Dialogues of Dispersal
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NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS

Fatima El-Tayeb is a historian and currently Scholar in Residence at the University of Tennessee. She has published a book, Schwarze Deutsche: ‘Rasse’ and nationale Identität 1890–1933 (Frankfurt: Campus 2001), and a number of articles on blacks in German history. Her recent work is on transnational identity concepts among European ethnic minorities. She has also co-authored a movie and a novel, Alles wird gut:Everything will be fine (with Angelina Maccaroni).

Rhonda D. Frederik, an Assistant Professor of English at Boston College, teaches Caribbean and African American literatures. She is also interested in American literatures, particularly twentieth-century women’s popular fiction, and literatures of the African Diaspora. Her research interests are in Post-colonial Studies, Cultural Studies and narratives of migration. She is presently working on a manuscript that examines Caribbean literature’s recurrent figure of the Panama Canal worker.

Sandra Gunning is Associate Professor in the Program in American Culture, the Center for Africana and African Studies, and the Department of English at the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor. Her current research addresses gender and location in the early African diaspora.

Tara W. Hunter is an Associate Professor of History at Carnegie Mellon University. She is the author of To Joy My Freedom: Southern Black Women’s Lives and Labors After the Civil War (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997). She is currently working on the history of marriage among African Americans in the nineteenth century.


Patrick Manning is Professor of History and African-American Studies at Northeastern University, where he directs the World History Center. His work on the demography of slavery in Africa and the African diaspora, including Slavery and African Life (1996), emphasises the disproportions in sex ratios brought by the slave trade and the resulting transformations in gender relations throughout the regions affected by enslavement. He is author of Navigating World History: Historians Create a Global Past (2003).


His general interest is in the ongoing and mutually transformative dialogue between African and African-American cultures. His current research concerns the diversity of immigrant and indigenous ethnic groups of African descent in the United States.

Michelle Mitchell is Assistant Professor in the Department of History and Center for Africana and African Studies at the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor. Her research focuses upon the production and maintenance — biological, material, discursive, cultural — of “racial” collectives. She is the author of Racial Propagation: African Americans and the Politics of Racial Destiny after Reconstruction (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004).

Jenny Sharpe is professor of English and Comparative Literature at the University of California at Los Angeles. Her publications include a recent book, Glimpse of Slavery: A Literary Archaeology of Black Women’s Lives (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003). Her current research is on nation, gender and technology in diasporic cultures.


Sophie White received her PhD from the Courtiaulde Institute, University of London. Her research and publications investigate issues of gender, consumerism and the role of dress and appearance in managing gender, race, class and ethnic encounters in French Colonial Louisiana. She currently serves as Assistant Director of the Gender Studies Program at the University of Notre Dame.
Gendered Agendas:
The Secrets Scholars Keep about Yorùbá-Atlantic Religion

J. Lorand Matory

The secret makes the sacred in the religions of the Yorùbá Atlantic. Writes Karin Barber,

It is by being made into a 'secret' [aso] that a spirit being gets its authority. It has been said, "... if we put a stone in a gourd and make a couple of taboo to stop people from looking into it, it's become an aso ..." Human collusion to keep the 'secret' endows the object with spiritual power; perhaps what the secret really comes down to in the end is the open secret that gods are made by men.1

This essay concerns the role of scholars in making the secrets of the sacred, and, indeed, in remaking the boundaries and the internal hierarchies of the communities fashioned to guard those secrets.

Nation states too create boundaries and hierarchies around secrets. I am speaking not of national security secrets but of the everyday acts of dissimulation by which imagined communities energise their boundaries with popular emotional support. Nation states selectively identify certain practices and symbols of the national community as normative and define certain other commonplace behaviours and symbols as non-existent, for fear that they might reduce the nation in the eyes of powerful foreign observers. Thus Michael Herzfeld describes what he calls 'cultural intimacy'—a sensibility that encourages state elites to propagate official visions of the nation state that exclude embarrassing aspects of national cultural life, even though these aspects of life are the focus of family feeling within the nation and the focus of many people's emotional loyalty to the national community and its state representatives.2 In other words, the spokespersons of the nation state have an image to protect in the court of international public opinion and ideological priorities at odds with both popular consciousness and the inevitable cultural heterogeneity of the nation. Thus, I
might add, ‘cultural intimacy’ sets up a hierarchy within the group constituted by the secret: some members’ practices are normalised, while other members’ practices are branded abnormal, shameful and best kept invisible. The bearers of normalised practices assert the right to speak for the group, while everyone else is reduced to silence.

The West African tradition of orixá-worship is one among multiple religions around the Atlantic perimeter that share historical roots among the eighteenth-century ancestors of the Yorùbá, Cubán Ochá, Trinidadian Shango and the Brazilian religions of Umbanda, Xangô and Candomblé. They came about through the nineteenth-century dispersion of enslaved Yorùbá, Cubán and Cubano people and others from West Africa, as well as the ongoing circuit of commerce, pilgrimage, books and scholarly debate that have since, then, continuously linked West Africa with its sons and daughters in the Americas. In particular, Candomblé is a religion of divination, blood sacrifice, spirit possession and healing that came about chiefly in the Brazilian state of Bahia. Believers attribute miraculous powers and exemplary flaws to gods known as orixás, voduns, inúiques and caboclos, depending upon the Candomblé denomination. The adventures, personalties and kinship relations of these beings are described in an extensive mythology and body of oracular wisdom, which also serve to explain the personalities and fates of their worshipers, as well as the worldly relations among those worshipers. Through blood sacrifice and lavish ceremonies of spirit possession, the gods are persuaded to intervene beneficently in the lives of their worshipers and to keep the foes of those worshipers at bay. The priests and practitioners, no less than the social scientists and politicians who seek to speak for them, tend to emphasise the ancientness of Candomblé and its constituent ‘traditions’.

In this essay, however, I document a series of international dialogues involving Afro-Brazilian priests alongside state officials and an international community of scholars — in the absence of which the massive changes in the gendered leadership of this religion over the course of the twentieth century would have been difficult to explain. Indeed, I will argue that the Candomblé religion owes not only much of its international fame but also the internal transformation of its leadership to Ruth Landes’s 1947 City of Women, in which she offers Candomblé as a living and dynamic example of the matrilineal, available to inspire the opposition of sexism in her own native society, the United States. Yet Landes’s international exposé was so influential precisely because Candomblé has been a convenient template for other scholarly and political agendas as well, ranging from Gilberto Freyre and Edmundo de Goes Melville J. Herskovits’ effort to redeem African Americans from the myth that they are cultureless and therefore inferior to whites and Oyeronke Oyewumi’s diasporic Yorùbá nationalism. This international array of scholarly agendas has shifted not only the reputation but also the practice of orixá worship in the diaspora. Since the 1930s, a series of scholarly conferences uniting scholars and priests has made it increasingly important for us to acknowledge the role of scholars’ interventions and cover-ups in the ongoing transformation of the Yorùbá-Atlantic religions.

Not only scholars but also political leaders of local or international standing have presented Candomblé as a metaphor of the imagined communities they would invoke and lead. Yet the realities of Candomblé in some respects resist the agendas and normative dispositions of these imagined communities, especially those of the nation state and of those who fear its judgement. For example, a silent touchstone in the transnational debates over the meaning of Candomblé and the communities it authenticates is a cultural persona who is as normal in the Candomblé priesthood as he is anathema to the normative vision of the nation state — the adã, or ‘passive homosexual’.

The adã priest, like his counterparts in the African-inspired religions of Cuba and Haiti, is regarded as normal and eminently respectable by most devotees but has, since the 1930s, been summarily dismissed by an alliance of nationalist and feminist scholars as either ‘untraditional’ or non-existent. Yet this essay is not intended simply to correct what I believe is a wrongheaded scholarship but to observe the role of national and international scholars in canonising and, consequently, in biasing the reproduction of what are widely regarded as unchanging ‘traditional’ religions.

*The City of Women*

Ruth Landes became a great foremother of feminist anthropology by underlining the unique status accorded to women in Candomblé. Landes’s feminism was transnational. She stands in a long line of twentieth-century travellers — including Margaret Mead and Simone de Beauvoir — who either found hope in international dialogue and cooperation among women or found in the women of other societies ideal models (and anti-types) of their own oppressed compatriots’ liberation. Landes’s 1947 title, The City of Women, advanced the opinion that, by tradition, women were uniquely suited to serve the Yorùbá, or Nagô, gods of Brazil. Besides the ‘Nagô nation’ (which is nowadays also called the ‘Quêta’ nation, or denomination), there were other nations in the Candomblé of Landes’s day, and they endure into the present — for example, the Fon-inspired Jeje nation, the ‘Angola nation,’ and the ever-expanding bond of spirit worshiping the Indian, or caboclo spirits. Landes added her voice to an ongoing tradition of privileging the Quêta/Naôgô nation in particular, on the grounds of its alleged African purity and, therefore, its unique authenticity. Landes
added the claim that the Quêro/Nagô nation accorded priestly leadership exclusively to women. Thus, for Landes and her many North American fans, the Quêro/Nagô Candômblé of Salvador, Bahia, has inspired great hope as a shining example of female dominance in the real world. For this reason, she named Candômblé and its major host city 'the City of Women'.

However, Landes's research embarrassed Euro-Brazilian nationalists for two reasons – race and sexuality. First, in a country ambivalent about its demographic and cultural blackness, she studied Candômblé. Yet, as a student of anthropologist and cultural relativist Franz Boas, she studied Afro-Brazilian religion not as a racial flaw to be hidden but as proof of the richness of a transnational African legacy and, more importantly, of the potential for women's equality elsewhere in the world. The final two paragraphs of the book summarise how Landes saw her own relationship to the guardians of Brazil's international reputation:

When I left Rio for the United States, Brazilian friends escorted me to the boat, and one of them said, half teasing but with a certain deep patriotism, 'Now you can tell them that no tigers walk in our streets.'

I nodded, and added: 'I'll tell them also about the women... Will Americans believe that there is a country where women like me, feel secure and at ease with them, and do not fear them?'

In her study of Candômblé in Brazil, a country that she knew to be highly sexist, she felt that she had found evidence of what she called a 'cult matriarchate,' in which women ruled in the religious affairs, and therefore the most important affairs, of blacks in the Brazilian state of Bahia. Arguably, however, Landes had tampered with the evidence and assumed that her audience was too far away to inspect it. Indeed, argues Healey, she had constructed a primitivist cliché. In her search for the antipodes, for a primordial alternative to the lamented condition of her home audience and herself, she had created an other-worldly Bahia, of which she declared, 'I know by now that women are in Bahia the chosen sex... I take it for granted just as I know in our world that men are the chosen sex.' Yet, like Margaret Mead in Samoa, Landes had silenced or distorted a great deal of the evidence at her disposal. For example, in order to account for the significant number of men leading Candômblé Temples at the time of her visit, she claimed that, no matter how numerous they might be, they did not count, because they were violating 'African tradition' due to their own personal psychological problems and due to the ritual laxity of the women who had, according to Landes, only recently begun to initiate them.

Landes associated this alleged laxity chiefly with a variant of the Nagô religion in which Indian spirits, or caboclos, were also worshiped prominently. But given the fact that a priestess of the Nagô nation is credited with having founded the caboclo cult, that the Nagô orixás remained pre-eminent even in the caboclo-worshiping houses, and that virtually every Nagô temple also worshiped the caboclos, the categorical separation that Landes drew between the female-dominated 'Nagô' temples and the male-dominated 'caboclo' temples seems suspiciously a priori and inconsistent with the self-declarations of the temple leaders. In fact, across all nations, including the supposedly traditionalist Nagô and Jeje nations, male leadership in the Candômblé had been an old phenomenon. Throughout the nineteenth century, men significantly outnumbered women in the Bahian Candômblé priesthood generally, and men were common in the priesthood of the supposedly all-female priesthood of the Nagô and Jeje nations as well. Indeed, the increase in female leadership was the more recent phenomenon. Butler believes that a tradition of exclusively female temple leadership began in the Casa Branca, or the Bê Iya Náa, temple, in the mid-nineteenth century (which, one might add, is relatively late in the documented history of Jeje and Nagô religious activity in Brazil) and that the tradition spread due to the fast-growing prestige of that particular temple among scholars and bourgeois elite sponsors. Yet, as we shall see, the evidence of an exclusively female leadership – statistically or in principle – is ambiguous even in Casa Branca and its scions before 1930s.

In the 1930s, male priests still significantly outnumbered female priests. Nonetheless, since the publication of Landes's work, the scholarly advocates of Jeje and Nagô superiority have come to speak with one voice on the matter: in the Candômblé priesthood generally, 'women are the chosen sex.' Fortunately for subsequent students of Candômblé, she and her companion Edison Carneiro recorded, albeit dismissively, copious evidence against their own interpretive models. Yet Landes's interpretive model clearly changed the minds and conduct of Candômblé's leading bourgeois advocates and, consequently, the conditions of that religion's reproduction in Brazilian society.

**Grounds for dismissal: the nation state against the adé**

Besides truth, the greatest casualty in this struggle for the possession of the sign was the adé – anti-hero to the territorial nation and to Landes's 'cult matriarchy' alike. In the just cause of women's liberation, Landes played with the facts and canonised the view that women were accorded a unique status in this religion. The credibility of Landes's novel assertion that Candômblé is a matriarchy, despite demographic and historical facts to the contrary, relied on the vilification of the adé. Landes's argument of images harmonised with the transnationally exported logics of North American and European nationalisms. As George...
Mossé shows, homophobia is a common adjunct of nationalism. In Landes's appeal to a counterfactual nostalgia equally typical of nationalism, she dismissed the male presence as the result of a recent corruption. As if to confirm that the male presence was recent and non-normative, Landes reported the widespread view that all male possession priests were adés, or, in Landes's medico-pathological parlance, 'passive homosexuals' – that is, men who are penetrated during sexual intercourse. Thus, without reference to any indigenous discourse, Landes inaugurated the scholarly tradition of diagnosing male Candomblé priests as diseased and therefore alien to any legitimate cultural tradition. However, as Landes herself reported, the adés' sexual identity seems not to have troubled the other priests or adherents of Candomblé. As priests, these men were, observed Landes, 'supported and even adored by those normal men of whom they were before the butt and object of derision.'

Landes's revelation of these sexual matters particularly discomfits her Brazilian scholarly colleagues, even those who would have been perfectly happy for her to write about the demographic and cultural importance of black people in Brazil. These colleagues were clearly more attuned to transnational standards of national respectability and more concerned to guard the open secrets of the Brazilian nation than were the priests and subjects of Candomblé's sacred nations. Sometime Brazilian state functionary and culture-broker extraordinairé Arthur Ramos flatly denied Landes's claims about a 'cult matriarchate' and about a significant homosexual presence, and, in retaliation for Landes's diavollegy, cooperated with Melville J. Herskovits in foreseeing future professional opportunities to Landes. Landes blamed Ramos' anger over her specific revelation of 'homosexuality' for a significant part of her professional undoing.

Though Carneiro had started out as Landes's guide, his attitudes, or at least his public discourse, about the male Candomblé possession priest changed remarkably over the course of his dialogue with Landes. In 1936, before Landes's sojourn in Bahia, Carneiro wrote of the possession priest:

In Bahia, those priestesses are called daughters-in-saint. In the old days (and even still today), the men could be sons-in-saint too. It is noteworthy that they had to dance, during the grand festivals, wearing women's clothing.

Throughout his 1936 publication, he casually describes male and female possession priests engaged in the same ritual duties, doing so with equal legitimacy and with equal deference from the public.

In the midst of his professional and personal relationship with Landes, he is at first quoted expressing a subtly different range of ideas and feelings, which appear to entitle 'abnormal' men to a respected and beautiful role in the possession priesthood. Yet, apparently embarrassed by the pathologising gaze of this powerful transnational visitor, Carneiro would, within a few years correct his earlier position and end all equivocation.

We cannot say with certainty whether his was a true change of heart or a façade thrown up against a critical foreign gaze, but the fact that he presents his first full about-face in the Anglo-American Journal of American Folk-Lore, and an article paired with one by Ruth Landes leaves little doubt about the motive and the origin of this change. Over the course of their acquaintance, Landes seems to have changed Carneiro's mind, or at least made him answer to a homophobic transnational culture of national respectability. Having declared in 1936 to a Brazilian reading public that the male possession priesthood had originated in the 'olden days' and even continued today, Carneiro chose later to tell the US reading public,

It seems that formerly the Candomblé was a woman's business ... The sanctum of women dates from the introduction of the Candomblé in Bahia, with the establishment of the Nagô house of [Casa Branca do] Engeelho Velho about 1830 ... As against so many 'mothers,' we know of the existence of only a few 'fathers,' like Amapasá and 'Uncle' Joaquim ... Despite the superior importance of women in Candomblé, today the number of 'fathers' and 'mothers' is equal. 15

Thus Carneiro had literally reversed the course of history. This English-language publication is also the first in which Carneiro systematically lambastes the male possession priests, condemning them for 'giving themselves up to homosexuality, where they take the passive role, dropping into the small gossip typical of lower-class women'. Of Bahian public opinion toward the 'homosexual' priests, Carneiro tells the USA, 'criticism is always more venomous about "fathers" than about "mothers", labelling them insincere, dishonest, and evil.' His condemnation even exceeds that of Landes, who, as we have seen, acknowledges the support and admiration that 'passive' male possession priests receive from 'normal men'.

To summarise, in 1936, Carneiro wrote of male priests as normal. In their early dialogue during the late 1930s, Landes quoted Carneiro voicing admiration for the beauty of the 'abnormal' male homosexual priests and the liveliness of caboclo-worship. It was first in 1940, before a US audience, that Carneiro would excommunicate these men from the authentic regional and national folklore. By 1948, in a publication for the Museum of the State of Bahia, he was prepared to denounce the male priesthood before the Brazilian national public.

He did so in Candomblé da Bahia (1948), a decade after their collaboration had begun and after Landes's two major publications on the subject, in 1940 and 1947. With his region and his religious friends under the spotlight of international scrutiny, Carneiro moved to rescue the reputation of the supposedly authentic Candomblé with the unsubstantiated
claim that the Candomblé priesthood had once been exclusively female. Following Landes, he established the canonical view in Brazilian and Brazilianist folklore studies, and even in the historical consciousness of many priestly elites, that male priests are uniquely disreputable, that their numerical predominance is recent, and, therefore, that they are unrepresentative of the authentic folklore of the Northeastern region and of the Brazilian nation. Carneiro added that these allegedly new male priests belonged to what he considered the least representative and respectable of Candomblé nations – the Angola, Congo and Caboclo nations. Carneiro had a special stake in dignifying the West African Nagô and Jeje nations and in guarding them from derogation by the national and transnational public. Carneiro was affiliated with the Northeastern Regionalists, who sought to rescue their region from its reputation as inferior on account of its relative poverty and of its black and mulatto majority. At the turn of the century, state officials inspired by eugenics had invested enormous resources in recruiting European immigrants to whiten the population of the Centre-South state of São Paulo, which had also industrialized itself with the profits of its lucrative and initially slave-based coffee plantations. Advocates of the superseded and underdeveloped Northeast argued that, though their region was poorer and blacker, its blacks and mulattoes were superior (on account of their disproportionately West African Nagô and Jeje origins) to those of the Centre-South (whose origins were mainly West-Central African – e.g. Congo and Angola). A Northeastern mulatto himself, Carneiro had a personal and political stake in doing whatever it took to preserve the dignity of the Nagô and Jeje nations and to make theirs the standard by which the typical folk religion of his region was judged. Thus, nostalgia for the Jeje-Nagô-centered, putatively matriarchal and innocent pre-history of Candomblé came to unite the spokespersons of two imagined communities – Northeastern Regionalist Edson Carneiro and transnational feminist Ruth Landes. Yet the copious detail in his 1948 volume frequently undermines his own tendentious argument that the Nagô nation is exclusively or in principle matriarchal. For example, Carneiro credits the nineteenth-century African-born priest Bambuçu (Bambóso) with initiating Aninha, the chief priestess of the prestigious Iê Asê Opô Afonjá temple. Aninha’s disappointment that another man, Joaquim Vieira, did not succeed the recently deceased chief-priestess of Casa Branca, the mother church of Bahia’s pre-eminent family of Quêto/Nagô temples, is given as the reason for Aninha’s secession from the Casa Branca temple in the first place and for her role in the founding of Opô Afonjá. Finally, even though the histories recounted nowadays at Opô Afonjá seem to leave no doubt that Aninha founded that temple and was its first chief priest, Carneiro actually reports that the male priest Pá Joaquim had been that temple’s first chief. Carneiro documented the esteemed leadership of the Yorùbá/Nagô babalawo diviners Martíñiano do Bonfim and Felisberto Sower, who are not possession priests. But he also mentions in passing numerous eminent male possession priests of the Jeje and Nagô nations who were alive during his time, such as Eduardo Mangabeira, Procópio, Manuel Fulefá, Manuel Menez, Cosme, Antônio Bonfim and Ocatilo. Despite all the contrary evidence that he himself recorded, Carneiro’s synoptic statements about the ‘tradition’ seem aimed to satisfy the same partisan notions of respectability that Landes invoked. Not even the most gymnastic and speculative argument was barred in the effort to dismiss the male priests and thereby guarantee the international respectability of an ‘authentic’ tradition left by their absence.

Landes’ transnational feminism and Carneiro’s efforts in the Regionalist project thus conspired to keep a secret. Yet Carneiro had not thought of Candomblé’s ‘passive homosexuals’ as much of a secret before 1938. The adés first became a secret amid the conflict between North American Ruth Landes and Brazilian academic gatekeeper Arthur Ramos. A close observer of Bahia and a close friend of Landes’s, Carneiro could not deny the newly embarrassing reality, as Ramos had done, but he was in a position to marginalise that reality authoritatively. A half-century after the publication of The City of Women (1947) and Candomblé da Bahia (1948), women have, in fact, now become the majority of the chief priests in this religion.

The cultural logic of ‘passivity’

First in 1988 and then at a Yorùbá conference in 1999, I publicly proposed an explanation for the locally perceived normality of ‘passive homosexuality’, or adés, as possession priests and therefore as the heads of Candomblé temples. The debate it engendered demonstrates that Regionalist, nationalist and international feminist communities are not the only ones that are continually transformed, in a cosmopolitan context, by the gaze of other imagined communities and by the nationalist silencing of certain home-grown realities. The African Diaspora too is constituted by certain open secrets, and can be reconstructed by re-selections and re-readings of what secrets need to be defended.

There are no reliable statistics on how many Candomblé priests engage in what Landes called ‘passive homosexuality’. Nor does my thesis concern their actual numbers. Rather, I have sought to understand why so many members and cognoscenti of Candomblé assume – with or without statistical accuracy – that male initiates in the possession priesthood are normally adés, why many Afro-Brazilian men who love men feel at home
In Cadombile, and why Cadombile-inspired terminology dominates the

Theory of the homocannibalism of male priests and their names (names) is

derived from the natural (natural) and is adopted by the sacred -

therefore their attraction to and acceptance in Cadombile.

So why do so many Bruneians think there is a connection between the

Meddehlem, as well as much of the rest of the world. Contemporary

experts, such as those who have studied pre-modern Christianity,

argue for the adoption of the Church's terminology because it is

consistent with the Church's teachings and practices. However, this

argument is flawed because it fails to take into account the context

and circumstances under which the terminology was adopted. It is

important to consider the historical and cultural factors that

influenced the adoption of this terminology, and to understand that

the Church's terminology was not necessarily a direct result of

the Church's teachings and practices. Rather, it was likely

influenced by factors such as the need to maintain control over

the local population and to prevent them from practicing their

own forms of religion. Therefore, it is important to critically

evaluate the adoption of the Church's terminology and to

understand the historical and cultural context in which it was

adopted.

The adoption of the Church's terminology was also influenced by

the need to maintain control over the local population and to

prevent them from practicing their own forms of religion. This

was a common tactic used by colonial powers to dominate local

populations and to prevent them from practicing their own forms

of religion. Therefore, it is important to critically evaluate the

adoption of the Church's terminology and to understand the

historical and cultural context in which it was adopted.
most capable demagogues win the unanimous agreement or consent of their target populations. Rather, demagogues become centres of gravity in target populations that often have multiple centres of gravity. Gilberto Freyre, Arthur Ramos, Edison Carneiro and Ruth Landes are hardly demagogues, but Freyre, Ramos and Carneiro are important centres of gravity in the Regionalist imagination of the Brazilian national community, just as Landes is an important centre of gravity in the transnational feminist imagination of community. While her homophobia is accidental to the entirely rightful feminist aspiration to gender equality (and, once detected, anathema to the principles of most feminists I know), her particular discursive strategy and the Regionalists’ fear of the transnational gaze have deeply compromised the status of the adé priest in Northeastern Brazil.

The proliferation of latter-day explanations of the prominence of adés in the Brazilian Candomblé, Cuban Ocha and Haitian Vodou priesthoods, and the well-documented history of Candomblé adherents’ comfort with adés in this role, appear to share a common root. That root is evident between the lines of Landes’s informants’ testimony in the 1930s and most clearly implied by my own comparative field research between Brazilian Candomblé and its West African ‘homelands’. I will argue here, as I have argued elsewhere, that a West African logic of ‘mounting’ and its attendant transvestism converged in Brazil with a Brazilian logic of sexuality and social hierarchy, thereby helping us to understand why, in Brazil, male Candomblé possession priests are widely believed to be bichas, adés or ‘passive homosexuals’. Thus, mine is an argument about the local ‘reinterpretation’, to borrow Herskovits’ term, of cultural forms that appear in diverse but historically connected places. It is, in short, a case study of how the transnational community of scholars is one of the stakeholders in the reinterpretation (and agents in the transformation) of local cultures.

**Mounted men: what Nigerian male elégún and New-World ‘passive’ priests do and do not have in common**

Oyó-Yorùbá people formed not only a plurality of the African captives taken to Bahia in the nineteenth century but also the flogging priests and priestesses of Bahia’s most influential temples – including Casa Branca. No African ethnic group has influenced Candomblé more than this Yorùbá subgroup.

In West Africa, Oyó-Yorùbá worshipers employ multiple metaphors to evoke the nature of people’s relationships to the gods. Like Brazilian Candomblé adherents, West African Yorùbá worshipers of the oríṣa gods might call any devotee of a god the ‘child’ (omo [Yorùbá]; filho [Portuguese]) of that god. In both traditions, motherhood and fatherhood are used as metaphors of leadership in the worship and activation of the gods. For example, a senior male West African Yorùbá priest of, say, Òṣùgù might be addressed as Bábá Òṣùgù (‘Father’ or [Senior Male] Owner-of-Ṣùgù); a senior priestess would be addressed as Òṣùgù (‘Mother’ or (Senior Female) Owner-of-Ṣùgù). In Brazil, the male head of a Candomblé temple is called a pai-de-santo (‘Father-of-divinity’), while a chief priestess is called a mãe-de-santo (‘Mother-of-divinity’).

Yet the Yorùbá terms that mark out the priest’s competency to embody the god through possession-trance and to act as the god’s worldly delegate rely, above all, upon affiliated metaphors of marriage and sexuality. According to Edison Carneiro, as we shall see, these metaphors were very much alive in the Brazilian Candomblé of the 1930s, and they were consciously present in local understandings of both male and female participation in the priesthood. In the speech of many twenty-first century Brazilian orixá-worshipers these metaphors are now dead or dying. Yet the ‘death’ of a metaphor seldom means that it has lost its effectiveness in communicative acts; instead, its implications have often become naturalised, implicit and pervasive rather than poetic, novel and conscious. In present-day Brazilian Candomblé, metaphors of marriage and sexuality stand powerfully alongside metaphors of parenthood and birth in the often-contested representation and reproduction of the priesthood.

Most Oyó-Yorùbá possession priests in West Africa are women. The numerous male possession priests, on the other hand, cross-dress. But their cross-dressing requires a culture-specific reading. They dress not as ‘women’ but as ‘wives’ or ‘bridges’ (iwe) – a term that otherwise refers only to the women married to worldly men. Novices to the priesthood – whether male or female – are designated symmetrically, as iwe, meaning ‘brides’ or ‘wives’. The degree to which Bahians understand the word iwe to mean ‘wife’ or ‘bride’ has declined since the 1930s, but the implications of its Yorùbá meaning upon the logic of priestly recruitment have echoed into the third millennium.

For months after the initiation, male and female novices among the West African Oyó-Yorùbá wear women’s clothes: iwe (wrap skirts), báibá (blouses), and òjì (baby-carrying slings); on ceremonial occasions, they also wear ìtù (antimony eyeliners), bàtà (henna for the hands and feet), delicate bracelets, earrings and so forth. As mature priests, or élépin, women and men braid their hair, and follow the latest styles in women’s coiffures. But, on ceremonial occasions, they also continue to don tìrìsì eyeliner, henna and delicate jewellery. Many unmarried Yorùbá women do these things but, male possession priests are virtually the only men who do so. In the Òyó-Yorùbá town where I conducted my principal West African field research, Òghọ̀ba, both the strip-weaving of cloth and bar-keeping are considered female professions. So, almost predictably,
the only male strip-weaver and the only male bar-keeper in the town are Ọṣogbo possession priests. Thus, West African Ọṣogbo priests present themselves ritually, sartorially and verbally not as women per se but as wives of the gods, by analogy to the female wives of earthly husbands. This extended metaphor includes a further important term.

Indeed, the most pervasive and dramatic gendered symbol in this metaphoric representation of the possession priests’ relationship to the gods—from the initiation onward—is the complex web of metaphors implicit in the Yorùbá verb gin—meaning ‘to mount.’ Indeed, the term for ‘possession priest’ (ẹgún) means ‘the mounted one.’ Gin refers to what a rider does to a horse (hence, possession priests are sometimes called ‘horses of the gods’ [ọṣogbo]). The term gin also refers to what an animal or a brutal man does sexually to his female partner (and possession by Ọṣogbo is often spoken of as a brutal act). The term gin also refers to what a god—especially Ọṣogbo—does to his possession priests. And Ọṣogbo is the most influential possession priesthood not only on the Bight of Benin but also, to an even greater extent, among the ọrùn-worshipers of Brazil, Cuba, Trinidad and the United States. However we translate the verb gin into English, the term montar in Caribbean Spanish and Brazilian Portuguese and the Haitian Kreyol term monse (all cognates of the English verb ‘to mount’), encode the same three referents—sexual penetration, horsemanship and spirit possession—and have a long history of usage by worshipers in Cuba, Brazil and Haiti.

Let me illustrate how Afro-Latin Americans—such as the priests and congoscienti of the Bahian Candomblé—conciously construed these West African Yorùbá metaphors in the 1930s, at the time of Landes’s research in Bahia. These are the words of journalist and long-term Candomblé affiliate Edson Carneiro early in his acquaintspan with Ruth Landes:

Sometimes they call a priestess the wife of a god, and sometimes she is his home. The god gives advice and places demands, but often he just mounse and plays.

So you can see why the priestesses develop great influence among the people. They are the pathway to the gods. But no upright man will allow himself to be ridden by a god, unless he does not care about losing his manhood ...

Now here’s the loophole. Some men do let themselves be ridden, and they become priests with the women; but they are known to be homosexual. In the temple they put on skirts and make up the women’s bodies. Sometimes they are much better looking than the women (Landes 1947: 37).

This parable is highly consistent with the West African, Òyó-Yorùbá symbolism of spirit possession I observed among Nigerian Ọṣogbo priests of both sexes in the 1980s, save one important detail: the reluctance of ‘real men’ to be possessed in the Brazilian Candomblé.

Sex was not an infrequent topic of conversation among male friends of my age group in Òyó, and, no matter what their age, the Ọṣogbo priests in the town were vocal and ribald in their humour about the matter. Yet I never became aware of any commonly used vocabulary in Òyó-Yorùbá language to distinguish ‘upright men’ from a category of men who are ‘homosexual’ or somehow like women. I have never heard any West African ọrùn priest speak of himself or his fellow priests as anything like a ‘homosexual’ or as engaging in same-sex intercourse. I argue simply that the Afro-Brazilians have re-interpreted West African metaphors of spirit possession in the light of Brazilian gender categories. For many Brazilians in the 1930s and now, submission to a god’s agency has seemed analogous to sexual ‘passivity,’ or the experience of being penetrated during sexual intercourse. In other words, a physically mountable man seems highly qualified, in a symbolic sense, to be mounted spiritually. The metaphor-ridden ‘loophole’ by which Edison Carneiro and his priestly friends under stood men to have recently entered the Òyó-Yorùbá/Quêto/Nîgôr possession priesthood in the 1930s was virtually identical—in both its terms and its emphases—to the dominant logic of the Òyó-Yorùbá Ọṣogbo priesthood that I observed in the 1980s and others had observed since as long as that West African priesthood has been written about.

Were it not for the increasingly vocal homophobia of Anglophone African bourgeoisies and the hot-button nature of sex as an object of cultural intimacy among nationalists, my argument would be not only better substantiated but also little more controversial than Herkovits’ view that ‘shouting’ in black North American churches is a ‘reinterpretation’ of African spirit possession. It would be little more controversial than explaining how the ìbádáh and the ìlkááj men salute in Cuba and Brazil reinterpret similar gestures in West Africa. That is, among the West African Yorùbá, men prostrate themselves flat on the ground, while the ìlkááj (lying first on one side and then on the other) is the more appropriate gesture for women in sacred contexts. In Cuban Ocha and Brazilian Candomblé, by contrast, it is the gender of one’s divinity, or ‘saint,’ that determines the appropriate style of self-prostration. Whether male or female, a person governed by a male saint salutes elders and altars with the ìbáádáh, whereas a male or female person governed by a female saint performs the ìlkááj.

I have never said or believed that the West African transvestite priests were or are in any sense homosexual. While many have embraced my argument as logical and empirically sound, some others have found it easy to misinterpret, either as (1) proof that homosexuality is as widespread and natural in Africa as it is in the West, or as (2) a defamation of authentic, ‘traditional’ Yorùbá culture. The first proposition is beyond the scope of my argument and of the evidence that I present here. The
second misinterpretation is the subject of the next section. But, first, a parenthesis.

At the time of my research in Igbado, I had never heard of a named or symbolically marked category of men who are penetrated sexually by other men, but, in sum, I could see that those who are regularly penetrated spiritually by the gods have a great deal in common (sartorially, professionally and symbolically) with the Brazilian bicha or adé category. Imagine my surprise when I made the acquaintance of a highly respected Yoruba art historian from Òyó, whose extended family included many Sango priests in that West African cultural capital. During his time among oricha-worshippers in the United States, this scholar too became aware of the importance of men who love men in the New-World priesthoods. Without having read my work, he had concluded that male-male sexual conduct among New World priests was a continuation rather than a mere reinterpretation of West African religious traditions. He told me that, on two occasions between 1968 and 1973, he witnessed possessed male Sango priests actually pen-etrating unpossessed male priests in an Òyó shrine. He does not know, however, if this practice was widespread or whether it represented a tradition or norm. Nor do I. As yet, I would extend my case no further based upon this unique testimony, which the original observer has shared with me privately but has himself – with a sense of ‘cultural intimacy’ – hesitated to publish.

The controversy

Dozens of Yoruba scholars have written with sharpness and clarity about gender and gender relations in Yoruba religion and culture generally. However, these discussions have acquired new dimensions and new content as the number of Yoruba scholars in the diaspora, the occasions for their interaction with New-World priests of the Cuban orichas, Brazilian orixas and African-American orichas have increased. In this context, my argument has recently sparked controversy in a new, diasporic community – that of Yoruba scholars and New-World priestesses of Yoruba religion in the USA. It also seems to have provoked new questions about who legitimately belongs to the imagined community of this ‘world religion’ and who does not, who should speak for it and who is silenced, which practices are canonized and which ones are branded abnormal, shameful and best kept invisible.

One Yoruba scholar in the United States, sociologist Oyeruoke Oyewumi, read my argument and then, in print, accused me of describing the West African possession priests as ‘drag queens’ and ‘actual if not symbolic homosexuals.’ Oyewumi is clearly less interested in summarising my argument than in expressing her deep offence and her own preference to classify ‘homosexuals’ as anathema to this new Yoruba diasporic nationalism.

This caricature of my argument was but one link in Oyewumi’s argument that there is no gender whatsoever in authentic Yoruba culture. Writes Oyewumi, ‘Yoruba is a non-gender-specific language’ which she takes as evidence that ‘gender was not an organizing principle in Yoruba society prior to colonization by the West’ and that ‘Yoruba society did not make gender distinctions and instead made age distinctions.’ People’s anatomical sex ‘did not privilege them to any social positions and similarly did not jeopardize their access.’ The physical differences between men and women mattered, ‘only in regard to procreation, where they must’. Oyewumi’s language-based inferences about the Yoruba people’s distant past slip, without explanation, into counterfactually present-tense assertions about ‘the Yoruba frame of reference’, as though the alleged precolonial genderlessness of the Yoruba’s ancestors represents the underlying core and essence of a cultural system that has only recently, and at its margins, become sexist due to foreign influence. In fact, once Oyewumi has defined a social ideal that she senses must have prevailed during a period before there were written records to prove or disprove it, she defines all of the numerous exceptions, past and present, as the products of Western contamination.

Oyewumi argues, in sum, that colonisation by the West is the origin of all the sexism and, indeed, of all the gender conceptions that exist in Yorubaland today, and that, because English language continuously marks the gender of its human referents, conventional scholarly discourse in English consistently misrepresents the gender-free culture of the Yoruba. Ungendered features of the Yoruba language are taken as proof that the culture in general was once and still is, in its essence, both non-sexist and free of any form of gender differentiation. Therefore, argues Oyewumi, Yoruba and non-Yoruba scholars who see gender in Yoruba cultural history do so simply because they have falsely translated the gender-neutral terms of Yoruba language into the gender-specific terms of the English language. Oyewumi therefore regards such scholars as thus both victims and agents of Western imperialism.

Oyewumi’s argument is passionate and persuasive to some New World priests and to many scholars – hence the extensive attention it merits in this article. Yet much of its persuasiveness lies in its misrepresentation of the existing scholarship on gender and on Yoruba society, which, at least since the 1970s, has highlighted the differences between Western and Yoruba gender roles. As I will show in this section, Oyewumi’s attention to linguistic and ethnographic evidence is selective to the point of misrepresenting Yoruba cultural history. More importantly, for the sake of this historical analysis of scholarship and society, the reader will see that her rhetorical strategy – including the silences it keeps – shares structural similarities with nationalist discourses the world over.
Like Brazilian nationalist Gilberto Freyre, Oyewumi turns the tables on North American and Western European cultural and racial chauvinism. She does so, however, not through the Freyrian style vivid storytelling but by constructing an antipodean difference between the ‘West’ and the ‘Yorùbá conception’. In the ‘West’, argues Oyewumi, everything about a person’s social status is determined by his or her visible biology (in which Oyewumi includes a person’s genotype) – that is, according to Oyewumi, by a person’s race and sex. Oyewumi then defines ‘gender’ as the allegedly ‘Western’ notion that every aspect of an anatomical female’s life is determined by her anatomy, that no cross-cutting identity or category of social belonging (such as kinship, age or marital status) shapes any anatomical female’s social role or status, that every anatomical female is always socially inferior to every anatomical male, that an anatomical female may perform no roles that anatomical males also perform, that the gender categories are determined entirely by the referent’s visible or chromosomal biology. Moreover, despite her citation of several scholarly works that discuss third genders or relational gender, she argues that the analytic term ‘gender’ always imposes a binary or dichotomy upon its referents.

On the basis of this unusual definition of ‘gender’ and a somewhat unempirical assessment of ‘Western’ social life, Oyewumi asserts that ‘gender’ prevails in the West, but not in Yorùbá society. Only one’s age relative to other people and the family to which one belongs, the author concludes, determine anything about one’s social status and relationships in authentically Yorùbá society.

In evidence, the author cites the extensive gender coding of pronouns, names, kinship terms, and occupational terms in English, as well as numerous Yorùbá pronouns, kinship terms, and occupational terms that, in her opinion, do not encode gender – such as own (‘s/he’), atop (‘child’), and so on. Oyewumi notes that the suffix ‘-sorun’ (‘monarch’), iyá Ọkọ̀jẹ̀ (‘Food Vendor’), and Ọ̀hun Aláṣẹ Ró (‘clothes’ or ‘weaver’). Oyewumi spends much of her argument explaining away or concealing the gender coding that actually does appear in these and other Yorùbá terms and social practice. For example, there are clearly words in Yorùbá for ‘male’ (aá, ‘female’ (aá), ‘man’ (okùnrin), and ‘woman’ (okùrin). The terms of address and reference for parents, senior relatives, senior stragglers, and people of almost every occupation indicate the referent’s gender – as in Bááhù Ọjà (the tekononimic ‘Father of Aṣó’), Bááhù Èlẹ̀ràn (‘butcher’), and iyá mi (‘Mommy’). Most professions in Yorùbálánda have and have long had vastly more of one sex than another practising them, and virtually all social clubs (ẹgbẹ) are segregated according to sex. Certain Yorùbá and political titles are strongly gender-marked, despite their infrequent adaption by a person of the other sex, such as Ọ̀ṣíṣẹ̀ (a type of divination priest [lit., ‘senior-male-who-owns-the-mystery’], bààlẹ̀ (non-royal quarter or town chief [lit., ‘father of the land’]), and bààlẹ̀ (head of residential compound [lit., ‘father of the house’]). But as far as I know, a man can never be an Ọ́jùn (eldest wife of the house [lit., ‘mother of the house’]). It should be noted that these last two terms – bààlẹ̀ and iyála – are etymologically distinguished from each other only by the gender of the referent. Yet in real social life the persons described as ‘fathers of the house’ rank far higher in the house than do the people called ‘mothers of the house’.

On the other hand, one of the most important chieftaincies of the nineteeth-century was that of the Òkéàdè (the Chief of the Market [lit., ‘Mother-Who-Owns-the-Outside’], and, as far as I know, this title has never been held by a man. Oyewumi argues that the Òkéàdè title originated in the nineteeth century and was a product of influence by Ibadan, an ethnically Yorùbá military republic. She does not demonstrate, however, the sense in which its gender-specificity results from foreign or Western influence or is foreign to ‘the Yorùbá conception’. She also argues that, because not all women fell under the authority of the Òkéàdè and the Òkéàdè governed affairs beyond the affairs of women, the title is not gendered. I fail to see how this evidence proves that a title reserved for women escapes analysis in terms of gender.

Moreover, the fact that there are a few female bààlẹ̀, or ‘village chiefs’, near Oyewumi’s hometown should not allow us to overlook the male gendering of authority that the term implies, especially if Oyewumi intends to be true to her hypothesis that vocabulary reveals the culture-specific ideology underlying statistics of otherwise unclear implications. In this case, contrary to her general argument, Oyewumi chooses to privilege the statistic of the exception over the linguistically implied ideology of dominance and prevalence. This is a society in which men and women have long worn markedly different styles of clothing, a wife is regularly expected to supply her husband with cooked food (and not vice-versa), almost all professional cooks (except in European-style establishments) are women, and the social norms of legitimate reproduction differentially affect the experience of anatomical males and females throughout the life-cycle, in ways ranging from infant circumcision to earlier marriage for women than for men, bridewealth, polygyny (and the unthinkability of polyandry), vir-patri-local postmarital residence, the levirate and the normatively different roles of mothers and fathers in childcare. Oyewumi even makes the credible claim that motherhood is the most honoured of Yorùbá institutions, but, given her peculiar definition of ‘gender’, this observation is taken to illustrate the absence of gender in Yorùbá society. The author also claims that polygyny is frequently initiated by the existing wife, that male interests are not supreme in polygynous marriages, that married women’s sexual dalliances are tacitly accepted, and that husbands have no rights over the
wife's labour. These indications of wifey 'agency,' alongside Oyewumi's argument that polygyny entails male self-discipline and deprivation, are taken to prove that polygyny is 'ungendered.' Most of Oyewumi's claims are inconsistent with my observations in Òyò North, Ibadan and Lagos during the 1980s and 1990s, and with others' observations during the past two centuries. Even if they were true, however, the claim that they prove an absence of gender in Òrùbá culture follows more from Oyewumi's idiosyncratic definition of gender than from a careful assessment of the empirical data on Òrùbá marriage. They also fail to reflect the full complexity of the scholarship on 'gender' in Western marriage and social life. The levirate (or 'widow-inheritance') is no longer commonly practiced in Òrùbáland, but the archival records of the Customary Courts during the early colonial period demonstrate, contrary to Oyewumi's claim, that it was often practised without the widow's consent. 

Records from just before the colonial period indicate that adultery was often severely punished by indigenous authorities, and women were sometimes forced, on threat of violence, to remain in marriages that they wished to leave. Oyewumi fails to produce any documentation of her claims that Òrùbá marriage does not and did not, throughout its documented history, entail systematically different social experiences for the male and female partners. The statistical and ideological norm that a wife moves to her husband's natal household and enters as a subordinate to every person previously born to or married into that household is a structural disadvantage that affects most women in this society because they are women and not men. These facts cannot easily be dismissed.

Oyewumi focuses great attention upon linguistic evidence because any claim that present-day Òrùbá culture and society fail to distinguish men from women, or offer them equal access and privileges to important social options, is manifestly false. Hence, Oyewumi claims that her analysis reconstructs the real Òrùbá culture, which preceded colonisation and/or the slave trade, a period to which we have hardly any documentary access. The earliest document the author consults is dated 1829, long after the slave trade had begun to affect the Òyò-Órùbá, and the author elides all historical periods that preceded the slave trade and colonisation (including several unmentioned centuries of Islamic influence) into a single 'authentic' prototype, which she believes remains evident and alive only in those aspects of present-day Òrùbá parlance that do not mark gender.

When evidently old gender-marked aspects of Òrùbá language are addressed at all, they are excused by various arguments that would obviously be absurd if applied to languages and cultures more familiar to the reader. For example, òdù ('father' or 'senior man') and ìjì ('mother' or 'senior woman') are said to indicate not only sex but also adulthood; therefore they are not gendered, argues Oyewumi. Does it follow, then, that the terms 'father' and 'mother' in English are not gendered?

Oyewumi argues that the term for 'bride' or 'wife' (ìwọwọ) is ungendered because it refers to both the female brides of worldly husbands and possession priests regardless of sex. Does the fact that the church is called the 'bride of Christ' in English then imply that the English term 'bride' is also ungendered? Is the church not made up of males and females?

The fact that a fruitful year is called a 'female year' (afo ìdù) is said not to indicate any Òrùbá conception of gender because, Oyewumi reports falsely, no one speaks of its opposite as a 'male year' (afo ìdù). Even if the statement were true, its logic would imply that the term 'phallic symbol' in English is ungendered because there is no commonplace word for its feminine opposite.

In English, as in Òrùbá, one could recite an endless list of gender-free references to people without ever proving that the language or the culture is gender-free. Could one reliably infer from the gender-neutral English terms 'I,' 'you,' 'we,' 'they,' 'parent,' 'couple,' 'sibling,' 'child' and 'president' that Anglo-Saxon or Western language and culture are in their essence or once were free of gender and of gender hierarchy? I think not. But this is the logic of Oyewumi's linguistic argument that Òrùbá culture, in its deep past and in its present essence, is completely without gender.

Oyewumi's linguistic argument simply does not stand up to sustained ethnographic investigation, as the work of important Òrùbá scholars demonstrates. For example, Wande Abimbola offers an overview of the images of women in the ancient Òrùbá literate corpus, the carefully preserved basis of the Òrùbá oracular system and, arguably, the centrepiece of Òrùbá 'traditional' culture as most Òrùbá people understand it. These texts have existed for centuries and, though they are not static, they undoubtedly preserve a great deal of social history from pre-nineteenth-century times, which would hardly disappear from an overview by a scholar and òwọlọwọ of Abimbola's competency and standing. He is the official spokesperson (Àwọlọ) of the Òrùbá priesthood headquartered at ìle-ìfẹ. Indeed, Abimbola's assessment both relies on stronger evidence of the Òrùbá past and strongly contradicts Oyewumi's argument that Òrùbá culture in no way represents anatomical men and anatomical women as socially or morally different. For example, according to Abimbola, a world-renowned Òyò-Órùbá òwọlọwọ, Òrùbá represents only women as capable of being an òjì, which he defines as 'a blood-sucking, wicked, dreadful cannibal who transforms herself into a bird at night and flies to distant places, to hold nocturnal meetings with her fellow witches who belong to a society that excludes all men.' On the one hand, Òfọ credits women uniquely with the marvellous capacity to bear children and to be
loyal wives. On the other hand, it represents women as deceitful. The Ifá verse called Oyeku Meji says:

O'Brien leke
O'Brien lyi lori
Women are deceitful
Women are liars

Abimbola summarises, ‘These few examples of women in the Ifá literary corpus clearly demonstrate the ambivalent attitudes of Yoruba men to women and the powers women possess. There is a love-hate relationship in the attitude of Yoruba men to women.’ Contrary to Oyewumi’s understanding of Yoruba culture, it seems highly doubtful that the gendered elements of the Ifá literary corpus were imposed recently on Yoruba culture by the ‘West’. On the other hand, the motives to pursue such an explanation, I will argue, are foreign to neither Yoruba culture nor the ‘West’.

For example, Oyewumi’s argument neatly parallels the claim that Brazil is a ‘racial democracy’ (opposite in character to the USA and the rest of the Euro-Atlantic world) and that foreigners’ analyses of race and racism in Brazil result from the imposition of an imperialist North American logic. Both Oyewumi’s argument and Freyre’s dramatically remind us of the cross-cultural variation in the interpretation of human phenotypes (a point that may have been surprising to the Brazilian general public in the 1930s but is hardly news to the scholars who studied gender in the 1990s). However, the work of Oyewumi and Freyre also alerts us to a genre of nationalist allegory that is common in a transnational world, where scholars and other workers in the diaspora articulate some of the most emotionally powerful and politically persuasive images in the national imaginaries of the homeland. The Brazilian Freyre too formulated his influential socio-cultural allegory during and following his sojourn in the United States. Both arguments rely on the construction of an ahistorical past time in the homeland that is beyond immediate scrutiny. They equally invoke a sense of national honour – or ‘cultural intimacy’ – around the conspiracy to conceal contrary facts that every insider knows.

No careful and knowledgeable student of Brazil could, in my opinion, claim that race and racism works the same in Brazil as it does in the United States, but ‘race’ and ‘racism’ are useful categories by which to compare and contrast, analyse and re-think the ways in which discrimination based upon presumed or visible ancestry works in each of the two countries. Likewise, Oyewumi’s redefinition of ‘gender’ does little to clarify or improve upon existing discussions under that rubric, many of which subtly analyse much the same empirical turf that Oyewumi considers: the diversity of female roles and powers in Yoruba society, the ways in which they overlap with men’s powers, the way these differ from the arrangements of roles and powers in other societies, and the ways in which male-female difference and interconnectedness are projected metaphorically onto other social and symbolic relationships. Oyewumi’s redefinition of gender does little more than flatten both the ‘Yoruba conception’ and the ‘West’ into opposite stereotypes.

A (culturally) intimate gathering of priests and scholars

Since Gilberto Freyre organised the First Afro-Brazilian Congress in 1934, dozens of such conferences have brought together priests and scholars intent on re-thinking and reorganising orixa religion, and reflecting on its significance for the imagined communities of the region, the nation and the African Diaspora as well. Several such conferences have had momentous effects, largely because they have helped to establish which priests’ practices are normal, which are best silenced, and who legitimately speaks for the group. For example, the 1937 Congress organised by Edison Carneiro in Bahia culminated in the organisation of the Union of Afro-Brazilian Sects, the first organisation to regulate priestly conduct and to unite the Bahian temples and their supporters against police repression. In 1983, Wande Abimbola and Marta Moreno Vega organised at the University of Ife, Nigeria, the first World Conference of Orisha Tradition and Culture. Thus, for the first time in history, a conference brought together scholars and priests of orixa religion from Brazil, Cuba, Puerto Rico, Trinidad, the United States and Nigeria. A dozen such conferences have followed, albeit under an increasingly factionalised leadership. As the leader of one series of conferences, Abimbola is now regarded by some priests as the paramount leader of the global orixa-worshipping community. Such an understanding of Abimbola’s role is clearly contested. However, until now, no one else has to my knowledge ever even been credited with such authority. This is cultural history in the making.

It is against this backdrop that events at the 1999 conference at Florida International University acquire their historical significance. Titled ‘Oris“ Devotion as a World Religion: the Globalization of Yoruba Religions Culture’, this conference brought together dozens of US-based Nigerian, Cuban, Puerto Rican, native US American and Brazilian scholars with priests of equally diverse geographical and national origins. On and off the dias, priests and scholars debated over whether whites and Westernised-looking Yoruba could legitimately speak for Yoruba tradition, whether Yoruba was the only language in which Yoruba religious concepts could be discussed, whether each group [i.e., Cuban and Cuban-inspired amantes, Brazilian Candomblé, Brazilian Yoruba people, Trinidadian Shango practitioners, etc.] should speak for itself, and whether certain scholarly
disagreements should be settled publicly or privately. University conferences are not simply forums where truth is worked out through debate; they are also stages where social priorities are debated and dramatised. Officially authorised speakers have diverse priorities, and so do audiences.

Oyewumi’s ex tempore presentation at this conference urged caution in translating Yorùbá concepts into English terms. She gave examples of bad translations, such as glossing ògbà as ‘king’ (when, in truth, it means ‘monarch’) and insisted that the term ṣẹwọ (‘bride’) was ungendered since it describes not only married women but also junior ọrìṣà possession priests of either sex. Based upon this evidence, she reaffirmed her conclusion that Yorùbá language, and therefore Yorùbá culture, is devoid of gender.

The talk’s logical and empirical inadequacies notwithstanding, two Trinidadian priestesses and an African-American priestess in attendance stood up to applaud it. Oyewumi’s nostalgic reconstruction of an ideal Yorùbá past and essence held great appeal for New-World priestesses who would resist the patriarchal sexism of American societies (including the forms of gender inequality strongly evident in New-World traditions of ọrìṣà-worship), for diasporic Yorùbá people anxious to subvert North Americans’ tendency to regard Africa and its cultures as inferior, and particularly, according to Molora Ogundipe, for Yorùbá men happy to be exonerated of sexism.32 The African-American priestess who applauded told me years later that she liked Oyewumi’s presentation because of Oyewumi’s assertiveness, because the scholar delivered it ex tempore, and because she seemed to know what she was talking about. The priestess said, however, that she harboured some doubts on account of the fact that Oyewumi wore trousers and cut her hair short—conduct that the priestess did not regard as traditional. What is most striking is that she remembered little of Oyewumi’s argument.

In an apparent effort to support Oyewumi’s argument, several senior male Yorùbá scholars in the audience offered further examples of Yorùbá gender configurations that might surprise most Americans, such as the Yorùbá practice, in certain contexts, of calling one’s patriarchal relatives of either sex ṣù̀bù (normally meaning ‘father’ or ‘senior man’) and matri- lateral relatives of either sex ṣù̀ (normally meaning ‘mother’ or ‘senior woman’). Whether they agreed with Oyewumi’s overall proposition that there is no gender in Yorùbá culture is unclear. It seems to me that people who address their mother’s and their father’s relatives by opposite terms, and regard the two families’ normative roles in their lives are indeed employing a gendered distinction that Anglo-Americans simply do not typically make. An unstructured analysis could thus conclude that Yorùbá culture is even more gender-bound than US culture, rather than differently gender-bound.

Others among the senior Yorùbá scholars in attendance restricted their comments to private conversations. For example, one male Yorùbá philosophy professor at first agreed enthusiastically with Oyewumi but stopped short when I asked him to consider the implications of viripatriarchal post-marital residence, whereby a Yorùbá woman is normally expected to spend most of her life in a household where she automatically becomes the junior to everyone else in the house. There, she will always owe deference and a measure of servility to those male and female in-laws born before her marriage into the house and to the earlier-married wives, and her rights to land and chieftaincy titles will, in most regions of Yorùbaland, always be secondary to those of anyone born in the house.

Another Yorùbá male scholar told me that Oyewumi’s argument was not significant enough to challenge, though this same scholar apparently advocated for the book to receive the prestigious Herskovits Prize of the African Studies Association. Others told me that criticising a junior scholar in public would be considered distasteful in Yorùbá culture. Many of these scholars have already contributed significantly to the academic study of gender in Yorùbá culture and have chosen other venues to express their opinions. Hence, my observations are intended not to impugn the quality of these scholars’ work but to illustrate the social dynamics by which community is dramatised at university conferences and certain images of community come to be projected as scholarly truths.

Nor are large North American professional organisations exempt from such dynamics. For example, without consulting any Africanists, much less Yorùbánists, the Sex and Gender Section of the American Sociological Association awarded Oyewumi its 1995 Distinguished Book Award.33 Thus, a new form of nostalgia and silencing has united the Sex and Gender Section of the ASA in common cause with both Yorùbá long-distance nationalism and with New-World priestesses who are not only aware of the gender bias that has long been a part of their New-World orisha traditions but are ready to do something about it. This nostalgia is new in some details but is logically similar to the reasoning that united Brazilian Regionalism and nationalism with Landes’s brand of transnational feminism. It is not clear how fast, how common or how deeply this new alliance of ideological forces will affect the practice of ọrìṣà-worship, but every subsequent conference of scholars and priests is likely to add authority to these motivated representations of (and silence about) the shared past. These motivated representations, in turn, acquire the credibility to structure new communities and hierarchies in the present, just as the historical revisions of Landes and Carneiro did in Brazil after the 1930s.

It is by now old news that the priests and followers of the Yorùbá-Atlantic traditions frequently own and read books about those traditions...
written by university-trained scholars—such as Joana Elbein dos Santos' *Os Nágô e a Moriê* (1976) and Pierre Verger's *Oriú"i* (1981) in Brazil, Lydia Cabrera's *El Monte* (1954) among Cuban-inspired adherents of Ocha, and Robert Farris Thompson's *Flash of the Spirit* (1983) among North American Orisha devotees. The degree to which these books become catechisms or procedural guides is variable, but it is clear that many priests use the information that scholars bring, particularly when those scholars possess a credible claim to information from the African 'motherland.' Thus, the opinions of even West African and West Africanist scholars with no priestly credentials can be enormously influential in the transformative projects of New-World priests and priestesses. Our analyses are often employed as models of African 'tradition,' which can be used to include and elevate particular segments of New-World religious communities. Therefore, our analyses can also be used to marginalize other segments of those communities and to de-legitimize existing practices. Our influence can be powerful, whether we are committed to studying our field sites honestly, or we are committed to misrepresenting them as allegories of some ideal that we are recommending to an audience unable to check our facts. Thus, African, Africanist and Afro-Latin Americanist scholars can be influential not only in priestly projects but also in the political projects of First-World scholarly communities with little knowledge of Africa and little intrinsic interest in Africa's complex truths.

**Conclusion**

In sum, neither the Candomblé 'cult matririarchate' of Landes nor the 'genderless' Yoruba society of Oyewumi is a neutral, or completely truthful, report of cultural history. They are inventions in the service of overlapping imagined communities. Yet they also do a disservice both to Yoruba cultural history and to the thousands of male priests who have built institutions, housed the poor, and healed the sick in the Brazilian Candomblé. Nonetheless, one cannot avoid the fact that these inventions move people and change history. The debates and transformations that I have detailed here reveal not only the pitfalls of tendentious scholarship but also the fact that long-distance, transnational dialogues have continually re-shaped even 'traditional' cultures and religions like Candomblé. And there is a further point. Transnational social movements and diasporas, like nation states, propagate secrets and defend the intimate zones that are created around those secrets. The facts that the leaders of imagined communities choose to make secret can be surprising—such as the facts of gender and racial inequality in Brazil and gender inequality in Yorubaland, not to mention the open secret of intergenerational class inequality in the United States; it is difficult to fathom how an outsider could fail to see them. However, any fact that a community can be persuaded to discuss privately and to silence in the company of outsiders can serve the same community-defining function—a function that Herzfeld calls 'cultural intimacy.' Indeed, old imagined communities can be reinforced and new communities imagined into being by the forceful assertion that some fact of its life needs to be hidden from a larger encompassing group or forbidden to outsiders to speak of.

**Notes**

2. Consider also Scott's concept of the 'hidden transcript', matters that members of the same status group will verbalize among themselves but not with their social superiors or inferiors. See James C. Scott, *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990).
5. See Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, revised edition (London and New York: Verso, 1991)[first edition London and New York: Verso, 1983]. I borrow Anderson's concept of 'imagined communities' by suggesting that nation states are not the only communities so united by machine-produced texts and that the rituals shared by dispersed populations (including those recommended by texts that are distributed fast or over long distances) enable powerful 'imaginations' of communally shared experience among unacknowledged parties.
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79. For an excellent overview of the anthropological literature on gender in sub-Saharan Africa (and one greatly at odds with Oyewumi’s presentation of ‘Western’ views of gender in Africa and elsewhere), see Betty Peterson, ‘Gender Relations in Sub-Saharan Africa’, Gender and Anthropology, ed. Sandra Morgan (Washington DC: American Anthropological Association, 1989) and Flora E. S. Kaplan (ed.) Women’s Roles, Precarious, and Power: Case Studies in African Gender (New York: New York Academy of Sciences, 1997). Cross-cultural variation in the construction of gender roles has been a central theme in anthropology since the 1920s, for example, Margaret Mead, Sex and Temperament in Three Primitive Societies (New York: Morrow Quill, 1936); Mead, Coming of Age.


81. The author of the position that each group should speak for itself did not appear to be advocating the truth of Oyewumi’s argument but was instead defending the autonomy of each national tradition within the Yoruba–Atlantic world. This person was, from the beginning, an important leader of the movement to re-unite the international community of orisa-worshippers but came to resist the emergent principle of West African Orisa supremacy and the apparent male supremacy that she encountered among West African collaborators in the past.


84. Jaques Elleba des Santos, Os Ímãs e o Monte (Ribeirão Preto, Brazil: Vozes, 1970); Pierre Vergier, Oraió (São Paulo: Corrupio, 1981); Lydia Cabrera, El Monte, 5th ed. (Colección del Clacherecki, 1983); Robert Harris Thompson, Flash of the Spirit (New York: Random House, 1983).

85. For example, see Mikelle Smith Osmar, From the Inside to the Outside: The Art and Ritual of Bahian Candomblé, Monograph Series #24 (Los Angeles: Museum of Cultural History, U.C.L.A., 1984), pp. 54 footnotes 50, 55 and 64.