journeying* has added significance for Ifá apprentices, practitioners, and elder-sages. In this chapter, I will foreground a critical verse of Ifá wisdom teaching<sup>291</sup> (from the divination

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<sup>291</sup> In Ifá practice — be it as a ritual and healing practice for the community or as the private scholarly-devotional practice of devotees, apprentices, and specialists — the sacred musico-poetic verses (as well as the narratives they inspire) are *only* rendered vocally. Thus, despite the long-standing framing of Ifá verses, especially in the academic disciplines of folklore and African studies, as “oral literature,” such a gloss is a misnomer and misleading, because *in practice* there are no “texts.” As Femi Oyebo aptly notes (regarding Yorùbá oral literature): “The text only lives through the human voice” (1995:95). This is particularly relevant for studies of Ifá practice, ways of knowing and of healing. For example, there are three genres of verse that are unique to Ifá ritual and therapeutic practice, each of which is recognized (and differentiated) by a distinctive mode of musical articulation. And each of these styles, when orchestrated from the mouth (and stomach) of a skilled Ifá healer-sage, is associated with a specific musical (and therapeutic) performative force (Austin 1972 [1965]). In other words, each of these musical genres in Ifá practice, when skillfully articulated, is associated with the power to effect change in the phenomenally given world. Yet for more than a century, the sonic and the embodied dimensions of Ifá practice, ways of knowing, of healing, and of transcendence have been silenced and erased by a popular and scholarly discourse of Ifá (locally in West Africa and globally) that uncritically equates knowledge, power and practice of Ifá with “text(s).” Elsewhere I present a historiography (Gardner 2004) of this discursive framing of Ifá in relation to efforts by members of a “community” of educated Yorùbá elites (Anderson 1991) in urban metropolises such as Lagos, to craft first a cultural, then national, and later, international identity over the past century. For more on these contested discursive projects of cultural and national identity formation, see Barber (1990), Falola (1999), Ferguson (1996), and Kopytoff (1965). This dissertation — by exploring the power of the sonic and corporeal techniques of Ifá everyday scholarly-devotional practice to body forth the specialized life-world, mode of being-in and attending-to the world particular to Ifá — seeks to be a corrective for this historical silencing and deafness. For more on orchestrations of performative and therapeutic force in Ifá, see chapter one. Also see “Ifá and *Qfù*: Sound Medicine” (Gardner, 1994). For more on the relevance of musical elements in the study of Yorùbá “oral literature,” see Isola (1973, 1975), Lasebikan (1955, 1956), Olatunji (1973, 1982, 1984), Oyebo (1995), Oyelaran (1975), Vidal (1969, 1971).

signature<sup>292</sup> *Òfún Méjì*) as the primary point of departure for exploring the layered significance of the journey for Ifá healer-sages. This specific verse revolves around *Qgbón ríbí-ríbí*, profound wisdom in Ifá practice, and offers penetrating insights into the fundamental principles, dynamics, and contours inherent in the healer-sage's journey of life.

Rather than present this lengthy musico-poetic verse in its entirety, I will weave an exegetical narrative, interspersing select pieces of the verse. Exegesis is a prominent aspect of the Ifá healer's ritual and therapeutic engagement with the client and of the Ifá teacher's mentoring practice. Apprentices, practitioners, as well as clients benefit from the impressive exegetic interpretations of skilled elders, as it provides them with powerful food for thought and for deep, meditative reflection.<sup>293</sup> Such narrative renderings in Ifá practice are referred to as *itàn*. The word is derived from the verb *tàn*, which means not only to spread out (chronologically and/or geographically), but also to illuminate. Furthermore, the verb used to describe the act of rendering *itàn*, is *pa*, most often associated with separating the two lobes of a cola nut, or decoding a riddle or parable (*pa òwe*, *pa àlò*). Thus as Yai notes (1994:108-9): “*Pitàn* [the contraction of *pa itàn*] therefore means to produce such a discourse that could constitute the Ariadne's thread of the human historical labyrinth, history being equated with a maze or riddle. *Pa itàn* is to de-riddle history, to shed light on human existence through time and space.” In a more atypical move (for public renderings and practice of Ifá), I will also call upon verses from another archetypal principle of Ifá wisdom teaching (*Èjì Ògbè*), an abbreviated biographical narrative, and the voices of select scholars (such as Fela Sowande above) to weave my exegetical cloth.

### ***Qgbón ríbí-ríbí*. (Giving Voice to) Wisdom and Social Responsibility in Ifá.**

The central verse of my exegetical project, as noted above, is from *Òfún Méjì* — a powerful divination signature and archetypal principle<sup>294</sup> in Ifá practice and one which is particularly important for Ifá apprentices and nascent practitioners as they begin their life-journeys. This specific verse, which I will gloss as *Qgbón ríbí-ríbí*, opens as follows:

*Qgbón ríbí-ríbí*

*Ni a fì gbà qgbón ríbí-ríbí.*

Great wisdom

Is what we use to acquire profound wisdom

<sup>292</sup>And/as archetypal principle. *Òfún Méjì* is an *Odù*. In Ifá divination there are 256 *Odùs* (sixteen primary and 240 secondary; the latter are “off-spring” of the former). Each *Odù* simultaneously refers to (a) divination signature; (b) a specific archetypal principle of manifestation; and (c) an *Irúnmolè* — extremely rarified and subtle emanation of Divine Presence (characterized by a higher vibratory frequency and finer oscillatory pattern than that of the *Òrìsà*). See Abimbola (1969a, 1969b, 1975, 1976, 1983); A.R.S.A.D.A. (1965); Bascom (1960, 1969); Epega (1948); Epega and Neimark (1995).

<sup>293</sup>In my opinion, the two dimensions of giving voice to Ifá verses — the performative and the interpretative — are complementary and interpenetrating. Their dynamic engagement is mutually and reciprocally edifying for Ifá practitioners, bodying-forth creative productivity much like the dynamic interplay of the two halves (*òrun* and *ayé*) of the calabash of existence. Thus, while the focus of this dissertation is an initiatory exploration of the power of the sonic and corporeal in Ifá practice, in this chapter I bracket the sonic and the evocative, focusing instead on an exegetical exploration of the significance of journeying for Ifá apprentices, practitioners, and elders.

<sup>294</sup>*Òfún Méjì* is one of the sixteen primary *Odùs*, and is often (re)presented as the cosmic egg. The other *Odù* cited in this chapter is *Èjì Ògbè*, the first *Odù*, and a powerful force of manifestation. For many Ifá practitioners, these two particular *Odùs* are the alpha and omega of the primary *Odùs* in their manifestation in the material dimension (*ayé*) and thus are particularly powerful healing and ritual forces.

*Bí a ò bá ní oḡbón ríbí-ríbí nínú<sup>295</sup>  
 Àì kó oògùn ríbí-ríbí.  
 Bí a ò bá kó oògùn ríbí-ríbí,  
 Àì wò àrùn ríbí-ríbí.  
 Bí a ò bá wò àrùn ríbí-ríbí,  
 Àì gbà owó ríbí-ríbí.  
 Bí a ò bá gbà owó ríbí-ríbí,  
 Àì rí nkan ríbí-ríbí gbé se.*

*Àwọn l'ó dá fún Òrúnmilà.  
 Ifá nse awo rè òde Ìlá.  
 Òrúnmilà ní awo òde Ìlá ti ó nlọ yìi,  
 Ó ti se lè dára fún on?  
 Òrúnmilà kò mó ibè télè.*

If we do not gain great wisdom  
 We will not be capable of making potent medicines  
 If we are unable to make powerful medicines  
 We won't cure serious illnesses  
 If we can't cure serious illnesses  
 We will not achieve wealth and prosperity  
 If we don't achieve wealth and prosperity  
 We will be unable to make significant contributions  
 to our society/community  
 These were the ones who cast Ifá for Òrúnmilà  
 When he was going to Ìlá to practice Ifá  
 Òrúnmilà asked, this work that I am going to do in Ìlá  
 What should I do so that it will go well?  
 Òrúnmilà had never been to Ìlá before. He was  
 unfamiliar with the people and their customs and he  
 did not know how to get there it.

The opening line calls our attention to the weight and depth of wisdom in Ifá — *oḡbón ríbí-ríbí*<sup>296</sup> — *oḡbón* is "wisdom"; the adjective *ríbí-ríbí* sonically evokes<sup>297</sup> the characteristic qualities of this wisdom: unimaginably LARGE, profoundly deep and thus extremely heavy. *Ríbí-ríbí* also calls forth a cavernous or womb-like shape the contents of which echo and reverberate endlessly, producing an enduring and affectively moving, low frequency high intensity musical hum.<sup>298</sup> In Ifá practice — both in its aspect as healing therapeutic for the community and as the scholarly-devotional practice of practitioners — the introduction as well as the sacred verse in its entirety are rendered vocally as a musically performative (Austin 1972 [1965]) orchestration evoking divine presence as/and healing force. In this chapter, however, we will bracket the evocative and performative dimension of Ifá practice,<sup>299</sup> focusing instead on this

<sup>295</sup> The Yorùbá phrase implies that deep wisdom is a capacity that is cultivated *nínú* — within the individual's stomach, womb, "insides."

<sup>296</sup> I strongly encourage the reader to pause and vocalize this phrase a few times, gently bringing your attention to the resonant sensations in your cheeks, oral cavity, and throat, while simultaneously allowing yourself; your consciousness and corporeality to be drenched more globally in the sonic contours of the phrase.

<sup>297</sup> In addition to, and distinct from, the vocalization techniques of performative force in Ifá noted above in fn. 1, Yorùbá language is a rich repository of sonically evocative words, what Babalola (1966:67-8) calls "word pictures." Yorùbá language is tonal (pentatonic scale) and prior to colonial contact was entirely nonscripted. Words like *ríbí-ríbí* masterfully use the inherent musicality of Yorùbá language to evoke an image; to paint a picture, thus the gloss "word pictures." Yet while the association between the musical qualities and contours and the images evoked are completely naturalized among Yorùbá native speakers — and even among some scholars, see Drewal 1989) — I believe that these associations are sonically *and* culturally informed.

<sup>298</sup> The sonic quality of these endless reverberations bring to mind (mind's ear) recordings of seemingly continuous, deep and harmonious, chants of Buddhist monks' articulations of *Ohm*. For an acoustic sampling of this phenomena, I refer the reader to Smith's (1968) recording of the Gyuto monks or to Armstrong's (n.d.) recording of chanting of *iyere Ifá*.

<sup>299</sup> The unique corporeal capacities of musical and therapeutic performative power among Ifá healer-sages, alluded to in fn. 1 above, are engendered by, and orchestrated through, Ifá's sonically-informed mode of being-in and attending-to-the-world, commonly referred to as *inú t'ó jnlè bi igbá* (lit. "a stomach as deep as a calabash") that has been introduced in earlier chapters. The process of cultivating this specialized somatic mode of being-in-the-world is explored in the next chapter (chapter 6). The distinctive genres, as well as the corporeal capacities, of musical performativity in Ifá learning and healing practices are explored elsewhere. See fn. 1 for references.

mytho-poetic presentation<sup>300</sup> of the unique and multidimensional significance of the *journey of life*, in relation to the cultivation of knowing as/and being in Ifá.

Returning to the opening lines of this verse, they also introduce us to the moral import, or focus, of the verse and to the narrative through which the wisdom teaching will unfold. Thus, in addition to feeling, somatically, the weighty sonic reverberations of *ogbón ríbi-ríbi*, we hear some salient ways in which the cultivation of deep wisdom is pivotal to Ifá practice. *Ogbón ríbi-ríbi* not only opens the way for learning how to attend to, and alleviate suffering, it is also the foundation of a larger project (and calling), in Ifá: social service and social responsibility. Finally, in the last lines, we are introduced to *Òrúnmìlà*, the central character of the verse, as he prepares to embark on a journey...a journey to practice Ifá; to attend to the suffering of others and do good in the world. Yet *Òrúnmìlà* is unfamiliar with *Ìlá*, the destination of this journey. He has never traveled there before. Thus, *Òrúnmìlà* willingly prepares to set off on a journey that will take him to and through foreign terrain, beyond the boundaries of the given, the known, the comfortable, and the familiar. Thus, through the opening presentation of this verse, (the cultivation of) the profound wisdom (*ogbón ríbi-ríbi*), healing power and social responsibility of Ifá practice are linked — sonically, symbolically, and narratively — with this journey into the unknown.

### **Beginnings, Part One: *Òrúnmìlà* as Primordial Ancestor and Source of the Ifá Community**

Before we proceed with my narrative rendering and exegetical engagement of this journey, let us turn our attention to *Òrúnmìlà*, the protagonist of this mytho-poetic wisdom teaching. Who is *Òrúnmìlà*? And what is his significance in Ifá verses and to Ifá practice?

*Òrúnmìlà* is the appellation given to the human incarnation of Ifá, as emanation of Divine Consciousness-Presence. *Òrúnmìlà* was the first person to develop and use the diagnostic and therapeutic techniques of Ifá. Later, *Òrúnmìlà* began training apprentices to carry on the tradition, as we see in the opening of the following verse:<sup>301</sup>

*Àrówó d'ifá*  
*Awo ilé jegbé*  
*Àgbàgiwo nù s'olúwo*

*Ìsálú òrun*

*Ifá pé'wo Òrúnmìlà*  
*N'íjọ́ tí n t'òrun bó w'áyé*

*Wọ́n ní yíò ní obìnrin*  
*Wọ́n ní obìnrin náà yíò bímo*  
*Méjì l'ọ́ojọ́*

One who has money casts Ifá  
The awo of the Jegbe compound  
Agbagiwo is his elder-mentor  
(and an expert-sage, high priest).  
In the inner court of *Òrun* (the sonic or  
spiritual realm)  
Ifá called *Òrúnmìlà*  
On the day that he was coming to *áyé* (the  
material realm) from *òrun*<sup>302</sup>  
Ifá told *Òrúnmìlà* that he would marry  
And that his wife would give birth  
to twins

<sup>300</sup> See Armstrong's arguments (1971, 1975, 1981) of the *presentational* character and quality inherent in creative expressions of "affective presence" (resonant with my framing of orchestrations of divine and/or ancestral presence) as the wellspring of culture.

<sup>301</sup> This verse, from the divination signature and Holy Odù Èjì Ògbè, appears in Olajubu (2003:115-116). The translation is my own.

<sup>302</sup> The reader will recall that *áyé* and *òrun* are considered complementary and interpenetrating domains of the phenomenally given world, on earth (*ilẹ̀*), and that this lived experience is (re)presented in the powerful, ritually consecrated "calabash of existence" (*igbá iwà*).

*Gégé bii òrò Ifá*  
*Òrúnmilà n'iyawó*  
*Ó lóyún, ó sí bí b'èjì*  
*Òkan j'òkùnrin, òkan j' obìnrin*  
*Láti kékeré ni àwọn méjèjè*  
*Tí n wò bàbá wọn bó tí ngbé 'wo Ifá*

*Bí òkùnrin tí mọ̀n 'fá dídá*

*Ní obìnrin náà mọ̀n 'fá dídá*

Just as Ifá predicted  
Òrúnmilà got married  
His wife became pregnant and had twins  
One was male, the other was female  
From a very early age both children  
Observed their father as he engaged in all  
aspects of Ifá practice  
As the son knew how to perform Ifá  
divination (diagnosis and ritual practice)  
The daughter did as well

Thus, Òrúnmilà's first borne twins — a son and a daughter — are among the original disciples. But the practice of Ifá is not limited to Òrúnmilà's biological heirs. The verse continues, reminding us that Ifá practice is a spiritual lineage open to *all* men and women:<sup>303</sup>

*Nígbàtí àwọn omọ ènìyàn*  
*Dé isàlayé, àwọn awo*

*Ní iwò Ìwáwónlásé*

*Omọ re ò kífá*  
*Ó dáhùn ó ní obìnrin ni*  
*Wọn ní kò l'èwò*  
*Se bí àkóbí Òrúnmilà*

When human beings  
Arrived on, and began to inhabit the earth,  
the Ifá disciples  
Said “You, Awawonlaseri, “the one who is  
turned around,”  
Your child does not practice Ifá  
He answered and said “my child is a female”  
The disciples replied this is not a taboo  
Just as you see Òrúnmilà's first born

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<sup>303</sup> The presence of women Ifá practitioners in contemporary Nigeria, is rather limited and varies regionally. In some Diasporic communities, particularly those following the Cuban Lucumí traditions, women have been excluded from active participation as Ifá healer-priests. For more on the presence of women in Ifá in West Africa, see Barber (1991:218-291), Gonzalez-Whipple (1989), Olajubu (2003:115-117), Omari-Tunkara (2005:36, 39). In my estimation Marcuzzi's (2005) hypothesis that the presence of women in Ifá practice (in Nigeria) is a twentieth century adaptation informed by financial necessity as a means of enabling more men to enter and practice Ifá, is ungrounded. Marcuzzi bases his historical claims *solely* on Reverend Samuel Johnson's “ethnographic account” of “Yorùbá culture.” Reverend Johnson was an educated Sierra Leonian Saro (Yorùbá), whose primary objective, in writing this text was, “above all that Christianity should be the principal religion in the land — paganism and Mohammedanism having had their full trial —...[for] every true son of Yoruba”(Johnson 1976 [1921]:642). For Marcuzzi to use this missionary and missionizing text as a reliable representation of Ifá ritual practice and as the foundation of his argument, is extremely problematic at best. This is not to deny that the economic unraveling and political instability of Nigeria (as well as the concomitant explosive influx, and valorization, of media images of specific forms of global modern identity) have contributed to a marked atrophy of the community of Ifá practitioners, and a significant decline in interest and participation of youth (as initiates and apprentices) — of both men and women — *over the past quarter century*. Returning to women in Ifá practice, historically, I maintain that their uneven presence is but one of many regional variations in Ifá practice that were erased by the powerful discursive rendering, over the past century, of Ifá as a monolithic, uniform, and textually based and encyclopedic “embodiment of the soul of the Yorùbá nation and the repository of their knowledge — religious, historical and medical” (Epega 1935:5). Ajayi (1960) argues that the sonically-informed dynamism and regional distinctions of the nonscripted, spoken linguistic variations present on the ground prior to colonial contact, were “reduced” to a monolithic, official, scripted — and for many, if not most, indigenes unrecognizable — “Yorùbá language.” Similarly, I maintain that the sonically-informed dynamism and regional diversity of Ifá practice on the ground throughout West Africa was/is powerfully erased and silenced by the on-going officializing discursive invention crafted by Yorùbá elites to forge a cultural, national and transnational identity (Gardner 2004).



Thus, *Ọ̀rúnmilà*, the man, is the progenitor of Ifá practice and the ancestral source (*orisùn*, “source,” or “wellspring”) of the universal Ifá community. As the latter, *Ọ̀rúnmilà* is an enduring Ancestral Presence that critically informs the being-in-the-world (*iwà*)<sup>304</sup> of every Ifá devotee, apprentice, healer, and elder-sage, and to whom they commonly (and affectionately) refer to as “*Bàbá wa*” (lit. “our father”). Yet as a character in Ifá wisdom teachings, *Ọ̀rúnmilà* appears not only as an important historical (and cultural) figure and powerful Spiritual Presence, but also as the embodiment of mastery in Ifá practice — as the archetypal Ifá practitioner and as a metonymic signifier for (the epitome of) Ifá ritual and healing practice.

### **Beginnings, Part Two: *Ọ̀rúnmilà* as the Embodiment of (mastery in) Ifá Practice**

*Ọ̀rúnmilà*, as historical figure (human being) and as Spiritual Presence,<sup>305</sup> has many *oríkì* (“praise names”).<sup>306</sup> One of his better-known *oríkì* is *Afèdèfèyè*, “He who speaks all languages, including Yorùbá.” This *oríkì* is generally interpreted as an indication of *Ọ̀rúnmilà*’s capacities as a polyglot, and by extension, of the value attributed to multi-lingualism and multiculturalism in Ifá practice. Yet I believe that this *oríkì* also speaks to, and invokes, other critical qualities of *Ọ̀rúnmilà* in his aspect as the embodiment of Ifá ritual and healing practice — as a *global* presence of *universal* relevance. And the following verse, from Èjì Ọ̀gbè,<sup>307</sup> points the way:

<i>Oore ì gbé</i>	Kindness and compassion are never wasted
<i>Oore ì nù</i>	Benevolence never fails
<i>E e rora gùdò</i>	Be extremely attentive
<i>K'óore ó má baà se gbé</i>	That generosity may not perish
<i>A dífá fún Ọ̀rúnmilà</i>	Cast Ifá divination for <i>Ọ̀rúnmilà</i>
<i>Ifá ó tẹ̀ omọ awo méta rẹ̀ nífá</i>	When he initiated three disciples
<i>Ifá lo t'opón nífá</i>	He initiated <i>opón</i> (Ifá divination tray)
<i>Opón sawo lo síko Àwúsí</i>	And sent <i>opón</i> to the land of Àwúsí, the Americas <sup>308</sup>

<sup>304</sup> See the discussion of *iwà* in chapter 3 and the discussion of spiritual presence as fundamentally informing *Ìyágbà*’s life and her mode of being-in-the world in chapter 4.

<sup>305</sup> *Ọ̀rúnmilà* manifests, distinctly, as (a) Ancestral Presence and (b) an emanation of Divine Presence. The latter is often (mistakenly) conflated with Ifá.

<sup>306</sup> The *oríkì* are powerful, spiritual invocations as well as “praise names,” and speak to (and have the capacity to activate) particular qualities of the individual to whom they refer. The *oríkì* may also speak to special social, cultural, personal and/or familial attributes of the individual, important historical accomplishments of the individual and/or her/his family or community, or aspects of her/his spiritual or social power. For an excellent and detailed presentation of *oríkì* in Yorùbá culture, see Barber’s (1991) *I Could Speak Until Tomorrow*.

<sup>307</sup> This Ifá verse appears in Yai (1994:110). However, the translation and exegetical interpretations offered above are my own.

<sup>308</sup> Abimbola (1983:80; cited in Yai 1994:108) claims that *Ìkọ Àwúsí* refers to the Americas; *Odòròmù Àwúsè*, the African continent; and *Ìwọnrán ojúmóore é ti í mọ́*, to Australia. However, *ojúmóore é ti í mọ́* is “where the sun rises”, and thus I agree with Yai in locating *Ìwọnrán* as “the Orient”. Nonetheless, it should be noted that Ilesanmi (1995:33) agrees with Abimbola’s interpretation of *Ìwọnrán* as referring to Australia, and that he claims “Ifá has long ago divided the globe into five regions” and includes the following additions: “*Mèrètélú* (Europe and Asia); *Mèsín Àkàárùbá* (Arabia, the land of worship of Kaaba)”(ibid). Thus, while the interpretation of *Ìwọnrán* may be contested, there is agreement among scholars that Ifá was familiar with the various major regions of the earth (and thus, consistent with my argument of Ifá as a global presence) long before colonial contact.

*Qba l'ó je*  
*Ifá lo tẹ̀ ajere nífá*  
*Ajere sawo lo s'Ódòròmù Àwúsẹ̀*

*Qba l'ó je n'ibẹ̀*  
*Ifá lo tẹ̀bò nífá*

*Ìbò sawo lo síwónrán ojúmóore*  
*é ti í mọ̀*  
*Níbẹ̀ ní o gbé di oba*  
*Kí í màà gbé adésẹ̀*  
*Kíí gbé, adésẹ̀*  
*Orire*

Where he became a leader of the community  
He initiated *ajere* (the vessel for medicines)  
And sent *ajere* to Odòròmù Àwúsẹ̀, the  
far reaches of the African continent  
Where she became a ruler  
He initiated *ibò* (consecrated diagnostic  
tool)  
And sent *ibò* to Iwónrán in the Orient  
to the place where the sun rises  
Where s/he became a ruler of the people  
Benevolence is rewarded  
Compassion and generosity endure  
Through acts of good character

In this verse *Òrúnmìlà* is given Divine advice — regarding the fundamental importance of compassion and benevolence — as he initiates three disciples into the holy priesthood. These resounding words of guidance and inspiration for *Òrúnmìlà* also serve as the foundation of the initiatory experience for his disciples (and thus, guideposts for their lives and their practices as healer-priests). Thus, to serve as an *Ifá* practitioner, one follows a Divine call to embody kindness, benevolence and compassion in her/his being-in and engagements-with the world. And this world of social engagement is, quite literally, global. For *Òrúnmìlà* sends these early disciples to the far corners of the world — to the Americas, to the Orient and throughout the African continent.

Listening to the names of the three disciples, above, and to their experiences, provides us added insights into *Ifá's* global presence as a force of benevolence and compassion. First the names of the disciples reveal that one is clearly a *babaláwo* (male practitioner), one is an *iyánífá* (female practitioner), and that the gender of the third disciple is unmarked. *Opón*, the divination tray, is male. *Ajere* a round clay vessel, is female. And *ibò*, a cluster of small items used in divination, can refer to either a man or a woman. Yet the symbolic valence of the names of these disciples extends beyond a reiteration of the equal participation of men and women in *Ifá* practice. These three ritually consecrated objects — the divination tray, used in devotional practice as well as in diagnosis and the preparation of medicines; the vessel used in the preparation and storage of medicines; and the ritual instruments essential for diagnosis and prognostication — are three of the most fundamental material tools of *Ifá* healing practice.<sup>309</sup> Each term, when used as a referent for an *awo*,<sup>310</sup> above, also serves as an abbreviated *oríkì* (“praise name”), highlighting a specific capacity of each disciple — as a nascent practitioner and as an aspect of the embodiment of *Ifá* practice.

*Òrúnmìlà* dispatches *Opón*, *Ajere*, and *Ìbò* to distant lands — as novice healers — to expand their clinical horizons through experiencing distinctive forms of suffering and other culturally-informed therapeutic interventions. Through their acts of social service and humanitarianism, these young disciples become experienced medical practitioners while simultaneously serving as ambassadors, engaging in cultural, linguistic, intellectual (exoteric and

<sup>309</sup> In addition to the primacy of these tools in *Ifá* practice, their *number* is also significant, reminding astute listeners of the trinary logic that informs *Ifá* practice, as well as *igbá iwà* (the calabash of existence) and/as the phenomenally given world.

<sup>310</sup> *Awo* or *awo'fá* (the latter is a contraction of *awo* + *Ifá*) are nongendered referents for *Ifá* healer-practitioner(s).

esoteric) and political interchange.<sup>311</sup> In this way, the verse relates how traveling to foreign cultures to minister to suffering is a fundamental dimension of “the journey” of Ifá practitioners.

Finally, the names of these *awos*, in their complementary iteration as critical components of the embodiment of Ifá, highlight *the primacy of healing* practice in Ifá, and metonymically link this to *Ifá’s presence*, historically — as a force of benevolence and as a powerful Divine calling — *throughout* the world. In this instance, the *awos* bathe the far corners of the globe as emanations of Òrúnmìlà’s transcendent Spiritual Presence, as it is embodied in and through masterful ministrings of Ifá’s healing power. Thus, their presence, globally, speaks to the capacity of Ifá practice to transcend cultural and linguistic barriers, as a spiritual and therapeutic practice that speaks to and resonates with the global human community. And this brings us back to *Afèdèfèyò*.

Thus, the “multi-lingualism” implied by the praise name *Afèdèfèyò* speaks not only to Òrúnmìlà’s comprehension of all languages, but to his comprehension of the universality of the human condition and his capacity, through Ifá therapeutic practice, to offer *all* members of the human community, regardless of social or cultural signifiers of identity,<sup>312</sup> opportunities to experience healing, personal transformation, and (possible) spiritual transcendence. As has been noted elsewhere in this dissertation, the Yorùbá verb “to hear” (*gbó*) not only denotes linguistic comprehension but also, and more importantly in this context, cultural competency.<sup>313</sup> This *oríkì*, in proclaiming Òrúnmìlà’s mastery of all languages, asserts his extraordinary capacities of aural reception and comprehension of the breadth and depth of the human condition. It speaks to (and honorifically praises) Òrúnmìlà’s capacities to *hear* and *understand* the nuances and complexities of the myriad forms of suffering experienced by the human community; to *comprehend* the spiritual essence of human corporeality and of the human experience; and to *effectively minister to*, and serve, humanity. Furthermore, by extension, this *oríkì* invokes and activates the Spiritual Presence of Òrúnmìlà, which fundamentally informs every Ifá practitioners, and in so doing, inspires her/him to realize and embody these same capacities in her/his being-in and attending-to-the world.<sup>314</sup>

### Returning to Òrúnmìlà in *Ogbón ríbí-ríbí*: Beginning the Journey

In the mytho-poetic verse, *Ogbón ríbí-ríbí*, Òrúnmìlà is a historical figure as well as a signifier for the archetypal Ifá practitioner, and thus, of (the road to) mastery of Ifá practice. Returning to

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<sup>311</sup> The verse clearly articulates that each of these disciples becomes an *oba* in the foreign land in which s/he has been sent. This can be interpreted as signifying that, through their healing practice, as acts of benevolence and social service, they receive formal recognition, as leaders in their respective communities. The referent *oba*, connotes political and moral leadership, and thus speaks to possible forms of political interchange. It may also speak to the historical role of Ifá practice — in its iteration as the *egbé babaláwo*, “guild of Ifá practitioners,” an institution of moral and political authority, central in the local, regional and national political organization of the Ifè polity — and the expansion of the Ifè-centric political empire. For more on the latter, see “Olùkùmi Nation” (Gardner, in progress).

<sup>312</sup> Here I am referring to *èniyàn*, the nongendered referent for human beings in Yorùbá language. For more on *èniyàn*, see chapters 2 and 3 and Gbadegesin’s essay (1998) “Èniyàn: The Yoruba Concept of a Person.” For more on the humanism and liberatory potential of Ifá and Orisa practice, see Amherd’s essay “Isese Heritages” (2005).

<sup>313</sup> See chapters 3 and 6.

<sup>314</sup> Ifá devotees, apprentices and practitioners also listen attentively to the qualities and attributes ascribed to Òrúnmìlà in his *oríkì*, aspiring to emulate and embody these characteristics and/or behaviors. They are similarly attentive to Òrúnmìlà’s life experiences as rendered in Ifá mytho-poetic wisdom teachings, aware that these verses are a rich source of metonymic referents and symbolism, providing them guideposts to inform their journeying and unfoldment.

our verse, we find that *Òrúnmìlà* — after seeking Divine (oracular) consultation and making the prescribed ritual offerings to facilitate a smooth and successful undertaking — begins his journey to, and through, unknown terrain (to *Ìlá*). En route, he encounters some individuals:

*Kí Òrúnmìlà maa ló nu u*  
*L’o bá àwọn onyàgbè l’oko*  
*O ní onyàgbè*  
*Ó kú isé o.*  
*Onyàgbè ní ho.*  
*O ní Ìlá ni o nbèrè.*  
*Onyàgbè ní Ìlá èwè*  
*Ón yíóò mú o dé Ìlá*

As *Òrúnmìlà* was going along  
 He met some farmers in the fields  
 He called out to the farmers  
 And greeted them for their work.  
 The farmers said “Ho”  
 He asked them how to get to *Ìlá*  
 One of the farmers said, “*Ìlá?*”  
 “I will take you there.”

Thus, it appears that *Òrúnmìlà* has found someone to guide him through this unfamiliar land, enabling him to reach his intended destination, *Ìlá*, and to begin to practice as a healer there.

### **Journeying in Ifá as a learning process of cultural exchange: the life story of Ojo**

It is common for an Ifá priest, after formal initiation into the priesthood, to continue his/her study by traveling to distant communities, within or beyond the boundaries of Yorùbáland (Abimbola 1976, 1983; Bascom 1969; Brenner 2000). As Abimbola (1976:25) notes: “A good Ifá priest regards his training as a continuous, life-long process and realizes that the post-initiation part of his training is very crucial...In this way, all successful Ifá priests usually travel a great deal...acquiring more knowledge and broadening their outlook on life as they mix with different kinds of people.”<sup>315</sup>

Often the *awo’fá* chooses a particular location because there is an elder-specialist with whom s/he wishes to study. At other times the *awo* may travel to learn the language and customs of distant (and/or foreign) places and peoples. Participating in ritual and devotional practices, in concert with engagements of intellectual and esoteric interchange, the Ifá practitioner expands her/his repertoire of ritual performances, medicinal preparations and therapeutic interventions and enhances her/his wisdom, knowledge and understanding (as well as her/his status and social capital).<sup>316</sup>

Maupoil (1988 [1943]:129-132, quoted in Brenner 2000:56) includes a lengthy personal account by a *babaláwo* named *Ojo* whom Maupoil encountered practicing Ifá in Porto Novo among the Fon.<sup>317</sup> *Ojo* was originally from *Ilé Ifè* and his travels, encompassing all the reasons cited above, epitomizes this dimension of Ifá’s sagely journeying.

It should be noted that *Ojo* began his travels even before he was formally initiated into the priesthood. After more than seven years of study in his hometown of *Ilé Ifè*, under the tutelage of two different elder-priests, he moved to Ibadan. There he became apprenticed under the guidance of a third *babaláwo* for two and a third years, after which he was formally initiated into the priesthood.

<sup>315</sup> Note the resonance between this dimension of the learning process, in Ifá, and the ethnographic experience in anthropological practice and professional formation.

<sup>316</sup> My relocation to *Ilé Ifè* to continue and deepen my Ifá practice was perceived by my Ifá mentors and colleagues in Nigeria as part of this long-standing, and highly esteemed pedagogic tradition of cross-cultural study in Ifá.

<sup>317</sup> Bernard Maupoil resided in Abomey and Porto-Novo, in Dahomey, from January 1934 to January 1936 (Maupoil 1988 [1943]:vii).

Ojo’s priestly sojourns began when he left Ibadan “in order to establish myself in a big city for one year and two months, in Ogbomoṣo in the home of babaláwo Kule” (ibid). From there Ojo returned to Ifè where he “carried the bag of the great diviners<sup>318</sup> when the king invited them for consultation” (ibid) for a year. Leaving Ifè with another babaláwo named Faloke, they went to Ijeṣa. Ojo notes that Faloke was a skilled healer and that he followed him “in order to learn medical recipes”(ibid). After nine months in Ijeṣa they returned to Ifè. Ojo, however, did not stay in Ifè, choosing instead to travel to the Ijebu region where he remained four years with another prominent babaláwo. After this, Ojo continued traveling and studying for approximately fifteen years: for thirteen years, in various locations in and around Porto Novo; then to Abeokuta, where he remained for a year and a half, learning (more) about herbs and the preparation of amulets; after which he moved to Lagos for eleven months. “In Lagos,” he notes, “I pursued my study of amulets and of Ifá, and I married my fifth wife. Then I returned to Porto Novo, where I set myself up as a diviner and maker of amulets. When I feel my death coming on, I will set out on the road to Ifè, my country. And those who recognize me will be surprised” (ibid).

As the biographic narrative above reveals, Ojo, as a young *awo*, traveled extensively in the Bight of Benin, actively seeking out, and working with elder-sages who specialized in various aspects of Ifá healing and ritual practice. For *more than twenty years*, Ojo consciously and conscientiously traveled beyond the known and the familiar; living among different cultural and ethnic communities, while working as a healer and studying with expert healers and elder-sages. In each location, in addition to his regular participation in ritual enactments and therapeutic interventions, Ojo actively engaged in social, intellectual, cultural, and esoteric interchange. Thus, Ojo’s journeying exemplifies the value of incorporating difference as a practice of personal and communal enrichment.<sup>319</sup> Incorporating distinctive ritual, devotional, and therapeutic practices into his habitual way(s) of being-in, knowing, and healing, Ojo grew as a person and as an Ifá healer-priest. And in so doing, Ojo’s engagements with others are enriched and his contributions to the health and integrity of individual and social bodies, enhanced.

### **Journeying in Ogbón ríbí-ríbí: Rupture and Surrender**

Returning to the narrative of *ogbón ríbí-ríbí*: the farmer escorts Òrúnmìlà to his home and invites Òrúnmìlà to rest a moment before they depart. Òrúnmìlà obliges. But the farmer’s promise to guide Òrúnmìlà to Ìlá is a ruse. While Òrúnmìlà rests, the farmer rushes to the senior member of his family compound, the *bálé*, and excitedly tells him that a slave spontaneously appeared as he was tending his fields. The *bálé* recommends that they bring the slave immediately to the *oba*<sup>320</sup> of Ìlá. And so they proceed to the farmer’s home to take Òrúnmìlà to the *oba*’s palace. They attempt to tie Òrúnmìlà’s hands as befits a slave. But Òrúnmìlà assures them that it is not necessary. He tells them that:

*Òun kò se erú tí a dè;*

He is not a slave that needs to be bound;

<sup>318</sup> *Akáàpò* (lit. “the one upon who[se shoulder]the bag hangs”). This term is used to denote an apprentice or junior Ifá priest/ess who carries the bag — containing the consecrated tools of divination qua diagnosis —for an elder-sage. To carry the senior-sage’s bag is an honor and privilege, and signifies that the individual is a trusted assistant.

<sup>319</sup> See chapter 2 for a discussion of incorporating difference as a fundamental value informing Yorùbá culture and practices.

<sup>320</sup> Yorùbá indigenous ruler — for each municipality (city-state) and for the Yorùbá nation as well (the latter is referred to as the *Òḗni*). The term *oba* is frequently translated as “king,” but this is a misrepresentation because (a) Yorùbá language is nongendered and (b) both men and women have held/can hold this critical position of authority in Yorùbá indigenous moral and sacred governance. See discussion in chapter 2.

Ó ní òun í jókó ti olúwa òun ni;

Ó ní òun kíí sá;

Ó ní ibi tí olúwa òun bá rí tí bá nrán òun lò,

ní òun maa lò

Ó ní òun kíí sá.

Bí wòn bá jí

Wòn a rán Òrúnmilà l'oko igi

Òrúnmilà a lò.

Bí wòn bá rán l'oko ewé

Òrúnmilà yìò lò.

Bí wòn bá rán l'odò, yìò lò.

Òrúnmilà sá lò.

He said that he will remain wherever his master is;

He said he will not try to escape;

He said wherever his master sends him,

That is where he will go

He will not try and run away.

When his master wakes in the morning

If he sends Òrúnmilà to the farm for firewood

Òrúnmilà will go.

If they send him to the farm for herbs

Òrúnmilà will go.

If they sent him to the river to draw water.

He will run and bring it.

And so Òrúnmilà, the sage, lives as a slave in the ruler of Ìlá's household.

Òrúnmilà's experiences in Ìlá do not resemble the collegial experiences or working conditions described by Ojo in his sojourns. Òrúnmilà is not free to move about as he wishes, nor to associate with whom he desires. He is unable to study with elders, participate in ritual or intellectual interchange, or practice openly as a babaláwo. (Mis)taken as a slave, Òrúnmilà's movements and engagements with others are severely restricted, the activities of his daily living limited to following the orders of the ruling family.

It is important to note that Òrúnmilà does not argue with his captors nor does he appear to be angry or saddened at his unexpected and difficult circumstances. Here Òrúnmilà is exhibiting *sùúrù* — serenity, patience, and perseverance — in the face of an emotionally and physically challenging situation.<sup>321</sup> He has *surrendered to the journey*, trusting Divine will and Presence, and is quietly observant.<sup>322</sup> Furthermore, despite the severe limitations of his personal freedom and the demands and discomforts of everyday living as a slave, Òrúnmilà maintains an accepting attitude, calmly completes his given tasks, and interacts courteously with those around him regardless of their status.

Another critical characteristic of the journey in this particular wisdom teaching is Òrúnmilà's loss of status, his "fall." Willing traveling beyond the known and the familiar — in his quest to gain wisdom and, thus, become a more potent and effective agent of social responsibility — Òrúnmilà experiences a dramatic rupture in his social status as well as in his habits of everyday living. Now a slave, Òrúnmilà is called upon to go to the bush for firewood and/or medicinal plants; to the fields to plant, tend, and harvest produce; and to the river to draw water — and then to return to town, to the royal compound, carrying these in heavy loads atop his head or strapped to his back. Within the confines of the compound Òrúnmilà's duties include cleaning (clothes; cooking pots and pans; all the rooms, walkways and patios); attending to the whims and desires of his captors; and tending the horses and other animals (dogs, goats, chickens, guinea fowl; perhaps pigs and cattle) of the compound. His work is dirty, physically

<sup>321</sup> Òrúnmilà's attitude resonates with J. Lasater's essay regarding the ideal yoga practice, entitled "Discipline and Detachment" (1987).

<sup>322</sup> This depiction of Òrúnmilà echoes the characteristic facial expression of Yorùbá sculptures — serenely observant countenance with eyes wide open, looking straight ahead, prominent (attentive, discerning) ears and perfectly sealed lips — that epitomize Thompson's (1966, 1973) assignation of Yorùbá art as an "aesthetic of the cool."

demanding, and exhausting. It begins each day before dawn and ends late into the night. And when his work is completed, Òrúnmìlà returns to the slave quarters where he eats and sleeps on the ground. In work and in rest, he inhabits a lowly state of intimate association with the earth.

Thus, in the quest for *ogbón ríbí-ríbí* (deep wisdom and social responsibility), Òrúnmìlà's sojourn is marked by significant corporeal and social disruptions. His everyday living is characterized by harsh conditions, personal confinement and lowliness, associating with plants and animals more than human beings and living in intimate contact with the earth. And the intensity of these ruptures and losses is compounded by the lack of any perceptible horizon for release from his enslavement.

### **Rupture as Transformative Ordeal**

Nonetheless, Òrúnmìlà quietly and patiently endures his condition of restriction and loss. Despite the difficulties, discomfiture and uncertainty, Òrúnmìlà maintains a calm and attentive disposition. He recognizes and accepts this experience of ruptures and confinement as an *ordeal*; an ordeal that is an inherent part of the journey. And, given his previous engagements with initiatory rites, as participant and as initiator, as well as his practice as a healer, it is reasonable to assume that Òrúnmìlà is familiar with, and appreciates, the transformative power of ordeals.

Time passes. One day, Òrúnmìlà is called upon to bring out and saddle a horse,<sup>323</sup> and then assist the oba's first born son in mounting him. The royal prince mounts the horse easily and then leaves to visit a near-by friend. Yet while steadying the horse for the prince, Òrúnmìlà notices an aberrance in the shadow that the prince's body casts on the ground. He immediately recognizes this as a subtle sign that the ruler's first borne son has a serious, albeit not yet apparent, illness.

Òrúnmìlà wá wò òjìjì àrẹ̀mọ̀ Onílá

Òrúnmìlà looked at the shadow of the ruler's first borne

This should not be interpreted literally. Rather it expresses that, in the presence of the oba's first borne, Òrúnmìlà experienced a deeply visceral awareness (the embodied certainty of *èrí okon*<sup>324</sup>) that the prince had been psychically *tied*. A common expression *pípa òjìjì* (literally, "the act of killing a shadow") refers to the act of consciously directing malevolent spiritual forces to attack or injure another individual.

After experiencing this form of embodied prescience (and the prince's departure), Òrúnmìlà turns privately to his tools and techniques of divination (*dia ·gnosis*<sup>325</sup>). He does so, first, to ascertain more details of the source and contours of this serious illness. Then, later that day, Òrúnmìlà uses specific techniques of musically performative articulation of the Ifá musico-poetic verses (of the aforementioned divination signature) to *call forth* and *orchestrate* the intervention of powerful forms of Divine Presence as an antidote and remedy.

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<sup>323</sup> Horses were introduced to Yorùbáland prior to colonial contact, in the seventeenth century, and were initially prominent in the Ọ̀yọ̀ empire's militia, which was renowned for its fierce cavalry (Pemberton 1989:148). And in Yorùbá culture and artistic productions (and in Ifá wisdom teachings) horses are recognized as a symbol of elevated social status and material affluence (Abiodun 2000).

<sup>324</sup> Discussed in chapter 3.

<sup>325</sup> The etymology of *diagnosis* is noteworthy. The word comes from the Greek *dia* ("through," "across," "by") + *gnosis* ("a seeking to know...particularly seeking spiritual or mystical, deep knowledge.") *Webster's Encyclopedic Unabridged Dictionary* s.v. "diagnosis."

*Òrúnmìlà tẹnu bẹ̀ kìní tí ó tẹ̀ nìyìí, ó pẹ̀<sup>326</sup>*

Òrúnmìlà used his mouth to intervene in that which he had marked [in divination], he called forth [the divine presence]

Through Òrúnmìlà's orchestration of Divine Presence as healing force, the subtle, yet powerful forms of disruptive presence that were afflicting the royal first borne are forcefully expelled from his body. As this occurs, the royal prince (returning home with an entourage) loses consciousness. His attendants, unsuccessful in their attempts to rouse the prince, carry him home to the palace. Òrúnmìlà learning of the prince's condition upon their arrival, rushes to his side. And through Òrúnmìlà's thoughtful and compassionate ministrings, the prince rapidly regains consciousness.

### **Health and Integrity Restored**

Immediately, the prince calls the royal court, proclaiming Òrúnmìlà's wisdom, insight and the power and effectiveness of his therapeutic interventions. The prince then admonishes the *oba* and the community not only to honor Òrúnmìlà, but also to incorporate Òrúnmìlà and his wisdom (Ifá sacred-medical practice) in a position of authority within the institutions of local government.<sup>327</sup>

*Ó ní gbogbo obàrá tí wọ̀n ta mọ̀nlára,*

He [the prince] said all the “ropes” that they shot [like an arrow; orchestrated energetically] that stuck to my body

*Ó ní òun l'ó já.*

Òrúnmìlà was the one who broke them.

*Ó ní Kabiyesi ni bàbá òun máà ké fún.*

He said “Your Majesty” is what my father should shout for Òrúnmìlà [because of the great feat he has accomplished]

They seat Òrúnmìlà on a royal throne, place the beaded *oba*'s crown on his head, bestow upon him half of their collective wealth, and hail him as an equal ruler of Ìlá.

*Ijọ́ tí Òrangun dí méjì n'Ìlá nun<sup>328</sup>*

That was the day that there came to be two rulers in Ìlá.

<sup>326</sup> The verb *pẹ̀* (lit. “to call; to call forth”) is one of the sonically (and therapeutically) performative genres in Ifá, mentioned in fn. 1 above. Also see Gardner (1994).

<sup>327</sup> Crowning Òrúnmìlà as an *oba* is echoed in the second verse from Èjì Ògbè (presented earlier in this chapter), in which each of Òrúnmìlà's disciples (*Qpón*, *Ajere*, and *Ìbò*) also become an *oba*, or indigenous ruler, in the land to which s/he travels. The installation of Òrúnmìlà or an Ifá practitioner, as a ruler, in her/his sojourn to a foreign land, not only speaks to the incorporation of Ifá practice as a recognized moral force of social responsibility in these places, but also suggests that Ifá practice, as an institution, also participated as an active agent in the expansion of the Ifé-centric polity within the Bight of Benin. For more on the latter dimension, see “Olukumi Nation” (Gardner, in progress).

<sup>328</sup> This is a conscious play on words that enhances the significance of this verse (and wisdom teaching) for Ifá adepts. *Òrangun* is the title of the ruler of Ìlá. The phrase *Òrangun dí méjì* is commonly interpreted as “there came to be two rulers of Ìlá.” Yet *Òrangun Méjì* is also one of the alternate or praise names for the divination signature to which this musico-poetic verse pertains, *Òfún Méjì*. Thus this line metonymically reiterates the fundamental resonance between *Òfún Méjì*, deep wisdom, and (Òrúnmìlà as the embodiment of) mastery of Ifá.



Ọrúnmilà’s ordeal ends as abruptly and as unexpectedly as it began. So, too, those (the chronic, indolent and the acute) of the royal first borne. In restoring the prince’s health — and, by extension, that of the social and political bodies — Ọrúnmilà is also returned to his rightful place as a leader of the community. It is crucial to note that Ọrúnmilà acted selflessly to heal the prince, without any rancor for his unjust enslavement or any expectation of personal benefit. He used his deep insights and healing power guided solely by a moral imperative. In this way, Ọrúnmilà serves, once again, as the embodiment of Ifá as a spiritually-informed force of benevolence, compassion and social responsibility, while simultaneously reminding us that personal suffering informs mastery of Ifá transcendent power and therapeutic practice.

The verse ends by reiterating the opening lines:

*Ogbón ríbí-ríbí*

*Ni a fì gbà ogbón ríbí-ríbí.*

*Bí a ò bá ní ogbón ríbí-ríbí nínú*

*Àì kó oògùn ríbí-ríbí.*

*Bí a ò bá kó oògùn ríbí-ríbí,*

*Àì wò àrùn ríbí-ríbí.*

*Bí a ò bá wò àrùn ríbí-ríbí,*

*Àì gbà owó ríbí-ríbí.*

*Bí a ò bá gbà owó ríbí-ríbí,*

*Àì rí nkan ríbí-ríbí gbé se.*

*Àwọn l’ó dá fún Ọrúnmilà.*

*Ifá nse awo rẹ òde Ìlá.*

Great wisdom

Is what we use to acquire profound wisdom

If we do not gain great wisdom

We will be unable to master potent medicines

If we don’t learn powerful medicines

We won’t be able to cure serious illnesses

If we can’t cure serious illnesses

We will not achieve wealth and prosperity

If we don’t achieve wealth and prosperity

We will be unable to make significant contributions to our society/community

These were the ones who cast Ifá for Ọrúnmilà

When he was going to Ìlá to practice Ifá

In giving voice to these words again, we come full circle Their articulation reaffirms the value of profound wisdom, healing, and social responsibility in Ifá and, simultaneously links them, sonically and metonymically, to the sage’s journey. In other words, the goal of Ifá practitioners is the continuous quest for, and refinement of, wisdom and therapeutic power in the service of the social good. And, as the last portions of this Ifá narrative highlight, the *key to embodying this wisdom and healing power, and thus, a defining characteristic of this life-long journey, are ruptures as transformative ordeals.*

### **The Journeying of Ifá Healers, Revisited: The Transformative Power of Ruptures in the Quest for Wisdom and Therapeutic Power**

As we recall from the previous chapter, in Yorùbá society respected elders are those who have spent their lives seeking *ìmò kò ló’pín*, “knowledge without end.” Two of Ifá’s *oríkì*, or praise names, are *Agírí ilé Ìlógbón*, “Agírí [a chief] in the town of wisdom” and *Àmòìmòtán*. “Infinite knowledge [that which can never be completely mastered or comprehended].” The Ifá adept and sage by definition, as elders in Yorùbá society and in Ifá, journey everyday to enhance their knowledge of the world. Thus one iteration of the journeying of Ifá healers is the existential journey of life, presented in the previous chapter: a search for knowledge through the conscious cultivation of a spiritually and morally-informed way of being-in-the-world. Yet as elders in Ifá,

they are called upon to go beyond this and to seek *ogbón ríbí-ríbí*, “profound wisdom” in the service of social good.

Wisdom is the key to curing all forms of suffering and affliction — be they individual or collective; emotional, physical or psychic. Furthermore, listening more closely to the *ogbón ríbí-ríbí* verse, a fundamental resonance between the cultivation of wisdom, as a corporeal capacity (in the “stomach” of the Ifá practitioner), and the cultivation of therapeutic power is revealed:

*Bí a ò bá ní ogbón ríbí-ríbí nínú*

*Àì kó oògùn ríbí-ríbí.*

If we do not cultivate deep, powerful wisdom within our stomachs, wombs, or insides  
We will not be capable of making powerful medicine; We will not have capacities of ritual and therapeutic power

Therefore, the journey of Ifá healer-sages — in at least one of its various forms and iterations — is a quest to cultivate wisdom, therapeutic power and transcendence *as corporeal capacities*. To appreciate *how* this occurs, let us return to the narrative of the *ogbón ríbí-ríbí* wisdom teaching. Although the ordeal has ended, we must not lose sight of its fundamental role in bodying forth the restoration of individual, social (and cosmic) health and integrity. For, I maintain, it is *through* the shifts,<sup>329</sup> ruptures, and confinement that Òrúnmìlà experiences — in concert with his calm attitude and his receptive relationship with Divine Presence — that Òrúnmìlà gains enhanced spiritually-informed diagnostic and therapeutic capacities (the former, a component of wisdom).<sup>330</sup>

Òrúnmìlà’s intimate association with the earth, as a slave, and the disruption of his (mundane) social world, resonates with the apprentice and novice practitioner’s experiences of the everyday scholarly-devotional practices of Ifá. These techniques, in bringing the apprentice down to the ground, destabilize her/his social status.<sup>331</sup> Gradually, over time, these embodied articulations, as they cultivate a corporeal intimacy and resonance with the earth, disrupt the mundane *habitus* of the apprentice and/or novice practitioner. As I present in the next chapter, the orchestration of these particular everyday practices bodies forth a distinctive, spiritually-informed mode of being-in, perceiving, and acting upon the world, known as *inú t’ó jìnlè bi igbá* (lit. “a stomach as deep as a calabash,” where the calabash refers to the “calabash of existence”).= And, I argue that this specialized mode of being-in and attending-to the world, or *habitus*, of the Ifá practitioner and elder-sage is the source (*orisùn*) of their profound corporeal capacities of therapeutic power and transcendence.

Furthermore, Òrúnmìlà’s calm acceptance of these harsh and painful conditions is not only a reflection of his emotional tempering and his capacity to perceive Divine presence within

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<sup>329</sup> Here I am referring to the shifts in habits of everyday living, particularly those that keep Òrúnmìlà in close and prolonged contact with the ground. See the next chapter for a presentation of specific body techniques in Ifá everyday scholarly-devotional practice and the transformative power, for Ifá healers, of cultivating corporeal intimacy and resonance with the earth.

<sup>330</sup> One can also argue that it is *through* his experience of corporeal disruption (transient loss of consciousness), that the prince also gains enhanced capacities of perception and understanding, both regarding his previous state of health and Òrúnmìlà’s true identity, as a powerful healer.

<sup>331</sup> As discussed previously in the dissertation, in Yorùbá culture, prolonged contact with the ground is generally associated with low and/or marginalized social status (infants, those in mourning, and the insane). Ifá practitioners are a noted and noteworthy exception, for although they spend the vast majority of their time on the ground, they are held in high regard.

these harsh circumstances, but also of his capacities of containment (corporeal, affective, spiritual) — capacities characteristic of, and engendered by, a “deep stomach.”<sup>332</sup> As the reader recalls, a fundamental characteristic of *igbá iwà*, the calabash of existence, is the harmonic containment of complementary forces, in a dynamic state of engagement. Again, in my interpretation of this wisdom teaching, *Òrúnmìlà*’s ordeal fundamentally informs these capacities. The ruptures of mundane and taken-for-granted habits that *Òrúnmìlà* experiences (in this verse), challenge *and* cultivate his ability to *contain paradox* — to simultaneously hold present a serene attitude *and* his discomfort; to (cultivate and) balance his capacities of discernment *and* receptivity; discrimination *and* acceptance. Thus, these affective shifts and corporeal ruptures are the catalysts through which *Òrúnmìlà* bodies forth and embodies a “stomach as deep as a calabash.”

I believe that *Òrúnmìlà*’s experiences in the *ogbón ríbí-ríbí* verse reverberate beyond the particularities of Ifá scholarly-devotional practice and offer other insights about Ifá. I will briefly present three additional ways that *Òrúnmìlà*’s experiences in this verse speak to Ifá journey and practice. First, their articulation also gives voice to the awareness, among Ifá elder-sages, of the transformative power of ordeals, ritual or circumstantial, in their journeying. Most, if not all, Ifá elder-sages have traveled to different cultural communities, studying with select healers, and living among, and serving, the local populace. As noted earlier, geographic migrations and cultural interchanges, as an iteration of the journey, is widely recognized as a hallmark of the formal learning process in Ifá. And for discerning listeners, the *ogbón ríbí-ríbí* verse speaks to, and offers additional significance of, these cross cultural journeys through the trials and tribulations *Òrúnmìlà* faces and his responses.

As widely reported in anthropological literature, living in a foreign community, unable to communicate as fluently or easily in the foreign language as in her/his mother tongue, the traveler is reduced to a child-like status. And ignorant of the cultural values and mores, s/he feels disoriented. Thrown into different rhythms, patterns, and practices of everyday living — and, possibly, being immersed in a world that is informed by a distinctive cultural sensorium — the sojourner’s known life-world is rent asunder. Thus, *Òrúnmìlà*’s experience, and serene acceptance, of the shifts and disruptions in his everyday living (as a foreigner in Ilá) reveals that Ifá — and the elder-sages, by extension — is also aware that corporeal, social, and cultural ruptures are the foundation of this iteration of the sagely journey.

Next, *Òrúnmìlà*’s experiences metonymically remind us that *Ifá practice*, as a spiritually-informed force of benevolence, compassion and social responsibility, *is critically informed by personal suffering*. *Òrúnmìlà*’s conscious willingness to plunge into the unknown speaks to an awareness, by those who are called to serve as emissaries of Ifá, of the personal risks and grave dangers involved in their journeying. Earlier in this chapter, I attribute *Òrúnmìlà*’s serene acceptance of these ruptures to his recognition of such circumstances as an ordeal, and to his awareness, as a ritual expert and healer, of the transformative power of ordeals. As a healer, *Òrúnmìlà* has witnessed the transformative power of corporeal ruptures in, and for, his patients. The prince’s loss of consciousness attests to this. Yet, there is more. The Ifá healer’s practice is not only informed by the afflictions of others, it is informed by *her/his personal experiences of suffering*. Through *Òrúnmìlà*’s enslavement and complete uncertainty as to how, or when, or if,

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<sup>332</sup> The cultivation, and significance, of enhanced capacities of containment (an aspect of the elder-sage’s “stomach as deep as a calabash”) is discussed in greater detail in the next chapter.

he will be liberated, I believe the *ogbón ríbi-ríbi* verse artfully expresses this critical aspect of the Ifá healer's journey.<sup>333</sup>

In *all* forms of profound suffering — be they from devastating corporeal, affective, interpersonal, or material disruptions — the pain and loss not only *consume* the affected individual, they distort her/his horizons of time and space beyond recognition. The individual feels trapped and *alone*, held hostage by the limitations of her/his particular condition. The contours of everyday life are profoundly distorted, foreign, frightening. His/her social world shrinks, often to the point of extinction.

In experiences of corporeal rupture, the distortions of given-ness of the body and the loss of its taken-for-granted capacities, leave the individual struggling, continually, to find (or re-create) a recognizable sense of self; constantly grasping for a now evasive and chimerical sense of integrity. The comfort and familiarity of the contours of one's corporeality are similarly assaulted, compounding the afflicted individual's experience of loss. These assaults body-forth grotesque distortions of the sufferer's physical appearance, frightening the afflicted as well as those around her/him, and thus exacerbating her/his losses and social isolation.

As Elaine Scarry, in her book *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World* (1985) notes, pain resists the world of communication; it "shatters" language (op cit:5). "[I]ntense pain is world-destroying" (op cit:29). The sheer *inexpressibility* of one's interior experiences of pain, loss, suffering compound the terror and shattering of life-worlds...One is stuck, confined in an abysmal state, without any promise of respite, release, recovery.<sup>334</sup>

Òrúnmìlà's unexpected fall, his entrapment and his enslavement, his confinement and his profoundly limited social engagements, the deterioration of his physical appearance, the indescribability of his conditions, and the complete uncertainty if he will ever recover — are *all*, in my opinion, eloquent symbolic renderings of the lived experience of intense pain and suffering. And while cross-cultural journeying is recognized, by scholars and the public, as a hallmark of the learning process in Ifá, *corporeal crisis is recognized by Ifá practitioners*, as equally, if not more vitally, informing their engagement with, and their practice of, Ifá.

Many Ifá healers are called to Ifá through their own corporeal distress. Coming to Ifá initially as patients, *suffering and in pain*, their bodies rent asunder, these people experience first hand (and thus have deep, personal "knowledge" *ìmò*<sup>335</sup>) of the transformative and therapeutic power of Ifá. Some of these individuals, moved by gratitude — most, from a profound internal, spiritual quickening, perceive (and/or recognize) their own corporeal crisis as the threshold for entering the Ifá priesthood — begin studying Ifá. Later, for each of these individuals *as an Ifá practitioner*, her/his intimate experiences of corporeal crisis, pain and suffering — this "making and unmaking of the body, making and unmaking of the world" — serves as the *alpha and omega* of her/his healing practice. This profound intimacy with suffering as shared human experience; with the frailty and resilience of human being-in-the-world is the *experiential foundation* of her/his (a) relationship with Divine and Ancestral Presence; and (b) practice of Ifá.

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<sup>333</sup> There is an extensive body of literature on "rituals of affliction" and on suffering as the foundation (or "calling") in many indigenous healing traditions. For a small sample, see Bell (1992), Csordas (1983), DeRosny (1985), Eliade (1959), Fields (2001), Friedson (1996), Goodman (1990), Harner (1990), Janzen (1992), Sullivan (1988), Turner (1992), Whyte (1989), Whitmont (1993).

<sup>334</sup> This resonates exquisitely with European mythopoetic narratives of the healer's journey as one of death, entombment (confinement), followed by re-birth and of the symbolism of the alchemical vessel and transformative process. For more details as well as a rich discussion of the power and value of life ordeals as transformative experiences of critical importance in the formation of healers, see Whitmont (1993).

<sup>335</sup> See discussion of knowledge and belief in Yorùbá culture, discourse, and experience in chapter 3.

For these practitioners, their personal experiences of suffering are, literally, the foundation of their work, their quest for knowledge as social responsibility, their life journey.

For those Ifá practitioners who do not experience corporeal crisis as the threshold for entering Ifá, personal suffering nonetheless figures prominently in their life journeys, and thus fundamentally informs their mode of being-in, engaging, and attending-to-the-world. Thus, the widespread recognition, within the Ifá community, of personal suffering as a fundamental dimension of their journey and practice. *Òrúnmìlà*'s experiences — of profound disruption of the social, corporeal, and affective dimensions of his everyday life; his confinement, as a *slave*; the destruction of his previously taken-for-granted life world — highlight, and are symbolic references to, personal experiences of pain and suffering as the foundation of Ifá practice and as the point of perpetual departure and return for Ifá healer-sages.

Thus, *Òrúnmìlà*'s experiences in the *ogbón ríbí-ríbí* wisdom teaching serve as cautionary reminders, alerting discerning listeners (particularly those who intend to embark on, or have already begun, the journeying of Ifá), that ruptures are a fundamental dimension of the conscious quest for wisdom and mastery in Ifá. As *Sowande* (1967:54-5, emphasis added) admonishes: “[To become a healer-sage, one] will not travel in an air-conditioned car on tarred roads; it is not a journey to be undertaken, and perhaps only a sense of compulsion that drives one on regardless of aught else will ensure success.” Finally, they remind one and all that Ifá — as a spiritually-informed force of benevolence, compassion and social responsibility — is critically and fundamentally informed by corporeal ruptures; the making and unmaking of the body, and through this, the making and unmaking of life-worlds.

## Chapter Six. *Ìforíbalẹ̀'fá*. I Touch My Head to the Ground: Ifá Everyday Scholarly-Devotional Practice and Bodying Forth a *Deep Stomach*

[W]e may legitimately ask how it is that these transcendental orientations are embedded in the consciousness of the initiate; how is reality transformation and self-transformation made real and convincing? ... Perhaps the point is not really the communication of specific information at all, but *experiential upheaval... a radical recentering* of experience... the religious reality ...becomes part of the initiate, orienting the preconscious...into a characteristic disposition.... [N]ot just ideas are involved, but a whole orientation of the self.

Evan Zuesse (1985:144-145, emphasis added)

I simply participated in it [Vodun ritual practice] to the extent that an average serviteur might, and with the average amount of pleasure, boredom, and discomfort, according to circumstances. I observed the appropriate conventions and formalities of the rituals I attended, sang the songs as I became familiar with them, and danced the dances. In effect...I *served* the loa and, in so doing, I learned (as I have said...) that *the effect of the ritual service is upon the doer*.

Maya Deren (1983:324, emphasis added)

Among the Yorùbá in Nigeria, it is customary, every morning, for young girls and boys to kneel or prostrate in front of their parents, greeting them at the start of a new day. It is also customary each morning, for every Ifá priest, priestess, and initiate to ritually greet — *awakening* and *refreshing* — the spiritual Presence of Ifá that resides in her/his personal Ifá shrine (*ojúbọ̀'fá*). This chapter examines the aforementioned ritual practice, focusing specific attention on *ìforíbalẹ̀'fá* (lit. “the act of touching one’s head to the ground in salutation and/or propitiation of Ifá”). I claim that the daily articulation of *ìforíbalẹ̀'fá* radically transforms and recenters the Ifá initiate’s habitual patterns of being-in-the-world, bodying forth unique perceptual and affective sensibilities and new cognitive orientations, while simultaneously laying the groundwork for the cultivation of “deep” corporeal capacities of transcendent and therapeutic power.

### “Big Men” and Small Beginnings: Early Articulations of *Ìforíbalẹ̀'fá*

Bàbá Dáyìísí<sup>336</sup> was one of my early mentors (*ògá*, lit. “masters”) in Nigeria. During the time of my apprenticeship with him, he rented a small two room flat in town for his Ifá work and worship. Made of mud and concrete brick and topped with a corrugated tin roof, this flat is situated on one of the main arteries of town, within easy walking distance to a prominent market. Although the flat contains two distinct rooms, Bàbá Dáyìísí had furnished the entrance area (a short narrow hallway) with a few metal chairs and a locally-made, matching, overstuffed chair and sofa. This space served as both the sitting room where family, friends, and guests were entertained, as well as the consultation area where Bàbá Dáyìísí interviewed patients and performed public divination and simple rituals of therapeutic intervention.

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<sup>336</sup> This is a pseudonym.

The first room of the flat served as sleeping quarters, either for Bàbá Dáyìísí — when he worked late into the night, wanted respite from his extended family, or when ritual responsibilities mandated solitude and/or sexual abstinence — or for those clients who required close monitoring or more extensive medical and/or ritual treatment. The second room went through various changes and renovations during the years of our acquaintance. The most dramatic renovation, however, was the installation of wire netting in the window frame and a ceiling fan. I appreciated the ceiling fan for providing much appreciated comfort — if and when there was “light” (electricity) — on hot stagnant days. I also appreciated its strategic value, particularly in juxtaposition to the brick and mud structure of the flat, as an obvious marker of status. A screen was also awkwardly “installed” on the inside of the irregularly contoured mud window, its jagged edges curling inward, splaying like spiked fingertips, leaving a patchwork of gaping holes along the window’s periphery. Although this netting was totally ineffective in protecting the space and its inhabitants (especially me) from the malarial terrors of mosquitoes, Baba Dáyìísí used it effectively to enhance his social capital. Always finding a way of bringing the screen’s presence to the attention of his guests, Baba Dáyìísí proudly asserted that he installed it to protect me, his *Òyìnbó* (“white;” “foreign”) student, as well as for the comfort of other (future) foreign visitors. The implication was that he was a “Big Man” with the power to draw foreigners to such a rustic albeit renovated space.

Despite these cosmetic transmutations, the second room consistently served as the private ritual room. Housing Bàbá Dáyìísí’s shrines for Ifá and *Òsun*,<sup>337</sup> this room was reserved primarily (although not exclusively) for ritual and was where Bàbá Dáyìísí conducted most of his daily, personal ritual practice, as well as the secluded preparation of powerful medicines and ritually consecrated and/or empowered implements. Although Bàbá Dáyìísí frequently allowed select family members and/or apprentices to witness and participate in the former, only rarely did he permit anyone — and then, *only* another Ifá specialist or apprentice — to witness and/or assist him in the latter. Furthermore, special ritual enactments — reserved for Ifá specialists, apprentices, and/or devotees — were also frequently performed (at least in part) there. Finally, he used this special room for private meetings with Ifá colleagues, other ritual specialists,<sup>338</sup> as well as other important visitors.

Unlike the sleeping area, which remained open and freely accessible to all — including untethered goats, pigeons, chickens, and/or guinea fowl — Bàbá Dáyìísí strictly restricted access to the second room. When not in use, its door was ostensibly secured with a small, flimsy padlock, imported from China, which he had purchased from an itinerant street vendor. More important for maintaining the integrity and security of this room, according to Bàbá, were the various medicines, in gourds of differing shapes and sizes, hanging above the doorframe as well as other medicines that are strategically hidden from view throughout the flat.

Although Bàbá Dáyìísí’s private ritual room was *not* the first place where I witnessed *ìforìbalè’fá* — the bodily postures used to greet Ifá — it *was* there, in front of his Ifá shrine, that I was first instructed in its execution. “You get down like this,” Bàbá Dáyìísí explained while demonstrating the posture. He prostrated his body on the cool cement floor, placing his head,

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<sup>337</sup> *Òsun* is a major female divinity; the mother of the sweet waters of fecundity; and one of Ifá’s “wives.” She has a critical relationship with the (derivative) form of divination, used by *onîsègùn* (herbalists) and *Òrìsà* specialists, known as *mérìndínlógún* (“sixteen”) — that employs sixteen cowries. For more on *Òsun*, see chapter 4.

<sup>338</sup> Among these are the *onîsègùn*, the herbalists; the *olòòrìsà*, the *Òrìsà* specialists; the *Ògbbóni*, the indigenous enforcers of moral law; as well as the *Alfas*, Muslim ritual healers who use a form of divination (diagnosis) very similar to that used in Ifá practice.

face down, a few inches in front of his *agere Ifá* (earthenware vessel containing the consecrated palm nuts – *ikin'fá* – his “hands of Ifá”). Then, placing his hands on either side of his chest and bending his elbows, he arched his back and softly raised his chest and head.

“*Òrúnmìlà*” — he faced his Ifá squarely as he called one of Ifá’s names in a normal conversational volume and pitch.

“*Mo yín bọ̀rú!*” (“May you accept my offerings of propitiation.”) He gently undulated his upper torso. Effortlessly, he touched his forehead and then his chest lightly to the ground in concert with the words, returning his body to its original arch, belly against the floor, chest and face towards his Ifá, at the end of the phrase.

“*Òrúnmìlà,*” — again, he called Ifá, gently facing his shrine.

“*Mo yín bọ̀yè!*” (“May my offerings lead to long life.”) Again, the soft wave moved through his upper torso in harmony with the rhythmic tempo of his verbal articulations, bringing his forehead, and then his chest, to the earth, and ending in the same mildly arched pose.

“*Òrúnmìlà,*” — he greeted Ifá a third time, softly but intently facing his *agere Ifá*,

“*Mo yín bọ̀sise -O!*” (“May my prayers and offerings come to fruition!”) His chest rippled a third time, carrying his forehead and then chest gently to the ground, and coming to repose with chest and face in the mild forward-facing arch.

Without a break, still prostrate and in the same rhythmic tempo, he called out:

“*Ifá*” — facing his Ifá,

“*Orí mi 're!*” (“May you bless my head with blessings and good fortune!”)

This time touching *only* his forehead to the ground in harmony with the first two syllables, raising it on the last. He performed this three times.

Then raising himself into a low squatting position, in front and slightly to the side of his Ifá, he beckoned me. “Now you try it!”

I prostrated myself on the cool cement floor facing Bàbá Dáyíísí’s Ifá. Timidly and a bit unassuredly at first, I repeated his words and actions, while he chimed in occasional choral support. I was acutely aware of the refreshing coolness of the ground against my legs and belly (through my wrapper, *iró*, and *bùbá*<sup>339</sup>) and briefly on my forehead and chest when they lightly tapped the surface. The vessel containing Bàbá’s Ifá now seemed like a smooth black clay head that was looking at me eye-to-eye while I played “peek-a-boo,” my head bobbing softly up and down at the end of each body ripple. I also noticed that our lyrical face dance was being bathed in the soft shadow cast by the adjacent, much larger and taller vessel containing Bàbá’s *Ọ̀sun*.

Upon completion, I rose to a kneeling position facing both Bàbá Dáyíísí and his Ifá. He turned slightly to face his Ifá. Then with one hand he removed the lid from his *agere Ifá*, revealing its precious contents, while with the other he opened and then raised a bottle of Schnapps (commonly referred to as “hots”). Generously he poured the Schnapps in three large dollops, splattering his *ikin Ifá* — “*Ire! Ire! Ire!*” (“Blessings! Blessings! Blessings!”). Before closing the bottle of Schnapps, he poured a small amount into the bottle cap for our consumption — first for himself, and then for me. He ended by returning the lid atop his *agere Ifá*.

And so it was that I first came to *foríbalè'fá* — to touch my head to the ground in salutation and propitiation of Ifá.

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<sup>339</sup> “A short, loose garment worn by men or women: in the case of women it hangs over the... *iró*” (Abraham 1958:116) The *bùbá* for women is a loose fitting, long sleeved, top. Usually the wrapper and top are made of the same cloth.



## The Transformative Power of Body Techniques for Ritual Practitioners

This work marks an initial exploration of the bodily techniques<sup>340</sup> of Ifá practice, focusing primarily on the small, subtle techniques — what I choose to refer to as the *subtle dances* — that constitute the mundane, yet vital, essence and life-blood of everyday living for Ifá practitioners. I propose that there are two distinct, yet interdependent, categories of bodily techniques that critically inform the ways of being, and of knowing, particular to Ifá: (1) the subtle dances of everyday living, referred to above, and (2) the dramatic, episodic ruptures incurred in the periods of intense, often secluded, ritual initiation. In real-time, the overwhelming majority of these embodied techniques — be they soft and subtle or harsh and dramatic — are enacted in concert with the various modalities of Ifá’s musical *techne*,<sup>341</sup> forming a seamless whole. I artificially separate these intertwined arms of the phenomenal whole, however, to facilitate analysis and interpretation.

I propose that bodily techniques of Ifá practice destabilize and disrupt the apprentice’s (mundane) *habitus* engendering a creative negative space, or aperture, for bodying forth the new and distinctive *habitus of the Ifá specialist*. The two forms of embodied practice — the continuous repetition and insertion of the subtle dances of daily ritual and the intermittent punctuation of ritual initiations — play complementary roles in this process. It is important to note that such techniques are presented (to students) and experienced (by students and specialists) as part of the given and natural(ized) world in Ifá.

Other aspects of Ifá pedagogy and practice such as the interpretation of the particular significance of a divination signature; exegesis of the Ifá verses;<sup>342</sup> the etiology of various maladies and misfortunes; the preparation of *oògùn* (medicinal substances); or the orchestration of a particular therapeutic intervention are frequently the subject of considerable contemplation and/or animated discussion by masters and apprentices alike. Furthermore, the significance of “big,” important ritual performances — such as the rite-of passage for a newborn child (*fiesèn’tayé*, “the first step of life”); the initiation of an individual into the Ifá priesthood; or the funeral and burial proceedings for an Ifá specialist — are common leitmotifs for discussions concerning cosmological, epistemological, and existential inquiries among Ifá practitioners. Ifá experts (as well as academic scholars) appreciate how rites-of-passage such as these mark and constitute critical moments in “the ontological journey” (Drewal 1992:29-88).

Yet, the body techniques of these critical ritual moments (initiations) as well as those of the subtle dances of the everyday fall beneath the horizon of serious or “deep” (*ìjìnlẹ̀*<sup>343</sup>) consideration among Ifá specialists, students, and devotees. These fundamental embodied techniques of the daily and of the spectacular<sup>344</sup> (dramatic ceremonial) ritual life of devotees

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<sup>340</sup> “Techniques du corps” of Marcel Mauss (1973).

<sup>341</sup> For more on *techne*, see chapter 2; on the musical performativity in Ifá, see chapters 1 and 5, and Gardner (1994).

<sup>342</sup> See my brief presentation and critique of the framing of Ifá oral literature in the previous chapter.

<sup>343</sup> In Yorùbá, *ìjìnlẹ̀* connotes profound intellectual and/or esoteric depth and power; and the term gestures, linguistically, to Yorùbá associations between the earth, deep wisdom and phenomenologically potent power. *ìjìnlẹ̀*, literally “that which is as deep as the earth:” from *ì*, the nominative + *jìn*, “deep” + *ilẹ̀*, “the earth.”

<sup>344</sup> Although “spectacle” in English is associated with “spectators” and “actors,” and thus with passive rather than active participation, this is *not so* in Yorùbá culture and ritual practice. Drewal (1992:15, emphasis added) notes “...[I]n the Yorùbá notion of spectacle there are no fixed bicameral roles. *Yorùbá spectacle is participatory*...[t]he relationship between spectators and spectacle are unstable, one always collapsing into the other.” Furthermore, the term for “spectacle” in Yorùbá is *ìran*. This term, or a derivative thereof, is also used to denote a revelatory vision or the power of revelatory experience (*ojúùran* and *ìrùran*, respectively). This linguistic association gestures towards, and highlights, the critical cultural (and I argue, phenomenological) association

and/or healer-specialists have been similarly ignored, with rare exception, by scholars of Yorùbá and Diasporic communities, as well as by anthropologists.<sup>345</sup> I will briefly present a few noteworthy exceptions: Browning's (1995) *Samba: Resistance in Motion*, Yvonne Daniel's (2005) *Dancing Wisdom* and Michael Jackson's essay (1989) regarding an initiation rite in Sierra Leone.<sup>346</sup>

Browning, a dancer, capoeirista, and scholar, discusses various body techniques — Samba, capoeira, and the dances of the Orishas, the Yorùbá divinities — in relationship to history and identity among Afro-Brazilians. Although she limits her discussion of ritual body uses strictly to the dances of Candomble, Browning nonetheless offers critical insights regarding the transformative effects that are bodied forth through participation in these communal ritual dances. Browning asserts that it is the *Orishas* who are the creative agents in these movements, not the dancers. “The dancer in a state of orixá's<sup>347</sup> incorporation [possession] is not a writer of that dance but rather becomes the text, written by the orixá... [I]ncorporating orixá energy does require an acknowledgement that we don't fully determine our own significance in the world” (1995:50-51). Thus Browning highlights that the *Orishas*, as beings of Divine Presence, fundamentally form and *inform* not only the corporeal expression and consciousness of the devotee, but also the individual's subjective experience of “self"/identity and her/his participatory engagement in the world.

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between *iran* — as “spectacle,” “revelatory vision,” and/or “the receptive capacity to perceive revelatory images” — and *òrun*, the immaterial dimension of the phenomenally given world. Furthermore, Drewal (op cit:13, emphasis added) references the linguist and scholar, Olabiyi Yai when asserting: “Intrinsic to the meaning of the Yorùbá word *iran* is repetition and *transformation*. Thus *iran* derives from the verb *ran*...[as in] *ransé* (*ran isé*) = to send a message via a messenger...[A]ccording to Yai, the message delivered is the messenger's interpretation of the original...the repetition is a revision of whatever was repeated.” Therefore *iran*, as the spectacular dimension of spiritual practice, reveals and bodies forth aspects of the sonic and immaterial dimension of the world (*òrun*) into the material dimension (*ayé*) of existence, in ways that are critically, fundamentally (as well as phenomenologically) transformative. See Drewal and Drewal (1990 [1983]: chapter 1, particularly pgs. 1-7) and LaPin (1980:7-8) for more on the cultural and etymological associations between *iran* and the immaterial dimension of existence.

<sup>345</sup> See Devisch's (1993, 1996) ethnography of ritual healing among the Yaka of Zaire; Evans-Pritchard's classic work among the Azande (1976); Dunham's (1971 [1946], 1983 [1947], 1994 [1969]) work on Haitian dance; and Hurston's (1938) ethnography of Hoodoo practice in the Southern United States. Although none of these projects focus specifically on the embodied techniques of ritual practice as the wellspring of specialized ways of knowing and/or therapeutic power, their rich ethnographic descriptions are wonderful “food for thought.” A few studies of Asian ritual therapies also warrant mention for their attention to, and engagement with, embodiment and techniques of the body among devotees and practitioners. See Fields (2001), Ots (1994), and Zarrilli (1984, 1990, 1998).

<sup>346</sup> Mason (1994, 2002) examines the social significance of an isolated ritual gesture in relation to “the creation of subjectivity and the constraints on agency” (2002:3). This work, while noteworthy for its attention to a ritual technique of the body that is more mundane than spectacular, does *not* engage the phenomenological, somatic, sensuous or processural dimensions of the ritual enactment, and thus does not contribute to our discussion of the power of embodied practice to body forth specialized ways of being-in, perceiving and engaging the world. Mason engages *moforibale*, ethnographically and theoretically, as a sign. For more on his work, see fn. 352 below. Another ethnography of note is Maya Deren's (1983 [1953]) *Divine Horsemen*. Deren provides a short yet exquisite description of her personal experience of being *mounted* by a vodun in a Haitian ritual (op cit:247-262; 322-324). Unfortunately, her interpretative comments on the significance of her participation in these embodied practices and transcendent experiences are few and buried in the final remarks of her last footnote (op cit:323-4). Yet this does *not* in any way diminish their significance. They are literally — and metaphorically — her last words and are powerful, insightful and bear repeating. For this reason I use her last words in the epigraph of this chapter, above.

<sup>347</sup> Orixá are the Yorùbá deities of Brazilian Candomble. In Nigeria, they are the Òrìṣà. See Verger (1957, 1981) for a wonderful, and exhaustive, photographic and linguistic documentation of the continuities in Orixá worship and ritual practice between Yorùbáland and Bahia, Brazil.

Daniel, a dancer and anthropologist, explores the “dancing wisdom” engendered through the rhythms and passionate trance-dances of communal rituals among worshipers of Vodun (*Lwa*) in Haiti and of *Òrìṣà* in Cuba and Brazil (2001, 2005). She offers a richly detailed presentation of these dances — in concert with music patterns, chants, herbal preparations, colors, foods — as vehicles through which the participants learn, and come to embody, the history, philosophy, and values (and for those who are “mounted,” the presence) of the *Lwa/Òrìṣà*. As she notes (2005:252) “When *oricha* dance movements are performed, they provide for historical catharsis, contemporary relief, and meaningful social action...[T]he nonverbal messages — both displayed visually and experienced physically — of persistence, deliberation, dedication, reliability, resourceful resilience, and ultimately, calm, strength, endurance are all taught, learned over time, and transferred beyond the dance event to other arenas of social life.” Like Browning, Daniel acknowledges the transformative power of incorporating Divine Presence, yet she focuses more on how this experience informs (and transforms) the collective. Ultimately Daniel frames these sacred (Yorùbá-inspired) dances as a powerful form of social medicine, highlighting their capacity to inject the presence of the *Lwa/Òrìṣà* into the social and political bodies, and thus, to facilitate “the re-integration of spirituality into the significance of human interaction and social behavior” (op cit:271, 274).

Michael Jackson, in his essay “Knowledge of the Body” (1989), attempts to “outline a phenomenological approach to body praxis” (op cit:124). Jackson uses his own experiences with bodily practice of hatha yoga as a point of departure. Yoga provided him with an intimate awareness of his body — “I began to live my body in full awareness for the first time” — as well as “the embodied character of [my] will and consciousness,” and “prompted” him “to explore the interplay of habitual body sets, patterns of practical activity, and forms of consciousness — the field of what Mauss and Bourdieu call the *habitus* ...focus[ing] on culturally conditioned modes of consciousness and body use (op cit:119-120).” Jackson examines the public performances, enacted by the community members (*not* the neophytes), in association with the puberty rites of passage for young women among the Kuranko of northern Sierra Leone. Although he asserts that “Kuranko initiation is first and foremost a disruption in the *habitus*,” he claims that this disruption is short lived, and that ultimately the popular *habitus* is reproduced — for the community members. Yet it is critical to remind the reader that Jackson was unable to penetrate the ritual seclusion of the initiation process. I believe, aware of this shortcoming, he leaves open the possibility of a more enduring disruption of the *habitus* among the initiates when he acknowledges that “the habitual or set relations between ideas, experiences, and body practices may be broken. Thus, altered patterns of body use may induce new experiences or ideas” (op cit:129).

As a dancer and someone who has practiced yoga and other forms of meditation-in-motion, I share these scholars’ awareness of, and appreciation for, the nuances and profound transformative potential of a regular practice of body techniques. That said, it is important to reiterate a fundamental distinction between the ritual and devotional practices characteristic of *Òrìṣà* and *Lwa* (or Vodun)<sup>348</sup> apprentices and specialists (the focus of Browning’s and Daniel’s

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<sup>348</sup> As has already been noted earlier in this dissertation, Haitian Vodun practice is a Diasporic religious practice informed primarily by Dahomean Vodun practice, which was also significantly influenced by Yorùbá cultural and devotional forces. There is a profound resonance between the *Lwa* and the *Òrìṣà*, as forms of Divine Presence intimately associated with natural forces that often also manifest/have aspects as Ancestral Presence. Furthermore, as noted above in the text (and as referenced in the fn. 346 above), the priests and priestesses in Vodun and *Òrìṣà*

scholarship) and those of Ifá students, healers and sages, the focus of my work herein. The communion with Divine and Ancestral Presence characteristic of, and cultivated by *Òrìṣà* and *Lwa* (or Vodun) devotees and practitioners is a passionate, ecstatic embrace. The priest/ess enters a trance state (generally, although not exclusively, through his/her engagement in communal ritual dance), experiencing a transient loss of conscious awareness (and amnesia) as his/her consciousness is temporarily displaced by that of the “mounting” Divine or Ancestral Presence. This passionate, ecstatic embrace with Spiritual Presence cultivated in *Òrìṣà* and Vodun practice stands in stark contrast to the *cool*, *conscious*, and *dispassionate* communion with Divine Presence that is the signature of Ifá practice. As Zuesse (1979:210, emphasis added) notes in his description of Ifá healers in Dahomey (referred to as *bokono* in Fon): “[T]he *bokono* had no time for ecstatic indulgences. In fact, he was...the very embodiment of *coolness* and *freshness*, (Fa means both of these concepts)...The *bokono* cultivates tranquility, *quite unlike the vodusi*...”

Furthermore, it is also essential to highlight a critical lacuna in the phenomenological and theoretical engagements of bodily techniques of the works cited above. Browning, Daniel, and Jackson, by focusing exclusively on embodied techniques of the spectacular in ritual practice, fail to explore everyday ritual and devotional practice of novice-devotees and specialists. In so doing, they miss the profound transformative power of embodied techniques of everyday practice in cultivating the specialized modes of being-in, engaging, and attending-to-the-world particular to the healers and ritual specialists. My engagement in Ifá practice, as practitioner and academic, has powerfully impressed upon me that the simple, small (and historically ignored) body techniques of everyday ritual life are absolutely fundamental in the process of transformation from the mundane *habitus* of popular Yorùbá culture to the unique *habitus* of the Ifá healer-sage. Furthermore, I argue that this special *habitus* engenders a distinctive quality of receptivity and flexibility to its dispositions and orientations which is reflected in Ifá’s non-dualistic epistemology and which facilitates both continuity and innovation in Ifá knowledge and practice.

### ***Ìforíbalẹ̀*: Gestured Greeting and Embodied Practice**

This discussion focuses on the simple, yet powerful practice of *ìforíbalẹ̀* (“to place one’s head to the ground”) as it is performed by Ifá specialists, the *Babaláwos* and *Ìyánífás*, and their apprentices, the *awo* ‘*fás*, in-and-around Ilé Ifẹ̀, Nigeria. As an isolated act, *ìforíbalẹ̀* is an embodied gesture used by Ifá students and practitioners to acknowledge and greet Ifá, as a being of consciousness, force, and Divine Presence, at personal and/or communal shrines. As a posture of salutation, *ìforíbalẹ̀* can be contextualized in relation to a larger social field of embodied greeting typical of Yoruba culture. These habits of bodily salutation: symbolize, demonstrate, and embody *respect* and deference towards others of greater social status; constitute a critical threshold in subject formation; and serve as markers of social belonging as well as social competence (or ineptitude). Thus, as a gesture of greeting, *ìforíbalẹ̀* plays upon these naturalized, cultural associations to cultivate a relationship of deference between the apprentice and the Presence of Ifá and to demarcate membership within the Ifá community.

Yet, while it is important to situate the isolated posture of *ìforíbalẹ̀* within this larger landscape of cultural corporeal techniques, I assert that *ìforíbalẹ̀* does *much more* than merely reproduce common corporeal tropes of salutation and social inclusion. *Ìforíbalẹ̀* is also a fundamental aspect of daily ritual practice for Ifá specialists and specialists-in-training.

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communities in West Africa and the Diaspora, commune with, and embody the Divine Presence of the *Lwa* and of the *Òrìṣà* through ecstatic trance-dance.

Generally, *ìforíbalè* is first presented to the student as a public performance (see the next section). Later, the student may assist and/or join her/his mentor in periodic private articulations, as a component of ritual and devotional practice, in front of the mentor's Ifá shrine (as when I learned *ìforíbalèfá*). Eventually, once the novice practitioner has been initiated and has her/his personal Ifá shrine, *ìforíbalèfá* becomes part of the individual's private daily scholarly-devotional practice.

As embodied practice, *ìforíbalè* initiates a physical intimacy with the ground and, therefore, a disruption in the mundane *habitus*. In Yorùbá culture, it is extremely uncommon (except among ritual specialists) for anyone to sit on the ground. Such vertical *lowness* is reserved for infants and toddlers, family members in mourning, or the socially disenfranchised (the destitute or insane). Even when hand-grinding pepper on a stone slab on the ground in one's home or among the street or market vendors, a low wooden stool (*àpótí*) is used so as to avoid sitting directly on the ground.

*Ìforíbalè'fá* opens the way for a shift towards an embodiment of “coolness” and “openness” (receptivity) by fostering an intimate and sensuous relationship with the earth and an attentiveness to Divine (and Ancestral) Presence. Other practices of everyday ritual and therapeutic, characteristic of Ifá — such as “opening Ifá,” the practice and performance of Ifá divination (*Ifá dídà*), and the preparation of medicines — are enacted, in a seated position on the ground. These practices, the purview of specialists and advanced students, build upon the foundation established in *ìforíbalè*, and literally *root* Ifá practitioners to the ground (particularly to the earth as container of the numinous and material dimensions of the world).

Initially a shock for the student, the practice of *ìforíbalè* disrupts and destabilizes her/his previously established embodied habit patterns and associated sensibilities.<sup>349</sup> Yet through repetition and subsequent incorporation, *ìforíbalè* becomes a fundamental dimension of the Ifá apprentice's life and being. *Ìforíbalè* — as practice — ultimately engenders a new embodied orientation of *triangular articulation* between (a) the earth and its metonymic associations to cool-ness (as both physical and emotional temperateness) and receptivity (to Divine and Ancestral Presence); (b) the *orí*, “head” (both in its aspect as *opolo*, or “brain” and as *orí inú*, or “inner head”); and (c) the *òkòn*, the “heart” or “heart/mind.”<sup>350</sup> This triangulation of sensibilities is, simultaneously, the foundation of the Ifá healers' distinctive *habitus* as well as of the tripartite (nondualistic) orientation of Ifá epistemology.

### **Greeting Ifá (in Public)**

A few days after Bàbá Dáyìsí's demonstration, we went to visit one of his teachers, Ifájímí.<sup>351</sup> Upon entering the elder's home (after meeting, and greeting, the elder on the veranda), we were ushered into the front room where he had his Ifá shrine. Immediately, Bàbá Dáyìsí prostrated himself facing his teacher's Ifá, and greeted Ifá exactly as before. When he rose, I lowered

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<sup>349</sup> A student apprentice who comes from an Ifá family lineage with active devotees and/or healer-priest/esses is often more familiar with, and has more experience performing, the postures of *ìforíbalè'fá* than the other students. Thus, I feel compelled to leave open the possibility that the sense of disruption for this apprentice may not be as marked as for the others, as s/he may have already incorporated aspects of the *habitus* (and orientations) distinctive to Ifá.

<sup>350</sup> There is an additional metonymic – and phenomenological – association between the earth and *inú* that is more actively (consciously) cultivated once the “head” and “heart-mind” are tempered; they come to “rest,” resonate with, and become “rooted” in the healer-priest/ess' *inú*. For more on *orí*, see Abiodun (1987), Adedeji (1980), Sowande (1966), Wenger (1983).

<sup>351</sup> A pseudonym.

myself to the floor, repeating the performance. Both Bábá Dáyíísí and Ifájímíí nodded in approval.

Whenever an Ifá specialist or apprentice enters an abode known to house Ifá (other than her/his own) — such as the home of another Ifá specialist, the local Ifá shrine (for a town), or Òkè Ìtásè, a prominent hill in central Ifè, the renowned “birth place” of Ifá and home to the global shrine for Ifá — s/he will approach the Ifá shrine and *foríbalè* to greet Ifá. Typically this occurs after, and is distinct from, the customary (embodied) greetings that are offered to elder Ifá specialists and other social seniors.<sup>352</sup>

As noted previously (in chapter 5) Ifá, a particular form of Divine Presence known as *Ìrúnmolè* (lit. “a heavenly Being who illuminates the earth”) and is held by all Ifa specialists, apprentices, devotees, and worshippers as *Bábá Wa*, “our father.” It is Ifá’s vital Presence (in the shrine) which is acknowledged and honored through *iforíbalè*. In this sense, then, *iforíbalè* can be a very private encounter with Ifá. (I argue, later in this chapter, that this private and intimate dimension is critical in the development of *iforíbalè* as a practice of everyday living — when the apprentice and/or specialist performs *iforíbalè*, daily, at home, in front of, and in relation to, her/his personal Ifá.) However, when an Ifá apprentice or specialist is greeting Ifá in a communal shrine or in the shrine of another person, it is by definition a public performance witnessed by others. In this public context, then, *iforíbalè* is also an enactment in which the individual publicly demonstrates and affirms her/his membership in a select community while simultaneously supporting and reaffirming the character and competence of her/his teacher(s).<sup>353</sup>

### ***Ìkíni*: The Practice and Performance of Greeting**

Antonia Yétúndé Fólàrìn Schleicher, a Yorùbá linguist and scholar, has written a book entitled *Jé k’Á Sò Yorùbá* (“Let’s Speak Yorùbá”). This text, according to its author, “invites students from the very beginning to communicate meaningfully in Yorùbá and at the same time to understand better *the daily life and attitudes* of the Yorùbá-speaking people” (1993:xi, emphasis added). Given these objectives, it is noteworthy that the text opens, in a “Preliminary Lesson” (1993:3) addressing “social interaction”, with an extended lesson entitled “*Ìkíni*” (“Greetings”, from *ì*, the nominative + *kí*, “to greet” + *eni*, “anyone”). As Fólàrìn Schleicher notes, “Greeting is an essential part of Yorùbá culture. It is important that a younger person initiate the greeting when

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<sup>352</sup> The same — customary — embodied greeting is used to greet Ifá elders and social seniors alike. See next section. However, there are special verbal salutations that are exchanged between Ifá specialists and/or apprentices.

<sup>353</sup> In *Living Santería* (2005) M. Mason presents the ritual gesture *moforibale* in the Cuban Diasporic *Òrìṣà* practice, Santería — in which the devotee prostrates him/herself in front of ritual elders — as (a) a sign publicly marking deference and social belonging within the Santería community — “He [the neophyte, also known as *ahijado/a* (Spanish, “godchild”)] prostrates himself in *moforibale*, enacting his own subjugation to the authority of his elders and the orichas that empower them” (op cit:115) — as well as (b) an indication of the character and competence of the ritual elders — “Just as parents raise a child, so too will godparents enculturate the *aleyó* [outsider who has been newly initiated]; they demonstrate the proper behavior and the *aleyó* learns by following their example...” (op cit:40). I have presented this to show the resonance in the *social significance* attributed to this gesture of ritual greeting in Diasporic ritual practice and that of public enactments of *iforíbalèfá* in Nigeria. However, this is the extent of the similarities. It is equally, if not more important to highlight the distinctions. *Moforibale*, in form — as a technique of the body — as well as in practice — as a gesture, rather than a practice of everyday living within the Cuban Diasporic *Òrìṣà* community — is markedly *different* from the embodied practice of *iforíbalèfá* that is the focus of my discussion above. For my previous discussion of how the enactment of embodied greetings is “read” by indigenes as indicative of the moral character of the individual performer’s family, see my encounter with Ìyá Mòjín-mòjín, and the advice she gave me, as presented in chapter 3.

he/she meets an older person. A girl kneels down... while a boy prostrates himself. The honorific pronoun *E* must be used when addressing an older person; otherwise one will be regarded as being rude” (ibid). To illustrate her point, Folárin Schleicher includes two sketches of a girl kneeling in front of an older woman, as well as a photograph of a young boy prostrating before a woman (op cit:5).

Every day upon awakening, in Yorùbá communities in Nigeria, it is customary for children to greet each of their parents — as well as any other important elders present in the household — and for wives to greet their husbands. Beyond the home, as well, it is expected that one will pause and greet — verbally and with the appropriate body posture — acquaintances and family members of social seniority as well as important community leaders. Greeting elders is considered an imperative social practice, and greeting performances are evaluated on the basis of the quality of both the verbal and physical dimensions of their execution.<sup>354</sup>

In a social encounter between individuals of unequal social status encounter, the person of lesser status initiates the salutation. To greet a social “senior,”<sup>355</sup> one must *first* assume the appropriate posture (discussed below). For greeting those of equal, or lesser, status no special bodily position or attitude is required. Regardless of the relations of social hierarchy of the involved parties, salutations uniformly conform to a standard (a) structure — “*E kú X!*” for a senior, or “*Kú X!*” for one of equal, or lesser, social status; (lit. “I greet you for *X!*”); and (b) formula — the first greeting offered must either be for the time of day of the encounter (morning, afternoon, dusk, evening) or to formally welcome the other’s arrival.

When greeting a senior, one is required to maintain the salutation posture until acknowledgement, in the form of a reply, is received. Then (and only then), the junior may assume his/her prior, unmarked, posture (i.e. standing or sitting) and is free to offer a wide variety of other greetings. These subsequent greetings, although still conforming to the above noted structural constraints, allow for, and in fact *encourage*, individual expression. Thus, one may choose, perhaps, to offer a greeting about the weather; the social or political climate; current activities; the profession, family or personal attributes of the person(s) being greeted; etc. In, and through, the various moments and dimensions of the entire greeting performance an individual demonstrates the level of her/his cultural competency, individual creativity, and expressive prowess, as well as points to the nature of social relations s/he has with the individual(s) being addressed and with the larger community.

### **Cultural Competency and Thresholds of Social Belonging**

When I first arrived in Ilé Ifè, I struggled, daily, with the language. Each night, when I returned to my flat, I would be exhausted from *working so-o hard to hear and understand* my interlocutors. I could and did — albeit awkwardly and frequently with totally misplaced tonality — attempt to speak. However, understanding what others’ said, particularly if they were not speaking slowly and carefully, directly to me, was an *enormous* (and at times, insurmountable) task. At the end of four months — having failed to realize my expected (self-imposed) goal of thinking *in Yorùbá* — I was feeling particularly despondent over my linguistic shortcomings. It was during this time that the following incident occurred.

It was mid-afternoon, and I was sitting on the brightly colored, hand-woven straw mats atop the cement floor in the small (approximately 5 x 6 foot) room where Ìyá Níké,<sup>356</sup> an Ìyánifá

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<sup>354</sup> See chapter 3, particularly the descriptions of my greeting experiences with Baba G and Ìyá Mòin-mòin.

<sup>355</sup> For a discussion of status and social hierarchy, see chapter 2.

<sup>356</sup> A pseudonym

(and another of my early mentors), received her predominantly female clients. Here, she performed various forms of divination and made medicines for her customers. On this particular afternoon, a few of Ìyá Níké's neighbors were sitting on the wooden benches which lined the side and back walls of the room, talking animatedly with her about some mutual acquaintances. I felt as though black smoke was spewing from the top of my head as I pushed the wheels of my brain past their limit, trying to follow more than a vague outline of this brisk conversation. Suddenly, the conversation was interrupted by a knock at the door. An older woman entered, nodding her head in an abbreviated greeting (as everyone in the room was equal, or junior, to her in social status). She could, however, not conceal her surprise to see an *Òyìnbó* (“a white person;” “a foreigner”) seated on the ground next to Ìyá Níké! And so Ìyá introduced me. “This is Ifátólú!” she said in Yorùbá waving her hand toward me. “She is here from Amérikà, and she is studying Ifá!” At this, I rose to my knees and said, “*E kààsán, mà! Sé àlàáfìà ni?*” (“Good afternoon, ma’am. Are you well?”) The woman could barely contain her excitement! “*Ah! Omọ wa. Ó gbọ Yorùbá dáadáa-o!!!*” (“Oh my! OUR child, you speak Yorùbá SO well!!!”). She then proceeded to interrogate Ìyá Níké as to how I — a white foreigner — could know the language (read: culture) so well as to greet her properly. Ìyá Níké responded by boasting that I could even write Yorùbá, and insisted upon dictating a simple sentence to me for immediate transcription (and inspection).<sup>357</sup> Although the woman was duly impressed with my transcribing abilities, she was obviously far more impressed with my competence — albeit limited — in greeting her. Among Yorùbá, to greet someone properly — both in words and posture — signifies an awareness of, and participation in, critical webs of social hierarchy and signification.

I have experienced this phenomenon, personally, on countless occasions throughout my stays in Nigeria, as well as in my interactions with Yorùbá immigrants here in the USA. I have also witnessed it occurring to other American students and researchers in and around Ilé Ifè. Repeatedly, when a Yorùbá indigene is properly greeted — with the socially appropriate posture and verbalizations — by an *Òyìnbó* (“a white person;” “a non- Yorùbá”) the response is an appreciative comment — typically noted with genuine surprise and/or amazement — on the foreigner’s competency in Yorùbá (culture).

Furthermore, for Yorùbá children as well, competency in greeting is equated with social and cultural competency. When, a few years after the aforementioned event, I returned to Nigeria after a seven-month hiatus, Bábá Dáyíísí immediately informed me — with irrepressible excitement — that he had a surprise for me! My repeated inquiries as to the substance of this surprise, however, were met only with an impish smile. Shortly after Bábá’s announcement, his young son, Dáyíísí, appeared. Immediately upon seeing me the three and a half year old Dáyíísí literally sailed through the air, landing prostrate on the grass in front of my feet. “*Ifátólú! E káàbò!*” (“Welcome, Ifatolu!,”) he cried out gleefully, peering up at me slightly from the ground. His father was bursting with prideful delight! “*Ah! Omọ dáadáa-o!*” I proclaimed with joy! “*Ó ti dágbá-o! Ó gbón!*” (“Oh my! You are such a GOOD child! You have grown up! You are so smart!”)

To physically greet one’s social seniors marks an important transition within the life cycle of the child — from *omọ ìrinsè*, a toddler (lit. “a child who walks around on foot”) to *omọ t’ó gbón* or *omọ l’èkò*, a social being (lit. “an intelligent child,” or “an educated child.”)

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<sup>357</sup> Of note, is that Ìyá Níké is illiterate. Typically, whenever she dictated an Ifá “verse” for me to transcribe, she had her teen-age daughter inspect and review my work to ensure its accuracy. For Ìyá Níké, my ability — as a foreigner — to transform her spoken words to (in)scripted signs seemed to hold a special fascination. Furthermore, having a White (foreign) apprentice, who could read and write Yorùbá, enhanced Ìyá Níké’s social capital.



Following *om̩ titun*, a newborn (lit. “a new baby”) and *om̩ owó*, an infant (lit. “a child who is carried in another’s hands”), *om̩ ìrinsè* is the third stage, or moment, of childhood. Walking does mark a slightly diminished dependency on adults, however, most toddlers in Yorùbá culture continue to be carried, in public, on the back of a senior sibling or adult. Thus, *om̩ titun*, a newborn; *om̩ owó*, an infant; and *om̩ ìrinsè*, a toddler, all share a common element: these children are not yet considered social beings. The first three moments of child development, within this configuration, are merely markers of the physical development of the child, differing little, if at all, from that of other animals. Parents train their children — usually between three and four years of age — to *dòbálè* (prostrate) or *kínlè* (kneel) on command. As one informant (a Yorùbá immigrant in California) described it: “We train them [*om̩ ìrinsè*, toddlers] just like you train dogs in America [to assume a posture on command].”<sup>358</sup> Only when a child has demonstrated competency (however limited) in recognizing and physically assuming the posture of greeting a senior, does s/he become *om̩ t’ó gbón* (“an intelligent and educated child”), a social being. Kneeling or prostrating before her/his elders, signifies to those around her/him that the child (a) “has a brain”<sup>359</sup> (is mentally and cognitively developing); (b) recognizes social hierarchy and social values; and (c) comes from a “good family” (who trains the child in proper behavior).

Initially, these greeting performances of the new social being are performed silently. Later, depending on the individual child’s linguistic development (and personality), s/he will learn a few perfunctory verbal greetings to recite in concert with the greeting posture. Regardless of the verbal component, these performances bring extensive positive reinforcement for the young child from family, neighbors, and friends. S/he will receive much adulation (praise), appreciation, and even small gifts (such as a few coins or some special food). Most importantly, s/he will incorporate the posture into the fabric of her/his being-in-the-world and the practice — of greeting social seniors morning, noon, and night — into the warp and weft of everyday life.

### The Postures

Oyèrónké Oyèwùmí notes (1997:36): “Any casual observer would notice that in the contemporary period, *obìnrin* [typically translated as “women”] usually *kínlè* (kneel down, with both knees touching the floor) when greeting a superior. *Qkùnrin* [typically translated as “men”] are seen to *dòbálè* (prostrate themselves, lying flat on the ground and then raising their torsos with arms holding them in a push-up pose).”<sup>360</sup> As Oyèwùmí also observes, there is another form of embodied greeting used by women (and girls): *ìyîká*. This form is reserved for greeting an *Oba*, a Yorùbá traditional ruler, and/or a wealthy or prominent man in society.<sup>361</sup> Furthermore,

<sup>358</sup> Personal communication.

<sup>359</sup> This English expression was the characterization most frequently used — more than any other Yorùbá or English word or phrase — by my informants to express the significance of this moment in a child’s development. It is relevant, however, to note the common assignation of “brain” to “*ogbón*” (a noun formed from the verb *gbón*), as well as the frequent practice of interchanging one (“brain”) for the other (*gbón*) in conversation.

<sup>360</sup> It is important, here, to note that Oyèwùmí would strongly disagree with my gendered characterization of the words *obìnrin* and *Qkùnrin*. Her argument is that *gender* as a social category and/or institution of social hierarchy did not exist within Yorùbá culture prior to colonization. She posits that the kneeling practice of greeting — *ikúnlè* — is a later, historical development, speculating (without historical evidentiary support) it to be a result of colonial contact. Gender, identity in/and the spheres of sociality in Yorùbá culture are discussed in chapter 2.

<sup>361</sup> Oyèwùmí claims (unconvincingly, for this author, as she offers only her unsupported opinion) that *ìyîká* was/is a variant of *ìdòbálè*, as both involve prostration. Furthermore, she implies that *ìyîká* was the “original” (and thus, “true”/“authentic”) form of female obeisance in Yorùbá culture. Yet Oyèwùmí fails to support these claims. Furthermore she fails to convincingly offer an account OTHER than gender for the elaboration (currently OR

this special form of greeting — in addition to marking her obeisance — is also an embodied (coded) demand for a financial response, as noted in the expression: *Tí obìnrin bá yîká, òkùnrin máa fowó s'apò*. (“If a woman *yîká*’s for a man, he will put his hand in his pocket [to give her money].”)

Thus, *ìdòbálè* — the act of prostrating on the ground (as described above in Oyèwùmí’s text) — is the embodied form of greeting a social senior used by men and boys. Often, however, men (and teenage boys) in public encounters — with the immutable exception being when they are greeting an *Oba* — perform one of two abbreviated versions of *ìdòbálè*.<sup>362</sup> In the first abbreviated posture, the man bends forward slightly from the waist while extending his right arm towards the ground in front of his right leg. He may also (this is optional) bend his right knee slightly, thereby lowering his head and torso, and advancing his right hand to contact the ground. The second, even more, abbreviated form is the posture generally adopted when a socially junior man or teenage boy is seated and a social senior approaches or arrives. The junior will remain seated and bend over from the waist, right arm extended towards the ground. Prostration — fully executed or in an abbreviated version — is required of all Yorùbá men when greeting someone of greater status. The ONLY men exempt from this practice are the indigenous rulers. However, it is claimed that *in private* an *Oba* will kneel — *kúnlè* — *solely* to greet the aged wives of deceased predecessors (and these elder women will, in turn, reciprocally kneel to him).<sup>363</sup>

Women and girls, as stated above, usually *kúnlè* — kneel, with their knees, shins, and the anterior aspects of their feet on the ground — when greeting a senior. Frequently, as also noted previously, when greeting an *Oba* or a “Big Man,” they may elect to *yîká* (rather than *kúnlè*). *Ìyîká* is a more complicated form of greeting than kneeling. It requires the woman to: (1) first prostrate on her right side, slightly propped up on her right elbow and resting the side of her head on her right hand — *yîká òtún* (“*yîká* on the right side”); then (2) roll gracefully to her left side; and (3) repeat the prostration gesture on her left side — *yîká òsì*. There is no abbreviated form of *ìyîká*.

However, as with *ìdòbálè*, there are two abbreviated forms of *ìkúnlè*.<sup>364</sup> In the first abbreviated posture, the woman (or girl) does a brief curtsey, bending her knees towards the ground. The second abbreviated form, like that for the men (and boys), is initiated from a seated position. In this case, the woman (or teen, perhaps) slides herself off her chair extending her knees towards the ground, while supporting her torso erect (holding onto the arms or seat of the chair). Depending on the woman’s agility and/or the height of the chair, her knees may actually touch the ground, but, in contrast to the fully elaborated posture, they do not remain on the ground, as she bounces promptly back into her seat.

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historically in Yorùbá culture) of *distinct* forms of embodied greetings in relation to a normative practice (her rendering) of prostration for (as she puts it) “anatomic males.”

<sup>362</sup> Note, however, if a younger boy assumes an abbreviated posture it will most often be interpreted as a sign of pride and/or impudence, and the child will be criticized and/or punished. Age is a *critical* social marker of social hierarchy in Yorùbá culture.

<sup>363</sup> Johnson, *History of the Yorubas* (1976 [1921]:65).

<sup>364</sup> These abbreviated versions — particularly the latter — are also generally reserved for women and older (teenage) girls. Curtseying appears to have fairly wide currency and acceptance. Yet, to merely motion toward kneeling (as in the case of the most abbreviated form, initiated from a seated posture) would be considered a sign of laziness, impudence, and/or bad character in a young girl and would be subject to criticism and, more likely, corporal punishment.

## ***Ilẹ̀: The Ground, The Earth...The Sacred Vessel of Existence***

All of these postures of obeisance incorporate an intimate association with the ground, *ilẹ̀*, phenomenologically as well as linguistically. *Ìdòbálẹ̀*, etymologically, is a contraction — a common procedure of word formation in Yorùbá language — of: (a) *ì*, a nominative prefix; (b) *dódò*, “to bow;” (c) *bá*, “to meet” or “to encounter;” and (d) *ilẹ̀*, “the ground,” “the earth.” *Ìkúnlẹ̀*, similarly, is formed by the contraction of: (a) *ì*, nominative; (b) *kún*, “to kneel;” and (c) *ilẹ̀*, “ground,” “earth,” “land.” The linguistic relationship between *ìyùkà* and *ilẹ̀*, although not as obvious as in the first two examples, is nonetheless, equally palpable. *Ìyùkà* is formed by combining: (a) *ì*, nominative prefix; (b) *yí*, “to turn (in a particular direction),” as when walking or driving, or “to roll (along);” (c) *ì*, nominative prefix (again); and (d) *ká*, “to encircle” (as in wrapping a cloth or towel around one’s body). In this construction we have an action in which one turns or rolls over, as in a circle. Although unstated, this action undoubtedly occurs solely on the ground — *ilẹ̀*.

Strauss (1966) argues that erect posture (standing “up”) — the inverse of what we have been discussing above, bringing one’s self “down” to the ground — has universal social, psychological, and moral implications. Among these are: (a) independence and inspired intention — mobility and motivation, “get up and go;” (b) distance from other sentient beings — “status” as well as social and biological Darwinism; and (c) upright moral character. Furthermore, he presents a short, yet provocative, linguistic argument to (a) support a claim that psychologically, “to stand,” incorporates enduring resistance to destabilizing influences; and (b) demonstrate an association, using the etymological root of standing (“sta”), between erect posture and “status,” “state,” “standard,” “institution” (op cit:143.) Strauss’ arguments clearly articulate a set of (“modern,” “Western”) culturally and historically naturalized associations between elevation of one’s body and elevation of one’s social position — associations that, it appears, are shared by contemporary Yorùbá. Thus, to “lie down” (in prostration) or “kneel down” — for both contemporary “Western” and “Yorùbá” subjects — is a gesture that embodies “relation to a higher force,” be it social, moral, or spiritual (Thompson, 1974:80.)

Included in Strauss’ universal implications of standing “up” is a “[d]istance from the ground. In getting up... we lose secure contact with the *supporting ground*, with Mother Earth, and we miss it” (op cit:144, emphasis added). Mother Earth has additional resonance and significance in Ifá. As noted earlier in this dissertation,<sup>365</sup> *ìgbá ìwà* (“the calabash of existence”) is a fundamental metonymic icon in Ifá practice, (re)presenting<sup>366</sup> the earth (*ilẹ̀*) as a spherical vessel that contains the dynamic interplay of the material and immaterial dimensions of the phenomenologically given world (*ayé* and *òrun*, respectively). For Ifá practitioners, the earth is the Divine Feminine *incarnate*, her “belly” swollen in a perpetual state of pregnancy. She is the receptacle of eternal germination by Divine and Ancestral Presence while simultaneously giving birth, continuously, to the infinite variations of material form. Through their engagement in everyday scholarly-devotional practice, Ifá healer-priest/esses cultivate a profound intimacy with, and corporeal resonance to, mother earth, bodying forth, over time, “a stomach as deep as a calabash”<sup>367</sup> — as deep as *ìgbá ìwà*, the primordial wellspring of existence. And this sonically (and spiritually) informed somatic mode of being-in, perceiving, and engaging-the-world is the

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<sup>365</sup> Throughout the dissertation, but particularly in chapters 1 and 2.

<sup>366</sup> Here I am consciously echoing and incorporating Robert P. Armstrong’s (1971, 1975, 1981) recognition (and detailed arguments) that aesthetic works, such as *ìgbá ìwà*, are *not* representations, but rather *presentations* of affective (and transcendent) presence.

<sup>367</sup> *inú t’ó jìnlẹ̀ bi agbè* (a “stomach” or “inside” which is “very deep like the *agbè* calabash”).

source and wellspring (*orísun*) of the deep wisdom (*ogbón òjìnlẹ̀*) and healing power (*agbára*) particular to Ifá.

### **Bodying Forth Distinctive Ways of Knowing in Ifá: From the “Ground Up”**

Stated differently, there is a fundamental relationship between the embodied techniques of everyday living among Ifá initiates and priests and the production of their specialized ritual and therapeutic knowledge. Ifá epistemology is rooted in an inductive process of comprehension from the “ground up.” This is presented by Zuesse in his chapter entitled “Esoterism and Bodily Knowledge” (1979:135-150), in which he frames “oretic symbolisms” in relation to inductive cognition (op cit:135, emphasis added): “Ascending symbolisms, which we can also call oretic symbolisms, are based on sensory physical *complementarities*...elemental sensory experiences, which in their repetition and interlacing correspondences weave an inclusive and organized sensory-motor order...This tacit cognitive structure, [is] *rooted...in the sensory*...” He continues (op cit:144-5, emphasis added), as noted in the epigraph of this chapter:

[H]ow it is that these transcendental orientations are embedded in the consciousness of the initiate; how is reality transformation and self-transformation made real and convincing? ... Perhaps the point is not really the communication of specific information at all, but *experiential upheaval*... a *radical recentering* of experience... the religious reality ...becomes part of the initiate, orienting the preconscious...into a characteristic disposition.... [N]ot just ideas are involved, but a whole orientation of the self.

Although Zuesse is specifically addressing the fundamental role of cultivating corporeal capacities of comprehending the transcendent, I maintain that his arguments have equal force when considering Ifá medical knowledge. I also refer the reader to Buckley’s (1985) *Yorùbá Medicine*. Based on extensive fieldwork, Buckley claims Ifá medicine is informed by an underlying, albeit naturalized and formally *unarticulated*, conceptual framework. He then offers a detailed formulation of this framework as a paradigm that is critically informed by a trinary logic. Of particular note is his presentation (op cit:53-57; 118-120; 136-7) of the metonymic resonances between the healthy pregnant (female) body and two powerful symbolic (re)presentations of “the cosmos” — the cooking pot (and its watery contents) atop the three hearthstones (*ààrò mèta kùí dobèè*<sup>368</sup>); and *igbá iwà*, the calabash of existence. Each is a black vessel containing and enabling the dynamic and harmonic interpenetration of white and red substances therein, and in so doing, ensures and sustains the health and creative productivity of the whole. In this configuration, “black” metonymically expresses an energetically temperate mater-iality of containment (*ilẹ̀*), as well as foundational support and integrity; “red,” (*ayé*) heat/fire, life blood, dynamic material nourishment; and “white,” (*òrun*) air/ethereal element, spiritual activating principle. Thus, in the various spheres of sociality and existence — the individual (human) body, the social and political body, as well as the cosmic organism — health, harmony and creative productivity are bodied forth through the *containment of complementarity* in a harmonic (read: balanced) orchestration of “incorporating difference.”

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<sup>368</sup> Lit. “the three hearthstones prevent the soup [in the clay pot] from overflowing.” Note: the indigenous pots are made of fired clay and are black in color.

As Jackson, challenging Bourdieu's (1977; 1990) overly deterministic renderings of *habitus*, notes (1989:129): "the habitual... relations between ideas, experiences, and body practices may be broken...[A]ltered patterns of body use may induce new experiences and provoke new ideas." The regular performance of the morning ritual of salutation begins only *after* initiation into Ifá. Initially, the daily articulation of these new patterns of body use destabilize and disrupt the mundane *habitus* of the initiate. Simultaneously, this practice begins to insert new patterns and rhythms into the initiate's bodily being-in-the-world. Gradually, the corporeal resonances of this daily practice harmonize the initiate's head (*orí*) and heart-mind (*okòn*) with the earth (*ilé*), re-centering her/his embodied experience and bodying forth a new, unique *habitus* — that of the Ifá priest/ess. This new configuration of bodily being-in-the-world, and its associated dispositions and orientations, is an open and dynamic field of being where the conscious and discriminating incorporation of Divine Presence flourishes, and which yields an on-going and ever-changing dance of enhanced perceptual and intellectual possibilities.

### **Departures and Returns. *Iforíbalè' fá* as Everyday Practice: the Cultivation of Coolness, Receptivity and a "Deep" Engagement with Divine Presence**

Early in the course of my apprenticeship to Ifá ritual/healing specialists in Ilé Ifè, and just a few months after my introduction to the practice of *iforíbalè' fá*, I was formally initiated into the Ifá priesthood (as an *awo Ifá*<sup>369</sup>), receiving my personalized *ikin Ifá* (consecrated palm kernels used in devotional and divinatory/diagnostic practice, also known as the "hands of Ifá"). The *ikin' fá*, contained within a clay pot or wooden vessel, constitute the *awo's* personal Ifá shrine, the locus of her/his personal devotional practice.

The following account, based on one of my journal entries from Nigeria, occurred after I had been engaged in this daily devotional practice for more than two years.<sup>370</sup> Nonetheless, I prefaced this entry by noting, "Although I feel the rhythms of Ifá practice have become an integral part of my being, I am also acutely aware of how *young* and *small* I am [in Ifá practice/as an Ifá practitioner]."

In the morning, before the intensity of the Nigerian sun begins to bake the air, I rise, bathe, and dress quietly in the solitude of my "self-contained" room. Then, carrying a small bowl

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<sup>369</sup> *Awo* is generally translated as "mysteries" (as in the common translation of *babaláwo*, as "father of the mysteries"). In this context it signifies one who *not only* has been undergone the *itèfá* initiatory rites, but *also* is conscious of, and responding to, a "calling" to serve Ifá and the human community as a healer-priest, and thus is committed to, and actively participating in, the life-long quest for cultivation of self, wisdom, and transcendence described in the previous chapter. Unfortunately, there is a common *mis*-understanding among many in the Diasporic communities in which completion of the *itèfá* initiatory rites is equated with priestly status. This misinformed conflation of participation in an initiatory ceremony and mastery, wisdom, and/or priestly status is discussed in chapters 1 and 2 — in relation to the historic mystification and over-valorization of the spectacular, in scholarly and popular imaginaries; and to the erasure of everyday practice and its fundamental importance as the means for the *cultivating* Ifá's distinctive mode of being-in, engaging, and attending-to the world. In Nigeria it is (and has been) common for an individual to enter *igbódù* (Ifá's sacred grove) and undergo *itèfá* because of a desire to know his/her "star" (indwelling logos); to receive a personalized Ifá shrine as a means of enhancing one's personal, social and/or spiritual power (*agbára*); or as a prescribed ritual therapeutic intervention. For the latter, see M. Drewal's description of the taxi driver who underwent *itèfá* as a prescriptive and effective treatment for alcoholism (1992:72-3).

<sup>370</sup> I have maintained my engagement in this fundamental everyday devotional practice through the present moment, continuing to grow with, and in, the practice; to be sustained and nurtured, supported, transformed, and *informed* by my ongoing, dynamic and intimate relationship with Ifá; with Divine (and Ancestral) Presence.

of cool fresh water, I silently approach the closet that houses my humble Ifá shrine. Ifá, as an emanation of Divine Presence, is the embodiment and essence of truth and wisdom. He is the Word of God.

Opening the closet door the light from the room gently falls on the floor, illuminating the small earthenware vessel containing my ikin'fá. I sprinkle cool water on the ground in front of my Ifá three times, each time quietly pronouncing “*Ire*” (“blessings”). Then I prostrate myself on the floor with my head face down, six inches or so in front of my Ifá. Placing my hands on either side of my chest and, bending my elbows, I arch up, slightly raising my chest and head, in a posture reminiscent of “cobra” of my yoga practice years earlier in the US.

“*Òrúnmilà,*” I call *Ifá* softly.

“*Mo yín ború!*” (“May my offerings be accepted.”)

“*Òrúnmilà,*”

“*Mo yín boyè!*” (“Through our relationship, may I enjoy a long life.”)

“*Òrúnmilà,*”

“*Mo yín bosíse -O!*” (“May my prayers and utterances become manifest in the world.”)

And today, as each morning, I accompany my vocal articulations with the gentle rippling articulations that I first performed under the watchful eye of Bàbá Dáyíísí (and of his Ifá). Now, however, the movements flow easily and harmoniously with my words, forming a unified whole. My legs, outstretched behind me, rest gently atop the ground. The concavity of my belly meets, and melts into, the earth. And as the ripples move through me, my upper body, my chest and forehead alternate as they softly brush against the soft, cool floor. Serenity washes over me with each undulation. My facial expression is relaxed, my eyes soft. My mind is clear, my emotions, quiet. I am alert and calm. My breath is deep, full, expanding from the apices of my lungs into the floor of my pelvis without stress or strain. I feel as though I am floating on the currents of my breath. The ripples of my torso and the ebb and flow of the breath are one. I experience a quiet unfolding sensation in, and around, my heart, like flower petals opening towards the sun.

I continue effortlessly, softly uttering the phrase “*Ifá, Orí mi 're!*” (“May my head<sup>371</sup> be graced with blessings and good fortune!”) three times. Each time tapping my forehead gently tapping on the ground as I invoke my (inner) head (*orí mi*).

I have a fleeting awareness that my lips are slightly upturned in a smile.

I take a moment and then gently push myself up and back, until I am seated on my haunches, my heels raised slightly off the ground. I open a bottle of Schnapps and pour libations on the ground in front of my Ifá, chanting a brief praise poem (*oríkì*) honoring Mother Earth. Then, invoking select *oríkì* praising Ifá, I remove the lid from the vessel, and generously douse my ikin'fá with Schnapps uttering “*Ire! Ire! Ire!*” (“Blessings! Blessings! Blessings!”). Following the Schnapps, like waters from a wellspring, sacred verses (*kíkì'fá*) and prayers gush forth from my mouth onto my Ifá. In the midst of this melodic recitation, I sense a light cloud of consciousness and Presence, with a faint, almost imperceptible, golden-hue, rise from the contents of the vessel and softly expand in the compacted space of the shrine. I become quiet and still, as I feel this co-Presence physically enter my consciousness, my heart, my being. In this conscious embrace with Divine Presence I sense a quiet, yet impressive, internal eruption of synesthetic impressions. It is as if my mind and my body have become a blank, elastic palate:

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<sup>371</sup> *Orí mi* here refers to *orí inú* (lit. “inner head”), a spiritual center within the human body that is intimately associated with the individual’s indwelling *logos*; spiritual essence; and unction for this particular incarnation.

multiple and overlapping, three dimensional images are spontaneously and simultaneously pressing on and through this palate creating a kaleidoscopic dance of shifting shapes, contours, textures and colors...a myriad of visceral and sensuous impressions. To clarify and concretize this perceptual experience, I pick up the four lobes of a kola nut from the ground and begin to ask simple yes/no questions. The responses of the kola nut serve as a guided conversation assisting me in translating this embodied experience of co-Presence and communion to familiar mental images and linear linguistic formulations of communication.<sup>372</sup>

The “conversation” completed, I feel Ifá’s Presence recede from my body. I quietly thank him, sprinkle cool water lightly on the ground and replace the lid atop my *agere Ifá*. Then, to close my sweet dance of daily ritual awakenings, I re-articulate *iforibalèfá*, this time in its most abbreviated form. Kneeling, I delineate: First, a larger arc as the middle and ring fingers of my right hand move gently from the ground to my forehead, and then my heart three times, carried by my voice articulating the prayers with which as I first initiated my morning practice;<sup>373</sup> and then, a more contained arc, as these fingers press the ground and then my forehead thrice more, in harmony with requesting Ifá (as before) to bless my head. Beginning, and ending with *iforibalèfá*, the subtle dance of my morning ritual practice has come full circle. Remembering the messages, and bearing the traces of Ifá’s embrace in my bodily being-in-the-world, I rise from the ground to face another day.

### Reflections and Revelations

Recapitulating some salient points of this chapter, in its most superficial dimension, *iforibalèfá* — as prostration of salutation — can be contextualized in relation to a larger social field of embodied greeting typical of Yorùbá culture. Greeting, for most Yorùbá, represents the quintessence of sociality and “culture.” These habits of bodily salutation, as minutiae of mundane practices of everyday living,<sup>374</sup> are fundamental dimensions of the fabric of subject formation and sociality. As practices they provide a critical space — corporeally and socially — for demonstrating (or disrupting) social belonging and for cultivating (and/or challenging) social relations, particularly those of respect and social seniority deference.<sup>375</sup> Thus, as described

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<sup>372</sup> See Parkin’s (1991) description of experiences of “Kenyan Diviners” as they move from “simultaneity” to a more linear narrative “sequence” in their distinctive divinatory and diagnostic practices. Parkin’s description of each ritual healer’s experience is limited and partial, nonetheless my reading of the text suggests that in each instance, the specialist initially experiences some form of communion with spiritual presence which Parkin associates with a state of interiority characterized by excessive, and unwieldy meanings. The specialist then shifts his focus exteriorly, to the client, and proceeds in a process Parkin frames as “semantic disentanglement and clarification [that] runs parallel with the idiom of movement from a wilderness to a set [cultivated, culturally and linguistically familiar] place and time” (op cit:183). Parkin’s descriptions and interpretations resonate with my experience of shifting from the powerful corporeal impressions (engendered by communion with Divine and/or Ancestral Presence, depending upon the circumstance) and “translating” these sensations to cognitive formations.

<sup>373</sup> Marcel Mauss “Techniques du corps” (1973).

<sup>374</sup> This is a conscious allusion to M. Jackson’s *Minima Ethnographica* (1998).

<sup>375</sup> Although my presentation of these postures as everyday practices in Yorùbá quotidian life, in the earlier sections of this chapter, emphasizes their capacity for reproducing social belonging and social relations, I would be remiss if I did not highlight that they are actively and consciously deployed to challenge the authority of social seniors and to disrupt social relations. They are also a space for cultivating an individual’s capacity for “joking” and for creative innovation — highly valued abilities often equated by indigenes (and anthropologists) with Yorùbá identity, as presented in chapters 2 and 3. M. Drewal (1992:16) provides a wonderful example of the penchant for, and delight in, joking in Yorùbá culture as well as its strong associations with Yorùbá identity. Drewal’s Yorùbá friend (and ethnographic subject) narrates how another man played (*seré*, lit. “to play”) a joke on a policeman, when the policeman insisted that he stop at a checkpoint. “Playing the situation,” (ibid) the man feigned that the car’s engine

earlier, only when a toddler has demonstrated competency (however limited) in recognizing, and physically assuming the appropriate posture for greeting a “senior”, does s/he become *omo t’ó gbón* (“an intelligent and educated child”), a social being. Kneeling or prostrating before her/his elders, signifies that the child (a) “has a brain” (is mentally and cognitively developing); (b) recognizes social hierarchy and (c) has incorporated social values.

Thus, on one level, *iforibalẹ́fá* plays upon common, naturalized corporeal associations to cultivate a relationship of humility and deference between the initiate and Ifá, as a Being of Spiritual Presence, and to demarcate membership within the Ifá community. Furthermore, and more critical to the process of breaking and remaking the initiate’s *habitus*, *iforibalẹ́* has special resonance with the prototypic posture of salutation for young boys in Yorùbá culture, *idòbálẹ́*. Whenever greeting a social senior, a young boy fully prostrates himself, facing the ground, then uses his arms to slightly lift his torso into a low plank position, maintaining a grounded gaze. One can postulate that, perhaps, *iforibalẹ́* is an extension, or variation, of *idòbálẹ́*. The signature posture of *iforibalẹ́* — the one to which it continually returns — is prostrated legs and belly, gentle arch from the waist atop straightened arms, an open chest and soft gaze forward. Yet *iforibalẹ́* begins, and passes through, in an almost invisible moment, an articulation of *idòbálẹ́*. Even the arched position of *iforibalẹ́fá*, with the torso’s close proximity to the ground and its prostrate legs and belly, resonates deeply for Yorùbá men with the bodily memories of *idòbálẹ́*. Thus *iforibalẹ́* originates from, and re-enacts, the first technique of embodied greeting for Yorùbá boys — the one which reflects an awakening of their conscious awareness; marks their ascension to the realm of social and cultural beings and, most importantly for our inquiry, is the embodiment of their smallness. Yet while young children typically remain prostrate for a few seconds, the practice of *iforibalẹ́fá* sustains this embodied *smallness* (deference or humility) for much longer periods of time (anywhere from a few minutes to a half an hour or more). Thus, for initiates to Ifá — the overwhelming majority of whom, in contemporary Nigeria are Yorùbá men<sup>376</sup> — the daily enactment of *iforibalẹ́* is a sustained, intensified embodied re-membering of this physical, social, and emotional smallness and lack of power. As such, *iforibalẹ́* initially precipitates a drastic, destabilizing and often discomforting shift in bodily being-in-the-world.

Beyond this embodiment of smallness and humility, *iforibalẹ́* also significantly challenges the mundane *habitus* of the initiate by initiating, and then establishing, a lasting physical intimacy with the ground. As previously described, in contemporary Yorùbá culture, it is extremely uncommon to see anyone sitting on the ground.

Members of the Ifá priesthood are the notable and solitary exception, for they spend most of their time and perform most of their ritual work, both personal and public, either seated, kneeling or prostrate on the ground. The practice of *iforibalẹ́fá*, and its associated dance of salutation and communion, brings the Ifá initiate down to the ground, opening the way and laying the foundation for an intimate and sensuous relationship with the earth.

What is the significance of this bodily intimacy with the earth? A brief overview of a few common Yorùbá expressions which incorporate intimacy with the earth — *ba*, “to touch” + *ilẹ́*, “the earth” — and aspects of the body, will provide insight into the particular cultural

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would not start, forcing the policeman to help him, by pushing the car. After approximately thirty minutes, the man finally “allowed the engine to kick in,” thanked the officer and left. Drewal ends by noting that her friend prefaced his narrative “by reminding me, ‘you know, he is a Yorùbá man.’ The fact of ‘being Yorùbá’ he presented as the basis for me to understand the ruse and the man’s ability to pull it off” (ibid).

<sup>376</sup> For a brief discussion of the variable presence of women in Ifa practice and of the decline in newly entering student-apprentices, both male and female, over the past 25 plus years, see fn. 303 in chapter 5.



significance of these associations. *Ìfokònbalè* and *ìbalè àyà* both mean “peace of mind” or “tranquility”. The former literally translates to the act of touching the heart/mind to the earth, while the latter literally brings the chest down to the earth. *Ìfarabalè* meaning “calm” or “composure,” literally translates as the act of bringing the body upon the earth. Following this culturally informed logic, bringing the heart/mind, the chest, as well as the full weight of the body in close contact with the earth offers rest, repose, and (physical and emotional) cooling.

Here it is important to note, that the seat of both emotions and thought, in Yorùbá embodiment, are internal — *inú* — which means both “inside” and “in one’s belly.” The physical head, *orí*, is the locus of discriminatory sense and intelligence (*ogbón*) as well as of the “inner head,” *orí inú*. The latter is a subtle, numinous, aspect of being-in-the-world that is intimately associated with individuation and, for those that seek it, enlightenment. The heart, *okòn*, actually translates as “heart/mind” and incorporates both emotional, perceptual (such as intuition), and cognitive dimensions of being. The heart/mind and the head serve as filters or gateways through which emotional, perceptual, and/or mental impressions flow, in one of two directions — either down into the individual’s *inú* (“interiority” or “stomach”) or outward (through verbal expression or one’s behavior).

Furthermore, linguistic analysis of expressions such as ruminating (*ironu*, lit. “a stirring of thoughts inside”), anger (*ibinú*, lit. “a forceful eruption, as in vomiting, of the contents of one’s inside”), or remorse (*ibanuje*, lit. “the spoiling of one’s insides”), all point to excessive internal agitation and/or heat as the source of emotional and mental disharmony. Thus, by bringing the body close to the earth — linguistically and/or phenomenologically — a cooling and calming of both mental and emotional dispositions is achieved. Intimacy with the earth for Ifá initiates and healer-priests/esses engenders an embodied “aesthetic of the cool” (Thompson 1966), a calm and tempered meditative state of bodily being-in-the-world.

Finally, by turning to the most abbreviated form of *ìforíbalè* (as described in my closing of the morning ritual devotion) we can grasp another, more finely tuned, dimension of this embodied relationship with the earth. The fingers of the right hand point the way, bringing our attention to the bare essence of this particularized embodied experience. First they articulate a triangulation of the earth, the head and the heart; and then a triangulation between the earth, the head, and Ifá as a Being of Spiritual Presence.

The earth — *ilè* — is, as previously noted, exquisitely significant in Ifá practice. The calabash of existence, *igbá iwà*, is a vessel containing extremely potent, sacred *medicines* which only senior priests may possess. This round calabash has two halves whose lips, ideally, seal seamlessly. Essentially, this calabash (re)presents the universe of existence.<sup>377</sup> The two halves (re)present *ayé* — the world of material existence — and *òrun* — the realm of spiritual presence. When sealed, the round outer form, the calabash itself, re-presents the earth. Thus the earth is the vessel that contains, and allows for, the dynamic interplay and interpenetration of the material and the immaterial realms of existence. Thus, I propose, the specific intension<sup>378</sup> of *ìforíbalè* is to

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<sup>377</sup> Here I am consciously echoing and incorporating Robert P. Armstrong’s (1971, 1975, 1981) recognition (and detailed arguments) that aesthetic works, such as *igbá iwà*, are *not* representations, but rather *presentations* of affective (and transcendent) presence.

<sup>378</sup> As Jackson notes (1989:207) “The Latin stem *intendere* consists of *in* plus *tendere*, *tensum*, the latter meaning ‘to stretch.’” I include this to highlight an important etymological, and experiential, resonance between corporeal articulations and/or gestures — as a stretching or reaching (beyond the known, familiar, comfortable) — and their capacity to body forth expanded affective, perceptual and/or intellectual horizons and possibilities.

harmonize and align the initiate's head and heart with the earth, engendering an embodied permeability to spiritual Presence.

By fostering an intimate and sensuous relationship with the earth, *ìforíbalẹ̀* opens the way for a shift towards an embodiment of “coolness” and “openness” (permeability) to Presence. Initially a shock for the student, the practice of *ìforíbalẹ̀* disrupts and destabilizes her/his previously established embodied habit patterns and associated sensibilities. Yet through repetition and subsequent incorporation, *ìforíbalẹ̀* becomes a fundamental dimension of the Ifá apprentice's life and being, and ultimately engenders a new embodied orientation of *triangular articulation* of harmonic resonance between the (a) the *orí*, “the head;” and (b) the *òkòn*, the “heart” or “heart/mind” and (c) the *inú*, the “abdomen” and “insides” (here referring to the corporeal and energetic core as well as to a state of deep — affective and transcendent — interiority). This triangulation of sensibilities is, simultaneously, the foundation of the Ifá specialists' distinctive *habitus* as well as of the tripartite (nondualistic) orientation of Ifá epistemology<sup>379</sup> that foregrounds *dynamism and relationships*, recognizing and valorizing the tensions and complementarities inherent in the dualistic domain of material existence as well as the interpenetration of same by the third, or spiritual, dimension.

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<sup>379</sup> See my presentation of Ifá epistemology in relation to, and emergent from, the specialized, sonically-informed somatic mode of being-in, attending to, and making-sense-of-the-world particular to Ifá practice and practitioners — earlier in this chapter.

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