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“Life is War.” African Grammars of Knowing and the Interpretation of Black Religious  
Experience

By

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Doctor of Philosophy

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Experience

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An abstract of  
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## Abstract

“Life is War.” African Grammars of Knowing and the Interpretation of Black Religious Experience

By

Marcus Louis Harvey

This dissertation utilizes a phenomenological approach to explore indigenous grammars of knowing constituting the spiritual epistemologies of the Yorùbá of Nigeria and the Akan of Ghana. These grammars of knowing are treated as major theoretical resources that can greatly inform the interpretation of black religious experience. Organizing the study is a constructive emphasis on the permanency of existential conflict, irresolution, and mystery as motifs that structurally inhere in these grammars of knowing while also reflecting an opaque epistemological orientation in black religious experience. The dissertation seeks to re-assess a commonly-held assumption among scholars of black religion that the conceptual and theoretical categories of Western Christianity are best suited to the task of interpreting black religious experience. Additionally, the dissertation aims to redress the widespread notion in the African-American community and in broader American society that Africa is to be feared and is of little or no intellectual or cultural value. Departing from this notion, I argue that the Yorùbá and Akan epistemological traditions are indispensable repositories of highly-developed *non-Western* forms of philosophical knowledge and spiritual practice. As a way of grounding my investigation in the African-American context, I also explore motifs and insights in Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* that are epistemologically cognate with various motifs and insights found in Yorùbá and Akan epistemology, including the three motifs

mentioned above. The components of the dissertation work together to illumine new discursive trajectories for the phenomenological interpretation of black religious experience which give careful attention to the opaque epistemological orientation in this experience and which go beyond the Christian-based epistemological limitations of methodologies employed in conventional black religious scholarship.

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## **“Life is War:” African Grammars of Knowing and the Interpretation of Black Religious Experience**

### **Introduction**

#### *Background*

This study addresses the problem of black religious hermeneutics. In many ways, hermeneutics is the most fundamental and vexing problem confronting the study of black religion. This comes as no surprise given that interpretation is mediated through various forms of verbal, bodily, artistic, and musical language which, as semiology reminds us, are at their most basic level semantically indeterminate and hence dynamic.<sup>1</sup> In this sense, then, the challenge of hermeneutics is shared by all modes of academic inquiry. Nevertheless, the problem of hermeneutics in the study of black religion is exacerbated by several other issues. One of these issues is socio-historical in nature. Many historians have noted the relationship between American slavery and Christianization, the former of which can be understood as an arm of the transatlantic slave trade. One such historian is Jon Butler, who suggests that, through the linked processes of enslavement and Christianization and the collective impact of other factors such as “dispersed slave settlements,” linguistic differences, “coercion,” and “labor discipline,” the ancestral religious traditions of enslaved Africans in the so-called New World underwent a “spiritual holocaust,” especially during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. In Butler’s view, this “spiritual holocaust” left “discrete African religious practices” largely intact while eradicating “African religious systems.”<sup>2</sup> Butler’s position is consistent with that of Albert J. Raboteau, who made a similar argument twelve years earlier.<sup>3</sup> Yet, neither Butler nor Raboteau go as far as sociologist E. Franklin Frazier did in 1963 when

he argued that the conditions of transatlantic and American slavery erased all traces of the slaves' religio-cultural heritage.<sup>4</sup> Frazier's argument was in part a response to anthropologist Melville J. Herskovits who, in his 1941 book *The Myth of the Negro Past*, demonstrates the variable presence of African cultural survivals among African-American communities in the United States. These cultural survivals, claims Herskovits, have their origins in such West African countries as Dahomey (now the Republic of Benin), Nigeria, Congo, Senegal, and Sierra Leone.<sup>5</sup>

Despite the fact that it presents a host of problems for black religious interpretation, Frazier's perspective is understandable given that the socio-political climates of American chattel slavery from the early seventeenth century to roughly 1865<sup>6</sup> and of the United States in the mid-twentieth century during which time Frazier was writing were extremely hostile to African cultures and to the very idea of Africa. Therefore, it is doubtless the case that Frazier's perspective was influenced by an African-American politics of respectability and acceptability believed by many African-Americans of his era to be a prerequisite for assimilation into American society. Nonetheless, Frazier's scholarship – particularly his book *The Negro Church in America* – contributed to a context in the study of black religion that, with the exception of earlier scholars like W.E.B. DuBois,<sup>7</sup> marginalized and/or ignored African religious cultures entirely in favor of the more socio-politically palatable traditions of Western Christianity. It is within this socio-culturally and politically conditioned context that the study of black religion emerged principally as the study of various forms of black Christianity,<sup>8</sup> thus obfuscating the broader morphology of black religion.

Another issue exacerbating the problem of hermeneutics in the study of black religion concerns the development of what has become known as black theology (or black liberation theology). Heavily influenced by the Civil Rights and Black Power Movements of the 1950s, 60s, and 70s, black theology, of which esteemed theologian James H. Cone is considered the architect, reflected an emerging sense of Christian myopia in the study of black religion signaled perhaps most strongly by Frazier's *The Negro Church*. Black theology interprets biblical narratives, ideas, and figures (especially Jesus Christ) as sources of liberation not only for black people, but for poor and oppressed people across the globe. The governing motif in most black theological texts is liberation. While biblical narratives such as the account in the book of Exodus of the ancient Hebrews' liberation from Egyptian enslavement as well as accounts that depict Jesus identifying in significant ways with social outcasts are hermeneutical anchors for black theological discourses, these discourses also tend to be anchored by a particular understanding of black experience and by engagement with black cultural idioms such as literature, blues, and jazz. However, black theologians' interpretations of black experience and black culture are almost always shaped by a Christianizing agenda that reduces black experience to a divinely-sanctioned Christological struggle against the violence of white supremacist oppression while also reducing black expressive culture to a creative struggle for transcendent liberation that is entirely intelligible to and therefore in theoretical conformity with the general framework of black theology. For example, in *Being Human: Race, Culture, and Religion*, liberation theologian Dwight Hopkins associates black experience in America mainly with the spiritual experience of being created in the image of a liberating God.<sup>9</sup> In a similar way, James Cone, in his latest

work entitled *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*, provocatively interprets black experience in terms of the horrific history of racially-motivated lynching in America and in terms of what he perceives to be the analogous yet liberative significance of the Christian cross.<sup>10</sup> Moreover, both of these theologians interpret black cultural idioms through the rhetorical lens of black theology.<sup>11</sup>

To be sure, several scholars have produced studies that can expand the scope of black theology. One such study is Delores Williams' *Sisters in the Wilderness: The Challenge of Womanist God-Talk*. In this volume, Williams interprets African-American women's social history from the seventeenth century to the present in relation to the story of Hagar in the book of Genesis. Williams explores motifs from the Hagar narrative such as slavery, poverty, sexual exploitation, ethnicity, exile, and divine encounter. By heuristically connecting these motifs to other aspects of African-American women's historical experience such as "coerced surrogacy," "voluntary surrogacy," and the uncertain struggle for a healthy "quality of life," Williams creates discursive space for the introduction of a new hermeneutical paradigm in black theology predicated less on liberation and more on survival.<sup>12</sup> Religious scholar Dianne M. Stewart (a.k.a. Diakité) has this to say regarding Williams' survival-based hermeneutical paradigm:

I would argue that by introducing the category of survival Williams alerts us to some substantive truths about Black suffering that were often eclipsed by the unwavering loyalty given to the motif of liberation in the works of her predecessors. I understand Williams' use of the survival category as an analytical rather than a reflective or prescriptive category that invites womanist theologians to review and record the complex and tragic dynamics of Black women's experiences, especially the most painful, humiliating, and muted aspects of Black women's history.<sup>13</sup>

Since the publication of *Sisters in the Wilderness* in 1993, Williams' survival-based hermeneutical paradigm has gained little traction among black religious scholars and

theologians. While, for instance, Josiah U. Young, III (*A Pan-African Theology: Providence and the Legacies of the Ancestors, Dogged Strength within the Veil: Africana Spirituality and the Mysterious Love of God*), Dianne Stewart (*Three Eyes for the Journey: African Dimensions of the Jamaican Religious Experience*), and the present author (“Engaging the *Òrìṣà*: An Exploration of the Yorùbá Concepts of *Ìbejì* and *Olókun* as Theoretical Principles in Black Theology,”) have proposed African-centered hermeneutical frameworks that are quite receptive to Williams’ survival-based paradigm, and Monica A. Coleman (*Making a Way Out of No Way: A Womanist Theology*) has drawn heavily on Whiteheadian process theology in developing a womanist hermeneutical framework that is similarly receptive to Williams’ paradigm, black religion and experience continue to be interpreted in the main as a fundamentally Christian phenomenon that is best understood through a Christologized notion of liberation.

The third issue amplifying the problem of hermeneutics in the study of black religion relates to the previous issue. Perhaps due in part to black theology’s popularity and discursive dominance, scholars of black religion have by and large failed to seriously explore the ancestral religious traditions of indigenous Africa as contexts for the theoretical and hermeneutical elaboration of black spirituality. Also, with very rare exception (anthropologist Marla Frederick’s ethnographic study *Between Sundays: Black Women and Everyday Struggles of Faith* and Dianne Stewart’s (a.k.a. Diakité) highly interdisciplinary study *Three Eyes for the Journey*, which includes ethnography as well as several other disciplinary approaches, immediately come to mind here), these scholars have failed to thoroughly consider and utilize disciplinary and methodological options

lying beyond Christian theology and the fields of history and sociology. Consequently, the following astute observation made by the preeminent theoretician of black religion Charles H. Long has received little critical attention among black religious scholars:

As stepchildren of Western culture, the oppressed have affirmed and opposed the ideal of the Enlightenment and post-Enlightenment worlds. But in the midst of this ambiguity, for better or for worse, their experiences were rooted in the absurd meaning of their bodies, and it was for these bodies that they were regarded not only as valuable works but also as the locus of the ideologies that justified their enslavement. These bodies of opacity, these loci of meaninglessness . . . were paradoxically loci of a surplus of meaning, meanings incapable of universal expression during the period of oppression. These opaque ones were centers from which gods were made. They were the concrete embodiments of matter made significant in the modern world. They formed new rhythms in time and space; these bodies of opacity were facts of history and symbols of a new religious depth.<sup>14</sup>

In this passage, “the oppressed” refers primarily to peoples of color – including modern-day African-Americans and their ancestors, many of whom were enslaved – who find themselves subjugated and objectified by the socio-cultural operations and “opaque” significations of European and Euro-American modernity. Interpretation of Long’s remarks requires not only a keen historical consciousness but also a willingness to examine black religio-cultural experience from a phenomenological perspective. Since the publication in 1986 of Long’s collection of essays entitled *Significations: Signs, Symbols, and Images in the Interpretation of Religion*, the only study produced which extensively employs phenomenological analysis as a means of probing the “opaque” emergence of black religion and experience within the context of modernity is James A. Noel’s 2009 volume *Black Religion and the Imagination of Matter in the Atlantic World*. Several other earlier and more recent studies can be viewed as moving in a more or less phenomenological direction as well. Some of these studies include Theophus H. Smith’s *Conjuring Culture: Biblical Formations of Black America*, Donald H. Matthews’

*Honoring the Ancestors: An African Cultural Interpretation of Black Religion and Literature*, Will Coleman's *Tribal Talk: Black Theology, Hermeneutics, and African/American Ways of "Telling the Story*, and Tracey E. Hucks' *Yorùbá Traditions and African American Religious Nationalism*. We might also mention Anthony B. Pinn's *Why Lord?: Suffering and Evil in Black Theology*, *Terror and Triumph: The Nature of Black Religion*, and *The End of God-Talk: An African American Humanist Theology*.

Though unlikely in my opinion, it remains debatable whether or not these texts represent a larger trend in the study of black religion favoring phenomenologically-informed methodologies.

It is my position that the study of black religion (especially black theology) is currently undergoing a largely self-induced disciplinary crisis. Despite the increasingly interdisciplinary climate of the American academy, the study of black religion has, generally and relatively speaking, only recently begun to incorporate interdisciplinary methodologies, and there are no definite indications that such incorporation will become commonplace. Compounding this crisis is what Dianne Diakité (formerly Stewart) would describe as an "Afrophobic" unwillingness among scholars of black religion to identify African religions as a major trajectory of research and critical reflection.<sup>15</sup>

Aminah Beverly McCloud's *African American Islam*, Richard Brent Turner's *Islam in the African-American Experience*, and Turner's *Jazz Religion, the Second Line, and Black New Orleans* are great examples of studies that engage in rigorous intercourse with religious modalities other than large-scale institutional and marginalized local forms of Christianity. However, the indispensable value of such intercourse as well as the interdisciplinarity often attending it are topics that are either minimally engaged or

omitted entirely from conversations about the future of black religious studies. This being the case, it is difficult to remain optimistic about black religious studies functioning in the years to come as anything other than a subfield of Anglophone Christian studies.

### *The Aim of This Study*

The current study represents a significant departure from conventional scholarship in the study of black religion. It recognizes and embraces the broader, more complex morphology of black religion while focusing specifically on the phenomenon of black religious experience in America as a dynamic dimension of Africana spirituality. The term “black religious experience” as used herein does not narrowly refer to one particular religious tradition. Rather, the term is intended to signify the complex morphology of black religion in America as well as an “opaque” (i.e., mysterious) epistemological orientation amplified by the unprecedented violence of modernity. While this study is in no way antagonistic to the kind of socio-political liberation promoted in extant scholarly discourses on black religion, liberation does not play a significant thematic role in the exploratory phenomenological examinations anchoring this study. My decentralization of liberation is attributable mainly to two factors: 1) The widespread use of the liberation motif among scholars of black religion and the biblical connotations that have come to be associated with this motif greatly contribute not only to the obfuscation of black religion’s complex morphology, but also to the elision of the opaque epistemological orientation in black religious experience; 2) I find the liberation motif hermeneutically ill-equipped to rigorously address this opaque epistemological orientation. Put otherwise, this study does not assume the general utility of the liberation motif as a hermeneutical trajectory.

This study avoids the Christian myopia that besets the scholarly tradition of black religious studies. I turn to the indigenous religions of Africa not in an effort to undermine the Christian projects of black religious scholars and theologians or to impugn the much-cherished motif of liberation, but rather in an effort to revalue these indigenous religions as African traditions worth studying in and of themselves and as theoretical/hermeneutical contexts within which our understanding of black spirituality can be significantly enriched. I focus specifically on the religious cultures of the Yorùbá of Nigeria and the Akan of Ghana, paying close attention in each context to what I call *grammars of knowing*. The term *grammars of knowing* refers to modes or patterns of meaning construction that give rise to epistemologies. Yorùbá and Akan grammars of knowing are explored phenomenologically with an eye toward their relevance to the opaque epistemological orientation in black religious experience. This exploration – which is conducted throughout the dissertation – revolves around three motifs: the permanency of existential conflict, irresolution, and mystery. Far from being conceptual fabrications of my own devising, these three motifs inhere within Yorùbá and Akan grammars of knowing and are therefore important for the understanding of Yorùbá and Akan epistemology. I also explore black fictional literature as an index of black religious experience. More specifically, I phenomenologically examine Zora Neale Hurston’s novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. The purpose of this examination is to connect Yorùbá and Akan grammars of knowing to the African-American religio-cultural experience through the identification and exploration of motifs and insights within Hurston’s novel that are epistemologically cognate with the Yorùbá/Akan-rooted motifs of the permanency of existential conflict, irresolution, and mystery as well as with other

insights emerging from my analysis of Yorùbá and Akan grammars of knowing. My basic argument is that Yorùbá and Akan grammars of knowing can serve as a theoretical basis for the creation and development of an African-centered phenomenological discourse on black spirituality that gives careful attention to the opaque epistemological orientation in black religious experience.

Some may wonder what accounts for my adoption of a phenomenological methodology. It may be helpful to frame my response based on the following question recently put to me by a highly distinguished professor: “How would you respond to someone who insists that you are a theologian at heart whose commitment to phenomenological analysis is limited to the purposes of this dissertation?” The first point to make in addressing this question relates to the purpose of theology as it has been and is traditionally understood in Western Christianity. The academic discipline of theology in the Western world assumes belief in the spiritual realities attested in the Bible and is closely associated with the life of Christian communities in that its main goal is to assist these communities in developing a critical understanding of and perspective on the various beliefs and practices comprising their faith. In this sense, theology, even in its most constructive and unconventional forms, remains a discourse of and for Christian churches. A similar claim can probably be made about Jewish and Islamic theologies as well, to name only a few. Theological discourse, whether constructive or confessional in nature, does *not* reflect my intellectual orientation. I am interested not in the theological interpretation of religious phenomena but in religious phenomena themselves. I am also intensely compelled by the question of how religious phenomena affect human perception while also engendering and sustaining modes of knowing. Phenomenological

analysis, especially in the tradition of Charles Long, is in my view better suited to the task of engaging such a question. Longian phenomenology also enables the recognition of theology itself as a discourse of power,<sup>16</sup> a recognition I regard as indispensable for the study of black religion.

### *Outline of Chapters*

The dissertation consists of five chapters. The first chapter, entitled “Braving the Margins: Indigenous Africa and the Study of Black Religion,” establishes the foundation upon which the remaining four chapters build. In this chapter, the historical circumstances influencing the Christianization of black spirituality in black religious studies are discussed in greater detail. This discussion, which is relatively brief, is intended to buttress the primary goals of the chapter. The first of these goals includes providing a rationale for my focus on Yorùbá and Akan grammars of knowing as philosophical resources that can play a major role in further developing our understanding of the opaque epistemological orientation in black religious experience. The second goal involves indicating what is distinct about my phenomenological engagement of black fictional literature. In relation to these goals, I discuss such issues as the widespread “Afrophobic” elision of Africa in the study of black religion, the abundance of indigenous scholarly literature on the religio-cultural traditions of the Yorùbá and Akan, and my African-rooted phenomenological examination of Zora Neale Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. This chapter also addresses the question of why the motifs of the permanency of existential conflict, irresolution, and mystery as interpreted in Yorùbá and Akan thought are better suited to this dissertation than other versions of these motifs found in Christian theological and mystical traditions. In brief,

the answer given is that the larger eschatological framework of Christian theological and mystical discourses ultimately tends toward existential resolution through divine union and thus away from sustained, constructive engagement with the conflictual messiness and uncertainty of materiality and religious experience. However, the non-eschatological frameworks shaping Yorùbá and Akan epistemology tend toward existential irresolution, thereby making possible trajectories of phenomenological discourse that are quite different from the trajectories made possible by the eschatologically-based frameworks of Christian theological epistemologies. I explore some of these non-eschatological or irresolutional discursive trajectories in the final chapter.

Chapter two, entitled “The ‘Aberrant’ Nature of Peace: Apprehending the Yorùbá Cosmos,” engages Yorùbá cosmology as a matrix of Yorùbá epistemology. This chapter is essentially a phenomenological exploration of a fairly wide range of cultural sources, some of which include Yorùbá originary narratives, conceptions of *Olódùmarè* (the Yorùbá High Deity) and other lesser deities or powers (*Òrìṣà*) such as *Ọ̀bàtálá*, *Ifá*, and *Èṣù*, the Yorùbá conception of human destiny (*orí inú*), which relates to a person’s spiritual “head,” religious symbolism associated with the the *Ọ̀gbóni* society (one of the most well-known and secretive cultural institutions in Yorùbáland), and the *Yemoja* festival held annually in the southwestern Nigerian town of Ayede. I examine ways in which the motifs of the permanency of existential conflict, irresolution, and mystery are encoded in these and other sources. I also discuss other related motifs and epistemological insights emerging from this examination. It is suggested in this chapter that careful analysis of Yorùbá cultural sources reveals a distinct grammar of knowing that shapes Yorùbá epistemology and is based on principles such as dynamism.

Chapter three, entitled “‘It is the Spirit That Teaches the Priest to Whirl Around:’ A Phenomenological Analysis of Akan Cosmology,” extensively probes a constellation of ideas and practices rooted in the Akan cosmological tradition. I consider *Onyame* (the Akan High Deity) and lesser deities such as *Asase Yaa* (the earth deity), the *Tete Abosom* (“tutelar” deities that protect communities), the *Suman Brafoɔ* (inspired implements used by individuals either to help or to harm), and the ancestors (*Nsamanfo*) both as realities and concepts whose fullest meanings lie in the depths of Akan religious-philosophical thought and in ritual practices such as *Akɔm* (“ritual dancing”), which is performed by a priest (*Ɔkɔmfo*) during communal worship of a deity (or deities). In addition, close attention is given to ideas related to the Akan understanding of the human being such as spirit (*sunsum*), soul (*ɔkra*), *ntoro* (“semen-transmitted characteristic”), *mogya* (“blood”), and destiny (*nkrabea/hyɛbea*). Furthermore, I reflect on several Akan aphorisms that, along with conceptions of various spiritual beings and of the human being, articulate an Akan grammar of knowing. Some of these aphorisms include *Obra yɛ ku* (“Life is war”), *Onyame soma wo a, ɔma wo fa monkyimɔnka kwan so* (“If Onyame sends you on an errand, [Onyame] makes you walk on a difficult road”), *Papa akatua ne bɔne* (“The reward of goodness is evil”), and *Papa asusu de rekɔ no, na bɔne di akyire rekɔgye* (“While goodness is thinking where he will go, evil is following him to frustrate his efforts”). Throughout my phenomenological engagement of Akan cosmology (which I interpret as an epistemology), I specify ways in which conflictual, irresolutional, and mysterious meanings as well as other types of meanings are manifest in Akan cultural experience. I do this, for instance, in the chapter’s concluding analysis of *abayifo* (persons involved in the practice of *bayi boro*, which is the skillful manipulation of

spiritual power for socially destructive ends) and anti-*bayi boro* rites performed at local shrines in the southern Ghanaian town of Dormaa-Ahenkro. One of the cardinal epistemological insights arising from my analysis of Akan cosmology is that, for the Akan, knowing is a heterogeneous and paradoxical experience marked both by power and limitation.

Chapter four, entitled “‘Hard Skies’ and Bottomless Questions: Zora Neale Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God* and the Opaque Epistemological Orientation in Black Religious Experience,” connects Yorùbá and Akan epistemology to black religious experience as indexed in Hurston’s 1937 novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. I suggest in this chapter that Janie Mae Crawford – the novel’s protagonist – responds to various experiences in her life, several of which are traumatic and in certain cases largely inexplicable, in ways that reflect an opaque epistemological orientation as well as cultural critic Albert Murray’s description of the blues. Through a phenomenological investigation of several passages in the novel, I highlight the presence of motifs and insights that I argue are epistemologically cognate with some of the motifs and insights explored in chapters two and three, including, but not limited to, the permanency of existential conflict, irresolution, and mystery. I reflect on the significance of the main motifs and insights explored in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* for our understanding of the opaque epistemological orientation in black religious experience. I also consider these motifs in light of Yorùbá and Akan epistemology. One of the important theoretical ideas gleaned from my analysis of Hurston’s novel is that the opaque epistemological orientation in black religious experience squarely confronts the limitations as well as the

myriad hardships and perils of material existence without inordinate recourse to notions of spiritual transcendence.

In chapter five, entitled “Toward an African-Centered Phenomenology of Black Religious Experience,” I begin with a brief reflection on the underutilization of phenomenological analysis in the study of black religion, a long-standing trend which signals the need for more phenomenological investigations in this field. Secondly, given the extent to which my dissertation is informed by the work of Charles Long, I offer a review of James Noel’s *Black Religion and the Imagination of Matter in the Atlantic World*, which is unique in that it is the only comprehensive phenomenology of black religion based on Long’s theoretical insights. While Noel’s volume represents one of the more important and innovative contributions to the study of black religion in recent years, I nevertheless find it wanting due to Noel’s surprising hermeneutical reliance on Western theological and philosophical categories. Moving away from such reliance, the third and final phase of this chapter constructively delineates possible discursive trajectories for an African-centered phenomenology of black religious experience based upon the exploratory investigations of the preceding chapters. My hope is that the delineation of these discursive trajectories will prompt an *active* realization among black religious scholars that African indigenous thought and practice can function as a context for research and critical reflection on the opaque epistemological orientation in black religious experience. This hope is grounded in a firm belief that these African-centered discursive trajectories can develop into discursive *traditions* that reshape our understanding of black religious experience.

## **Chapter 1**

### **Braving the Margins: Indigenous Africa and the Study of Black Religion**

At the core of this study lies the problem of black religious experience, a remarkably heterogeneous human phenomenon that has challenged, inspired, and perplexed African-American intellectuals and artists for more than a century. The dilemma presented by the phenomenon (or array of phenomena) conveniently and generally referred to as African-American or black religious experience is multidimensional. Firstly, as Mikhail M. Bakhtin, Roland Barthes, Jacques Derrida, and Paul Ricoeur would in similar ways remind us, any academic study taking any form of experience as its subject must confront both the limits and ultimate uncontrollability of language itself and therefore textualization, be it verbal or written.<sup>17</sup> Put differently, language is never fully within our interpretive control because it is the nature of language to always simultaneously mean less and more than what we want it to mean. Thus, the textualized interpretation of religious experience proffered herein must finally be regarded as a fragmentary focal point on a much broader spectrum of meaning.

Second, although several scholars have done so, it remains debatable whether or not we can speak in collective terms of a *religious experience* that is somehow consciously and/or unconsciously shared among all African-Americans.<sup>18</sup> To be sure, the strikingly diverse expressions of black religion examined in the works of such researchers as Zora Neale Hurston, Benjamin Elijah Mays, Arthur Huff Fauset, and Joseph R. Washington, Jr. make clear the questionable nature of arguments that insist on perceiving black religious experience as an experience fundamentally shared throughout the African-American community.<sup>19</sup> A third dimension of the problem that relates closely to the second has to do with a fairly widespread theoretical reliance in black religious

scholarship on categories found in the Western Christian tradition, especially those most prominently featured in biblical accounts. Some of these categories include revelation, sin, evil, suffering/oppression, divine chosenness, divine partisanship, redemption, liberation, and reconciliation. Given the ubiquity of these biblical categories in scholarly interpretations of black religious experience,<sup>20</sup> it seems safe to suggest that the logic reflected in the following trajectory of assumptions is actively being utilized by many scholars of black religion: 1) Within the Bible and the Western Christian tradition are found theoretical categories abundantly capable of serving as hermeneutical guides for the understanding and critical articulation of African-American religious experience; 2) Biblical or Christian categories are best suited to the task of creating and developing interpretations of this experience; 3) Hence, the most reliable, most illuminative understandings of African-American religious experience are biblically-based. This Christianizing logic has resulted not only in a far-reaching elision in black religious scholarship of non-Christian traditions as legitimate theoretical sources, but also in a coercion of African-American cultural idioms such as slave spirituals, the blues, literature, and folklore that makes these idioms appear largely consonant with the conceptual and rhetorical agenda of, for instance, black liberation theology.<sup>21</sup>

Indigenous Africa represents a cultural world that is commonly excluded from articles, monographs, and books on African-American religion. While indigenous Africa has received a considerable amount of attention in contexts such as the classic debate over African retentions in North America, for whom anthropologist Melville Herskovits and sociologist E. Franklin Frazier are well-known,<sup>22</sup> it has, with rare exception, garnered relatively little serious attention among other interpreters of black religion, particularly

those adopting a theological approach.<sup>23</sup> Africa's invisibility in dominant discourses on black spirituality leads us to consider the troubling possibility that the artificers of these discourses view indigenous Africa as having very little or nothing at all to contribute to the interpretation of black religious experience. The centuries-long history of racialized oppression in North America coupled with the cultural and intellectual marginalization and exclusion of Africa in the writings of most black religious critics have given rise to a discursive hegemony that mainly privileges the motifs of socio-political oppression and liberation as both formative and essential for any responsible account of black religious experience.<sup>24</sup> In light of the undeniable historical reality of Africans' involuntary presence in America and the ongoing struggle of African-Americans against deeply entrenched colonial traditions of systemic injustice, it is entirely understandable that the ideas of oppression and liberation would be seized upon by black theologians and other interpreters of black religious life. However, this myopic perspective has had unfortunate consequences for the understanding of African-American religious experience.

One consequence of the above-mentioned perspective is the impression that black religious experience is most intelligible when placed within a theoretical framework circumscribed by the themes of oppression and liberation. As suggested earlier, such a framework is useful and laudable insofar as it firmly roots black religious experience in a definite historical situation, thereby discouraging interpretations that are overly abstract and out of touch with the day-to-day lives of black Americans. The difficulty, though, is that the framework lends itself to reductive understandings of black religious experience. In other words, within this framework, black religious experience maintains its integrity as a *meaningful* phenomenon only to the extent that the existence of African-Americans

continues to be defined by racial oppression and a perennial struggle for social and political emancipation. The admittedly strong historical basis of the impression under discussion makes it exceedingly difficult to imagine black religious existence in a way that is not ultimately chained to the boundaries established by the two motifs being considered. Regrettably, what we are left with is a captivity of meaning as it pertains to black religious experience.

Bearing in mind the fact that, from the framework in question, a robust hermeneutical tradition has developed that has produced a body of knowledge about black religious consciousness,<sup>25</sup> we might say that this tradition constitutes an epistemology (way of knowing) of black religious experience. Let us refer to this epistemology provisionally as an epistemology of liberation. In black theology, this epistemology is predicated upon a profoundly Christologized interpretation of liberation wherein Jesus Christ is critically figured as the sole historical and symbolic liberator of oppressed humanity, which of course includes black humanity.<sup>26</sup> The issue with this epistemology, as alluded to previously, is that its overwrought *telos* – namely, the strategic interpretive positioning and valuation of Christic liberation as the true substance of black religious experience,<sup>27</sup> forecloses in-depth engagement of other epistemologies that could potentially enlarge or even transform our understanding of black religious experience in unexpected and generative ways. The wider, more complex scope of meaning endemic to black religious life which includes – among other things – what I refer to earlier as an opaque (i.e., mysterious) epistemological orientation is lost in an epistemology of liberation. Having said that, four pressing questions now present themselves: 1) What type of epistemological and thematic re-orientation would prove fruitful in bringing into sharper

critical relief eschewed trajectories for the interpretation of black religious experience? 2) How might such a re-orientation not only move beyond the limitations of an epistemology of liberation, but also begin to set the stage for the development of African-centered phenomenological approaches to the study of black religion that emphasize a set of concepts better suited to the promotion of nuanced and more complex understandings of the opaque orientation in black religious experience? 3) What themes emerge as most appropriate to such a task? 4) Where might we turn for theoretical and epistemological resources that are conducive to this type of re-orientation?

The overpowering epistemological emphasis specifically in black theology on liberation and other cognate motifs such as divine solidarity with the oppressed and chosenness ironically leads one to wonder about the kind of epistemological and thematic shift necessary to cast light on the opaque epistemological orientation in black religious experience.<sup>28</sup> The re-orientation needed would be shaped by a keen recognition of the reality that an epistemology of liberation is not the sole theoretical paradigm available to interpreters of black religious existence, nor is it *de facto* the most apt. This re-orientation would also be characterized by receptivity to the possibility of non-Christian epistemologies being legitimate – even essential – contexts within which to base understandings of black religious experience that give attention to its opaque epistemological orientation. The dislodging of Christian-based epistemologies as normative theoretical sites for black religious hermeneutics obviously entails the neutralization of the discursive limitations imposed by liberationist models. It also involves the creation of new space for the construction of fresh theoretical approaches and epistemologies that introduce motifs which highlight opaque facets of black religious

experience that are largely unexplored and perhaps wholly irreconcilable within a liberation perspective.

One contextual adjustment that could aid in facilitating the re-orientation being proposed would include West African religious traditions. The particular frameworks I have in mind are the religious *grammars of knowing* (by which I mean modes of meaning construction that constitute epistemologies and are rooted in particular conceptual repertoires and approaches to analyzing and interpreting the world) and epistemologies found within the cosmologies of the Yorùbá of Nigeria and the Akan of Ghana. These traditions are attractive and helpful for the present study in part because of the important structural and theoretical role played by three motifs that I contend also represent a largely overlooked opaque epistemological orientation in black religious experience that destabilizes an epistemology of liberation. The three motifs are the permanency of existential conflict, irresolution, and mystery.

The central argument put forth in the dissertation is that Yorùbá and Akan grammars of knowing can contribute significantly to the construction of an African-centered phenomenological discourse on black spirituality that focally engages the opaque epistemological orientation in black religious experience. Distinguishing the discourse would be a creative phenomenological focus on the permanency of existential conflict, irresolution, and mystery as constitutive elements of black religious experience capable not only of deepening our understanding of this phenomenon, but also of helping bring into view a previously elided African-rooted epistemology of black religious experience. The perspective being espoused here also recognizes the vital role of black cultural idioms as indices of black religious experience. I find this to be especially true of the

black literary tradition. One novel that in my estimation functions uniquely as an index of black religious experience is Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. A second component of the dissertation's main argument, then, is that through close analysis we find in this novel aesthetically rendered epistemological cognates of the three experiential motifs listed above that signal the latter's existence and importance as features of black religious experience.

Having delineated the basic elements of the dissertation – namely, black religious experience and its opaque epistemological orientation, Yorùbá and Akan religious epistemology, and black literature, it would be useful here to give more focused attention to each element in anticipation of a series of questions the project is likely to engender. The highly constructive nature and marginal status of the dissertation relative to mainstream traditions in the study of black religion understandably invite intense scrutiny. My hope is that carefully addressing some of the questions that could conceivably accompany such scrutiny will serve to buttress the elaboration of the dissertation's principal argument. The following questions will be treated in turn: 1) How are we to understand black religious experience and its opaque epistemological orientation? 2) On what ground is it justifiable to identify and explore African indigenous epistemological systems as viable frameworks for re-theorizing black religious experience? 3) What accounts for the selection of the Yorùbá and Akan traditions from among the thousands found across the continent of Africa? Along with this question I will also concisely explain my reasons for specifying the permanency of existential conflict, irresolution, and mystery as organizing motifs in the proposal of an African-centered phenomenological discourse on black religious experience with important

epistemological implications; 4) What is distinctive about my hermeneutical engagement of black literature?

### **Black Religious Experience and Its Opaque Epistemological Orientation**

The use of the category *black religious experience* in the current study is problematic for at least two reasons. As broached at the start of this chapter, the category tends to be understood through generalization. One of the prevailing assumptions among interpreters seems to be that African-Americans' common history of colonial enslavement on the ships of the Middle Passage and in the New World bred a novel collective consciousness that permanently bound the African-American community together in psychic solidarity.<sup>29</sup> By way of example, many would probably agree with the assertion that a shared African-American consciousness with Atlantic roots helped fuel major American artistic and social movements such as the Harlem Renaissance, the Chicago Black Renaissance, the Civil Rights Movement, and the Black Power Movement. The second major assumption typically made about the category *black religious experience* is that it signifies a phenomenon best described as Christian. In fact, over time the term has become so laden with Christian connotations as to be nearly synonymous with the category *Christian experience*. From a mainstream theological and semantic point of view, participation in black religious experience seems to demand close identification with the history of the black church in America as well as the various streams of Christocentric religious meaning generally associated with it.

It is not my intention to discredit Christianized understandings of black religious experience or to suggest that they are baseless. For even a cursory reading of the voluminous scholarly literature on African-American history shows that such

understandings are defensible. However, the singular and penetrating insights of unusually astute interpreters like cultural anthropologist Zora Neale Hurston cast some doubt upon Christian-based assumptions about the phenomenology of black religious experience. During an analysis of what she calls "culture heroes" in the folklore of the black American south, she observes that

The Negro is not Christian really. The primitive gods are not deities of too subtle inner reflection; they are hard-working bodies who serve their devotees just as laboriously as the suppliant serves them. Gods of physical violence, stopping at nothing to serve their followers.<sup>30</sup>

Hurston's disruptive claim points to the ongoing need to rigorously interrogate the cultural moorings and contours of black religious experience and its opaque epistemological orientation. It also foregrounds the great difficulty inherent in conceptualizing this experience and its orientation in a way that is functional and meaningful for the purposes of the dissertation. Let us now clarify further what the phrase *black religious experience and its opaque epistemological orientation* is meant to signify in the context of our larger phenomenological investigation.

The first thing to note involves the three motifs that give theoretical structure to the project. In punctuating the permanency of existential conflict, irresolution, and mystery as characteristics of black religious experience that signify a partially knowable (opaque) orientation in this experience and that have significant correlative associations with certain indigenous African religious sensibilities, I do not have any essentialist notions in mind. While I am undoubtedly positing these characteristics as important aspects which reflect an epistemological orientation that cannot be fully understood or resolved and that apprehends the world and spiritual power as ultimately mysterious, I am not suggesting that these characteristics should be seen as existing in a state of ossification. On the

contrary, the dissertation itself is informed at every phase of development by an acute awareness of the protean nature of all human experiences, including those described as "religious." Thus, dynamism emerges as a primary factor in the intricate, open-ended equation that is black religious experience. The three thematic components through which we are attempting to access and interpret black religious experience and its opaque epistemological orientation are themselves constantly subjected to an endless array of historical forces (e.g. socio-cultural and political vicissitudes in North America, personal and/or communal turmoil, personal failures and successes, new perceptions, new experiences, new interpretations, new knowledge(s), maturation, etc.). The subjection of these components to such forces implies that black religious experience and its opaque epistemological orientation are regularly faced with the burden of reconfiguration and adaptation in order to generate meanings that are relevant to present realities. So in contrast to perspectives that may privilege a more static understanding of black religious experience, I am privileging a more elastic conception that takes seriously the proven status of black religious experience as a highly mutable phenomenon. Readers would do well in remaining cognizant of this throughout their engagement of the dissertation.

Given the dissertation's firm theoretical and hermeneutical commitment to indigenous African epistemologies, some may find curious my decision to use the descriptive category *black religious experience* rather than, for example, *Neo-African*, *Black Atlantic*, *African Atlantic*, *African Diasporic*, or *Africana religious experience*. The tremendous value of these appellations lies in their ability to convey a sense of transnationality vis-à-vis the religious experiences of persons of African descent. We may think of these experiences as an extremely diffuse multi-continental, multi-regional phenomenon that

cannot be adequately accounted for by any single geographical or morphological study. My use of the category *black religious experience* is not accidental. My selection of this category is significantly informed not only by the preceding considerations but also by the singularly tensive existential predicament expressed in W.E.B. DuBois's classic theory of "double consciousness." DuBois's theory articulates a conflicted duality in African-American consciousness, a duality consisting of an unresolved, discomfiting awareness of self as both black and American.<sup>31</sup> My choice is also informed by the observations of race theorists Cheryl Harris and Nell Painter, both of whom help make quite visible the undeniable role of modernity in the inimical symbolic, social, and mercantile construction of *blackness*.<sup>32</sup> As renowned historian of religion Charles Long and American religious historian James Noel both argue, the idea of blackness – as an imaginative and purposeful European creation ensuing from "opaque material contacts and exchanges" with non-Western peoples – has had a definitive and unprecedented impact on religious formation in North America.<sup>33</sup> For this reason, and also because as an African-American it happens to be the social environment with which I am most familiar, the North American cultural milieu is the chief contextual referent for the term *black religious experience* as utilized in the dissertation.

I agree with Curtis J. Evans' argument that black religious experience is historically conditioned by the constructed "burden" of race.<sup>34</sup> Yet, concurring with Evans, I am unconvinced by those who would have us believe black religious experience is finally reducible to race. One need only consider the famed black religious thinker and mystic Howard Thurman, who produced many writings whose depth and scope go far beyond the limits of a strictly race-based religious discourse.<sup>35</sup> Moreover, belying totalizing,

reductionist interpretations of black religious experience that rely on a race-centered analysis is the fact that this experience, as an African Diasporic phenomenon, participates in a vast complex of variously conditioned and naturally differentiated religious experiences had by persons and communities of African descent. For our purposes, *black religious experience* denotes a heterogeneous African-American cultural phenomenon, while connoting an expansive field of experiences constituted by religious communities within the African Diaspora, of which the African-American community is a part. The phrase *opaque epistemological orientation in black religious experience* signifies a formative, African-rooted apprehension of materiality (which includes the natural world as well as human beings) and the spiritual dimension as ultimately mysterious to human knowledge. We conclude with a more concise articulation of what is here meant by the phrase *black religious experience and its opaque epistemological orientation*. What follows is a *functional* definition that should in no way be regarded as fixed: Occurring in both Christian and non-Christian African-American religious communities, *black religious experience and its opaque epistemological orientation* encompass a polymorphous, dynamic awareness and relational apprehension of a multi-powered spiritual community whose operation and meanings lie beyond the grasp of human knowledge. This polymorphous, dynamic awareness and its relational apprehension are shaped at different times and with differing intensities by disquieting encounters with the conflictuality, irresolution, and mystery *characterizing the material and spiritual dimensions*. These encounters often elicit a reflective and/or practical response.

### **Why Yorùbá and Akan Grammars of Knowing?**

It should now be clear that one of the foremost tasks of the dissertation is to illumine the opaque epistemological orientation in black religious experience by making use of grammars of knowing present in the indigenous epistemologies of the Yorùbá and Akan communities of Nigeria and Ghana.<sup>36</sup> What may not be clear, however, is the rationale for selecting these particular grammars of knowing. Also compelling our attention is the meta-question of whether or not the turn to *African* epistemological systems as viable cultural settings for a constructive re-imagining of black religious experience is justifiable. We will first address this larger question before narrowing the discussion to an explication of the reasoning behind my specific choice of the Yorùbá and Akan epistemological traditions.

#### *The Case for Indigenous Africa*

W.E.B. DuBois, who is credited with being one of the first Americans to apply sociological methods to the study of black institutional religion,<sup>37</sup> not only names Africa as an integral factor for understanding the social and cultural history of black religion, but also goes so far as to claim that Africa is the key to the moral and ethical renewal of the world.<sup>38</sup> Yet, ironically, despite DuBois's visionary and prophetic pronouncement, Africa has failed to gain much of a foothold in the study of black religion. With fairly rare exception, academic discourses on black religion have tended to focus primarily on different institutional forms of black Christianity.<sup>39</sup> For example, recent theological interpretations of black religious experience are more often than not explicitly or implicitly rooted in a denominational black church paradigm that gives much attention to biblical figures, concepts, and narratives as primary resources for understanding black

religion. Also, in some cases, less attention is given to select elements of African-American folk culture.<sup>40</sup> Therefore, one might expect considerable resistance to the African-based hermeneutical approach set forth in the dissertation. Critics will likely direct our attention to at least two factors that all too often work to preclude substantive intercourse with indigenous Africa as a constructive locus for re-thinking black religious experience. One factor to which critics could point is the relatively pervasive Christian self-identification found among members of the African-American community. Most scholars would not debate the prevalence of Christian self-identification within the African-American community as an historical verity. Any number of variables may account for the apparently ubiquitous presence of this kind of self-identification. Familial religious indoctrination extending across multiple generations comes to mind as one likely variable. Such socio-cultural transmission, which often involves the sharing of well-known biblical narratives, Christocentric patterns of belief, liturgical practices, and scripturally-derived ethical codes, is certainly reflective of the manner in which I was introduced to Christianity in my youth. Close friends and colleagues also claim to have undergone the same type of process during childhood.

A second closely related factor critics may enjoin us to consider is the deep-abiding reverence that many black Christians have for the black church and its pivotal historical role as a source of black social survival, empowerment, and political resistance. As the largest African-American social institution, the black church provided a space wherein many African-Americans experienced unifying modes of Christian spiritual formation and identification amid, for instance, the intense postbellum racial hostility that plagued the American cultural landscape during the period between 1880 and 1920.<sup>41</sup> The black

church has also served as the main organizing stage for some of the African-American community's most important and influential social activism programs. For example, historian Gayraud S. Wilmore has noted black Christian involvement in the creation of the Niagara Movement in 1905 as well as the National Urban League in 1906.<sup>42</sup> Although the two organizations can be distinguished ideologically – the Niagara Movement opposed the accommodationism of Booker T. Washington, while the National Urban League embraced a more assimilationist perspective – they both shared a firm belief in advocacy on behalf of the civil rights of African-Americans and an unequivocal denunciation of racial discrimination. Furthermore, the work of eminent Harvard professor Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham demonstrates that the tireless efforts of African-American women in black Baptist churches were instrumental in helping to establish these churches in the early twentieth century as powerful institutions of social reform committed to racial self-help, gender equality, suffrage, and equal opportunity for black men and women in the areas of employment and education.<sup>43</sup> From this, we begin to derive a sense of how participation in the black church stimulates in many African-Americans entrenched vocational commitments that are inextricably connected to *church*-based experiences of subjective and communal *Christian* religious formation and identification. Further animating these commitments is the black church's history of social activism. It is hardly a surprise then that the black church has become a nearly unassailable object of reverence in the African-American community.

The factors discussed above should not be taken lightly or reductively assessed simply as components leading to an argument for African-American epistemological captivity within Christendom. Yet I do regard as valid the perception of Euro-American and even

black Christendom as institutionalized, imperialistic cultural frameworks within which the African-American religious imagination is captive.<sup>44</sup> Even so, the positive social and political role played by the black church should not be belittled or ignored. To a significant degree the black church continues to delimit the religious imagination of many – if not most – African-Americans, thus supplying a spiritual map for making sense of their racialized existence. However, the factors in question must be seen against the backdrop of an inveterate cultural problem that has beleaguered the African-American community for generations. Religious scholar Dianne Stewart (a.k.a Diakit ) describes this problem as "Afrophobia." In her words, Afrophobia is

. . . the hatred and fear of that which is African and of being associated with things and peoples African. Afrophobia is Euro-derived and is arguably one of the greatest obstacles to overcoming anthropological poverty in Africa and across African diasporas, as so many people of African descent have internalized the symbols and ideas of the White oppressive imagination. Countless Blacks harbor Afrophobic sentiments that inform African Diasporic religiocultural languages, symbols, and attitudes.<sup>45</sup>

While not using the term "Afrophobia," Sylvester A. Johnson, another scholar of black religion, nevertheless perceives the problematic signified by the term as keenly and urgently as Diakit . In reflecting on what he sees as a grave need for more careful postcolonialist studies of African-American religion that squarely place it in the context of European and Euro-American colonial history, he avers,

One pressing implication of this colonial condition of African Americans as conquered, colonized peoples and of religion itself as a colonial category is evident in the need for intellectual attention to the religious hatred, specifically anti-African, that has overwhelmingly shaped the religious history of African Americans. This sentiment is so deeply instantiated in American culture that for generations even black Americans have loved to hate – to viscerally despise – African religions as the epitome of all that is evil and decadent. Despite all of this, the *American* history of religious hatred against African religion has yet to be written.<sup>46</sup>

The very need to provide a rationale justifying the exploration of indigenous Africa as a theoretical matrix for the interpretation of black religious experience is itself reflective of black America's inherited legacy of Afrophobia. Indeed, we would be remiss in failing to acknowledge the irony in the fact that the problem of Afrophobia helps make necessary the present study and others like it. As explicated above, Afrophobia is by definition a distortive, pathological attitude that contributes enormously to the ongoing dehumanization, deculturalization, and dehistoricization of the African world, thereby effecting its invisibility in the African-American community, particularly the African-American Christian community. Afrophobia is implicated in the establishment of historiographical traditions that narrate the emergence and growth of African-American religion in ways that devalue or ignore entirely its pre-Christian, pre-colonial African origins as well as perduring African cultural influences evident in both black and white American religious communities.<sup>47</sup> Historiographies that avoid giving critical attention to the African foundations of African-American religion run the risk of portraying the latter merely as an historical enigma whose cultural genesis and meaning are wholly dependent upon the genocidal violence of European modernity. In this historiographic paradigm, African-American religious experience amounts at best to an ambiguously meaningful by-product of a unique and permanent American socio-cultural predicament engineered by the Eurocentric imagination.

Critics are likely to persist in objecting firmly to our focus on indigenous Africa. They may cite the fact (or impression) that the majority of African-Americans more readily see themselves as members of the black Christian community rather than as members of a Diasporic African community with African cultural roots that are operative

in reconfigured and novel ways at the levels of subjective consciousness as well as social and spiritual expression. In one sense, critics would be correct in raising such an objection. It is commonly understood that the predominant pattern of religio-cultural identification among African-Americans overwhelmingly favors Christianity. We must ask, however, why this is the case. Historiographies of American slavery indicate that this pattern of Christian identification among black Americans is connected to insidious missionary-led colonial campaigns of African Christianization dating back to the seventeenth-century. Jon Butler, one of the few American historians who candidly perceives the genocidal energy that galvanized these campaigns in North America, sheds light on the query just posed:

Between 1680 and 1760 African slave capture, the rigors of slavery, and even the active opposition of Anglican and Dissenting clergymen suppressed and decimated traditional African religious systems in the mainland colonies. The *African spiritual holocaust* (my emphasis) differed significantly from the Jewish holocaust of the twentieth century. It occurred as a by-product of slaveholding rather than as a direct result of efforts to destroy an entire people; it did not stem from a carefully planned program; and it was not a step in the promotion of a master race. Still, it stemmed from violence and repression as well as from an open contempt for different religious beliefs, and it resulted in a cultural destructiveness of extraordinary breadth, the loss of traditional collective religious practice among the half-million slaves brought to the mainland colonies between 1680 and the American Revolution. No other religious event of the entire colonial period, including the evolution of Puritanism or the emergence of American evangelicalism, so shaped a people's experience of religion in America.<sup>48</sup>

Historical records simply do not indicate the *complete* eradication of African religio-cultural systems in North America, as Butler suggests.<sup>49</sup> Moreover, many studies published in the twentieth century and later impugn this aspect of Butler's thesis as well.<sup>50</sup> Still, Butler's emphasis on the impact of Christianization in colonial America bears greatly on the black community's widespread and eager adoption of a Christian identity. His analysis bespeaks both a remarkable aversion mainly among colonial slaveholders

and many clergymen to African spiritual traditions as well as their intractable desire to suppress and obliterate these traditions. The Christianization of enslaved Africans in colonial British North America was driven significantly by the genocidal impulse Butler's work brings to the fore. It is precisely this historical scenario of "Christianizing" the heathen souls of enslaved Africans presumably in need of liberation from their uncivilized and depraved religious origins that set the stage for the creation and preservation of a long-standing tradition in the black community of Christian identification over and against African identification.

Two more points should be made along this line, each representing important facets of early African Christianization in North America. First, as shown in the work of Curtis Evans, systematic efforts to convert enslaved Africans to Christianity in eighteenth-century colonial America meant that they became the subjects of racist debates about their presumably innate religious disposition. It also meant exposure to white colonists' commonly held belief in African intellectual inferiority.<sup>51</sup> Second, Sylvester Johnson ably illustrates that the process of African conversion to Christianity – especially in the nineteenth-century – meant exposure to and participation in a peculiar rhetorical arrangement imagined by Euro-Americans wherein they were naturally the chosen people of God and Africans, by virtue of being the accursed dark-skinned descendants of Ham (a fanciful Eurocentric interpretation of the biblical story of Ham) were not. The idea of being the chosen people of God precipitated white "anxieties" over existential "legitimacy," anxieties that relegated unconverted Africans to the dark and subhuman oblivion of their pre-Christian spiritual heritage.<sup>52</sup> To be sure, converted Africans were

continually beset by these anxieties as well. For even after conversion, Africans were unable to escape fully the semiotic reach of Ham's curse. In the words of Johnson,

Conversion to Christianity did *not* eliminate the searing marks of illegitimacy upon the Hamitic race. The basis of their identity was at once racial (black) and religious (heathen). Once having converted to Christian identity and having joined those who were people of God, they were still bound to the figure of Ham because they remained descendants of Ham. They neither desired nor were able to cease signifying Hamitic identity because Ham made possible Negro/Hamitic history, accomplishment, and presence in antiquity while also "clinging" to Negroes as an illegitimate marker.<sup>53</sup>

Let us pause for a moment to jointly consider the profound significance of the insights put forth by Evans and Johnson for our historical understanding of the black community's pattern of Christian identification.

Concurrent with the introduction of Eurocentric versions of Christianity by Portuguese and Catholic missionaries in Central Africa and upper coastal areas of West Africa, the system of transatlantic slavery also exposed New World Africans to Christianity as an imperial religion of the West requiring conversion to a new religious identity that expressly disallowed any positive religious appreciation of or participation in African cultural traditions.<sup>54</sup> Conversion entailed an immediate immersion into a Eurocentric world utterly convinced of the native, kindly religiosity and absolute intellectual inferiority of African peoples. African conversion to Christianity during the era of slavery in America also involved adherence to a socio-religious identity that was preeminently Christian, an identity whose very existence was dependent upon a society for whom darkly-hued skin was a marker of culture-less, history-less subhumanity. Additionally, African adoption of Christian identity meant being the target of white anguish and uncertainty over whites' "existential legitimacy" as self-declared people of God situated on the same historical trajectory of divinely-sanctioned power and conquest

as the elite urban monotheistic class of Ancient Israelites.<sup>55</sup> Even more troubling, African acceptance of Christian identity amounted to automatic inclusion in an elaborate Euro-American-derived semiotic scheme that necessitated an immutably pejorative signification of African-ness or blackness enlivened and sustained by coercive rhetorics powered – at least in the minds of their white architects – by the biblical curse of Ham. Entrée into the world of colonial Christianity was indeed a treacherous proposition designed to sever the relationship of enslaved Africans to their African past.

I am not suggesting that the process of converting Africans to Christianity in colonial America was a process devoid of African agency. To the contrary, for many slaves, conversion – which occurred in a polyreligious colonial ethos encompassing African religious cultures and African expressions of Christianity – sometimes occasioned what Christian planters and missionary clerics saw as recalcitrant behavior.<sup>56</sup> Of course what comes to mind immediately as the most successful and powerful example of conversion-related rebellion is Nat Turner's bloody 1831 revolt in the Boykins district of Southampton County, Virginia. Turner's revolt – which according to him was to be carried out "upon a Christian basis" – claimed the lives of fifty-seven white men, women, and children.<sup>57</sup> Also noteworthy are the earlier, less successful biblically-inspired revolutionary slave conspiracies led by Gabriel Prosser of Richmond, Virginia in 1800, white Virginia store owner George Boxley in 1816, and Denmark Vesey of Charleston, South Carolina in 1822.<sup>58</sup> Yet, as remarkable as these rebellions are, they were far from being the norm in terms of slave responses to colonial evangelization.

Eugene D. Genovese has shown that the responses of slaves to colonial evangelization were quite varied, and were often motivated by a desire for greater safety and

sympathetic treatment from their masters. Hence his conclusion that "the spiritual significance of their [slaves'] conversion cannot readily be assessed. Even in cases of conversions of convenience, however, religious sincerity played a role, for the protection it sought rested on a spiritual doctrine of equality before God . . . ." <sup>59</sup> Regardless of the differences in how enslaved Africans ultimately responded to colonial evangelization, we must remain ever-mindful of Albert Raboteau's statement that their responses were "always conditioned by the circumstances of slavery." <sup>60</sup>

What should be somewhat clearer now is the historical relationship obtaining between the early Christianization of enslaved Africans in colonial America and the African-American community's subsequent and ongoing social investment in and attachment to a Christian identity. The historical effect of American slavery on African-American culture has understandably compelled most interpreters of black religion to give primacy to the experience of forced enslavement and colonial evangelization as hermeneutical frameworks. However, in my view, the coercive, culturally genocidal nature of colonial African Christianization compels more attention to indigenous Africa as a grossly misrepresented and ignored locus comprising an expansively diverse array of conceptual and theoretical frameworks for African-American religious interpretation. Lamentably, African cultural frameworks continue to be the focus of Western-based cultural violence. <sup>61</sup>

Furthermore, although E. Franklin Frazier draws the opposite conclusion, the atrocities of North American slavery do not change the fact that blacks in America continue to be persons of African descent with historical and cultural ties to indigenous Africa. Keeping all of this in mind, engagement of African religious epistemologies as

legitimate and valuable resources in our efforts to probe and better grasp the protean complexities and meanings of the opaque epistemological orientation in black religious experience emerges not only as a highly reasonable choice, but also as an expected –even obligatory – choice. Failure by black religious scholars to recognize and appreciate the urgent need for such a choice is tantamount to self-negating collusion in what Sylvester Johnson calls an age-old "pageant" of biblicized white American identity formation. In this pageant, whites "saw themselves as descendants of those who crossed over to America, left the boats, stepped onto the stage of the American experience, took up their divine identity scripts, and performed Israel," while blacks were "beleguered by the burden of acting out a double script, lining the roles of both the people of God and the children of Ham – heathens."<sup>62</sup>

It warrants mentioning that while the focus of my phenomenological exploration of Africa is unique, I am hardly the first to perceive the significance of Africa for the study of black religion. Since the publication of W.E.B. DuBois's *The Souls of Black Folk* in 1903, a cadre of black scholars from several disciplines related to or within the field of religion have acknowledged the value of Africa as an essential grounding for efforts to elucidate the meanings and functions of African-American religion. Some of these scholars include Zora Neale Hurston, Charles Long, Henry H. Mitchell, Donald Matthews, Cecil W. Cone, Dianne Diakité, Josiah Young ,III, Will Coleman, and James Noel. Zora Neale Hurston and Charles Long are seminal figures who are among the first to position Africa as a governing theoretical and hermeneutical context for thinking about black religion in America.

Hurston and Long represent different methodological approaches. Hurston's approach stems from her training as a cultural anthropologist and incorporates theoretical description based upon the observed data of black folk life. Long's stems from his training in the history of religions and is typified by heightened and careful attention to black religion's inextricable historical connection to the complex cultural intercourses of modernity. Nonetheless, both Hurston and Long share a commitment to analyzing black religion in a mode that is more phenomenological than theological. Said differently, neither Hurston nor Long assumes that African-American religion is best understood when made the subject of Christian theological interpretations, including those proffered by black liberation theologians, all of whom claim to be speaking in one way or another to a shared African-American consciousness of historical oppression.

In fact, as noted previously in this chapter, the structure and character of black folk belief as encoded in black folklore of the American south is in Hurston's estimation not Christian at all.<sup>63</sup> In an equally provocative manner, Long impugns on a very fundamental level comfortable assumptions made by black theologians about the suitability and usefulness of Christian theology as a tool in the analysis and interpretation of black religious existence. The problem, as Long sees it, is that Christian theology in the West has since its inception operated as a Eurocentric discourse of power and as such is deeply implicated in modernity's dehumanizing function of rendering "opaque" the being of African peoples and that of other oppressed victims of modernity. For this reason, he questions even the possibility of theology being appropriated by modernity's victims and re-imagined as an empowering discourse of existential freedom. Long refers

to the theologies produced through such appropriation as "theologies opaque." He contends,

There is a theology of accusation and opposition which is to the fore in the theologies opaque. But it is precisely at this point that these theologies should not move forward to possess the theological battlefield wrested from their foes. It is at this point that theologies opaque must become deconstructive theologies – that is to say, theologies that undertake the deconstruction of theology as a powerful mode of discourse.

The resources for this kind of deconstructive theology are present in the histories and traditions of those who have undergone the oppressive cultures of the modern period. It means that attention must be given in a precise manner to the modes of experience and expression that formed these communities in their inner and intimate lives.<sup>64</sup>

The value of Hurston and Long for the purposes of this study lies in their exceptional ability to highlight African-American religious experience as a phenomenon that defies ultimate reduction. Their work indicates that the forms and meanings of African-American religious experience are not limited, for instance, to racist discourses intent on delineating what are perceived to be essential traits of African humanity, to Western formulas for what constitutes "religion" and by extension "the religious," to politicized black church or "cult" historiographies, or even to the liberationist agendas of "theologies opaque." The value of these two thinkers is also found in the fact that they have managed in remarkably novel and generative ways to weave Africa into the larger theoretical tapestry that comprises the heavily Christianized tradition of African-American religious interpretation in the West. The scholarship of Hurston and Long represents an intellectual precedent that undergirds the exploratory analysis and interpretation attempted in this dissertation. My work enters a hermeneutical continuum set in motion by these two figures, and takes a thematic cue from the following reflection by Long: "Religiously speaking, America must be afforded the religious possibility for the experience of the *mysterium tremendum*, that experience which establishes the *otherness*

and mystery of the holy. It is this element of holiness which is so familiar in my background."<sup>65</sup>

*The Yorùbá and Akan Traditions*

With the more general task of providing a rationale justifying the turn to indigenous Africa as a legitimate and important resource for black religious interpretation now behind us, attention can be given more directly at this point to my selection of the Yorùbá and Akan traditions. At issue here is my selection of these particular traditions from among the thousands constituting Africa's vast cultural profile. Let me acknowledge at the outset that the selection and exploration of *any* indigenous African epistemological tradition from my individual cultural location as a black Western-trained student is never a simple matter. The complicated nature of such an undertaking is attributable to three main factors: 1) My educational development has at every level privileged Western paradigms of thought and interpretation, thus imposing significant – but not insurmountable – limitations on my ability to accurately perceive and think within non-Western paradigms; 2) Like other cultural traditions throughout the world, there is often internal debate among members of African communities over the meaning and interpretation of discrete ideas comprising their respective philosophical systems;<sup>66</sup> 3) Systems of knowledge production on the African continent have been impacted by violent colonial incursions that have led to, among many other things, the rise of Westernizing discourses that render pre-colonial African traditions even more difficult to access. We will elaborate on the third point, as it is a common thread significantly affecting the first two factors listed.

The Westernizing discourses in question were mainly the creation of nineteenth-century European missionary and non-missionary social anthropologists whose efforts were sponsored by such organizations as The Société d'Ethnologie de Paris (founded in 1839), the London-based Ethnological Society (founded in 1843), and the American Ethnological Society (founded in 1844). Ugandan scholar and poet Okot p'Bitek names a primary feature of nineteenth-century anthropological discourses in commenting that "it [social anthropology] has . . . furnished and elaborated the myth of the 'primitive' which justified the colonial enterprise."<sup>67</sup> The concept of the "primitive" and other related ideas born in the Western anthropological imagination have contributed to the establishment of discursive traditions that have even effected the historical and cultural understanding of modern-day indigenous Africans. Consider the following observation by Congolese philosopher V. Y. Mudimbe:

Modern African thought seems somehow to be basically a product of the West. What is more, since most African leaders and thinkers have received a Western education, their thought is at the crossroads of Western epistemological filiation and African ethnocentrism. Moreover, many concepts and categories underpinning this ethnocentrism are inventions of the West . . . The conceptual framework of African thinking has been both a mirror and a consequence of the experience of European hegemony . . . .<sup>68</sup>

An implication of Mudimbe's observation is that to engage indigenous African epistemologies is to engage traditions that over the course of centuries have collided and intermingled with Western epistemologies. This factor along with those enumerated above combine to create an admittedly problematic interpretive situation. How are we to parse distinct conceptual components within *Yorùbá* and *Akan* epistemologies in a way that bears in mind their intercourse with Western thought forms? Connected to the previous concern is the issue of language. As an English speaker untrained in the

languages spoken by Yorùbá and Akan communities, how do I propose to gain any usable conceptual access to the belief systems of these groups, much less interpret them? The foregoing discussion specifies two serious objections critics may level against my constructive phenomenological exploration of the Yorùbá and Akan traditions. It is appropriate at this juncture to address the objections because my rejoinder will help clarify my selection of the two traditions.

It is understandable that critics would likely rush to point out the challenges presented to the current study by the dual problems of European cultural incursion and lack of language proficiency. Western interference in indigenous interpretation and transmission of the Yorùbá and Akan traditions of thought is doubtless a perennial concern that troubles any attempt to intellectually encounter the discrete pre-colonial conceptual and theoretical modalities shaping these traditions. What is more, the problem of language is a formidable one. The Yorùbá linguistic complex alone comprises multiple languages spread across more than twenty ethnic subgroups distributed primarily throughout western Nigeria.<sup>69</sup> The Akan language also consists of several variations – a few of which include Akwapim Twi, Fante, Denkyira, Nzema, Asante Twi, Ahanta, and Sefwi – spoken in parts of southern Ghana and Togo as well as in southeastern regions of la Côte d'Ivoire by at least thirteen ethnic subgroups.<sup>70</sup>

The dissertation would obviously be enriched by proficiency in the Yorùbá and Akan languages. However, lack of proficiency in these languages does not require the abandonment of the project, nor does this limitation necessarily disqualify the project as a legitimate and responsible attempt to phenomenologically probe the meanings of Yorùbá and Akan thought. The Yorùbá and Akan traditions are ideal for a project of this nature

in part because they are the focus of an extensive body of academic literature produced by indigenous Yorùbá and Akan scholars reared in the languages, thought forms, and practices of these communities. Some of these scholars include Oyeronke Olajubu, Kólá Abímbólá, Wándé Abímbólá, Jacob K. Olúpònà, Oyèrónké Oyěwùmí, J. B. Danquah, Mercy Amba Oduyoye, Kofi Asare Opoku, and Kwame Gyekye.<sup>71</sup>

These scholars as well as many others have devoted their academic careers to analytical research in a variety of areas relevant to this study. The areas range from Yorùbá and Akan religious philosophy and practice prior to the rise of colonialism and Christian empire in West Africa to ways in which, for example, modes of theorizing gender in feminist epistemologies of the West have led to extraordinary misunderstandings of notions of embodiment and identity as they actually existed and were understood in pre-colonial Yorùbá societies. Practically speaking, selection of the Yorùbá and Akan communities enables me to ground my research in a long-established, respected, and dynamic tradition of indigenous Yorùbá and Akan-based scholarship. This tradition of scholarship – by virtue of its critical depth – affords a degree of access to Yorùbá and Akan forms of thought and practice that makes possible highly focused non-indigenous exploratory investigations such as my own that are interested in indigenous theoretical and interpretive models.

Said otherwise, the existence of substantial and specialized indigenous scholarly literature on Yorùbá and Akan epistemologies as systems of thought made up of discrete yet interconnected ideas enables the kind of conceptual parsing needed to conduct this study. To briefly cite two examples, Wándé Abímbólá's analysis of the Yorùbá notion of *ori* (spiritual "head") and Kwame Gyekye's examination of the Akan ideas of *okra*

(“soul”) and *sunsum* (“spirit”) are essential to my exploration of Yorùbá and Akan epistemology.<sup>72</sup> These two analyses are vital because they provide a level of access to Yorùbá and Akan thought that enables an interpretation of how the human being is cosmologically constituted and made meaningful within the two philosophical traditions. To be sure, the privileging of works written by Abímbólá, Gyekye, and other indigenous Yorùbá and Akan scholars conversant in the two languages does not eliminate entirely the problem of Western interference. Still, the hope is that this privileging will mitigate the problem enough to allow us to make legitimate constructive use of the cultural forms and meanings shaping these two African communities.

I would like to briefly reflect here on what I see as a cardinal assumption informing the language-based objection to the present study. Over the course of several conversations with trusted professors and colleagues concerning the development of this project, it has become increasingly apparent that, while the language-based objection is not without merit, it is nevertheless connected to and indicative of a neo-colonial attitude regnant in academe. Rather than, in the spirit of knowledge production, remaining open and receptive to constructive studies such as my own that treat Africa as a vigorous repository of ideas and practices from which we all can benefit, the tendency of this attitude is to limit or foreclose critical engagement with Africa. This is generally done through attempts to impose greater restrictions on how Africa can be studied by appeal to austere Euro-derived disciplinary or linguistic requirements.

For instance, I have been told both directly and indirectly at multiple points throughout my graduate career that the current project cannot be done responsibly without extensive proficiency in Yorùbá and Akan languages as well as in-depth training

in the methods of historical analysis, ethnography, sociology of religion, and/or philosophy. However, interestingly enough, these strictures were not invoked at all in scholastic contexts where I was required to conduct close research and analysis of English translations of some of the representative texts of ancient Greek philosophical culture such as Plato's *Symposium* and Aristotle's *Metaphysics*. Nor did these limitations come into play during my study of the history of Christian thought in the West, which also included rigorous engagement of, for example, English translations of Latin, Greek, Old French, and German writings by such figures as Tertullian, St. Augustine, Marguerite Porete, and Meister Eckhart, to name only a few. I might add as well that, based upon personal observations I have made both as an undergraduate and graduate student, it seems safe to say that not all scholars of Western philosophical traditions or Christian thought in the West are themselves speakers of the non-English languages in which many of the texts they teach from and write about were originally written. Yet for the most part these scholars appear free as professional academics to authoritatively explore, analyze, and interpret such cultural materials relatively unimpeded by disciplinary or language-based objections.

The assumption underlying this attitude seems to be that the disciplinary and linguistic requirements just discussed are somehow more necessary for studies of indigenous African cultures than they are for studies involving non-African – especially ancient Greek and European – cultural traditions. The attitude in question is neo-colonial inasmuch as it – from a Euro-American perspective informed by sensibilities best described as imperialistic – seeks to limit the range of critical approaches available to those involved in the study of indigenous Africa, and hence the amount and types of

knowledge about Africa produced through such study. It is also neo-colonial in that it continues the nineteenth-century European tradition of wresting from persons of African descent the power to create for themselves new terms under which they can participate in the intellectual exploration of pre-colonial African cultures. The dissertation resists this neo-colonial attitude, drawing attention to the status of this attitude as a cultural reality partly responsible for a problem that the work of Kenyan author Ngugi Wa Thiong'o highlights as mental colonization.<sup>73</sup>

We are also acutely reminded here of Māori scholar Linda Tuhiwai Smith's incisive analysis of research itself as a colonizing tool of the West. In her point of view,

Research "through imperial eyes" describes an approach which assumes that Western ideas about the most fundamental things are the only ideas possible to hold, certainly the only rational ideas, and the only ideas which can make sense of the world, of reality, of social life and of human beings. It is an approach to indigenous peoples which still conveys a sense of innate superiority and an overabundance of desire to bring progress into the lives of indigenous peoples – spiritually, intellectually, socially and economically.<sup>74</sup>

The neo-colonial attitude under discussion is very much a product of the Western conception of research as defined by Smith. The close correlation between the set of assumptions upon which the Western idea of research is built and those underlying the aforementioned attitude should therefore come as no surprise. Smith's thoroughgoing analysis is also quite useful for our purposes because it signals the chief assumptions undergirding this project by specifying a Eurocentric group of assumptions apparently held by the majority of Western investigators of non-Western indigenous cultures.

The chief assumptions of the dissertation vis-à-vis Western research paradigms and indigenous communities are as follows: A) Western conceptions of cultural realities, be they indigenous or otherwise, as encoded in the languages of Western research are no

more legitimate or authoritative than non-Western conceptions; B) Western research-based understandings of the world do not represent a superior mode of knowing, nor do they represent the only mode of knowing; C) Rationality is not the exclusive province of the Western world; D) Indigenous communities too are in possession of *rationalities* that have their own cultural integrity and are capable of interfacing instructively and constructively both with Western and other indigenous rationalities; E) Indigenous communities are not necessarily best understood when perceived first and foremost in a way that automatically and uncritically places them on a Western-derived linear spectrum of historical and socio-cultural "progress;" and F) Western notions of "progress" are rarely – if ever – compatible with indigenous notions of progress, and consequently often are not conducive to the maintenance and overall well-being of indigenous communities or the survival of the various epistemological and practical systems upon which they depend. These assumptions help articulate a critical postcolonial perspective. This perspective regards as problematic objectifying and *other-izing* research models that create for indigenous communities historical experiences such as the one described by the late Māori writer and filmmaker Merata Mita when she commented that "We have a history of people putting Māori under a microscope in the same way a scientist looks at an insect. The ones doing the looking are giving themselves the power to define."<sup>75</sup> The dissertation represents an effort to counteract the Western research tradition's tendency toward the evisceration of indigenous humanity and meaning.

As an elaboration of the first reason named in support of my selection of the Yorùbá and Akan traditions – namely, the abundance of specialized scholarly literature on these traditions produced by indigenous Yorùbá and Akan researchers – the previous reflection

also helps establish a context for the second reason motivating this choice. My second reason for focusing on the Yorùbá and Akan frameworks has to do with the hermeneutical possibilities made visible by particular cosmological principles or motifs found within each epistemological system. These principles have been introduced above as the permanency of existential conflict, irresolution, and mystery. They serve as the thematic cluster framing the interpretive analyses educed in the dissertation. In the conceptual worlds of the Yorùbá and Akan, the three principles find collective expression on one level through ritual embodiment/enactment. On another level, they find expression as apothegms and as distinct religio-philosophical concepts signifying beliefs about the seen and unseen realms (i.e., the cosmos) as well as the community of spiritual beings or powers inhabiting them.

Later in the dissertation I shall examine the meaning and function of the three motifs within the ritual context of a *Yemoja* festival held yearly in Ayede, a town in southwestern Nigeria. In the Ghanaian context, I will also examine the meaning and function of the motifs in connection with counteractive *bayi boro*-related rites performed at special shrines located in the town of Dormaa-Ahenkro in southern Ghana's Brong Ahafo region. These rites are counteractive in that they are performed as a positive intervention on behalf of persons adversely affected by the negative power of *bayi boro*. In Twi, the term *bayi boro* signifies a negative presence of spiritual power as well as the specialized utilization of this power for socially destructive ends.<sup>76</sup> A significantly more detailed treatment of these ritual practices will be included in chapters two and three. Our more limited goal in the present discussion though is simply to provide a sense of the types of interpretive possibilities made available by the permanency of existential

conflict, irresolution, and mystery as ideas that appear to us perhaps most saliently in aphorismic or philosophical form in Yorùbá and Akan thought. Consider, for instance, the following Yorùbá and Akan sayings: A) *Abogun ki ri Egún, aboşa ki ri Òrìṣà, ati Imale ti o nfi ori bale ko ri Olorun* ["The Egún worshipper does not see the ancestral spirit, the Òrìṣà worshipper does not see Òrìṣà, and the Muslim who bows his head to the ground does not see God"];<sup>77</sup> B) *Qbra ye ku* ("Life is war").<sup>78</sup>

When assessed with the opaque epistemological orientation of religious experience in mind, the Yorùbá aphorism appears to indicate something significant about the limits of human apperception and understanding in the context of devotional intercourse with the spirit world. Awareness and thus knowledge of the spiritual powers venerated during worship as the *Egún* (ancestors), the *Òrìṣà* (lesser forces or deities serving as manifestations of or functionaries for *Olódùmarè*, a higher power in Yorùbá cosmology)<sup>79</sup> or Allah are only fragmentary. It is important that one of the major emphases of this adage is the notion of fragmentary awareness or, we might say, consciousness, as a *definitive* – and seemingly permanent – element of human engagement with the spiritual dimension. This adage challenges us to carefully evaluate, or re-evaluate, the status of knowledge itself in the moment of spiritual encounter. One intriguing implication of the adage is that, to the degree that apprehension of the spiritual realm is always piecemeal and hence never complete, the conceptual content of religious knowledge is mutable. A deeper related implication is that the meanings derived from the conceptual content of religious knowledge are unfixed and as such are subject to ongoing interrogation and contestation.

The Akan adage *Qbra yɛ ku* ("Life is war") addresses not only the question of human existence but also the much larger question of existence itself. Beyond the abstract construal of existence as a conceptual category, this adage signals the reality of existence as a tensive or conflictual *condition*. Existence is a condition that on every conceivable level reveals a situation of profound struggle that defies permanent resolution. The conflictual nature of existence is evidenced, for example, by the characteristics of the four known forces of the universe (gravitational force, electromagnetic force, strong force, and weak force) and their activity in the subatomic and atomic worlds,<sup>80</sup> the ceaseless wars in the microbiological dimension between healthy cells and pathogenic organisms, the daily threat of predation in the animal kingdom, and the unrelenting exigencies of survival in the human domain. We might therefore say that the variegated forms of being constituting existence find themselves immersed in a complex and intensely vital reality populated by countervailing forces that simply cannot be ignored. The diversified religious traditions of humankind furnish epistemological frameworks and other existential management strategies such as structured ritual engagement to guide and empower humans along the tortuous, treacherous journey of life. The practice of religion amidst the *sturm und drang* of existence engenders distinct polymorphous and multivalent experiences. Part of what the Akan figuration of life as "war" teaches us is that religious experience is to a significant extent determined by the ferocity of matter, and as a result can never fully be divorced from it.

Our abbreviated discussion of the Yorùbá and Akan aphorisms establishes a sense of the conceptual and theoretical orientation of each epistemological system as well as possible hermeneutical trajectories both systems together bring into view. The Yorùbá

aphorism destabilizes the modes of knowledge acquired during religious engagement by accenting humans' imperfect and thus less than exhaustive perception of the spiritual world. Implicit in this destabilizing function is a relationship between the spiritual and human dimensions wherein the human mind's efforts to more fully comprehend the meaning and operation of the unseen amid the seen are always ultimately frustrated and disciplined by the former. It can be said then that the Yorùbá aphorism under consideration invites interpretations of religious experience that place religious knowledge within the firm boundaries created by the mystery of spiritual intercourse.

It is important to note that religious meaning in Yorùbá epistemology is mediated through *materiality* rather than through abstruse philosophical constructions that compartmentalize and in effect demote the material from its position as an essential locus of knowledge.<sup>81</sup> For this reason, interpretations of religious experience emanating from a Yorùbá or Yorùbá-derived perspective would be punctuated by an existential emphasis shaped by the daily struggle of human communities to make functional meaning for their lives in face of the fearsome spirit-infused power, incessant survival demand, and uncertainty of matter. A probable focus of such interpretations might be the relationship between ritual practice and religious experience obtaining among black devotees of *Òrìṣà* traditions in the eastern United States, for example.<sup>82</sup> Two questions likely to be explored are: 1) What does the continued participation of these devotees in rituals whose outcomes are never completely known beforehand suggest about the substance and character of their religious consciousness? 2) How is the religious consciousness of black *Òrìṣà* devotees impacted by existence in an increasingly globalized North American society replete with competing religious epistemologies emerging from numerous

cultural sectors, all of which are constantly shifting and growing in response to one another? A primary challenge of a Yorùbá-derived hermeneutics of black religious experience would *not* be to stabilize the epistemological moorings of the experience but rather to creatively probe the unstable modes of knowledge extending from them for the purpose of elucidating the opaque epistemological orientation in black religious life.

The Akan aphorism is suggestive of an epistemology profoundly informed by the conflictual or oppositional state of matter. Indeed, only in and through the tensive conditionality of the material can knowledge be constructed. One can infer from such a purview that religious experience is not conceived as a phenomenon utterly separable from matter. On the contrary, religious experience is to a large degree constituted by matter. Consequently, the notion of religious knowledge as an attribute somehow lying beyond the pale of the material is from an Akan perspective untenable. Equally untenable is the idea that religious knowledge is able to achieve intellectual mastery over matter. Put otherwise, the very substance of religious knowledge is supplied by human beings' psychic, physical, and spiritual relationship with matter. It can even be said that the intelligibility of religious experience itself hinges on an inextricable connection to all of the natural features that make matter matter – namely, interdependence, intractability, impositionality, structural antagonism, irreducibility, unpredictability, power in various forms and intensities, paradox, dynamism, etc.

The perspective expressed in the statement "Life is war" helps us to imagine a religious hermeneutics predicated on the unadulterated and disconcerting messiness of materiality. Interpretations advanced from within such a theoretical frame would underscore the need to identify and utilize conceptual approaches to understanding

religious experience that centralize human beings' embattled efforts to negotiate the material. Discourses constructed in this vein may set out to trace some of the ways in which the material world constantly impinges on our attempts to erect intellectual models that bypass the theoretical challenges posed by the tensile structure of matter. Also of interest to these discourses would be possible implications for the theorization of the opaque epistemological orientation in black religious experience stemming, for instance, from: A) the continuing quest to create a coherent sense of black cultural identity that is not overly conditioned or determined by the colonial European and Euro-American traditions of racialized African denigration; B) the black church's apparent refusal to accept the full humanity of the black Lesbian/Gay/Bisexual/Transgender (LGBT) community; C) black women's project of wholistically reconstructing new understandings of black female humanity that stand in critical opposition to domestic and global mass media trends that increasingly depict black women through the languages of victimization, pathologization, and hyper-sexuality.<sup>83</sup> Interpretations of black religious experience set forth in discourses of this kind would not naively aim to finally resolve the socio-historical, cultural, and political paradoxes and complexities with which the problems just listed are generatively and inseparably entwined. Instead, the aim would be the development of an African-centered phenomenological hermeneutics of black religious experience that makes use of these tensional quandaries as opportunities to critically re-imagine black religious existence. This critical re-imagining would be done in ways that not only counteract the diminishment of black humanity but also help bring into clearer view modes of theorizing black religious life that are less laden by the

epistemological hegemony of Christian empire and the modern colonial racialization of African-descended communities.

In concluding this section, we should note that the foregoing analysis also responds to two important questions often posed to me concerning the three themes by which my exploration of the Yorùbá and Akan traditions is organized. The two questions usually take the following form: "The motifs of conflict, irresolution, and mystery are present in Christian theological traditions of the West as well, especially those traditions categorized under the heading "mystical." Do you find these traditions less-suited to your hermeneutical project? If so, why are they less-suited?" My answer to these queries is closely related to the reasoning behind my selection of the three motifs shaping the study. I shall first address the two queries.

No scholar of Western Christian thought would deny the presence of the ideas of conflict, irresolution, and mystery as significant explicit or implicit motifs in the evolution of certain streams of Christian theology. Before reaching back to a much earlier figure like fifth-century mystic Dionysius the Areopagite (Pseudo-Dionysius) to note the appearance of these ideas, we could turn to more recent thinkers who may not be considered mystics *per se*. Three twentieth-century thinkers who come to mind are German theologian and scholar of comparative religion Rudolf Otto, Roman Catholic theologian Karl Rahner, and Mennonite theologian Gordon Kaufman. What we find, for example, in Otto's *The Idea of the Holy (Das Heilige)*, in Rahner's *Foundations of the Christian Faith: An Introduction to the Idea of Christianity*, and in Kaufman's *In Face of Mystery: A Constructive Theology* are treatments of divine mystery as an *intellectual problem* to which the notions of conflict and irresolution are theoretically and

hermeneutically bound. For each of these thinkers, intellectual confrontation with the mystery of divinity necessarily involves a severe and undeniable disruption of all epistemologies and their attendant conceptual schemes. There exists a perduring conflict between the mystery of the Holy (i.e., God), which eludes conceptualization, and human attempts to think about the Holy, attempts that, due to the structure and limitations of the human mind, are naturally and perforce highly conceptual. In different terms, the conflict rests on an extreme *other-ization* of the Holy that places it infinitely beyond the boundaries of anything familiar to human conceptual systems. The procedure of *other-izing* the Holy begets an understanding of the Holy as an utterly transcendent reality that interferes with and further relativizes the linguistic chains or trajectories by which concepts signify. The Holy stands in opposition to the ineluctably reductive meaning-making function of conceptual constructs. For, in the words of Otto, the Holy at every moment heralds an "overplus" of meaning, meaning that by its very nature is uncontainable.<sup>84</sup> The resolution of this primarily intellectual conflict is very difficult to imagine outside of a deeply eschatological *weltanschauung*.

The *other-ization* of the Holy is by no means unique to the theological programs of Otto, Rahner, or Kaufman. It was established roughly fourteen centuries prior to their writings as a conspicuous discursive pattern in the mysticism of Dionysius the Areopagite. One need only look at Dionysius's *The Mystical Theology* to observe the pattern. In this text, *other-ization* of the Holy is achieved *apophatically* (from the Greek word *ἀπόφασις*, meaning "negative"), which is to say it is achieved through a process of linguistic and conceptual negation that seeks to lead readers to an experience of God through meticulous reflection on what God is not. In *The Mystical Theology*, God is

described as the non-perceptual and non-conceptual "supreme Cause" of all things.<sup>85</sup> The passage quoted below is illustrative of the Dionysian method of *other-izing* negation:

It [the supreme Cause/God] is not a material body, and hence has neither shape nor form, quality, quantity, or weight. It is not in any place and can neither be seen nor touched. It is neither perceived nor is it perceptible . . . It cannot be grasped by the understanding since it is neither knowledge nor truth . . . Nor is it a spirit, in the sense in which we understand that term. It is not sonship or fatherhood and it is nothing known to us or to any other being. It falls neither within the predicate of nonbeing nor of being. Existing beings do not know it as it actually is and it does not know them as they are. There is no speaking of it, nor name nor knowledge of it. Darkness and light, error and truth – it is none of these. It is beyond assertion and denial.<sup>86</sup>

Part of what is being asserted here is a radical and complete dis-relation between the Holy and the linguistic and conceptual components upon which human epistemologies rely. Such epistemological and discursive dis-relation helps establish the ontic – or shall we say pseudo-ontic – status of the Holy as transcendent *Other*. Also asserted is an absolute dis-relation between the Holy *Other* and matter, leaving us with an imaginative intellectual scenario wherein matter, even as a product of the creativity of the "supreme Cause" or Holy *Other*, is entirely incapable of extending any measure of intelligibility whatsoever to the Holy *Other*. Consequently, the human mind and soul, both of which exists in materiality, are left grasping for full relation with the "supreme Cause." The desperate existential condition of the human mind and soul is addressed by the eschatological theme of divine union.

The ultimate purpose of Dionysius's apophatic technique is to facilitate an experience of union with the Holy *Other* in his supposed friend and colleague Timothy<sup>87</sup> and presumably in readers as well which will to some extent satiate the human hunger for full relation. He says to Timothy, "my advice to you is to look for a sight of the mysterious things . . . and, with your understanding laid aside . . . strive upward as much as you can

toward union with him who is beyond all being and knowledge."<sup>88</sup> Dionysius is not alone in stressing the experience of divine union. It also appears, for example, in the writings of thirteenth-century Italian mystic San Bonaventura (Bonaventure) as well as the works of the fourteenth-century French beguine mystic Marguerite Porete. In Bonaventure's theological treatise *The Soul's Journey into God (Itinerarium mentis in Deum)*, human absorption into or union with what he calls "the superessential ray of divine darkness" requires a transcendent departure from the self and all material things.<sup>89</sup> In a similar vein, Porete describes the divinely transformed and unified soul (referred to as "she") as a soul that no longer searches for God in anything earthly or even spiritual because union with God bestows upon "her" a freedom wherein "she loses her name in him by whom and into whom she is melted and dissolved . . . ."<sup>90</sup> Compelling our attention in these passages are the ways in which the trope of divine union strips matter of its status as a constructive factor in the interpretation of religious experience. Also of related interest is the function of the passages as reflections of a *discursive trend toward eschatological resolution of the uncertain tensions and imperfect modes of awareness that characterize existence in the material world*. A significant feature of Christian hermeneutical traditions of the West, *this trend toward eschatologically-conditioned resolution of materiality can claim as its penultimate accomplishment the near erasure of the vexing complexities and difficulties inhering in religious experience*.

With the notable exception of African-American mystic Howard Thurman, Christian mystical traditions in the West seem geared toward tempering – or perhaps escaping – the dangerous untidiness of materiality through an intellectual and spiritual withdrawal into supramaterial union with the Holy *Other*. Union with the Holy *Other* surmounts or

resolves the problem of the material. As a hermeneutical trope, union with the Holy *Other* obfuscates the meanings vis-à-vis religious experience to be gained through rigorous constructive engagement with the material world as it is rather than as an unfortunate hindrance to the realization of an eschatological future that neutralizes materiality's existential complexities and struggles. While the trope of union with the Holy *Other* and the language of eschatology may be well-suited to Christocentric or otherwise Christian-oriented approaches to religious interpretation, they are ill-suited to the African-centered phenomenological approach proposed in this study. As we will see more clearly in the next two chapters, the Yorùbá and Akan contexts, both of which constitute the theoretical and hermeneutical core of my project, encompass epistemological systems that are fundamentally incompatible with Christian epistemologies. The theological dislocation of matter and other concomitant eschatological structures of thought found in Christian mystical discourses of the West are characteristics not shared by the Yorùbá and Akan traditions. The work of anthropologist Robin Horton is powerfully instructive in suggesting to us that the Yorùbá and Akan epistemological frameworks, as indigenous *African* theoretical traditions, represent discrete non-Western "patterns of thought" whose meanings are confused or lost entirely when interpreted through Western or Judeo-Christian intellectual categories.<sup>91</sup> Part of what I intend to demonstrate in the dissertation is that while the opaque epistemological orientation in black religious experience seems to have found some intelligibility within Western Judeo-Christian traditions of thought, this orientation finds greater intelligibility within indigenous African traditions of thought.

Although the permanency of existential conflict, irresolution, and mystery appear in Christian discourse in ways that are unhelpful for our purposes, these concepts are nonetheless ideal motifs with which to organize the present study because they invite constructive interpretations of religious experience that do not involve the critical dislocation of matter as a cardinal source of phenomenological reflection. To be sure, not all forms of Christian theology decentralize matter. Given their respective analyses of the historical and social conditions of various forms of external and internal oppression with which the black American community continually wrestles, the black and womanist theological traditions immediately come to mind as examples of Christian traditions that take matter seriously. However, in most black and womanist theological formulations, the engagement of matter is mediated by a reductive rhetoric of oppression somewhat reminiscent of nineteenth-century German philosopher Georg W. F. Hegel's Master-Slave (*Herrschaft und Knechtshaft*) dialectic.<sup>92</sup> This dyadic mode of interpretation casts black religious existence mainly as a struggle against multiple forms of systemic and intra-cultural oppression.<sup>93</sup> Importantly, black and womanist theological interpretations also frequently advance a Christologized and eschatologically-informed idea of liberation as the chief meaning and goal of this struggle.<sup>94</sup> Thus there is little room in these interpretive traditions for the motifs of irresolution and mystery, nor is there space for broadly understood notions of existential conflict that incorporate far more than the experience of black oppression. Significantly influencing my selection of the permanency of existential conflict, irresolution, and mystery is the fact that, perhaps more than any other set of motifs, they conceptually symbolize those aspects of materiality – and, we might add, supramateriality – that, intellectually speaking, may be considered the

most disquieting and the most difficult with which to come to terms. I contend therefore that as hermeneutical guides these motifs are uniquely capable of opening up new modes of religious interpretation that can further develop our understanding of the opaque epistemological orientation in black religious experience in ways not restricted by the discursive limitations of Christian eschatological or liberationist models.

Let us note in addition that my selection of the three motifs is a likely choice given their status as thematic or conceptual representations of highly understudied dimensions of black religious life. From the standpoint of the dissertation's unique hermeneutical focus, the choice is a likely one also because, as will become evident at later points in the study, Yorùbá and Akan expressions of the permanency of existential conflict, irresolution, and mystery as epistemological motifs do not involve an interpretive retreat from or elision of these ideas in favor of more manageable or convenient ones. Instead, as elements helping to constitute the very foundations of Yorùbá and Akan epistemology, such expressions *require* sustained and existentially-oriented interpretive engagement that grapples with everyday manifestations of the three principles in the material world.

One gains a sense of the function of the three motifs as integral ideas in Yorùbá and Akan cosmology upon considering certain statements made in the poetry of *Ifá* (one of the sacred texts of the Yorùbá religious tradition)<sup>95</sup> and in Akan traditions of thought. An excerpt from a poem in the *Ifá* literary corpus asserts the following: *Irinwó o mólé ojùkòtún, Igba mólé ojùkòsì òwúrò* ("Four hundred primordial supernatural powers of the right, Two hundred primordial supernatural powers of the left").<sup>96</sup> Highlighting an important concept in Akan religious philosophy is the saying, *wopē asēm aka akyerē Onyame a, ka kyerē mframa* ("If you want to say something to Onyame, say it to the

wind").<sup>97</sup> The *Ifá* excerpt foregrounds the oppositional structure of the Yorùbá cosmos. The "right" side of the Yorùbá cosmos is populated by the primarily “benevolent” *Òrìṣà*, while the "left" side is occupied by the immutably “malevolent” *Ajogun* ("warriors" or "anti-gods") whose sole purpose is to "wage war against both humans and the *Òrìṣà*."<sup>98</sup> This volatile and categorically oppositional state of affairs cannot be permanently resolved. The only hope for beneficial negotiation of it lies in regular sacrifice (*ẹbọ*) and ritual participation.<sup>99</sup> The Akan adage speaks to the uncontainability of *Onyame*, the ultimate power or deity in Akan religion. *Onyame's* meaning, presence, and operation are never limited to a single material or immaterial locale, including the mental constructs of human beings. Implicit in the adage is a strong assertion of mystery as it relates both to the nature of *Onyame* and to humans' fragmentary and thus incomplete knowledge of *Onyame*. We can begin to see then how, taken together, the two Yorùbá and Akan expressions bring to the surface the permanency of existential conflict, irresolution, and mystery as important – indeed primary – facets of religious experience. Furthermore, as highly developed religious epistemologies, the Yorùbá and Akan cosmological traditions create for us a profound theoretical and hermeneutical opportunity to constructively redress both the narrow engagement and frequent elision of these experiential facets in scholarly interpretations of black religion.

### **Sourcing Black Literature**

With the exposition of the rationales for my general turn to indigenous Africa and my specific interpretive focus on the Yorùbá and Akan traditions now complete, we can address what is distinctive about my exploration of black literature. Readers should bear in mind that my thematic exploration of Yorùbá and Akan epistemology folds into an

exploration of black literature. The exploration of black literature will serve to creatively illumine the presence and meaning of the dissertation's three organizing motifs in the context of African-American life. Black literature is included in the dissertation as an index of black religious experience. In its role as an artistic socio-religious index, black literature emerges as a legitimate cultural source of data on the substance and character of black religious experience. The ascription to black literature of such a status need not elicit suspicion. Since at least as early as the 1938 publication of Benjamin Mays's *The Negro's God as Reflected in His Literature*, scholars of black religion have increasingly regarded oral and written literary forms such as slave spirituals, slave narratives, essays, poetry and fictional literature as viable repositories of reliable information on beliefs and practices associated with black religion. Engagement of black literature in the study of black religion has consistently occurred in the theological domain. While utilization of the various genres of black literature is clearly seen, for instance, in the works of Josiah Young, Dwight N. Hopkins, Will Coleman, and Clarence E. Hardy, III,<sup>100</sup> their utilization is most prevalent among womanist scholars and theologians.

Though some texts like M. Shawn Copeland's 2009 volume *Enfleshing Freedom: Body, Race, and Being* continue to give attention to slave narratives and other non-fictional genres, womanist scholars and theologians are becoming increasingly interested in black fictional literature. Common to most scholarly treatments of black fictional literature in both womanist and non-womanist studies of black religion and spirituality is a preference for interpretations that uncover ways in which black literature adds depth, complexity, and clarity to fundamentally *Christian* understandings of black religious consciousness. This type of engagement represents a predominant tradition of

theologically-grounded literary interpretation among black religious scholars. Several exemplary texts readily come to mind. Some of them include Delores S. Williams' *Sisters in the Wilderness: The Challenge of Womanist God-Talk*, Dwight Hopkins' *Shoes That Fit Our Feet: Sources for a Constructive Black Theology*, Emilie M. Townes' *In a Blaze of Glory: Womanist Spirituality as Social Witness*, Karen Baker-Fletcher's *Sisters of Dust*, *Sisters of Spirit: Womanist Wordings on God and Creation*, and Kelly Brown Douglas's *What's Faith Got to Do With It?: Black Bodies/Christian Souls*. Collectively, these texts are notable for their theological interpretations of many well-known novels such as Richard Wright's *The Long Dream* and *Native Son*, James Baldwin's *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, Margaret Walker's *Jubilee*, Zora Neale Hurston's *Jonah's Gourd Vine*, Nella Larsen's *Quicksand*, Paule Marshall's *Praisesong for the Widow*, Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*, and Toni Morrison's *Beloved*.

Common to the five academic studies listed above is the assumption that black literature, particularly novels, poetry, and other fictional writings produced by black women, gives us significant insight into the *sui generis* experiences of black women struggling to reclaim their humanity and create lasting power and meaning for themselves and their families amid a decidedly hostile American landscape. Shared also by the five volumes is a relatively close association of Christian forms of spirituality with depictions of black women's experience found in the novels. For example, Delores Williams, at the end of her analysis of the varying experiences of and attitudes toward black motherhood depicted in the previously-mentioned novels by Margaret Walker, Zora Neale Hurston, Nella Larsen, and Alice Walker, stresses the point that the novels, despite their differing perspectives on black motherhood, nevertheless participate in a larger history of belief

among black women in a biblical God who has enabled their survival and sustained in them a sense of hope.<sup>101</sup> In another example, Dwight Hopkins, after completing an interpretive analysis of five of Toni Morrison's novels (*Song of Solomon*, *Sula*, *Tar Baby*, *The Bluest Eye*, and *Beloved*) wherein he acknowledges the African spiritual elements embedded within these narratives, writes,

Admittedly, Christianity does not consistently serve as the explicit primary location for divine spiritual presence in Toni Morrison's novels. Still, the liberating appearance of God's spirit in non-Christian revelations, through story, complement God's spiritual descending upon the decisive Christian revelation of Jesus the Christ . . . God, as a result, grants a unique revelation in Jesus the Christ as well as a general revelation in all of creation.<sup>102</sup>

The Christocentric tradition of theologically-rooted literary interpretation reflected in Hopkins' comments is likely influenced by the prevalence of historiographies that principally understand black religion as one of many traditions constituting the motley phenomenon that is American *Christianity*. Also, it is doubtless the case that the tradition evinced by his comments has a vested interest in casting black literature as an idiom providing cultural support for the claims of black liberation theology. Within this hermeneutical tradition, black literature becomes an important venue for fresh theological re-assertions of black Christian identity.

One also discerns a second less salient tradition of literary interpretation in black and womanist theology. Marking the second tradition is a stronger interest in phenomenologically-inclined examinations of black literature. These examinations tend to demonstrate more of a willingness to interrogate and critically expand the range of meanings usually attributed to black Christian experience. We should acknowledge that Delores Williams' can be placed in the second tradition as well due to her focused engagement in *Sisters in the Wilderness* of black women's literature as an existentially-

grounded tradition documenting – among other things – black mothers' embattled quest for personal and familial survival in a world where the presence of a liberating God is not always apparent.<sup>103</sup> However, even more indicative of the type of disruptive expansion I have in mind is Clarence Hardy's fairly recent volume entitled *James Baldwin's God: Sex, Hope, and Crisis in Black Holiness Culture*.

Hardy's study gives attention to both non-fictional and fictional works by Baldwin such as the essays in *The Fire Next Time*, *No Name in the Street*, and *The Devil Finds Work*, the stage plays *The Amen Corner* and *Blues for Mister Charlie*, and Baldwin's famous semi-autobiographical novel *Go Tell It on the Mountain*. Hardy analyzes the ambiguous, "tragic" dynamics surrounding Baldwin's estrangement from the black church and Christianity as recounted and reflected upon in his writings.<sup>104</sup> Baldwin's general estrangement from Christianity, which began as profound internal disillusionment with black holiness culture's denigration of the black body in conjunction with its asocial, otherworldly focus, is a complicated matter. As Hardy compellingly argues, Baldwin's departure from the black church was not absolute. Hardy shows that Baldwin ultimately was unable to completely sever his ties to the aesthetic dimensions of the black holiness tradition, nor did he succeed in cultivating a non-paradoxical personal relationship to moral elements of the tradition such as judgment and redemption.<sup>105</sup> While Hardy admits that Baldwin's failure to totally extricate himself from black holiness culture can be read as a testament to the latter's "vigor," he also suggests in a more interesting vein that this failure can be read along deeply tragic lines that greatly disturb conventional interpretations of black religion. Speaking of Baldwin's failure, Hardy opines,

. . . it [Baldwin's failure] might also reveal how tragic the black exilic experience in the United States truly is. While black religious culture clearly had true buoyancy that

was attractive to Baldwin, the partial character of his rejection of the black evangelicalism suggests that Baldwin could not afford to turn away from these resources in his quest for human dignity. However comprised black religion may be, in a world as hostile to black life as this one is, black people within the United States must contend with the near genocidal reality of white supremacy with whatever resources are at hand. Few, if any, sources within black culture can offer unambiguous expressions of a healthy engagement with the broader dominant culture. And as Baldwin demonstrates so well, black religion is no different.<sup>106</sup>

Hardy's phenomenological analysis of Baldwin's literary corpus is instructive on two counts: 1) In a Longian fashion, his analysis lays bare the fact that the choice made by so many African-Americans to self-identify as Christian is a choice necessarily conditioned by their "exilic" experience as displaced transplants in a hostile Eurocentric world. This world is known to its African-descended transplants primarily through an inflated valuation of whiteness predicated upon an unqualified denial of African humanity, a denial all too often perpetuated psychologically if not expressively in black Christian communities; 2) The analysis urges us to fully recognize the tragic – and dare I say desperate – status of black religion as an historical and cultural *complex* ever burdened by the need to protect itself from the "genocidal" presence and structures of Euro-American modernity. Baldwin's uncertain relationship to Christianity as investigated by Hardy serves as a logical point of transition into a discussion of another facet of the hermeneutical tradition under examination, a facet whose representatives use the interpretation of black literature as an opportunity to make constructive forays into non-Christian spiritualities.

Also evident in this emerging tradition of literary exploration among black theological interpreters is an interest in non-Christian expressions of black spirituality. Of special significance here is the fact that Africa tends to appear prominently in the writings of scholars in the tradition. For scholars like Donald Matthews and Will Coleman, the

complex symbolic worlds, ritual frameworks, narrational and other expressive characteristics endemic to the musical idiom (spirituals), folklore, personal testimonies and autobiographical accounts of African-American slaves are foundational in their role as African-rooted hermeneutical resources for the interpretation of African-American religious cultures. In his book *Honoring the Ancestors: An African Cultural Interpretation of Black Religion and Literature*, Matthews employs a methodology he describes as "cultural-structural" in his engagement of slave spirituals. His cultural-structural methodology is dialectical in that it joins together form and meaning such that the unique forms of African-American slave expressions have everything to do with how they signify and what they signify.<sup>107</sup> Matthews' methodology is heavily informed by the theoretical perspectives of W.E.B. DuBois, Melville Herskovits, and Zora Neale Hurston, all of whom assert the primacy of African cultural forms and meanings in the interpretation of African-American religion. Matthews displays little interest in the question of whether or not the formal and expressive modalities of slave culture underwent radical alteration through the process of Christianization. His emphasis instead is on how the *African* formal elements of slave spirituals such as "unceasing" improvisation, "jagged style," and "dissonance" (à la Hurston) can function as both theoretical and hermeneutical paradigms in the study of black religion and literature.<sup>108</sup>

Similar to Matthews, Will Coleman firmly situates his interpretive project within the context of African-American slave culture. In his volume titled *Tribal Talk: Black Theology, Hermeneutics, and African/American Ways of "Telling the Story,"* Coleman juxtaposes selected myths from Dahomean cosmology and narratives from African-American slaves. He makes use of several interpretive resources in his exploration of

these narratives, including Paul Ricoeur's hermeneutical theory, seminal texts in the field of African-American literary criticism (*Black Literature and Literary Theory*, *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African-American Literary Criticism*, and *Black Feminist Criticism: Perspectives on Black Women Writers*) and the hermeneutics of black liberation theology. Coleman sees the practice of stylized, polyvalent narration or storytelling as a defining component of West African and African-American cultural traditions, and, in his view, close study of this practice should play a much larger part in shaping the work of black theologians. It is not Coleman's goal to totally avert black theology's gaze from Christian sources. However, as a theologian, he argues for the "retrieval" of African and African-American "ancestral stories as a foundation for doing contemporary black theology."<sup>109</sup> Calling to mind Theophus H. Smith's classic book *Conjuring Culture: Biblical Formations of Black America*, Coleman likens the act of African-American cultural interpretation to the West African practice of *conjuring*. *Conjuring* is a practice traditionally performed by highly trained African religious specialists that involves structured yet creative interfacing with spiritual powers for the purpose of effecting some practical end. Like *conjuring*, the interpretation of African-American narrative forms and religious experience, Coleman suggests, requires an African pliancy of mind that enables interpreters to perceive multi-layered, open-ended meanings generated within and across multiple symbolic worlds often lying outside the ambit of Western or Christian understanding.

Though Matthews in *Honoring the Ancestors* does provide a very brief discussion of Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon* and *Beloved*, in which he relates these novels to two sets of coupled hermeneutical motifs (family and freedom, faith and feeling) culled from

his examination of slave spirituals,<sup>110</sup> black fictional novels are nonetheless marginal in his book. In Coleman's *Tribal Talk*, such novels are not treated at all. Black fictional novels receive more attention, however, in recent works by Josiah Young and Monica Coleman. Young, in *Dogged Strength within the Veil: Africana Spirituality and the Mysterious Love of God*, primarily revisits the essays of W.E.B. DuBois, Morrison's *Beloved*, and Baldwin's *Go Tell It on the Mountain* in an effort to bring visibility to an empowering Africana spirituality rooted in the cosmic wisdom and practices of ancestral Africa. Africana spirituality, in Young's formulation, also hinges on an awareness and acceptance of the mysterious love of God, a major theme in Baldwin's *Go Tell It*. John Grimes, the protagonist in the novel, manifests the mysterious love of God in his tension-ridden, ambiguous relationship to black holiness culture. For it is this often opaque, disquieting love that animates John's (and Baldwin's) quest for wholistic identity, life-affirming meaning, and personal freedom. Another manifestation of God's mysterious love occurs in Morrison's *Beloved* when the protagonist, Sethe, recalls the Bambara antelope dance during her escape from slavery.

Young connects Sethe's memory of the antelope dance to the spiritual epistemology of the Bambara, a West African people hailing from modern-day Mali. He suggests that Sethe's actionable desire for freedom takes on a wider African-based cultural significance when considered against the backdrop of Bambara cosmology as expressed in the belief system of the *Tyiwara*, a Bambaran initiation society. *Tyiwara* thought accents the idea that human "symmetry" with the essentially fecund universe depends upon human "work, gestation, and cultivation."<sup>111</sup> By extension then, Sethe's enslavement, from a *Tyiwara* perspective, represented a non-fecund scenario of human dis-alignment with the cosmos,

a scenario in which the freedom necessary to perform the tasks required to maintain proper cosmic symmetry was unavailable and therefore needed to be reclaimed. In Young's interpretation of *Tyiwara* belief, there is the sense that the structure of the cosmos on a very fundamental level energized – indeed mandated – Sethe's escape for her own sake as well as that of her family and perhaps even the cosmos itself. For Young, Sethe's recollection of the antelope dance and John's struggle for wholeness, meaning, and freedom in the context of black Christianity are occasions for the recognition of a mysterious divine love that affirms fully the African ancestral legacies that continue to shape the lives of African-Americans. Equally important is Young's ultimate point that divine love enables from within DuBois's veil of double consciousness an apprehension of Christianity in its "original" form, that is as something other than a dehumanizing religion of whiteness.<sup>112</sup> Young's exploration of black literature offers a strong response to questions related to how blacks can remain Christian given Christianity's integral historical role in African enslavement. His work also constructively addresses questions concerning the possibility of blacks practicing Christianity while maintaining a conscious and meaningful connection to their African cultural heritage.

Womanist theologian Monica Coleman exhibits an uncommon interest in the genre of science fiction and its relevance to black religion. In her book, *Making a Way Out of No Way: A Womanist Theology*, she turns to the work of highly-acclaimed black science fiction writer Octavia Butler as a valuable resource in the construction of a womanist theology that is responsive to the intellectual and cultural challenges and possibilities of postmodernity. In particular, Coleman focuses on Butler's 1993 novel *Parable of the*

*Sower*. The novel is set several decades into the twenty-first century in California at a time when the state is experiencing rapid and violent social decline. The novel's protagonist, Lauren Oya Olamina, initially lives with her family in a fictional walled community near Los Angeles called Robledo. Members of Lauren's family as well as other residents of her community share an insular approach to the question of how best to survive amid their crime-ridden, drug-ridden environs. For these persons, separation from rather than potentially lethal confrontation with the outside world offers the best chance for survival. Lauren, however, finds this popular solution unsatisfactory, and thus embarks on a journey northward toward Oregon, where conditions were believed to be safer and more stable. Motivating Lauren's courageous departure from Robledo is her personal religious philosophy dubbed *Earthseed*. *Earthseed* emphasizes the inseparable, dynamic link between change and human development. Lauren's theology dictates that she confront the dangers beyond the walls of her community with the determination that through the acquisition of new knowledge she will make the adjustments necessary for survival. As Lauren's journey unfolds, she attracts followers to whom she teaches her *Earthseed* theology. Lauren and her fellow sojourners, who collectively become known as the *Earthseed community*, eventually settle and establish a new community called *Acorn*.

Monica Coleman's understanding of what counts as theology is broad. She rejects the belief that expressions of Christian theology should be afforded a normative status relative to other non-Christian theological expressions. It comes as no surprise then that *Parable of the Sower*, which appears to make serious structural, symbolic, and theological use of Yorùbá cosmology, functions for her as a "literary illustration of

postmodern womanist theology . . . ."113 Oya, the protagonist's middle name, calls to mind the Yorùbá deity *Oya*, a powerful and widely venerated *Òrìṣà* associated with the destructive and constructive forces of personal, social, and natural change in the world. For Coleman, *Oya* serves as a hermeneutical principle that significantly guides her analysis of *Parable*. In Coleman's interpretation, the volatile and potentially deadly social conditions surrounding the suburban neighborhood Lauren leaves behind in Robledo are manifestations of *Oya's* power. Paradoxically, Lauren's irrepressible will to confront these conditions, learn how to survive in spite of them, and journey forward in search of new possibilities for herself and her community are also equally manifestations of *Oya's* power. The multi-dimensional power of *Oya* as embodied in Lauren and in the dangerous, unpredictable world she must negotiate makes possible what Coleman calls "creative transformation."<sup>114</sup> Creative transformation involves ongoing intercourse with rather than a retreat from the perils of life. Creative transformation in Coleman's perspective is very much a life-giving *process* that should also serve as a governing principle in the development of a postmodern womanist theology.

Coleman's engagement of Butler's novel is important because of the explicit hermeneutical attention given to *Oya* and Yorùbá cosmology as a major framework for her analysis. The incorporation of this methodological approach makes Coleman extremely rare among womanist theologians and scholars of black religion who write about black literature. Coleman's focus on *Oya* as a womanist principle of creative transformation is likely attributable in part to her intellectual commitment to process theology.<sup>115</sup> Process theology, a distinctive form of Christian discourse based on the ideas of twentieth-century English mathematician and philosopher Alfred North

Whitehead, emphasizes concepts such as the mutability of God, existential flux, freedom, and self-determination as basic structural characteristics variously manifesting within and through everything extant in the universe. Coleman's commitment to process theology is consistent with an observable pattern among black theologians and scholars who utilize black literature in their work. With the exception perhaps of Donald Matthews and Will Coleman, the theological scholars we have discussed in this section interpret black literature from a fundamentally Christian point of view that tends to construe black literature as a creative cultural venue for enlarging our understanding of black Christian experience and identity. This point is significant because, in a contrastive sense, it signals what is distinctive about my approach to interpreting black literature.

My phenomenological engagement of black literature in the dissertation does not arise from a commitment to Christianity or to some form of Christian theology. While the seemingly infinite range of meanings found in black literary texts certainly renders them capable of being placed in service to Christian-based intellectual agendas, such usages are not of primary importance in the context of the present study. While not synonymous with my approach, the work of Donald Matthews and Will Coleman, Josiah Young's analysis of the remembered antelope dance in *Beloved* in light of Bambara cosmology, and Monica Coleman's *Oya*-centered examination of *Parable of the Sower* are more or less in keeping with what grounds my constructive integration of black literature. My exploration of black literature is grounded in a phenomenological commitment to African indigenous epistemologies as cultural traditions having great theoretical and interpretive relevance to the study of black religion and the opaque epistemological orientation in black religious experience.

For reasons already discussed, the dissertation focuses particularly on grammars of knowing contained within the philosophical and ritual traditions of the Yorùbá and Akan communities. However, my hermeneutical agenda as it relates to black literature is not one of Africanizing religious experiences that blacks themselves understand in Christian terms, nor am I interested necessarily in Africanizing any other form of black religious experience that blacks do not view as African. Such Africanizing interpretation strikes me as an especially violent form of intellectual coercion that erodes understanding both of African-American religious consciousness and African indigenous religions. Rather, of interest to me is a thematic exploration of the opaque epistemological orientation in black religious experience poetically documented by black novelists but overlooked by scholars of black religion. It is my contention that the various forms of spiritual insight encoded in the beliefs and practices of the Yorùbá and Akan peoples extend a significant and heretofore unacknowledged measure of intelligibility to the opaque epistemological orientation in black religious life about which numerous black *littérateurs* like James Baldwin, Toni Morrison, Gloria Naylor, Zora Neale Hurston, and Randall Kenan write. To the best of my knowledge, no scholar to date has drawn an explicit theoretical or interpretive connection between Yorùbá and Akan epistemology and the permanency of existential conflict, irresolution, and mystery as major themes in literary portrayals of black religious life. My phenomenological engagement of black literature is therefore unique in focus. Representing an all-too-often completely ignored perspective, my engagement of black literature joins other studies such as Josiah Young's *Dogged Strength* and Monica Coleman's *Making a Way* that press against – if not redefine – the boundaries within which black religious experience is generally conceptualized.

## **Conclusion**

In this chapter, I have attempted to present a foundation upon which the remainder of the dissertation will build. The chief argument advanced positions the spiritual epistemologies of the Yorùbá and Akan as vital cultural contexts for the development of an African-centered phenomenology of black religious experience that engages the opaque epistemological orientation in this experience. As suggested in the last section, black fictional literature is also a crucial element in part because it provides useful and unique cultural data through its creative documentation of black religious life. The importance of black literature also lies in the fact that it affords us a particular kind of access to black religious experience's opaque epistemological orientation that otherwise is not readily available. Moreover, the black literary tradition is of tremendous value to the dissertation because of its ability to greatly stretch or even weaken the perceived boundaries of black religious consciousness, thereby facilitating the discernment of new frontiers in the development of our understanding of black spirituality.

Another important purpose of this chapter involves the introduction of the tripartite thematic trajectory along which the dissertation's various phenomenological interpretations unfold. The trajectory is constituted by motifs I describe as the permanency of existential conflict, irresolution, and mystery. The philosophical and ritual expression of these motifs in the Yorùbá and Akan traditions is rooted in distinct cosmological systems that function as complex epistemologies generating sophisticated knowledge of the relationship between the human and spiritual realms. The Yorùbá and Akan epistemological traditions anchor the dissertation conceptually and theoretically.

Thus it is fitting to embark next upon a more in-depth examination of Yorùbá and Akan epistemology. We begin with the Yorùbá tradition.

## Chapter 2

### The "Aberrant" Nature of Peace: Apprehending the Yorùbá Cosmos

In probing Yorùbá cosmology as a major source of epistemological meaning, it is important to remember that, as indicated in the first chapter, one of our primary goals is to conduct a constructive analysis that is neither dependent upon nor in service to Judaeo-Christian or Western philosophical categories. The focus of this chapter encompasses a phenomenological examination that highlights major structural elements of Yorùbá thought as reflected in Yorùbá cosmology and ritual practice. The first phase of the examination explores a range of religio-philosophical ideas that are important as concepts that help to frame Yorùbá understandings of the *interlinked* invisible and visible dimensions of existence. My analysis of Yorùbá cosmology, while admittedly most attentive to concepts that extant indigenous scholarship suggests are found throughout much of Yorùbáland, should not be read as an attempt to elide or downplay the socio-cultural and institutional differences found among the various polities comprising Yorùbáland. Part of my goal in conducting the analysis in this manner is to make clearer some of the ways that Yorùbá cosmology emerges as a truly distinct non Judaeo-Christian, non-Western *tradition of thought* with its own epistemological orientation. In doing so, however, I remain mindful of Nigerian sociologist of knowledge Oyèrónké Oyěwùmí's important point that "Africa is already locked in an embrace with the West; the challenge is how to extricate ourselves and how much. It is a fundamental problem because without this necessary loosening we continue to mistake the West for the Self and therefore see ourselves as the Other."<sup>16</sup>

Building upon the first phase, the second phase of my phenomenological examination emphatically acknowledges the status of Yorùbá cosmology as a cosmology of ritualized,

communally efficacious enactment or performance. In this phase, the analysis will explore the annual *Yemoja* festival held in the Nigerian town of Ayede (or Ayede Ekiti). The *Yemoja* festival will be considered as a ceremonial *material* practice that re-inscribes and encodes aspects of Yorùbá religious epistemology as they are expressed in Yorùbá cosmological thought. The second phase of analysis is also important because the *Yemoja* festival, like other major public rituals conducted in Yorùbáland such as the Otin, Oroyeye, Ọdun Ọba, and Ọdun Ogun festivals,<sup>117</sup> functions as a concrete yet dynamic instantiation of Yorùbá cosmology that compellingly demonstrates the role of Yorùbá cosmology as a powerful source of meaning and transformation within Yorùbá communities. Moreover, a critical exploration of the *Yemoja* festival as performed in *modern-day* Ayede helps in avoiding a problem described by Oyěwùmí as an assumption of Yorùbá cultural “timelessness” that accepts as given the notion that all Yorùbá ideas and practices are ancient and therefore undergo little or no modification or innovation over time in response to new historical exigencies and circumstances.<sup>118</sup> The analysis to follow, then, proceeds with and is guided by an understanding of Yorùbá cosmology as an historically-rooted, reconfigurable religio-philosophical system capable of recognizing and effectively addressing contemporary problems and realities.

### **Originary Narratives**

Strikingly elaborate beliefs about the origins of the world, the Yorùbá people, and humankind play an integral structural and epistemological role in Yorùbá cosmology. While the work of some scholars like J. O. Lucas and S. O. Biobaku suggests that the cultural history of the Yorùbá extends back at least one thousand years, around which time they are said to have migrated south from northern Africa,<sup>119</sup> we nevertheless do not

have complete or precise knowledge of the geographical origin of the Yorùbá or of the genealogy of Yorùbá religious thought. However, what is clear is that Yorùbá cosmogenic beliefs were actively encoded and transmitted via the poetic chapters (*Odù*) of *Ifá* (the most widely-known sacred text of the Yorùbá religious tradition)<sup>120</sup> as well as ancestral narratives, songs, and aphorismic sayings shared orally by community elders (*Agba*). Yet there are significant difficulties inherent to the study of Yorùbá originary narratives in particular: A) Over time, the Yorùbá have produced many different originary narratives, not all of which have been documented by researchers; B) There are multiple variants of the narratives that are known and have been documented; C) Some of these narratives seem to conflict with one another in fundamental ways. The difficulties just listed remind us that knowledge of Yorùbá originary narratives is at best inexhaustive and hence fragmentary.

Space does not allow for critical review and analysis of the full range of narratives found in scholarly studies of Yorùbá oral culture; such a study could easily fill the pages of a book-length manuscript and would require proficiency in the Yorùbá language in order to make meaningful, effective use of undocumented indigenous accounts as well as untranslated academic texts written by Yorùbá scholars. Our aim here is more limited in scope. For the purposes of this dissertation, we are primarily concerned with Yorùbá originary narratives that appear most frequently in indigenous studies that include detailed discussions of Yorùbá cosmology. These narratives are significant because they contain many of the conceptual and philosophical rudiments of Yorùbá religious thought. Therefore, the narratives are invaluable for the analysis and interpretation of Yorùbá cosmology. As we proceed, readers should keep in mind that the examination to follow

is not intended to serve as a definitive study of the moorings of Yorùbá religious philosophy, nor as the *final* interpretive word on indigenous Yorùbá spirituality. Rather, the task at hand involves highlighting *particular dimensions* of the Yorùbá religious tradition for the purpose of establishing how these dimensions bring into view a theoretical model that can reshape our understanding of religious experience.

*Ilé-Ifẹ̀ and Igbá Ìwà (“Gourd of Existence”)*

The tradition of Yorùbá originary narration that is most commonly known and studied is the tradition that gives central importance to the sacred primordial site of *Ilé-Ifẹ̀*.<sup>121</sup> *Ilé-Ifẹ̀*, whose combinative name derives from the noun *Ilé* (meaning “home” or “house”) and the verb *fẹ̀* (meaning “to expand” or “to spread out”)<sup>122</sup> is an actual town located approximately forty-six miles east of Ìbàdàn, the capital city of the state of Òyó in southwestern Nigeria. Occupying a singular position in Yorùbá cosmology not only as the legendary primordial home of the Yorùbá and as the place from which they are believed to have first migrated into other parts of the world, but also as the place where the earth and all terrestrial beings were created, *Ilé-Ifẹ̀* is perhaps the most sacred locale in all of Yorùbáland. Careful analysis of *Ilé-Ifẹ̀* as a symbolic and epistemological cornerstone of Yorùbá thought reveals an inextricable and generative conceptual link between *Ilé-Ifẹ̀* and *Igbá Ìwà*, the “cosmic gourd” or “calabash of existence.”<sup>123</sup>

The “gourd,” which in English generally refers to a fruit-producing plant of the species *Lagenaria siceraria* (also *Lagenaria vulgaris*) and to the hard outer shell of the plant’s fruit (especially when the shell is dry), takes on great cosmogenic significance in *Ilé-Ifẹ̀* narratives. There is a profound structural and interconnectional dualism that rushes to the fore upon considering the Yorùbá conception of the universe as *Igbá nlá*

*meji s'ojú dé'ra won* (a “big gourd with two halves”).<sup>124</sup> On one level, the ontological dualism reflected in both halves of the Yorùbá cosmos is mediated by a notion of reciprocal union expressed in the Yorùbá statement, *T'ako, t'abo, èjìwàpò* (“The male and female in togetherness”).<sup>125</sup> However, as we will see later, on another level the cosmic dualism symbolized by the gourd halves is mediated by a notion of unremitting antagonism. Such notions of tensive, dualistic relation are foundational to the Yorùbá conception of reality.

The *materiality* of the halved gourd functions as an embodiment of this essential cosmic dualism. According to Yorùbá tradition, the top half of the gourd represents both maleness and the sky, the latter of which is regarded as the spirit world (*Isalorun* or *Òrun*), the realm inhabited by the invisible spiritual beings that govern the universe; the bottom half of the gourd is associated with femaleness and with the raw materials from which the physical world (*Isalaye* or *Ayé*) was fashioned.<sup>126</sup> It is important to note that the cosmic gourd (*Igbá Ìwà*) is not self-sustaining, although its role as the seedbed of the physical dimension may suggest otherwise. The existence of *Igbá Ìwà* – as well as everything else constituting the physical dimension – is dependent upon the presence of a vital power known as *Àṣẹ*.

*Àṣẹ*, which may be usefully thought of as the cosmic force of being that “makes things happen,” animates and sustains all forms of life on earth (*Ayé*), and stems ultimately from *Olódùmarè*, the Yorùbá High Deity.<sup>127</sup> Yorùbá scholar Kólá Abímbólá outlines a communal order of being as structured within the framework of the Yorùbá cosmological tradition. Abímbólá’s model is instructive in that it makes clear the source of *Àṣẹ* while also providing a sense of how *Àṣẹ* is distributed throughout creation: *Olódùmarè* is joined

at the very top of the ontological order by *Ọ̀bàtálá* (*Ọ̀rìṣà-ńlá*), *Ifá* (*Ọ̀rúnmilà*), and *Èṣù*, three deities that, while not coequal with *Olódùmarè*, arguably play a more significant role in Yorùbá originary narratives than other *Ọ̀rìṣà* (lesser deities serving as emissaries or administrative functionaries of *Olódùmarè*);<sup>128</sup> the second level of the communal order of being is occupied by the other *Ọ̀rìṣà*, the *Ajogun* (“warriors against humanity and the good forces of nature”), and the *Àjé* (*Eleye* - “bird people,” “Owner of birds,” or *Eníyán* - “negative people”); humans, plants, and animals make up the third level, while the *Egún*, *Egúngún*,<sup>129</sup> *Ará Ọ̀run* or *Òkú Ọ̀run* (ancestors or denizens of *Ọ̀run*), and perhaps the unborn inhabit the fourth level.<sup>130</sup> Abimbólá’s outline helps us to see that *Àṣẹ* proceeds downward from *Olódùmarè*, infusing all life-forms that subsist within the hierarchically-constituted order of being. Let us now explore several Yorùbá originary narratives that in various ways explain the genesis of this hierarchical structure of existence.

In the first chapter of his book entitled *Olódùmarè: God in Yorùbá Belief*, E. Bólájí Idòwú provides a very detailed account of one of the earliest Yorùbá originary narratives involving *Ifẹ* (or *Ilé-Ifẹ*) and the creation of the world (*Ayé*). The narrative is quoted in full below. In examining this narrative, readers should be aware of Idòwú’s problematic tendency to refer to *Olódùmarè* using the pronoun “He,” a tendency that Kólá Abimbólá critiques based upon the fact that traditionally the Yorùbá describe *Olódùmarè* as a gender-less being:<sup>131</sup>

What moved *Olódùmarè* to think of creating the solid earth, no one knows. However, he conceived the idea and at once carried it into effect. He summoned *Ọ̀rìṣà-ńlá* [*Ọ̀rìṣà*, *Ọ̀bàtálá*, *Ọ̀òṣàálá*, *Ọ̀òṣàńlá*] the arch-divinity, to His presence and charged him with the duty: for material, He gave him a leaf of loose earth (some say that the loose earth was contained in a snail’s shell), and for tools a five-toed hen and a pigeon.

When *Ọ̀rìṣà-ńlá* arrived, he threw the loose earth on a suitable spot on the watery waste. Then he let loose the hen and the pigeon; and these immediately began the

work of scattering and spreading the loose earth. This they did until a great portion of the waste was covered. When enough of it had been covered, Òrìṣà-ńlá went back and reported to Olódùmarè that the work had been accomplished. Whereupon, Olódùmarè dispatched the chameleon to go down and inspect what had been done. The chameleon, it must be noted, was chosen on the merit of the extraordinary carefulness and delicacy with which it moves about, and the still more extraordinary way in which it can take in any situation immediately. From the first visit, the chameleon took back the report that although the earth was indeed wide enough, it was not yet sufficiently dry for any further operation; from the second visit, however, it returned with the cheering report that it was both ‘wide enough’ and sufficiently dry. The sacred spot where the work began was named Ifè. And that, according to the tradition, was how Ifè . . . got its name. The prefix *Ilé* was added much later on to signify that it was the original home of all and to distinguish it from the other towns called Ifè.

When Olódùmarè was satisfied that the work had indeed been accomplished, he sent Òrìṣà-ńlá back to equip and embellish the earth. This time, he sent Òrúnmilà [Ifá, Orunla] to accompany him and be his counselor. To Òrìṣà-ńlá, Olódùmarè handed the primeval *Igi Òpẹ* (Palm Tree). This he was to plant – its juice would give drink, its seed would give oil as well as kernels for food. He gave him also three other trees which were full of sap. These were *Iré* (Silk Rubber Tree), *Awùn* (Whitewood), and *Dòdò*. These also were to be planted and propagated: their juices would give drink. For as yet, there was no rain upon the earth. The original hen and pigeon which had been used in spreading the loose earth should somehow increase and multiply and provide meat for the dwellers on earth.

Òrìṣà-ńlá came down and did as he was told. When all was ready *Ọrẹlúẹrẹ*, one of the beings who had been prepared beforehand, was commissioned to lead a party of those beings down to earth. He brought them down as he was instructed and those became the nucleus of the human occupants of the earth.

When the affairs of the earth had been running for some time and its inhabitants were multiplying, it was discovered that there was not enough water for use. Therefore Òrìṣà-ńlá appealed to Olódùmarè and, as a result, rain began to fall upon the earth.

Òrìṣà-ńlá was assigned another special job. He was made the ‘creator’ of human physical features for the future. It is not clear from the oral traditions when he first began to do the work. However, he got the job, and his allotted duty was thenceforth to mould man’s physical form from the dust of the earth. He thus became the sculptor divinity. But the right to give life Olódùmarè reserved to Himself alone forever. The instruction given to Òrìṣà-ńlá, therefore, was that when he had completed his own part in the creation of man, he should lock up the lifeless form in a room and leave the place. Olódùmarè would then come and give breath [*ẹmí*], thus completing the creation of the human being.

A story is told of how, once, Òrìṣà-ńlá envied Olódùmarè this right to be the sole Giver of life. He therefore laid a plan to spy on Him. When he had completed his

work one day, instead of locking up the completed forms and leaving the place, he locked himself in with them and hid in a corner, awaiting the arrival of Olódùmarè. Olódùmarè, however . . . knew his crafty design and forestalled him by putting him into a deep slumber from which he awoke only when all the forms in his stock had become human beings. Since then, Òrìṣà-ńlá has contented himself with his own allotted part of the work.

The office of a ‘creator’ gave Òrìṣà-ńlá the prerogative to make at will human figures perfect or defective, and of whatever colours he wants them to be. The hunchback, the cripple, or the albino, are special marks of his prerogative or, more often than not, displeasure.<sup>132</sup>

Of interest in this narrative is the manner in which the narrative demonstrates how Yorùbá epistemology is embedded within a spiritual cosmology. The activities of the various deities in this narrative play an elemental role in the formation of a Yorùbá “world-sense”<sup>133</sup> that yields distinct knowledge about the cosmos as an environment wherein human meaning is at every stage rooted in the generative entanglement of the spiritual and material realms. An analysis of the narrative discloses the presence of *orienting concepts* that help define a Yorùbá epistemological perspective. Simply put, the term *orienting concept* as used here denotes an idea that significantly determines or influences how we perceive and interpret the world around us. We may also think of orienting concepts within the context of Yorùbá epistemology as indigenous heuristic devices that enable a particular awareness of reality. We find in the narrative under discussion at least three orienting concepts: mystery, materially-based relationality, and unpredictability. These concepts are tied in different ways to the actions of *Olódùmarè* and *Òrìṣà-ńlá* as portrayed above. We will now briefly reflect on how the concepts of mystery, materially-based relationality, and unpredictability help to give formative expression to the Yorùbá epistemological tradition.

The narrative begins with an assertion of the unknown; a full and precise understanding of *Olódùmarè*'s purpose in initiating the creation of the "solid earth" is beyond the reach of human knowledge. Therefore, any careful attempt to engage Yorùbá cosmology with the goal of probing the deepest meanings related to the origin of the earthly dimension will necessarily be attended by a sense of imaginative speculation and mystery. The circumscription of human knowledge implied by the lack of information regarding *Olódùmarè*'s intention for the terrestrial world encompasses far more than the teleological question about the origin of the "solid earth." At the very least, this circumscription also applies to human knowledge of all other non-earthly physical and spiritual phenomena that dynamically comprise the broader universe in which we exist. Definite knowledge of *Olódùmarè*'s purpose for the earth, the wider material cosmos, and the spirit world (*Òrun*) is simply unavailable to the human intellect and perhaps to the *Òrìṣà* as well. This means, for example, that the ultimate motivating factor or purpose for over three billion years of biological evolution on earth and nearly fourteen billion years of cosmic expansion is beyond the full grasp of all beings except *Olódùmarè*. This also means that the primary motives underpinning the inner workings of *Òrun* lie outside the realm of human comprehension. Our ability as humans to gain a more complete understanding of a given being is in large measure predicated upon the accessibility of knowledge related to that being's patterns of intentionality. Put differently, a critical understanding of the principal logic governing the creative activity of a being is vital to the acquisition of more comprehensive knowledge about that being. Given that human knowledge of *Olódùmarè*'s being does not include an understanding of the principal logic or reasoning undergirding *Olódùmarè*'s creative agenda as it pertains

to the “solid earth” or to other realms of existence, the deeper recesses of *Olódùmarè*’s being remain shrouded in mystery.

The circumscription of knowledge implied by the dearth of information regarding *Olódùmarè*’s intentionality vis-à-vis the creation of the “solid earth” may also be said to encompass human “potential”<sup>134</sup> or destiny. As we have seen, the originary narrative included above illustrates how ultimate purpose in regard to *Olódùmarè* functions in Yorùbá cosmology as a source of the unknown. One can also look at a particular aspect of the Yorùbá understanding of human destiny for further evidence of how ultimate purpose serves this epistemological function. The aspect I have in mind here is the concept of *orí* or *orí inú*, which refers to one’s spiritual “head” or “inner head.”<sup>135</sup> The Yorùbá believe that, prior to birth in the physical world, human beings choose an *orí inú* while in *Òrun* (the spirit realm). The purpose of the *orí inú* – which itself is worshipped as a divinity<sup>136</sup> – is to serve as a guide throughout a person’s life, helping to steer that person in a specific direction based upon the person’s largely irrevocable choice of *orí inú*.<sup>137</sup> There is no guarantee that the chosen *orí inú* will be good in nature; this is so mainly because *Àjàlá*, the spiritual entity credited with being the “supplier” of *orí inú*, gives to each unborn human an *orí inú* that is either good or bad. The nature of the chosen *orí inú* cannot be known beforehand. Thus, the kind of *orí inú* (i.e. good or bad) that a person selects is purely a matter of chance.

Also important to mention is the belief that only *Òrúnmìlà* knows the nature of any given person’s *orí inú* as well as that of the *orí inú* of each *Òrìṣà*.<sup>138</sup> The nature of a person’s *orí inú* simply cannot be determined on the basis of their physical attributes, behavioral characteristics, or any other set of personal features. As one researcher puts it,

. . . nobody can tell who has chosen a bad or a good Orí. The shape or size of a bad head may not be different from that of a good one. The type of Orí chosen by a particular person remains unknown to him and to all other men; it is Òrúnmilà alone, as the only witness of the act of the choice of destiny, who can tell what type of head each person has chosen. Hence the need for every person to consult Òrúnmilà from time to time.<sup>139</sup>

This understanding of *orí inú* is consistent with the understanding found in a verse from

*Òsá Méjì*, the tenth Odù of *Ifá*:

Orí burúkú kì í wú tuulu.  
 A kì í dá ẹ̀sẹ̀ ẹ̀ṣiwèrèé mọ̀ lójú-òṅà.  
 A kì í m'orí olóyè lówùjọ.  
 A díá fún Mọ̀bówú  
 Tí í ẹ̀ obìnrin Ògún.  
 Orí tí ó jọba lọla,  
 Ẹ̀nikan ò mọ̀;  
 Kí tọ̀kọ-taya ó mọ̀ pe'raa wọ̀n ní were mọ̀.  
 Orí tí ó jọba lọla,  
 Ẹ̀nikan ò mọ̀.

(“A bad head does not swell up.  
 Nobody knows the foot-prints of a mad man on the road.  
 Nobody can distinguish the head destined to wear a crown in an assembly.  
 Ifá divination was performed for Mọ̀bówú  
 who was the wife of Ògún.  
 The head that will reign tomorrow,  
 nobody knows it.  
 Let husband and wife stop calling each other names.  
 The head that will reign tomorrow,  
 nobody knows it”).<sup>140</sup>

This verse further grounds the Yorùbá conception of *orí inú* as a rather elusive reality to which human beings ironically have limited access. This verse also amplifies the uncertainty involved in the selection of *orí inú* by human beings in *Òrun* prior to their physical birth in the material world. In order for a person to understand his or her *orí inú* on a deeper level, the person must be proactive in putting forth the effort required to seek the wisdom of Òrúnmilà who, from the standpoint of knowledge, is a master of the *orí inú* of others. However, seeking the wisdom of Òrúnmilà in an attempt to ascertain the

nature of one's *orí inú* does not eliminate the mysterious uncertainty that accompanies any effort to improve or attain the destiny desired by one's *orí inú*.<sup>141</sup> Yet, the idea of effort remains a significant aspect of the Yorùbá understanding of human destiny.

The attainment of human destiny is only possible through protracted struggle or effort on the part of the individual. The necessity of struggle in the attainment of human destiny is expressed by the idea of *ẹsẹ* (which literally means “leg” or “legs”).<sup>142</sup> Wándé Abímbólá explains the relationship between *ẹsẹ* and *orí inú* in the following manner:

Whether or not the individual has chosen a good *orí*, he must still labor to realize his potential: hence the concept of *ẹsẹ*. Just as every individual has chosen an *orí*, he also has his own *ẹsẹ* with which he will have to struggle in life to aid his *orí* in the realization of his destiny. *Esẹ* represents the principle of activity and struggle without which even the best *orí* cannot unfold its good potentialities. As for those who have chosen bad *orí*, they have to work harder and struggle more with their *ẹsẹ* before they can achieve success in life.<sup>143</sup>

An interesting implication of Abímbólá's explanation that emerges upon closer analysis is that while ongoing struggle with one's *ẹsẹ* makes the realization of one's destiny more likely, such struggle nevertheless does not guarantee the realization of one's destiny.

This implication, along with a consideration of the opacity of ultimate purpose as regards the provision of *orí inú* by *Àjàlá*, and a recognition of the fact that human beings' access to information about the true nature of any given *orí inú* is limited (and in some cases perhaps even unavailable), helps to make visible the presence of mystery in the Yorùbá conception of human destiny. What is meant by my use of the term “opacity of ultimate purpose” in reference to *orí inú* is simply this: In a final analysis, it is altogether unclear why the kind of *orí inú* chosen by an unborn person in *Ọrun* is a matter left solely to chance. Moreover, it is also ultimately unclear why knowledge of the true nature of a person's *orí inú* is not more readily available. These points together represent an element

of mystery endemic to the Yorùbá cosmological tradition. Yorùbá epistemologies of human existence are tempered by this mysterious element, thereby keeping alive an experience or sense among the Yorùbá of the human being as a source of the unknown.

Furthermore, the originary narrative referenced earlier suggests that circumscribed knowledge is characteristic of the spiritual dimension as well. The deity *Òrìṣà-ńlá* functions as a primary means by which the narrative conveys this idea. Recall that, upon being sent presumably from *Òrun* a second time to “equip and embellish the earth,” *Òrìṣà-ńlá* is accompanied by the *Òrìṣà Òrúnmilà (Ifá)*, who is to serve as *Òrìṣà-ńlá*’s “counselor.” *Òrúnmilà* accompanies *Òrìṣà-ńlá* by mandate of *Olódùmarè*. At first blush, this detail of the story may not seem particularly significant. However, this impression changes as we consider this detail in light of what it implies about the nature of knowledge in the context of the spiritual dimension.

We are compelled to ask why *Olódùmarè* sees fit to assign *Òrúnmilà* to *Òrìṣà-ńlá* in an advisory role, especially considering that *Òrìṣà-ńlá* is widely acknowledged as the most senior *Òrìṣà*.<sup>144</sup> One obvious and valid answer to this question is that, in the Yorùbá tradition, *Òrúnmilà* is the divinity of “knowledge and wisdom.”<sup>145</sup> This being the case, the fact that *Olódùmarè* requires *Òrúnmilà* to be present with *Òrìṣà-ńlá* as a “counselor” while he completes the work of fashioning the earth should come as no surprise; the decision is quite reasonable in the sense that it reflects *Òrúnmilà*’s position in the Yorùbá pantheon. Yet, on another level, I contend that *Olódùmarè*’s decision to send *Òrúnmilà* along with *Òrìṣà-ńlá* also reflects an acknowledgement on *Olódùmarè*’s part of the fragmentary and imperfect nature of knowledge even among the *Òrìṣà*. *Òrìṣà-ńlá*’s seniority within the spiritual community of the *Òrìṣà* does not mean that his

knowledge of reality and the material world is complete and therefore no longer in need of further guidance, augmentation and development. This aspect of *Òrìṣà-ńlá's* depiction in the narrative helps us to gain additional insight into how the very idea of knowledge itself is constituted in Yorùbá epistemology. The portrayal of *Òrìṣà-ńlá* in the narrative under consideration suggests that knowledge is understood in the Yorùbá philosophical system as an *interdimensional phenomenon* that fluidly operates in both the material and immaterial dimensions. *Òrìṣà-ńlá's* portrayal also suggests that knowledge is understood as a somewhat dialectical phenomenon that is defined positively by what it produces (i.e., understanding) and negatively by its limitations (i.e., that which it cannot fully grasp conceptually and theoretically). We might usefully think of *Òrùnmilà* in the context of the narrative as a symbolic representation of the mystery-laden limitations and future development of *Òrìṣà-ńlá's* knowledge of reality and of knowledge in general. However, in a much more striking way, *Òrìṣà-ńlá* unintentionally punctuates the importance of mystery as a theoretical component in the constitution of knowledge in Yorùbá epistemology. He does so by attempting to outwit *Olódùmarè* in hopes of gaining access to the most esoteric and powerful recesses of *Olódùmarè's* knowledge.

According to the narrative, *Òrìṣà-ńlá* becomes desirous of the knowledge necessary to give life to the human forms he creates. Such knowledge, however, is the exclusive domain of *Olódùmarè*. Undaunted, *Òrìṣà-ńlá* devises a plan wherein he will hide among the inanimate human forms awaiting the infusion of “breath” (*ẹmí*) from *Olódùmarè*.<sup>146</sup> *Òrìṣà-ńlá* plans to do this so that he may surreptitiously observe what is actually involved in the divine bestowal of life, thereby acquiring knowledge and power that he was never intended to possess. However, *Olódùmarè* foils *Òrìṣà-ńlá's* plot by causing him to sleep

through the moment when he would have witnessed how *Olódùmarè* vivifies or *ensouls* the lifeless human forms that *Òrìṣà-ńlá* molds by hand. *Olódùmarè*'s decision to thwart *Òrìṣà-ńlá*'s plan to deceitfully gain knowledge not meant for him is important for our understanding of Yorùbá epistemology. The act of thwarting *Òrìṣà-ńlá*'s plan can be interpreted as symbolic in the sense that it represents the bounded nature of knowledge within the human and spiritual dimensions. Interestingly, though, *Olódùmarè*'s act is also symbolic inasmuch as it represents that towards which knowledge ultimately strives, namely, an ever-evolving understanding of the unknown.

What then does this symbolic act indicate about how knowledge is conceptualized in Yorùbá epistemology? We have observed that Yorùbá epistemology conceptualizes knowledge in close relation to the existential and spiritual mystery that circumscribes knowledge. In fact, in a Yorùbá philosophical perspective, knowledge and mystery make little sense as concepts when thought of in isolation from one another. The ideas of knowledge and mystery are intelligible within the framework of Yorùbá epistemology because both of these ideas are held together in a kind of theoretical tension wherein the meaning of knowledge dependently plays off of the meaning of mystery, and vice versa. What *Olódùmarè*'s symbolic act contributes to our understanding of the Yorùbá conception of knowledge is a stronger emphasis on what I refer to as the *seeking orientation of knowledge*.

The term *seeking orientation of knowledge* draws attention to the nature of knowledge as a phenomenon that, in the interest of expanding the scope of its intellectual domain, reaches for greater, ever more profound understandings of existence (*wíwà*).<sup>147</sup> As we develop new understandings of the world, these new understandings enable us to perceive

and ask new questions about the world, questions that we may not have considered previously. In response, we actively seek answers to these new questions based upon how we have been conditioned or trained to do so. However, Yorùbá epistemology adds the following important caveat to this very brief and basic phenomenological description of how knowledge develops: Despite the seeking orientation of knowledge, knowledge remains incapable of fully grasping the most arcane meanings of existence. This is so not only because of the limited nature of knowledge, but also because existence in its ultimate form is thoroughly mysterious and therefore entirely opaque to knowledge. The religio-philosophical significance of *Olódùmarè*'s act of thwarting *Òrìṣà-ńlá*'s clever plot helps bring this caveat into view.

With regard to *Olódùmarè*'s obstructive act, I would speculatively argue that it is motivated less by an interest in simply underscoring the ascendancy of mystery in the universe and more by a concern to further facilitate and preserve a certain mode of relationality within the spiritual dimension; *Òrìṣà-ńlá*'s unexpected confrontation with ultimate mystery in the form of *Olódùmarè*'s vastly superior intellect and power occasions in *Òrìṣà-ńlá* a clearer awareness and “content” acceptance of his role as the “sculptor divinity” as well as a sober acknowledgment of the limitations of his role. Relationally speaking, confrontation with mystery enables *Òrìṣà-ńlá* to remain properly connected and attuned to the will of *Olódùmarè*. What our analysis suggests is the functionality of mystery in Yorùbá epistemology; somewhat ironically, mystery makes conceptualization of the idea of knowledge possible while also facilitating meaningful spiritual relationships. To put the latter point another way, the fragmentary nature of knowledge in the human world makes relationship with the spiritual world and its

limitless repository of knowledge a necessity. However, it is important to bear in mind that, for the Yorùbá, the significance of relationality also encompasses the material dimension. Indeed, relationality is a foundational theoretical element in the Yorùbá conception of the material world. This brings us to the concept of materially-based relationality, which is the second orienting concept from our focal originary narrative.

The second orienting concept to be treated from the Yorùbá originary narrative under examination may be referred to as materially-based relationality. In the narrative, the divinity *Òrìṣà-ńlá* stands as the most salient embodied expression of this concept. *Òrìṣà-ńlá*'s creative involvement in the making of the “solid earth” foregrounds a tactile and fecund relationship with matter: The items given by *Olódùmarè* to *Òrìṣà-ńlá* to be used in the creation of the “solid earth” consist of “a leaf of loose earth” that may have been placed inside a snail shell, “a five-toed hen and a pigeon,” all of which are tangible, physical objects composed of matter. After traveling to the appropriate location, *Òrìṣà-ńlá* then casts the loose earth onto the “watery waste,” at which point he physically releases the hen and pigeon. The hen and pigeon then spread the newly-placed loose earth across vast distances in all directions. Upon receipt of the chameleon's second inspection report indicating that the new land was sufficiently “wide” and “dry” to accommodate further enhancement, *Olódùmarè* supplies *Òrìṣà-ńlá* with more matter in the form of the *Igi Òpẹ* (Palm Tree), *Iré* (Silk Rubber Tree), *Awùn* (Whitewood), and *Dòdo*, all of which are planted for the purpose of providing liquid nourishment for the new land's inhabitants. Concerning the hen and pigeon, the understanding is that, through proliferation over time, their role as “tools” of creation shifts to that of a food source for the denizens of the land. *Òrìṣà-ńlá*'s activity in this narrative gives rise to the

following question: What is the epistemological significance of matter as understood within the context of Yorùbá cosmology?

The broader epistemological significance of matter in Yorùbá cosmology encompasses much more than we can responsibly examine here given the limitations of this study. However, what must be addressed is the question of why matter in both its human and non-human forms occupies such an important position in Yorùbá epistemology. I would argue that the singular importance of matter in Yorùbá epistemology stems from its role as the primary theater of human knowing and action, both of which exert an influence upon and are influenced by the spiritual world (the latter point will be made clearer in later discussions). Therefore, as the following analysis will suggest, matter, knowledge, action and spirit are inextricable realities in the perspective of the Yorùbá. The narrative under consideration suggests not only the inextricable relationship between these four realities, but also the central importance of matter for any phenomenological understanding of Yorùbá spirituality, the foundation of which is constituted in part by an elaborate cosmology documented and expressed through Yorùbá oral traditions. The epistemological significance of matter as imaginatively depicted in the narrative we are exploring becomes more apparent when we take into account the nature of *Òrìṣà-ńlá*'s relationship to matter. *Òrìṣà-ńlá*'s relationship to matter is not superficial or exploitative. To the contrary, it is only through matter that *Òrìṣà-ńlá*'s creative mandate as a divinity is given expression and meaning.

What is more, *Òrìṣà-ńlá*'s relationship to matter underscores the status of matter in Yorùbá cosmology as a prime source of creative spiritual power, as a source that remains connected to the mysterious yet fecund will of *Olódùmarè*. We should also add that

matter functions in Yorùbá cosmology as the raw “stuff” (*kiní kan* or *nnkan*) upon which the “spiritual technology” utilized by *Òrìṣà-ńlá* in the creation of the “solid earth” depends for actualization.<sup>148</sup> All of these points signal the importance of *Òrìṣà-ńlá*'s relationship to matter for our understanding of Yorùbá epistemology. Through this relationship, matter emerges not as inert “stuff” but as a reconfigurable vessel of spiritual power, as a vessel that, by way of engagement, yields knowledge about the natural world as an environment shaped by profound creative potential and flux. We could even hazard the claim that, within a Yorùbá epistemological perspective, relationship with the matter comprising the natural world becomes a cardinal locus of knowledge production. In this perspective, knowledge is not gained through an intellectual retreat into the self that seeks to distance the operation of the mind, body, and spirit from matter. Rather, knowledge is acquired through an outward embrace of and active participation in the often chaotic but feracious messiness of matter. The aim of such participation is not the permanent taming of matter. Instead, the ideal aim is the cultivation of a constructive and communally beneficial relationship with the sacred power that sustains and works through matter. Nevertheless, relational participation in materiality is fraught with uncertainty and danger. This leads us to the third and final orienting concept to be discussed: unpredictability.

*Òrìṣà-ńlá*'s creative mandate in the narrative is not limited to the formation of the “solid earth.” *Olódùmarè* also appoints *Òrìṣà-ńlá* to the role of “sculptor divinity,” which means that his creative responsibilities additionally include the “moulding” of “human forms” and “features” from the “dust of the earth.” While *Òrìṣà-ńlá*'s investiture of creative power does not include the ability to give life (this ability belongs solely to

*Olódùmarè*), it does grant him the divine “prerogative” of making human forms “perfect” or “defective” depending upon his pleasure or “displeasure.” *Òrìṣà-ńlá*’s creative prerogative as the “sculptor divinity” introduces an element of uncertainty into the existential situation of material relationality. The divine crafting of earthly matter into physically optimal or suboptimal human forms is a matter subject to the caprice of *Òrìṣà-ńlá*. *Òrìṣà-ńlá*’s caprice represents the power to greatly exacerbate human suffering through somatic malformation or mitigate human suffering through healthy somatic formation. The unpredictability of *Òrìṣà-ńlá*’s role as the “sculptor divinity” prefigures the dangerously unpredictable dimension of matter itself as a reconfigurable vessel of spiritual power.

The unpredictable dimension of matter as reflected in *Òrìṣà-ńlá*’s rather whimsical role as the “sculptor divinity” brings to mind the function of mystery and materially-based relationality as orienting concepts in Yorùbá epistemology; the concept of materially-based relationality grounds human knowledge in the dynamic entanglement with matter that ensues as a result of existence in the physical world (*Ayé*), while the concept of mystery delimits the scope of human knowledge. As discussed previously, the orienting concept of unpredictability adds to our understanding of material entanglement the elements of uncertainty and danger. This leads us to an important point that should be accented: In conjunction with the concept of mystery, the concept of unpredictability works to destabilize the authoritative status of human knowledge. This is not to suggest that the accumulation of human knowledge carries no authority whatsoever with respect to its essential role in cognitively orienting human beings in the world, or that the meaning-making power of human knowledge is ultimately null. Rather, what we are

emphasizing is the cosmologically-based, axiomatic Yorùbá notion that human knowledge, by virtue of its ineluctable participation in the chaotic uncertainty of matter and the mysterious spiritual realities that undergird and operate through matter, does *not* deliver to us an absolute or immutable understanding of anything. It is important here that readers bear in mind the three principal motifs (the permanency of existential conflict, irresolution, and mystery) that constitute the conceptual structure of the dissertation, as these motifs are of profound relevance to the current discussion. We have just touched on the significance of the concept of mystery as it relates to the function of unpredictability in Yorùbá epistemology. Still in need of explanation, however, is the relevance of the permanency of existential conflict and irresolution to our analysis of the epistemological function of unpredictability as suggested in the Yorùbá originary narrative presently claiming our attention.

We have called attention to how *Òrìṣà-ńlá*'s work as the "sculptor divinity" casts light on the unpredictable dimension of matter itself and on the unpredictability involved in material engagement. The motif of the permanency of existential conflict helps to uncover yet another layer of meaning with respect to the function of unpredictability in Yorùbá epistemology. This motif is hardly foreign to the Yorùbá cosmological tradition. In fact, quite the opposite is the case; for the Yorùbá, the permanency of existential conflict is a central philosophical axiom that fundamentally influences the structure of Yorùbá cosmological thought. The motif of the permanency of existential conflict is inscribed in orally transmitted beliefs about the *Ajogun*'s ("warriors" or "anti-gods") indefatigable war against humankind and the *Òrìṣà*. Regarding the significance of the motif of the permanency of existential conflict in Yorùbá cosmology, scholar of Yorùbá

religion Wándé Abímbólá explains that “In the Yorùbá belief system, conflict rather than peace is the order of the day. Resolution can only be achieved through the offering of *ẹbọ* via the intervention of *Èṣù* [an important Yorùbá divinity about whom we will learn more later in this chapter] who is at the same time an *Òrìṣà* and a master of the *Ajogun*. But we must always remember that resolution is temporary. It is not, unlike conflict, a permanent feature of the universe.”<sup>149</sup> Abímbólá’s emphasis on the philosophical centrality of conflict (*ija, rogbodyan*)<sup>150</sup> within the conceptual framework of Yorùbá cosmology provokes questions about the epistemological connection between unpredictability and existential conflict. Chief among these questions is the following: How may we understand the Yorùbá concept of material unpredictability as a re-inscription of the motif of the permanency of existential conflict?

I am not suggesting that the meaning of material unpredictability in Yorùbá epistemology is limited to a re-inscription of the motif of the permanency of existential conflict. The potential trajectories of meaning one could explore in connection with the orienting concept of material unpredictability are likely innumerable. However, given the conceptual focus and purpose of the dissertation, we will specifically highlight the philosophical link between material unpredictability and existential conflict in Yorùbá thought. Deeply implicit in Yorùbá epistemology is the idea that the material world becomes meaningful for us in part through its unpredictable aspect. Unlike many conventional scientific epistemologies, the Yorùbá “world-sense” does not embrace an understanding of the material world as a largely predictable closed system. For the Yorùbá, it is impossible to know with absolute and unfailing precision how matter will behave from one moment to the next. Equally inaccessible is a comprehensive and exact

knowledge of how our individual and communal relationships with matter will change over time. Yet it is within this existential condition of profound entanglement with the unpredictable material world that human beings both desire and pursue well-being (*ayò àti àláfià*) and success (*ìyege*).<sup>151</sup> Well-being and success are possible only through a daily struggle to live constructively amid the unremitting and often destructive unpredictability of both non-human and human forms of matter. Thus it can be said that matter, by virtue of its unpredictable, frequently destructive aspect, often opposes human well-being and success.

It is here that we perceive more clearly the philosophical link between the concepts of material unpredictability and the permanency of existential conflict; just as non-human and human forms of matter frequently oppose the human struggle for well-being and success, this same human struggle opposes the dangerous unpredictability of the various forms of matter. The often harmful caprice with which the “sculptor divinity” *Òrìṣà-ńlá* molds human forms consisting of matter conflicts with the constructive goals for which many of these human forms will continually strive after having been ensouled or given breath (*ẹ̀mí*) by *Olódùmarè*. Another way of saying this is that the realities of material unpredictability and human striving reciprocally participate in the creation and preservation of existential conflict. It is in this tensive sense that the Yorùbá epistemological concept of material unpredictability can be philosophically interpreted as a re-inscription of Yorùbá belief in the permanency of existential conflict. The concept of material unpredictability can also be interpreted in a way that underscores its relevance to the Yorùbá principle of irresolution, the principle named earlier as the third idea in the

thematic trio according to which the dissertation is conceptually organized. It is to this principle that our analytical focus now shifts.

The presence of irresolution as a significant epistemological principle in Yorùbá thought is made more apparent by the above originary narrative's depiction of *Olódùmarè* and *Òrìṣà-ńlá*. In a previous discussion, we explored how the mystery surrounding *Olódùmarè*'s decision to sanction the creation of the "solid earth" is epistemologically meaningful. We specified some of the ways in which the mystery associated with this momentous decision implicitly points more generally to the limited nature of human knowledge. Presently in need of emphasis is the fact that the element of mystery connected to *Olódùmarè* and the creation of the terrestrial world very much lends itself to or perhaps even engenders the condition of unpredictability made manifest through the caprice demonstrated by *Òrìṣà-ńlá* in his creative post as the "sculptor divinity."

If *Olódùmarè*'s ultimate purpose for matter remains unavailable to human knowledge, as our focal narrative strongly suggests, then it stands to reason that the power to gain an unerringly predictive understanding of matter also lies beyond the pale of human knowledge. By extension, if neither the ultimate purpose of matter nor complete foreknowledge of its activity from moment to moment are within the reach of human intellect, then it also follows that the complexity of matter is never resolvable within any humanly contrived system of meaning. Hence the implicit idea in Yorùbá epistemology that human knowing is always conditioned and delimited by the permanently irresolvable or irreducible nature of matter. In a Yorùbá perspective, one of the vital functions of human knowledge is to sharpen our awareness of matter as a fundamentally irreducible

reality whose deepest meanings always frustrate and elude the powers of human reason. Yorùbá epistemology enables the foundational realization that at the level of material unpredictability and materiality's ultimate meaning, human knowledge is really no knowledge at all. This realization throws human knowledge back onto itself, disabusing us of the presumption that human knowledge can have *ultimate* authority within the material or spiritual domain. Let me interject a note of clarification here: I am *not* claiming that the Yorùbá tradition looks unfavorably upon human intellectual activity that seeks to probe the greatest depths of meaning pertaining to materiality. What I am claiming is that, for the Yorùbá, such probing must always remain connected to the overall condition and needs of specific human communities. This point will become more evident as our constructive exploration of Yorùbá cosmology continues to unfold.

The narrative we have just examined is part of a larger tradition of Yorùbá originary narration that includes multifarious accounts of the earth's origin. While a thorough consideration of the full range of these accounts is not possible here, it is nevertheless important to at least explore several of these accounts in order to further enlarge our understanding of the kinds of meanings that give shape to Yorùbá epistemology. Part of what we sought to establish in our analysis of the first originary narrative is that knowledge itself is understood in the Yorùbá epistemological tradition as a fundamentally creative, materially relational *human* phenomenon. In various ways, the Yorùbá originary narratives included below reflect this shared understanding. The next narrative to be recounted is a popular variant of the previous one. The *Òrìṣà Odùduwà* and *Ògún* both appear in this version.<sup>152</sup>

Much like the previous originary narrative, this commonly known variant holds that in primeval times the earth consisted almost entirely of water; small in number, the only extant landmasses were scattered mountains that protruded from the surface of the water at different places. Desiring to create new land from the primeval water that blanketed the earth, *Olódùmarè* commissioned four hundred *Òrìṣà* to bring this new land into existence. To assist the *Òrìṣà* in carrying out this task, *Olódùmarè* provided each of them with dust from *Òrun* (the “spirit world”),<sup>153</sup> a chameleon, and a ten-fingered hen. While four hundred *Òrìṣà* were commissioned by *Olódùmarè*, *Ọbàtálá* was chosen specifically as the creative leader who was primarily responsible for bringing forth new dry land from the primeval water. Aided by an iron chain given to them by the deity *Ògún*, the *Òrìṣà* traveled down to *Òkè-Àrà* (“mountain of wonders”),<sup>154</sup> a location that, geographically speaking, is well within reach of *Ilé-Ifè*.

While atop *Òkè-Àrà*, *Ọbàtálá* consumed a large amount of palm-wine, became inebriated, and fell asleep. *Odùduwà*, *Ọbàtálá*'s younger brother, took advantage of the situation by seizing *Ọbàtálá*'s sacral dust, chameleon, and ten-fingered hen. *Odùduwà* then set about the business of creating new dry land from the primeval water. He grabbed hold of the sacral dust from *Òrun* and scattered it about. Inexplicably, the granules of dust that *Odùduwà* had strewn across part of the surface of the water caused new land to form and solidify. *Odùduwà* then set down his ten-fingered hen, and the hen scratched the newly-formed land, thereby causing the land to expand continuously in every direction. Finally, *Odùduwà* released his chameleon in order that it may walk across the land and, with its feet, verify the firmness of the land.

After awakening from his drunken state, *Ọbàtálá* discovered that his brother *Odùduwà* had already completed the creation of the new dry land. The fact that *Odùduwà* stepped in and fulfilled the duty originally assigned to *Ọbàtálá* by *Olódùmarè* did not sit well with *Ọbàtálá*. Consequently, *Ọbàtálá* incited a fierce conflict between himself and *Odùduwà*, which was highly unusual given that ordinarily *Ọbàtálá* is a divinity of “peace, order, and clean living.”<sup>155</sup> After observing this bitter conflict for some time, *Olódùmarè* intervened on behalf of *Odùduwà*, giving sanction to the initiative *Odùduwà* demonstrated in completing the creation of the new dry land. In so doing, *Olódùmarè* acknowledged *Odùduwà*’s newly-acquired status as the creator of the earth. However, *Olódùmarè* also affirmed *Ọbàtálá*’s position as the eldest *Òrìṣà* while recommissioning him as the molder of human forms into which *Olódùmarè* would breathe life.<sup>156</sup> So ended the dispute between *Ọbàtálá* and *Odùduwà*. The physical point at which *Odùduwà* created the earth from the primeval water is now known as *Ifẹ*. *Odùduwà* eventually became the king of *Ifẹ* (or *Ilé-Ifẹ*), holding the title of *Ọlófìn-Ayé* (“lawgiver to the world”).<sup>157</sup> Many Yorùbá communities claim *Ilé-Ifẹ* as their ancestral home and identify *Odùduwà* as the progenitor of the Yorùbá people. The Yorùbá also regard *Ilé-Ifẹ* as the place from which all life on earth emerged.<sup>158</sup>

We may add to the preceding account details from a more complete account that appears in chapter two of Wándé Abimbólá’s book entitled *Ifá Will Mend Our Broken World: Thoughts on Yorùbá Religion and Culture in Africa and the Diaspora*. It is important to include the details that follow because they help to further develop our sense of how the natural world and the relationship of human beings to the natural world are construed in Yorùbá cosmology:

Vegetation later appeared on earth not by accident but by a deliberate design of Olódùmarè. A verse from Òtúá Ìrosùn, a minor Odù (chapter) of Ifá, explains how vegetation appeared on earth. This same chapter of Ifá tells us that each species of vegetation was asked to perform sacrifice before it left *òrun* [the spirit world]. Those species which performed sacrifice are the ones which are respected, and are, therefore, not felled down indiscriminately. Those which did not perform sacrifice have been wantonly exploited and destroyed ever since.

Apart from the chicken and the chameleon, Olódùmarè also caused other species of animals to be sent to the earth. Altogether, 880 species each of animals, plants, and birds were originally sent to the earth. Their appearance on earth pre-dated the appearance of human beings, who were created as a result of a joint effort between Ọbàtálá and Ọgún (the iron divinity) who supplied the skeleton, as well as Àjàlá [also a “potter” in *òrun*, somewhat like Ọbàtálá] who supplied the inner or spiritual head. Olódùmarè himself supplied the vital breath force known as Èmí, referred to by Ifá as a daughter of Olódùmarè.

All of these acts of creation were witnessed by Ifá, whose other name is Ọrúnmilà . . . It was Ọrúnmilà who gave each plant, animal or bird its own special name and identity. That is why Ifá is known as *elérìí – ipín* (witness of destiny) *a – jé – ju – òògùn* (who is more effective than medicine).

When all the species of plants, animals and birds arrived on earth, a covenant was made which stipulated that no species should wantonly or greedily exploit the other. A similar covenant was also made with human beings . . . The verses of Ifá tell us that in those ancient times some animals and birds understood and spoke the languages of human beings and some humans also spoke and understood the languages of birds and animals . . . In those ancient times, whenever human beings were celebrating important festivals, they invited animals and birds. Some trees had the ability to change themselves into human or animal form, and they too were cordially invited to human events. Those plants, animals, or birds left out of such great festivals felt insulted and sometimes found ways and means to sabotage or cause confusion on such occasions.

The ancient covenant between the plant kingdom, the animal kingdom and the human beings was finally broken in Ilé-Ifè. Several verses of Ifá tell us how this happened . . . A wife of Ọrúnmilà, known as Pèrègúnlèlè, daughter of Awùjalè, was the first woman to give birth to twins. They were named Èdun, the same which the Yorùbá gave to the colobus monkey.

But according to this verse of Ifá, it happened one day that Ọlófín, the priest-king of Ifè, was mysteriously lost in the forest. The male Èdun saw him, rescued him, and brought him back to the city. Ọlófín then organized a big thanksgiving ceremony to mark his return to the city. He invited as usual all species of birds and animals. The animals made *erin*, the elephant, their leader. He was assisted by *efòn*, the buffalo. But to the amazement of the animals, they were turned back one by one from the

party. The elephant was the first to leave the party in anger . . . The buffalo, the antelope, the duiker were all turned back like the elephant. But after some initial hesitation and doubt, Ēdun, the colobus monkey, was allowed to join the party and was eventually re-admitted into the society of human beings. He was placed among the Ifá priests who advise Olófin. But all the other animals who were turned back never returned . . . Thus it was human beings who broke the ancient covenant in Ilé-Ifè, leading to the separation of humans from the rest of creation. From that time until now there set in a relentless antagonism between humans and the environment . . . .<sup>159</sup>

The motifs of interconnectedness and conflict figure prominently in this account. The account describes a multidimensional, diverse community of being wherein relationship with the natural world is a primary means by which human existence gains a significant degree of intelligibility. The existence of the primordial human community and that of the natural world are so thoroughly intertwined in this account that some human beings are said to have the ability to speak and understand bird and animal languages, just as some animals and birds speak and understand human languages. Moreover, the depth of the existential connection between the natural world and the primordial human community is such that trees possess the ability to physically take on human form. These trees, along with birds and animals, are actively included in the affairs of the human world, so much so that they are invited to “important festivals” and other “human events.” This originary account evinces a fundamental understanding of human existence as a dynamic condition of profoundly communal relation with the various modes of life that comprise the natural world. In a very real sense, human existence on earth *is* material relation, and the same is indeed true of all other forms of existence on earth as well. Yet, as this account suggests, intrinsic to the condition of material existence is the reality of conflict.

We learn at the beginning of this originary narrative that *Ọrun*, which in many ways is the source of material existence, is itself a site of conflict. The apparently defiant

behavior of certain plant species in *Òrun* represents one element that establishes *Òrun* as a site of conflict. According to the minor *Odù* entitled *Òtúá Ìrosùn*, not all plant species performed the sacrifice requested of them prior to leaving *Òrun* for earth. Those that did not perform the sacrifice have since been the subject of exploitative violence and destruction. The non-compliance of these plant species directly conflicted with the staunchly sacrificial orientation and expectation of *Òrun*. As a consequence of their non-compliance, these plant species remain in conflict with beings in the material world who may wish to do them harm. This primordial manifestation of non-compliance and antagonism helps set the stage for the emergence of existential conflict as a perennial condition of the material world, a condition for which an explanation is provided later in the narrative.

The explanation just mentioned is found in the story involving *Ọlófín*'s thanksgiving ceremony in *Ilé-Ifè*. For reasons that remain unclear, none of the birds and animals invited to the thanksgiving ceremony celebrating *Ọlófín*'s successful return to *Ilé-Ifè* after having been rescued from the forest by *Èdun* are permitted to actually attend the ceremony. *Èdun*, the colobus monkey, is permitted to attend the ceremony and is “eventually re-admitted into the society of human beings,” but only “after some initial hesitation and doubt” on the part of human beings. The *human* decision to exclude birds and animals from *Ọlófín*'s thanksgiving ceremony violates the ancient covenant between human beings and all other material forms of life on earth, thereby creating a perduring and “antagonistic” rift between humans and the natural world. This exclusionary human decision introduces a new level or mode of conflict between human beings and the natural world that did not exist previously in the same way.

From a broadly social point of view, this decision precipitates a fundamental structural shift in relations between humans and other beings in the natural world, a structural shift involving a move away from cooperation to tensive opposition. The philosophical significance of this relational shift becomes more apparent upon considering that the human condition and the rest of the natural world both gain a certain kind of intelligibility when conceptualized according to an epistemology of conflict. Within such an epistemology, the human condition and the natural world are knowable as tensional domains of existence that often struggle against each other for survival and well-being. However, the perdurance of conflict between these two domains does not necessitate that they exist in total isolation from one another, nor does it completely eliminate the possibility of cooperation. The existential interconnection of the human world and the natural world remains. Abimbólá helps us to see this existential interconnection when he writes that

Even though the ancient covenant between man and the rest of creation was broken in Ilé-Ifè, vestiges of the covenant have survived, yielding a profound respect for nature among the Yorùbá even today. In the Ifá sacred literature itself, every creature or object of nature is personified. When Ifá speaks of a tree, an insect, a bird or an animal, it speaks of it as if it were human. For example, several birds, such as *igún* (the vulture), *agbe* (the blue turacoo), *àlùkò* (the red feathered turacoo), and *àgbìgbònìwònrà̀n*, are regarded as priests of Ifá in the Ifá literary corpus. *È̀èsún*, giant grass of the forest, is the Ifá priest of the forest while *m̀erùwà*, giant grass of the savanna, is the Ifá priest of savanna lands. *Irínm̀òdò*, a huge and very tall tree of river basins, is a wife of Òrúnmilà himself. A verse of Ifá speaks of *Irínm̀òdò* as follows:

Ifá ló firínm̀òdò jòba.  
 Ifá ló firínm̀òdò jòba.  
 Òrúnmilà lò gbé Irínm̀òdò níyàwó.  
 Ifá ló firínm̀òdò jòba.

It was Ifá who made Irínm̀òdò a potentate.  
 It was Ifá who made Irínm̀òdò a potentate.  
 It was Òrúnmilà who wedded Irínm̀òdò as a wife.  
 It was Ifá who made Irínm̀òdò a potentate.<sup>160</sup>

Abimbólá's translation of this verse illustrates one of the ways in which the *Ifá* literary corpus construes the human world and the natural world as cooperatively bound together, despite the fact that the primordial covenant between the two worlds was never fully re-established. Paradoxically, however, the existential tension introduced by the human community's breach of this covenant indicates that the two worlds are also bound together in conflict. Therefore, this verse and the previous narrative recounted by Abimbólá together impugn interpretations of Yorùbá cosmology that would reductively describe the material world either as a domain of cooperation or as a domain of conflict. The tensive multidimensionality of the meanings found within the originary narrative to which the above verse relates is reflective of meanings present in other Yorùbá originary narratives as well. One such narrative involves the cosmic gourd (*Igbá Ìwà*) or calabash, the circular husk of which is associated with the physical structure of the universe.

In this narrative, the cosmic gourd is depicted as consisting of two halves. It is said that both halves existed together in close union during the primordial era; the top half of the gourd (*Àjàlórùn*, or "male spirit-world") was under the rule of *Olódùmarè*, while *Ilè* ruled the bottom half of the gourd (*Àjàláyé*, or "female earth").<sup>161</sup> One day, *Olódùmarè* and *Ilè* went hunting together for bush rats in a forest located on *Àjàláyé*. After collectively managing to catch only one bush rat, *Olódùmarè* and *Ilè* argued over who should keep the rat. *Ilè* contended that she had an exclusive right to the rat due to her seniority and to the fact that the rat was a denizen of *Àjàláyé*, the domain over which she ruled. *Olódùmarè* ultimately decided to relinquish the rat. However, unfortunately, this decision resulted in the sundering of *Igbá Ìwà* into two disconnected halves. The sudden disconnection between the two halves of *Igbá Ìwà* caused the sky to cease producing rain,

thus severely impeding the reproductive processes of the natural world. Upon witnessing the harmful effect of *Igbá Ìwà*'s abrupt division on her domain, *Ilè* was compelled to recognize *Olódùmarè* as the chief cosmic authority. It was in this way that the balance of life on earth (*Àjàlàyé*) was restored.<sup>162</sup>

*Ilè*'s claim of seniority in the previous narrative is curious, particularly in light of *Olódùmarè*'s status in other narratives as the original creative impetus behind the existence of *Ilè* and *Àjàlàyé*. As Yorùbá art historian Babatunde Lawal suggests, the meaning of *Ilè*'s seemingly strange assertion becomes clearer when examined within the context of other Yorùbá originary narratives that view *Odùduwà* as the “Supreme Goddess” and as an “embodiment” of *Òrun* (the “spirit world”) and *Ayé* (earth).<sup>163</sup>

Consider, for instance, the following point made by Yorùbá cultural historian and elder J.

O. Lucas:

In the early myths she [*Odùduwà*] is credited with the priority of existence . . . She is regarded as having independent existence, and as co-eval with Olórun [*Olódùmarè*], the Supreme Deity with whom she is associated in the work of creation . . . *Odùduwà* is known as *Ìyá Agbè* – ‘Mother of the Gourd’ or ‘Mother of the closed calabash.’ She is represented in a sitting posture, nursing a child. Hence prayers are often addressed to her by would-be mothers.<sup>164</sup>

One of Lawal's informants, Yorùbá elder D. O. Epega, goes a step further than Lucas in stating that “*Odùduà* is the Self-Existent Being who created existence. He is both male and female . . . The word *Olódùmarè* is a praise title of *Odùduà*.”<sup>165</sup> Moreover, Yorùbá scholars E. Bólájí Idòwú and Ayo Bámgbóṣé lend a degree of etymological credence to the points made by Lucas and Epega in noting the occurrence of the word *odu* (“chief”) in the titles of *Olódùmarè* and *Odùduwà*.<sup>166</sup> This observation is significant because it raises the possibility that both appellations designate the same divinity. Lawal makes a similar linguistic observation concerning *Olódùmarè* and *Odùduwà*: “Indeed, *Olódùmarè*

is also known as Elédùwà, which recalls the *duwa* in *Odù-duwà*. Thus the narrative attributing the creation of the terrestrial world to *Odùduwà* may very well reflect a divine act of self-extension, identifying *Olódùmarè* as a sexually biune Supreme Deity.”<sup>167</sup> The case of *Olódùmarè* and *Odùduwà* stands as a prime example not only of the complex structures of meaning that inhere within Yorùbá oral culture, but also of the multivalent linguistic and conceptual constitution of deities found in the Yorùbá cosmological tradition. The cultural practice among the Yorùbá of intricately representing deities through a combination of nuanced conceptualization and oral theo-philosophical discourse is evidenced yet again in another well-known Yorùbá folk narrative about the origin of *Olódùmarè* and in the beliefs and religious symbolism of a powerful fraternal institution in Yorùbáland known as the *Ògbóni* (meaning “the old ones”) society.<sup>168</sup>

### **The Birth of *Olódùmarè*?**

Lawal perceives a significant degree of conceptual continuity between the idea of “mother” (*Ìyá Agbè*), with which the bottom half of the cosmic gourd (*Igbá Ìwà*) is associated, and the Yorùbá description of the lid of a container as *idéri* (“cover”) or *omori* (from the terms *omo*, meaning “child,” and *orí*, meaning “on top”). Lawal likens the physical support given by a container to the lid that sits atop it to the support that a mother gives to her child when she physically carries the child.<sup>169</sup> For Lawal, this linguistic connection, along with the fact that other scholars such as Lucas and Idòwú claim that *Odùduwà* is depicted in some Yorùbá originary narratives as a mother breast-feeding her child and as an embodiment of both the upper and lower halves of the gourd of existence, raises two interesting questions regarding *Olódùmarè* and the symbolic meaning of the gourd: 1) “Does *Olódùmarè* have a mother? 2) Can the two halves of *Igbá*

*Ìwà* also double as a Mother-and-(male) Child?”<sup>170</sup> In one Yorùbá folk tradition, the name *Olódùmarè* has its origin in the title *Olodù-omo-erè*, or, more specifically, the word *Olódù*, which, according to the following *Ifá* divinatory verse (*ẹsẹ*), signifies “the child of a female python:”

Ahéré oko sí sùn ní mú òpòlò tó lú ní òru  
 A dá fun erè  
 Tí o nfi ekún se iráhùn omo  
 Nwón ní kí ó rúbo kí ó lè bí omo: ewúré kan, aso kǐjìpá ara rè, èjìlógún  
 O gbó, ó ru  
 Erè si lóyún, o si bí omo  
 Àwon ènià si bèrèsíí wipé ‘lódú ni omo tí erè bí yì’  
 Nígbà tí omo náà si dàgbà, ó si joba ní ojú iyá rè  
 Òun ni gbogbo ènià si npè ní Olódùmarè tí tí di òní.

‘When we sleep in the farm hut, frogs jump on us in the night’  
 was the one who cast *Ifá* [performed divination] for Python  
 when she was weeping and moaning for a child.  
 They say she should sacrifice one she-goat, the homespun cloth she was  
 wearing and eleven shillings so that she might be able to have a child.  
 She heard and made the sacrifice,  
 and Python became pregnant, and she gave birth to a child.  
 And people began to say: “One who has *Odù*” was this child that  
 Python bore.  
 And when the child grew up, she lived to see him become a king.  
 He is the one whom all people are calling “One who has *Odù*, child of  
 Python” (*Olódùmarè*) until this very day.<sup>171</sup>

*Ifá didá*, which is the practical system or “process” of divination associated with the above-cited verse, will receive more attention at later points in the chapter.<sup>172</sup> Of interest to us presently is the ontological and phenomenological significance of this verse vis-à-vis *Olódùmarè* and the additional trajectory of meaning the verse contributes to the wider tradition of Yorùbá originary narration.

Lawal seems to suggest that the python (*erè*)<sup>173</sup> mentioned in this verse may be the Yorùbá divinity known as *Òsùmàrè* (also *Èsùmàrè*).<sup>174</sup> *Òsùmàrè*’s primary symbol is the python, and it is believed that *Òsùmàrè* is visibly manifest in the world in the form of the

rainbow.<sup>175</sup> We should note as well that wealth and prosperity are also symbolically connected to *Òsùmàrè*.<sup>176</sup> The possibility of there being a strong ontological link between *Òsùmàrè* and *Olódùmarè* becomes more apparent upon considering an astute morphological observation made by Idòwú and Bamgboṣe regarding the linguistic construction of the appellations *Òsùmàrè* and *Olódùmarè*; namely, that the word *mare* (meaning that which is “immense” or “infinite”) is found in both appellations.<sup>177</sup> The cosmology articulated in the previously quoted verse presents a narrative wherein the very being of *Olódùmarè* appears to have its genesis in and spring forth from the creative power of *Ifá didá* physically working through Python.

From a phenomenological perspective, it is significant that this narrative ascribes to matter and the natural world major roles in the process of bringing *Olódùmarè* into being as the ruler of the cosmos; *Ifá didá* was *physically performed* on Python’s behalf; Python offers “one she-goat, a homespun cloth she was wearing, and eleven shillings” as *material* sacrifices (*ẹbọ*) with the expectation that these sacrifices will enable her to give birth. An important implication to consider here is that, within the framework of this originary folk narrative, *Olódùmarè*’s existence is possible only through an inseverable and generative relationship with the material world. It is in and through matter that *Olódùmarè*’s being acquires efficacy and therefore becomes meaningful in a spiritual and physical cosmos that places upon living creatures the unrelenting demand of regular *material engagement* of the various forms of creative power upon which existence itself depends. The instrumental role of *Ifá didá* in this narrative is highly instructive in that it helps us to begin to see how knowledge is created and structured within the Yorùbá cosmological tradition.

In other words, *Ifá didá* emerges in the narrative as a materially-rooted epistemological practice that opens up creative trajectories of meaning and possibility that contribute much to our understanding of human existence, the natural world, and the spiritual dimension. We might also assert that *Ifá didá* functions in this narrative as a “mystical technology” of matter that produces in Python a knowledge of herself as a being that gives birth to new life in the form of *Olódùmarè*. As a “mystical technology” of matter, *Ifá didá* also serves in the narrative as an epistemological catalyst that prompts a conceptualization – or reconceptualization – of *Olódùmarè* as a deity whose being can be interpreted within the framework of a materialist ontology that creatively interweaves the cosmological significance of the natural world with that of *Olódùmarè*. In this narrative verse, *Ifá didá* helps to enable the apperception of another level of symbolic meaning as it pertains to *Igbá Ìwà*; both halves together (Python and *Olódùmarè*) can be understood as a symbolic and efficacious representation of the relationship between a mother and her child. This maternal trajectory of meaning is buttressed by the Yorùbá folk belief that contained within the rainbow is an encrypted message from *Olódùmarè* to *Olódùmarè*'s mother, the python, who resides in lower *Òrun*.<sup>178</sup> The polyvalent representation of cosmic deities examined in the preceding discussion is also profoundly evident in other Yorùbá cultural traditions. One such tradition is reflected in the beliefs and religious symbolism of the *Ògbóni* society.

### **The *Ògbóni* Tradition**

The *Ògbóni* society (known as *Òsùgbò* by the *Ìjèbú* and *Ègbá* Yorùbá of southwestern Nigeria)<sup>179</sup> is one of the more recognizable cultural institutions in Yorùbáland. This cultural institution, which existed long before the rise of European colonialism in Nigeria,

has maintained a significant presence in many of the polities comprising Yorùbáland through the establishment of lodges known as *Ilédi* or *Ilé odì* (“the house of secrets”) and as *Ilé tí a di nkan sí* (“the house [or houses] of concealment”).<sup>180</sup> Historically, the *Ògbóni* society has exerted considerable social and political influence within Yorùbá communities, having operated under various circumstances in the past as a “town council, a civic court,” and as an “electoral college” in charge of overseeing the selection of a new king or facilitating the removal of a corrupt or unwanted king. In addition, the *Ògbóni* society set and enforced town curfews during periods of emergency and carried out the executions of those found guilty of severe communal offenses.<sup>181</sup> Importantly, the social power of the *Ògbóni* society is rooted in the religious belief that the society functions as an essential spiritual nexus between Yorùbá communities and the cosmic powers of the earth (*Ilẹ̀*) upon which the existence of these communities depends.<sup>182</sup>

In *Ògbóni* cosmology, earth (*Ilẹ̀*) is accorded the ontological status of a goddess figure or deity. The idea of *Ilẹ̀* is linked conceptually to the word *edan*, which in one sense signifies what is perhaps the primary emblem of *Ògbóni* membership (a pair of male and female brass statues whose heads are often connected with an iron chain), and in another sense signifies *Edan* the goddess, the deity who is believed to be both the “daughter” and “alter ego” of *Ilẹ̀* as well as the point of spiritual connection between *Ilẹ̀* and the *Ògbóni* society.<sup>183</sup> Thus the terms *Edan* and *Ilẹ̀* are sometimes used synonymously in reference to the earth which, interestingly enough, is itself regarded as an *Òrìṣà* by Yorùbá linguist and literary scholar Wándé Abimbólá.<sup>184</sup> For *Ògbóni* society members, *Ilẹ̀* is a focus of veneration. Babatunde Lawal writes that the *Ògbóni* society “venerates the earth (*Ilẹ̀*) to ensure human survival, peace, happiness, and social stability in the community.”<sup>185</sup> The

term *Ilẹ̀* generally connotes the idea of “female earth.” However, the meaning of *Ilẹ̀* is ultimately ambiguous, as suggested by the fact that altars honoring *Ilẹ̀* found in many *Ògbóni* lodges include two prominently displayed male and female statues referred to as *Onilé* (“Owner of the House) or *Onilẹ̀* (“Owner of the Earth”).<sup>186</sup>

The ambiguous meaning of *Ilẹ̀* has a material basis in the artistic rendering of the *Onilé* and *Onilẹ̀* statues as an “androgynous” pair representing male and female aspects of existence. As Lawal has noted, these two brass figures are indicative of a firm emphasis in *Ògbóni* religious symbolism upon the concept of male/female interconnectional dependence as well as the critical role of motherhood in the creation and development of life.<sup>187</sup> The androgynous conceptualization of *Ilẹ̀* in *Ògbóni* cosmology is further evidenced by the fact that *Ilẹ̀* is at times described as *Obìnrin b’Okúnrin* (“a manlike woman”).<sup>188</sup> *Ilẹ̀*’s androgynous construction in *Ògbóni* iconography brings into view the ambiguity that plays such a determinative role in shaping how *Ilẹ̀* is understood among the *Ògbóni*. One dimension of *Ilẹ̀*’s meaning is associated with the care and sustenance of humankind as seen, for example, in *Ilẹ̀*’s provision of agricultural largesse. This dimension of *Ilẹ̀* is expressed in the saying, *Ilẹ̀ Ògéré, a f’okó yeri* (“Earth, the mother goddess who adorns/combs her hair with a hoe”).<sup>189</sup>

Conversely, a second dimension of *Ilẹ̀*’s meaning is associated with dangerous caprice and the destruction of human life in the form of “environmental hazards” and natural disasters. Another saying describes *Ilẹ̀* as the *Alápò ikà, ari ikùn gbé èniyàn mì* (“Owner of a bagful of evil, with a stomach big enough to engulf human beings”).<sup>190</sup> *Ilẹ̀*’s sustaining benevolence then is counterbalanced by a fearsome and unpredictable will to

destroy, a will that often specifically targets immoral human beings. Concerning *Ilẹ̀*, Lawal explains that “She deals ruthlessly with liars and traitors but rewards the righteous.”<sup>191</sup> This multivalent rendering of *Ilẹ̀* elicits the following questions: How might we assess the significance of the *Ògbóni* conception of *Ilẹ̀* in relation to the Yorùbá originary narratives discussed earlier? What does this conception reveal about the structure of Yorùbá epistemology?

Readers will recall that the originary narratives treated previously in this chapter establish linkages between the purposeful activity of various *Òrìṣà* under the authority and direction of *Olódùmarè* and the creation of the terrestrial realm. The narratives also establish linkages between the coordinated activity of *Olódùmarè* and the *Òrìṣà* and the creation of human beings. Moreover, in addition to giving an account of *Olódùmarè*'s inception (recall the story of Python), the narratives also disclose the unpredictable, disputational, and even bellicose personality traits of the *Òrìṣà* (recall the element of caprice involved in *Obàtálá*'s molding of human forms, *Ilẹ̀*'s argument with *Olódùmarè* over the bush rat, and *Obàtálá*'s conflict with his younger brother *Odùduwà* regarding the creation of the earth). When assessed in relation to these narratives, the *Ògbóni* conception of *Ilẹ̀* takes on a particular significance. The *Ògbóni* conception of *Ilẹ̀* is significant in that, much like the other Yorùbá originary narratives explored in this chapter, this conception disabuses us of the notion that the cosmos and the place of human beings in it are best understood when restricted to a single trajectory of theorization and meaning. The *Ògbóni* conception of *Ilẹ̀* suggests that the greatest depths of human and spiritual meaning are tied to the reality of existential irreducibility. So just as *Olódùmarè* both orients and confounds our understanding of existence, *Obàtálá* forms

and deforms human bodies, and human beings cultivate and fracture their relationship with the natural world, so too does *Ilẹ̀* nurture and destroy human life. In making this claim, I am in no way suggesting that the meanings in these narratives and in the *Ògbóni* conception of *Ilẹ̀* are reducible to a rigid dualism. Instead, what I am suggesting is that Yorùbá cosmology produces an expansive constellation of meanings, meanings that function in different ways on multiple conceptual and theoretical levels.

The significance of the *Ògbóni* conception of *Ilẹ̀* is also found in the fact that it highlights the epistemological function of tension in Yorùbá originary narration. The *Ògbóni* conception of *Ilẹ̀* and the originary narratives we have discussed exemplify some of the ways in which meaning in the Yorùbá tradition often oscillates between opposing or dialectically conjoined concepts that find expression in Yorùbá cosmology. For instance, the fuller meaning of the deity *Ilẹ̀* is not generated solely by her role as sustainer or her role as destroyer, nor is this deity's meaning restricted to her maleness alone or to her femaleness alone. Rather, *Ilẹ̀*'s fuller meaning is generated by the *conceptual and theoretical interplay* resulting from the combination of the notions of sustenance and destruction as well as maleness and femaleness as structural components that help form the idea of *Ilẹ̀*.<sup>192</sup>

Similarly, meanings associated with other deities as well as human beings in Yorùbá originary narratives also tend in some cases to be characterized by a tensive interplay of ideas. We have seen this, for example, in the narrative portrayal of *Ọ̀bàtálá* as the “sculptor divinity” who, while being known for his natural inclination toward “peace, order, and clean living,” also exhibits a capricious creativity in his work of molding human forms. The tensive or dialectical construction of meaning in Yorùbá originary

narration is also evident in the portrayal of human beings both as violators of their sacred covenant with the natural world and as a community that, despite the covenantal violation, strives to honor the broken covenant by according to the natural world a sacred status *within* the human community.<sup>193</sup> Readers should call to memory an earlier discussion in which we pointed out the fact that the *Ifá* literary corpus itself names the *igún* (vulture), the *agbe* (blue turacoo), the *àlùkò* (red feathered turacoo), the *èèsún* (giant grass of the forest), and the *mèrùwà* (giant grass of the savanna) as priests of *Ifá*. We also noted that the *Irínmòdò*, which is a large river basin tree, is regarded as the wife of *Òrúnmilà*, one of the most important Yorùbá deities. The way in which meaning is conveyed in the originary narratives involving *Ọbàtálá* and the human community is instructive in that it hastens an awareness of the *Ọgbóni* conception of *Ilẹ̀* as a conception that provides insight into Yorùbá religious belief *as an epistemological mode of thought* with its own structural integrity. We therefore must inquire as to what this conception reveals about the structure of Yorùbá epistemology.

Close analysis of Yorùbá originary narratives and the *Ọgbóni* conception of *Ilẹ̀* makes possible the discernment of a distinct pattern of thought within Yorùbá religio-philosophical culture that bears heavily on our understanding of the structure of Yorùbá epistemology. What such analysis reveals in particular with respect to this structure is the presence of a logic of oppositional/dialectical variation and conceptual irreducibility. Let me be clear: I am not implying that this logic encompasses the full range of Yorùbá thought, or that the myriad complexities of Yorùbá thought are reducible to this logic. What I am arguing though is that this logic of oppositional/dialectical variation and conceptual irreducibility is an important component of the theoretical structure of Yorùbá

epistemology and, as such, gives us a clue as to how meaning is often constructed within the Yorùbá religio-philosophical tradition.

The construction of meaning in Yorùbá epistemology is frequently rooted in the interaction of antagonistically-related concepts; the relationship between the concepts of sustenance and destruction in the articulation of the *Ògbóni* conception of *Ilẹ̀* represents one such interaction. In light of Oyèrónké Oyěwùmí's groundbreaking study of traditional Òyó society in pre-colonial Yorùbáland, which cogently demonstrates not only that the category of "gender" itself did not exist in traditional Òyó society, but also that "relative age" or seniority together with lineage association formed the basis of social organization among the Òyó-Yorùbá,<sup>194</sup> I hesitate to describe the ideas of maleness and femaleness in the *Ògbóni* conception of *Ilẹ̀* as antagonistic. However, it does seem safe to say that maleness and femaleness in Yorùbá epistemology are not reducible to one another. Also, it is fairly apparent that the meanings of maleness and femaleness in *Ògbóni* cosmology are *mutually constructed* such that maleness is conceptually tied to femaleness, just as femaleness is conceptually tied to maleness. The oppositional/dialectical logic and conceptual irreducibility we have identified in our analysis of Yorùbá epistemology as articulated somewhat implicitly in Yorùbá originary narratives and more directly in the *Ògbóni* conception of *Ilẹ̀* indicates that dynamism – as opposed to dogmatism – functions as a governing principle of meaning construction in Yorùbá thought. Hence, within the framework of Yorùbá epistemology, human knowledge is birthed not through the ossification of concepts but through the relational creation and evolution of concepts.

Some aspects of Yorùbá cosmology discussed above require more detailed attention given their tremendous relevance to our understanding of Yorùbá epistemology. Three of these aspects are the deities *Olódùmarè*, *Èṣù* and *Ifá* (the last two of which are especially powerful *Òrìṣà*). The fourth aspect is ritual engagement. The foregoing analysis of Yorùbá originary narratives establishes a framework wherein we can think critically about these four aspects as components of a distinct epistemology that philosophically undergirds the Yorùbá “world-sense.” Moreover, as will be demonstrated in later chapters, the foregoing analysis also helps position us to think constructively about the relevance of Yorùbá epistemology to African-American religious hermeneutics. An important goal of the phenomenological analysis to follow is to enlarge upon the preceding exploration in a way that gives further cultural grounding to the constructive perspective on Yorùbá epistemology being developed.

### ***Olódùmarè, Èṣù, and Ifá***

#### *Olódùmarè*

We have noted *Olódùmarè*'s positionality at the very top of the Yorùbá communal order of being. By virtue of *Olódùmarè*'s apical position in this communal order, *Olódùmarè* represents the primordial or ultimate matrix of existence in Yorùbá epistemology. As such, the scope of *Olódùmarè*'s power within the spiritual abode (*Òrun*) is unsurpassed. However, it is important to recognize that, in Yorùbá belief, *Olódùmarè*'s singular power is understood largely in political and administrative terms. Said another way, *Olódùmarè* is conceptualized in Yorùbá cosmology as a kind of Prime Minister who delegates the power necessary to create and sustain the entire universe. Thus, *Olódùmarè*'s power is very much rooted in a notion of political and administrative

*authority*. For this reason, *Olódùmarè* is also referred to as *Alase* (“the supreme authority”).<sup>195</sup> Yet, one must exercise caution in utilizing the idea of supremacy to interpret the cosmological meaning and significance of *Olódùmarè*. This is necessary because recent scholarship has convincingly shown that *Olódùmarè*'s authority is not a gendered authority, as some studies suggest, and also that *Olódùmarè* is not a “Supreme Being,” if what is meant by “Supreme Being” is an entity that is both omniscient and omnipotent.

*Ifá*, the primary sacred oral text of the Yorùbá religious tradition as it exists in Nigeria and other parts of West Africa, depicts *Olódùmarè* as a non-gendered, purely spiritual being. Kólá Abímbólá explains that “*Ifá* does not make use of any genderised [sic] personal pronoun to refer to the High ‘Deity.’ So in reality, *Olódùmarè* is neither male nor female.”<sup>196</sup> The non-gendered portrayal of *Olódùmarè* in the *Ifá* literary corpus as a wholly spiritual being further distinguishes *Olódùmarè* from all the other divinities that comprise the Yorùbá pantheon. Distinguishing *Olódùmarè* all the more is the fact that *Olódùmarè*'s (“*Its*”) position in the communal order of being is such that *Olódùmarè* cannot be the subject of any form of ritual veneration or material representation.

Abímbólá stresses this point in commenting that

. . . all over the Yorùbá Diaspora, *Olódùmarè* has no priests of ITS own, has no liturgy, nor any iconography. *Olódùmarè* has no temples or shrines. Sacrifices are never offered to *Olódùmarè*. Simply put, for all practitioners of Yorùbá Religion in Africa and its Diaspora, *Olódùmarè* is believed to be too mighty to be captured by any anthropomorphic, artistic, literary, or iconographic representation.<sup>197</sup>

This belief in the utterly singular ontological status of *Olódùmarè* and in the extensity of *Olódùmarè*'s power gives rise to the Yorùbá saying, *Ta ní le Olódùmarè lẹbọ?* (“Who dares give sacrifices to *Olódùmarè*?”).<sup>198</sup> The belief that *Olódùmarè* cannot be directly

propitiated through sacrificial worship reflects a closely related epistemological belief in the inscrutable nature of *Olódùmarè's* will as it is manifest and experienced in the world. The Yorùbá acknowledge that the fulfillment of *Olódùmarè's* will in the world sometimes involves violence, contradiction, unpredictable flux, and mystery, and that sacrificial engagement with the *Òrìṣà* is an essential means of trying to successfully manage this existential condition. The inscrutable reality of *Olódùmarè's* will and its manifestation in the world prompts the Yorùbá to declare, *Ìsé Olódùmarè, Àwámáridí* (“*Olódùmarè's* action is unfathomable”).<sup>199</sup> Therefore, we can plausibly assert that, from the perspective of Yorùbá epistemology, *Olódùmarè* is that reality which determines the boundaries of human knowledge. Yet, this singular epistemological status does not consign *Olódùmarè* to an isolated existence. As is true of all other deities in the Yorùbá pantheon, *Olódùmarè's* existence is very much a communal existence.

Abimbólá observes that, according to the *Ifá* literary corpus, *Olódùmarè's* existence is rooted in and indeed becomes meaningful within the context of the spiritual community of *Òrun*. *Olódùmarè's* being does not supersede *Òrun*, as interpretations that emphasize *Olódùmarè's* role as the Yorùbá High Deity often suggest. *Olódùmarè's* ontic rootedness in *Òrun* becomes apparent upon considering Abimbólá's point that “three other divinities (i.e., *Obàtálá*, *Èṣù*, and *Ifá*) have always co-existed with *Olódùmarè*. These three divinities have existed for as long as *Olódùmarè*, and *Olódùmarè* did not create them.”<sup>200</sup> Furthermore, *Olódùmarè's* active presence within the spiritual community of *Òrun* is also a practical necessity; *Olódùmarè* does not have full knowledge of all things. Hence we find in Yorùbá religious philosophy the belief that *Olódùmarè* routinely seeks counsel from *Òrúnmilà* (the “god of knowledge and wisdom”).<sup>201</sup> We must also remember that,

while it was *Olódùmarè*'s will that set in motion the creation of the world, the actual process of bringing the world into existence was a highly collaborative process that involved several *Òrìṣà*.<sup>202</sup> As perhaps the most profound spiritual expression both of the limits of knowledge and of the shared nature of knowledge, the example of *Olódùmarè* helps us to realize that in Yorùbá epistemology knowledge is understood as a fundamentally communal phenomenon whose transmission and material actualization are dependent upon active relationships between deities in *Òrun* and material beings on earth. The relational character of knowledge as understood in Yorùbá epistemology is also meaningfully and uniquely expressed in *Èṣù* (*Echu*, *Èlẹgbára*),<sup>203</sup> who is one of the most significant and powerful *Òrìṣà*, and who works closely with *Olódùmarè* in the management of the cosmos.

### *Èṣù*

As indicated above, *Èṣù* occupies an elite position in the Yorùbá order of being, having always existed alongside *Ọbàtálá*, *Ifá*, and *Olódùmarè*. Frequently referred to as the “trickster divinity,”<sup>204</sup> *Èṣù* serves as the sole intermediary between the *Òrìṣà* (“benevolent” powers) and the *Ajogun* (“malevolent” powers). *Èṣù*'s reputation as a “trickster divinity” is connected to his role as the holder of *Àṣẹ* (*Àṣẹ Èṣù*, *Àṣẹ Echu*), the power that enables him to unpredictably take on a seemingly infinite variety of forms across any number of contexts. Through the utilization of *Àṣẹ*, *Èṣù* “frequently turns himself into wind whenever he wants to travel.”<sup>205</sup> The Yorùbá also believe that

Each *Odù* of *Ifá* is governed by one particular aspect of *Èṣù*. Each *Òrìṣà* also has a particular form of *Èṣù* related to him or her. There is an *Èṣù* who walks with *Ògún*, whereas a different one walks with *Ọbàtálá*. *Èṣù* traverses very many terrestrial and heavenly spheres of existence. Some types of *Èṣù* dwell in the house, some dwell in the bush, some dwell on crossroads, whereas some dwell inside water. *Èṣù* is so vast in kind, number and function that it is very difficult to capture all his different

manifestations in any one artistic representation. If you see him in the morning he might be a dwarf, and when you see him in the afternoon he might be a giant.<sup>206</sup>

Of special significance here is the notion that *Èṣù*'s being multifariously participates in nearly every facet of existence; our experience of *Èṣù* shifts considerably from moment to moment and within different contexts, and is therefore an experience marked by dynamism and unpredictability. As suggested at the end of our previous discussion of *Olódùmarè*, *Èṣù* underscores the importance of relationality in Yorùbá epistemology; knowledge of *Èṣù* stems from how his being is expressed *in relationship* to other beings or contexts. *Èṣù*'s protean ability to negotiate the complex and incessant conflicts between the *Òrìṣà* and the *Ajogun* positions him as a divinity to which all practitioners of Yorùbá religion must offer supplication and sacrifice.

*Èṣù*'s power and importance are such that he is always the first *Òrìṣà* to be “saluted” on ceremonial occasions in Yorùbáland. His salute is *Láaróyè!*<sup>207</sup> Yorùbá belief holds that the practice of offering *ẹbọ* to *Èṣù* is essential for human survival and well-being. This is so because, in addition to functioning as an intermediary between the *Òrìṣà* and the *Ajogun*, *Èṣù* is also a “master” of the *Ajogun*. *Èṣù*'s role as “master” of the *Ajogun* is made apparent in the following *Ifá* verse: “Iku, Arun, Ofo, Egba, Oran, Epe, Ewon, Ese, Omo, odo, Èṣù ni won (Death, Disease, Loss, Paralysis, Big Trouble, Curse, Imprisonment, Affliction, they are all errand boys of *Èṣù*).”<sup>208</sup> Each of the eight “errand boys” mentioned in the *Ifá* verse just referenced is a type of *Ajogun*. Although *Èṣù* is a “master” of the *Ajogun*, the efficacy of his work as an intermediary between the *Òrìṣà* and the *Ajogun* nevertheless depends upon the proper performance of *ẹbọ*.<sup>209</sup> Writing about the centrality of *ẹbọ* in *Èṣù*'s mediational work, one scholar states that

When one offers a sacrifice to any *Òrìṣà*, the sacrifice will be communicated by one's

*Ori* (spiritual or inner head) to the *Òrìṣà* in the spiritual realm. The sacrifice will eventually be presented to *Èṣù* who will in turn communicate one's wishes to *Olódùmarè* so that one's prayers or desires may be accepted or come to pass. In the case of a negative force generated by one of the evil supernatural powers, *Èṣù* will present the sacrifice to the *Ajogun* responsible for the affliction or evil concerned. As soon as the sacrifice is accepted by the *Ajogun*, he (the *Ajogun* concerned) will leave the victim alone or let him off the hook. A balance or reparation will then be restored in the life of the individual, family, or community concerned. *The important point to remember is that the individual must first of all perform sacrifice, otherwise Èṣù cannot perform his mediating role* (emphasis added). This is the import of the statement often found in *Ifá* verse:

Eni o rubo  
Ni Èṣù u gbe  
("It is the person who performs sacrifice who receives the support of Èṣù").<sup>210</sup>

We can see that the sacred text of *Ifá* is unambiguous about the singular importance of *ẹbọ* for *Èṣù*'s "supportive" role as cosmic intermediary, and that it is possible for instability, conflict, human suffering, and other problems to be resolved through the intervention of *Èṣù*. However, we must not lose sight of Wándé Abímbólá's earlier-noted point that conflict, *not* resolution, is a "permanent" structural "feature" of the cosmos. Thus any resolution, balance, or condition of peace resulting from the offering of *ẹbọ* and the efforts of *Èṣù* can only be temporary.

Furthermore, it is important to recognize that the structural reach of conflict as a cosmic reality extends even to the "benevolent" domain of the *Òrìṣà*, who "usually have no protection for any human being who does not offer sacrifice," and who "may fight a human being who . . . prevents or corrupts the ethics, norms, or taboos of society."<sup>211</sup>

What this indicates to us is that *Èṣù* has the daunting task of managing the human domain, the domain of the *Òrìṣà*, and the domain of the *Ajogun*, all of which are permeated on a structural level by conflict. *Èṣù*'s interventional activity makes possible the mitigation of existential conflict and its potentially dangerous consequences.

Therefore, the offering of *ẹbọ* to *Èṣù* by humans should not be understood as a practice reserved only for times of crisis but rather as a *way of life* that acknowledges the tensive structure of existence while promoting human flourishing. Said otherwise, the offering of sacrifices to *Èṣù* – be they “he-goats, roosters, alcohol, or honey” – aligns (or re-aligns) a person with the spiritual world (*Òrun*) such that he or she has a better chance of successfully negotiating the inevitable vicissitudes of life.<sup>212</sup> The Yorùbá believe that, in addition to the essential service provided by *Èṣù* with the assistance of *ẹbọ*, knowledge also plays a major role in human well-being. Hence we now turn our attention to *Èṣù*'s closest colleague *Ifá*, the *Òrìṣà* of “wisdom and intellectual development.”<sup>213</sup>

### *Ifá*

In Yorùbá culture, the term *Ifá* is constituted polyvalently: *Ifá* refers not only to a divinity who is sometimes called *Òrúnmilà* or *Orunla*, but also to 1) a divination system (*Ifá didá*) 2) a sacred “body of knowledge” known as the *Ifá* literary corpus, 3) a particular poem (*fá*) from any of the “books” that make up the corpus, 4) medicinal “herbal mixtures” or “talismans” “prepared” by traditional Yorùbá healers or other religious specialists, and 5) poetic “incantations” that are believed to bring into existence that which the incantations themselves claim will occur.<sup>214</sup> Our focus here, however, is on *Ifá* the divinity. As stated above, *Ifá*, like *Èṣù* and *Ọbàtálá*, has always been co-existent with *Olódùmarè*. In one respect, *Ifá* is especially unique among the *Òrìṣà* because, according to the Yorùbá cosmological tradition, *Ifá* was the only *Òrìṣà* present during the creation of the world. He therefore carries the title of *Elerii-ipin*, which means “witness at creation.”<sup>215</sup> *Ifá* is also believed to know “the secret of creation” as well as “the hidden identities of all terrestrial and celestial beings.” Additionally, he is said to

hold “the key to the store of infinite wisdom and knowledge.”<sup>216</sup> Thus *Ifá* also bears the title of *Agiri-ile-ilogbon* (“The clever one who hails from the house of wisdom”).<sup>217</sup>

Other similar praise titles of *Ifá* include *Akééré-f’inú-şogbón* (“The small person with a mind full of wisdom”) and *Akóni-lóràn-bí-íyekan-èni* (He who gives one wise advice like one’s relative”).<sup>218</sup>

Some may assume that the other dimension of *Ifá*’s uniqueness as a Yorùbá deity lies merely in the fact that he has his own divination system. However, such an assumption would be misleading because at least three other popular *Òrìşà* – *Şàngó*, *Òrìşàńlá*, and *Òşanyin* – have their own distinct systems of divination, each of which is acknowledged within the Yorùbá religious tradition.<sup>219</sup> The other dimension of *Ifá*’s uniqueness has more to do with the kind of knowledge and wisdom his divination system makes available to the Yorùbá people. Consider the following assessment of *Ifá*’s significance in Yorùbá religious culture:

Without *Ifá*, the importance of the other Yorùbá gods would diminish. If a man is being punished by the other gods, he can only know this by consulting *Ifá*. If a community is to make sacrifice to one of its gods, it can only know this by consulting *Ifá*. So that in this way, *Ifá* is the only active mouthpiece of Yorùbá traditional religion taken as a whole. As a mouthpiece, *Ifá* serves to popularize the other Yorùbá gods; he serves to immortalize them.

With his great wisdom, knowledge and understanding, *Ifá* co-ordinates the work of all the gods in the Yorùbá pantheon. He serves as a ‘middleman’ between the other gods and the people, and between the people and their ancestors.<sup>220</sup>

*Ifá* makes possible communication between the Yorùbá people and the *Òrìşà*. Moreover, *Ifá* also makes possible the acquisition of sacred knowledge that empowers individuals and communities with a deeper understanding of how to best negotiate the challenges and crises that life visits upon them.<sup>221</sup> Interestingly, *Ifá* and *Èşù* sometimes work in concert to carry out the duties of their respective stations. For instance, despite the fact that *Èşù*

at times sets out to “tempt” *Ifá*, *Ifá* occasionally “borrows” the “special” *Aṣẹ* of *Èṣù* when wind-based travel is required or preferred by *Ifá* in the execution of his role.<sup>222</sup>

Furthermore, when sacrifices are offered to other Yorùbá deities via *Ifá*, a substantial allotment of these sacrifices is given directly to *Èṣù*.<sup>223</sup> *Ifá* clearly shares with *Èṣù* a somewhat managerial, highly knowledge-oriented function in the Yorùbá spiritual community.

Two other points require emphasis: 1) As opposed to being limited solely to the present, *Ifá*'s wisdom is relevant to the past, present, and future; 2) *Ifá didá*, which, as we have discussed, is a name given to the divination system bequeathed to the Yorùbá people by the divinity *Ifá*, is a primary epistemological source that acts as a *daily* guide in the lives of the Yorùbá people. The fact that *Ifá*'s wisdom relates to time is instructive with respect to our understanding of Yorùbá epistemology. The belief among the Yorùbá that *Ifá*'s wisdom reaches back to the past and forward to the future while simultaneously enlarging our understanding of the present does not mean that *Ifá* provides a complete knowledge of all things.<sup>224</sup> *Ifá* always retains his status as holder of “the secret of creation,” and as he who knows “the hidden identities of all terrestrial and celestial beings.” *Ifá*'s position as “the key to the store of infinite wisdom and knowledge” is never in question. This being the case, knowledge in Yorùbá society is always imbued with a sense of mystery.<sup>225</sup> Yet, the presence of the three dimensions of time as important elements in the wisdom of *Ifá* means that the processes of knowledge production and acquisition in Yorùbá society are not understood as ahistorical processes. While unquestionably infused with spiritual meaning, the knowledge of *Ifá* is nonetheless profoundly entwined with matter inasmuch as it takes seriously the historical and

existential realities and possibilities of the past, present, and future. The wisdom of *Ifá* is one major cultural resource that enables the Yorùbá people to understand themselves as historical beings who possess a knowledge of the world that is keenly attuned to the unpredictable power of matter. This keen awareness of the nature of matter engenders among the Yorùbá a strong belief in the need for regular communication with the spirit world through divination.

*Ifá didá*, the divinatory tradition originally established by *Ifá* himself, is not regarded by the Yorùbá as a tradition whose usefulness is limited to times of personal or communal crisis. As a counter to this notion, I would suggest that *Ifá didá* is a formative component of the Yorùbá “world-sense.” *Ifá didá* serves as what can be called a *grammar of knowing* that spiritually, historically, and practically renders the complexity of human experience more intelligible, thereby placing human beings in a better position to successfully negotiate this complexity. *Ifá didá* is a foundational and pervasive matrix of both *gnosis* and practical understanding. The following *Ifá* poem suggests the indispensable role of *Ifá didá* in the everyday lives of the Yorùbá people:

Ifá ló l’òni,  
 Ifá ló l’òla,  
 Ifá ló l’òtunla pèlu è.  
 Òrúnmilà ló n’ijó méréèrìn Òòsá d’ááyé.

(“Ifá is the master of today,  
 Ifá is the master of tomorrow;  
 Ifá is the master of the day after tomorrow.  
 To Ifá belongs all the four days  
 established by Òòsá on earth).<sup>226</sup>

The diviners who are trained on various levels in the mysteries of *Ifá didá* and in its technical application on behalf of the Yorùbá people are known as *Babaláwo* (male diviners) or *Ìyánifá* (female diviners).<sup>227</sup> *Ifá didá* is very much a fixture in the lives of the

Yorùbá people, so much so that “From birth to death, a person goes to a diviner at every turn in his or her life.”<sup>228</sup> To the extent that failure to seek the wisdom of *Ifá* and to regularly offer all required *ẹbọ* can lead to needless suffering and maybe even premature death, *Ifá didá* functions as an epistemological practice whose principal aim is to spiritually discern and share the knowledge necessary to maintain and promote the continual development of human life.<sup>229</sup> As a prime source of religious meaning and structure, *Ifá didá* is a cornerstone of Yorùbá society. A fervent belief in and reliance upon *Ifá didá* lends power to the ceremonial salute to the *Òrìṣà Ifá* which announces, *Àbọrú bọyè!* (“May your sacrifice be accepted and blessed!”). Sacrifices to *Ifá*, which may include “dark she-goats, hens, pigeons, palm oil, honey” or “*ọ̀bẹ̀ irú* (locust bean sauce cooked in palm oil),” are made in this spirit of fervent belief in and devotion to *Ifá* and his great wisdom.<sup>230</sup>

Our discussion of *Olódùmarè*, *Èṣù*, and *Ifá* further develops a conceptual framework that now allows us to explore Yorùbá epistemology as encoded within a particular ritual setting. The setting upon which we will focus is that of the *Yemoja* festival. The *Yemoja* festival is a four-day communal ritual typically conducted annually in the town of Ayede during the latter part of August and the beginning of September, shortly before the second yearly cassava and yam harvest.<sup>231</sup> This festival represents an important event in the lives of the people of Ayede. For it is believed that the festival serves as a means of spiritually facilitating the social cohesion and general well-being of the community.<sup>232</sup>

### **A Contextual Note**

Before moving to our discussion of the Ayede *Yemoja* festival, it is necessary to clarify the context and aim of the discussion. While the phenomenological analysis that appears later in this phase of the chapter is entirely my own, the detailed account of the Ayede *Yemoja* festival found immediately below has been adapted from an ethnographic study originally conducted by noted cultural anthropologist Andrew Apter in the early 1980s. It is important to state openly that the analysis and theorization that follows is based on extensive data provided in Apter's account of an Ayede *Yemoja* festival that occurred in the town of Ayede at a particular time in history. Apter's account appears in his book entitled *Black Critics and Kings: The Hermeneutics of Power in Yorùbá Society*. Some may question the legitimacy of insights drawn from such a highly localized account. However, it seems to me that such questioning would be most valid in cases where the author of said insights insisted on the insights having very broad relevance and applicability.

I do *not* assume or insist that the insights arising from my analysis of the Ayede *Yemoja* festival are generally relevant to Yorùbá culture more broadly or to other interpretations of Yorùbá cultural traditions. My goal in sharing these insights is simply to call attention to some of the ways in which certain aspects of the Ayede *Yemoja* festival can shed further light on the intricacies of Yorùbá epistemology. Moreover, the analysis I offer is intended to aid readers in perceiving how Yorùbá epistemology may be understood as a conceptual framework that can yield dynamic, spiritually-based interpretations of human existence and experience. Put differently, my analysis of the

Ayede *Yemoja* festival is best understood as a provisional and constructive analysis rather than as a definitive analysis.

### **The *Yemoja* Festival**

The *Yemoja* festival invokes the fecund power of the female *Òrìṣà* known as *Yemoja*. In contemporary Nigeria, the presence of *Yemoja* is said to be manifest in the *Òògùn* river which begins near the southwestern town of *Ìgbòhò* and terminates in the Lagos lagoon (*Òṣà*). While the association of *Yemoja* with a flowing river certainly suggests the ideas of fertility and life, her original name, *Ómújélèwù* (“person whose breast is longer than her garment”), is perhaps more suggestive of these ideas.<sup>233</sup> In Yorùbá cosmology, *Yemoja* functions as one of the most prominent symbols of the life-giving and life-sustaining aspect of female power, and as such very much represents the idea of motherhood.<sup>234</sup> *Yemoja* is also related to many *Òrìṣà* in ways that sometimes vary from one Yorùbá community to the next. For example, in Ayede, the *Òrìṣà Oko* is believed to be the husband of *Yemoja*, and *Ògún* and *Ṣàngó* are her sons.<sup>235</sup> However, as Cornelius Adepegba observes, *Yemoja* is understood by other Yorùbá communities to be the *wife* of *Ṣàngó*.<sup>236</sup> Additionally, *Yemoja* is related to several other *Òrìṣà* as well “either as their biological or patron mother.”<sup>237</sup> *Yemoja*'s ceremonial salute is *Odò!* Her preferred sacrifices include female goats, chickens, ducks, pigeons, and vegetables cooked with a large portion of onions.<sup>238</sup> The veneration of *Yemoja* is clearly a major part of the socio-cultural fabric of, for instance, the city of Abèòkúta, which is the capital of the Nigerian state of *Ògún*.<sup>239</sup> The examination to follow will show that the veneration of *Yemoja* is also a major part of the socio-cultural fabric of the smaller Yorùbá town of Ayede, which is located in the polity of Ekiti.

Structurally, the particular *Yemoja* festival held in Ayede can be divided into two main phases: 1) *ẹbọ ọba* (the “ruler’s sacrifice”) and 2) *ijó iponmi* (“day of carrying water”).<sup>240</sup> Each phase of the festival is conditioned by a firmly entrenched cultural belief in the ubiquity of volatile spiritual power in the world. It has been suggested at multiple points throughout this chapter that the Yorùbá understand the cosmos to be infused at all levels with spiritual power that is potentially beneficial or deadly. In Yorùbá thought, the existential mandate for human beings is not to retreat from or ignore this power, but rather to engage and carefully utilize it for life-promoting purposes. The *Yemoja* festival in Ayede is without question consistent with this existential mandate. The purpose of the Ayede *Yemoja* festival lies in harnessing and managing spiritual power in order to “replenish the body politic with fertile women, abundant crops,” and a ruler (*Àtá*) that is “strong” and “healthy.”<sup>241</sup>

#### *Ẹbọ Ọba* (“the ruler’s sacrifice”)

*Ẹbọ ọba* marks the beginning of the *Yemoja* festival in Ayede. In this phase of the festival, the ruler of Ayede (*Àtá*) supplies a ram that is later ritually sacrificed as a means of gaining the support and “protection” of *Yemoja*. *Ẹbọ ọba* is made at a forest shrine dedicated to *Yemoja* (*igbó Yemoja*). Devotees believe that *Yemoja* lives in “sacred water” (*omi ọsọpọrò*) housed at this shrine.<sup>242</sup> Before the *Àtá*’s *ẹbọ* is offered to *Yemoja* by a group of trained female diviners (*Ìyálòrìṣà*), *ẹbọ* is first offered to *Èṣù*, as is customary in all Yorùbá festivals. The *Ìyálòrìṣà* request the assistance of *Èṣù* by making an offering of pounded yam and red palm oil at his forest shrine, which in this case is a rock.<sup>243</sup> These offerings are made to *Èṣù* in hopes that he will use his unpredictable and potentially destructive power in a supportive manner, thereby increasing the likelihood that the *Àtá*’s

*ẹbọ* to *Yemoja* will be efficacious for the *Àtá* as well as the town of Ayede.<sup>244</sup> The following prayer is uttered while *ẹbọ* is being offered to *Èṣù*:

*Èṣù Láàró,*  
*B'ílẹ̀ yẹ̀ yẹ̀ yẹ̀ bí ilé ẹ̀iyẹ̀,*  
*Èniyàn ní gún'yán,*  
*Wọ̀n ò gejìgbo nílẹ̀ Látọ̀ọpa,*  
*Láàró jẹ̀ bọ̀ òfín,*  
*Jé'rù ó da,*  
*Ẹ̀ kú ọ̀dún o,*  
*Ẹ̀ mò kú àṣẹ̀yẹ̀.*

(“*Èṣù Láàró,*  
 one whose houses are here and there like bird nests,  
 people pounding yam,  
 they do not pound cooked corn in Latoopa’s house,  
 Laaro please let the sacrifice be acceptable,  
 let the offerings find favor,  
 greetings for the festival,  
 greetings for the festivities”).<sup>245</sup>

Once the *ẹbọ* to *Èṣù* is complete, a female *Ṣàngó* diviner (*Ìyá Ṣàngó*)<sup>246</sup> gathers with older *Ìyálòrìṣà* and devotees at *Yemoja*’s forest shrine. The group then collectively invokes *Yemoja* in anticipation of the *ẹbọ ọba*. This collective invocation consists of many offerings, praise chants, and prayers, during which *Yemoja* is referred to as *eléti wéyẹwéyẹ ọde ọrun* (“owner of so many ears in the sky”).<sup>247</sup> *Yemoja* is addressed in this way because she hears and understands the numerous voices comprising this collective invocation.<sup>248</sup> The invocation of *Yemoja* precedes the arrival of the *Àtá*, who travels from Ayede to *Yemoja*’s forest shrine.

The *Àtá* arrives at *Yemoja*’s forest shrine with an extensive retinue made up of “*Yemoja* drummers and palace retainers.” Among the retainers are a “messenger, several sons . . . and several wives” of the *Àtá*. The ram which is to be sacrificed to *Yemoja* is brought by one of the *Àtá*’s sons, and a larger unworn crown (the *Olókun* crown) is taken

to the shrine on a tray placed atop the head of one of the *Àtá*'s younger wives. The *Àtá* wears a much smaller “cap”-like crown rather than the larger *Olókun* crown because it is believed that the larger crown is “too powerful and would kill him.”<sup>249</sup> The *Àtá*'s arrival at *Yemoja*'s forest shrine is announced by drumming and praise chants uttered by the assembled diviners. The diviners acknowledge and celebrate the *Àtá*'s provision of the required sacrificial ram. The diviners also pray in an effort to ensure a good life and good health for the *Àtá*, the longevity of the *Àtá*'s career as ruler, and *Yemoja*'s “protection.”<sup>250</sup>

After the *Àtá*'s arrival, the ram is presented by one of the *Àtá*'s sons and is then sacrificed to *Yemoja*. As the ram's blood drains into a cavernous hole inside *Yemoja*'s forest shrine, an ancestral chant known as *ègún pípè* is sung by a priestess who lyrically declares,

Jogun-oşó n̄ m̀ ọ́n j'ẹran,  
 Èjẹ n̄ s̄an gbuuru o òòò,  
 M̀ ọ́n mu'tí àìdà-àìro,  
 È ẹ Yèyè, l'ọfẹ.  
 Olárínóyè n̄ mu'tí àìdà-àìro,  
 È ẹ Yèyè, l'ọfẹ . . . .

(“One who inherits [extraordinary power] is eating meat,  
 [and] blood is flowing profusely,  
 keep drinking the [hot] wine not-tapped-not-trickling,  
 thank you Mother, rise up without mishap.  
 Olárínóyè is drinking the [hot] wine not-tapped-not-trickling,  
 thank you Mother, rise up without mishap . . . .”).<sup>251</sup>

The ram's blood is collectively imbibed by *Yemoja*, a host of associated *Òrìşà*, and “the ancestral spirits of past devotees.”<sup>252</sup> The head of the ram is then cut off, after which the head is thrice raised skyward. Next, in order to determine whether or not *ẹbọ ọba* has been accepted by the spiritual beings present, a more experienced priestess performs

divination using kola nuts provided by the *Àtá*. If the priestess finds that *ẹbọ ọba* has been accepted, then the *Àtá* can be assured that he has gained the favor and protection of *Yemoja* for the upcoming year. As a somewhat celebratory way of acknowledging the acceptance of *ẹbọ ọba* by *Yemoja* and her *Òrìṣà*, assembled shrine devotees proclaim, “*Yemoja oo! Omi [Water] oo!*”<sup>253</sup> With *ẹbọ ọba* having been successfully completed, preparations are now made for *ijó iponmi* (“day of carrying water”), the festival’s second phase.

*Ijó Iponmi* (“the day of carrying water”)

We noted above that one of the main goals of *ẹbọ ọba* is to invoke the power of *Yemoja* on behalf of the *Àtá* of Ayede. The ritual of *ijó iponmi*, which occurs on the fourth and final day of the festival, involves physically transporting *Yemoja*’s power into the very center of the town of Ayede and then bestowing her power upon the *Àtá*, thus renewing the *Àtá*’s power as ruler for another year as well as the social cohesion and well-being of the wider Ayede community. *Yemoja*’s power, or at least some of it, is harnessed inside her calabash (*igbá Yemoja*) which is taken from her forest shrine into Ayede by the head *Yemoja* diviner (*Yèyéolókun*).<sup>254</sup> While being spiritually “climbed” by *Yemoja*, the *Yèyéolókun* walks from *Yemoja*’s forest shrine back into Ayede while balancing *igbá Yemoja* atop her head, which has been medicinally treated by other *Ìyálòrìṣà* so that it can better withstand the tremendous weight of *igbá Yemoja*.<sup>255</sup> The power contained within *igbá Yemoja* is extremely volatile and hence potentially destructive, and *igbá Yemoja* is itself so laden with this power that even all of the hunters in Ayede working in concert would be unable to move it. It is imperative that *igbá Yemoja* remains intact during transport because were it to be accidentally dropped and

broken, the *Yèyéolókun* would perish and the entire town of Ayede would be gravely imperiled.<sup>256</sup>

*Yèyéolókun*'s procession into Ayede from the forest while balancing *igbá Yemoja* is a highly delicate event that is managed with the utmost care by the *Ìyálòrìṣà* and *Yemoja* devotees in attendance. To counteract negative spiritual potions or other substances that may have been poured or tossed on the trail leading to Ayede by persons seeking to bring about the demise of the *Àtá* or the *Yèyéolókun*, *Yemoja* devotees place salt on the path along which the *Yèyéolókun* will walk. In addition, the *Yèyéolókun*'s feet are doused with water to “cool” them as talking- drums remind the *Yèyéolókun* to “walk cautiously.”<sup>257</sup> Accompanied by younger *Ìyálòrìṣà* who are balancing small containers of “water” on their heads, the *Yèyéolókun* travels first to the graves of past *Yemoja* devotees and chiefs and to other important public shrines as a formal expression of respect (*júbà*).<sup>258</sup> She then proceeds to the royal residence of the *Àtá*.

Upon arriving at the *Àtá*'s royal residence, the *Yèyéolókun* approaches the *Àtá* and positions herself in front of him, obstructing the view of the assembled crowd. The *Àtá* then touches the body of the *Yèyéolókun*, and the *Àtá*'s body quakes as he prays for longevity while receiving the power contained within *igbá Yemoja*. In this way the *Àtá*'s power and authority are renewed. Depending on where *igbá Yemoja* was placed the previous year after the *Àtá* received its power, the *Yèyéolókun* now takes *igbá Yemoja* either to a room inside the royal residence where the *Àtá*'s crowns are stored or to an altar in Ayede's public shrine to *Yemoja*, which is located within the town itself. However, regardless of where the *Yèyéolókun* ultimately places *igbá Yemoja*, the younger *Ìyálòrìṣà* go to the town's public shrine to *Yemoja* and carefully place the containers of “water”

they have been carrying atop their heads. *Yemoja* is believed to be present anywhere *igbá Yemoja* and the “water” carried by the younger *Ìyálòrìṣà* are placed.<sup>259</sup> Once the “water” has been placed, the younger *Ìyálòrìṣà* exit the shrine dancing to seven distinct cadences being played on talking-drums. Each distinct cadence is related to *Yemoja*, the *Òrìṣà Oko*, *Ògún*, *Òsùn*, *Ṣàngó*, *Ìbejì*, or the *Ògbóni* society.<sup>260</sup> The completion of the drumming prompts a waiting *Ṣàngó* diviner (*Ìyá Ṣàngó*) to “climb” the “*odó* of *Ṣàngó*,” a specially positioned, cemented yam mortar bearing *Ṣàngó’s oriki* (“praise name”). While “climbing” the *odó* of *Ṣàngó*, the diviner is spiritually “climbed” by *Ṣàngó* himself. *Ṣàngó* then communicates directly with the townspeople through the diviner, specifying multiple *ẹbọ* that the community must perform in order to avoid impending dangers. The *Yemoja* festival ends when *Ṣàngó* finishes his “prescriptive” address to the community of Ayede.

### *Some Epistemological Considerations*

To the extent that it serves to fortify the well-being and structural cohesion of the Ayede community by ritually confronting and engaging the dangerous uncertainty and mutability of life through sacrifice and the reinvestment of spiritual power, the *Yemoja* festival is a major practical piece of Ayede’s socio-cultural fabric. I would argue further that the Ayede *Yemoja* festival is also important because it encodes conceptual elements that can help us better understand the *grammar of knowing* that is present within Yorùbá religious culture. I would also suggest that among the many conceptual elements encoded in the Ayede *Yemoja* festival are the three motifs that together form the theoretical foundation of this study: namely, the permanency of existential conflict,

irresolution, and mystery.<sup>261</sup> Let us reflect on the significance of these motifs in light of their encoded presence in the Ayede *Yemoja* festival.

On one level, we can think of the Ayede *Yemoja* festival as a ritualized response to the permanency of existential conflict. Indeed, the very aim of the festival is to sacrificially invoke the power of *Yemoja* in an effort to constructively manage the conflictual potentialities that threaten the life and reign of the *Átá* as well as the overall well-being of the Ayede community. An acute awareness of the reality of conflict is evident in both phases of the festival. For instance, during *ẹbọ ọba*, there is an especially strong recognition among the festival diviners and devotees of the potential conflict between the constructive goal of the festival and the mercurial power of the *Òrìṣà Èṣù*. This recognition is encoded in the fact that an offering of pounded yam and red palm-oil is made to *Èṣù* at the beginning of the festival in hopes of ensuring the ritual success of the festival and thus temporarily avoiding any counterproductive interference *Èṣù* may have otherwise been inclined to cause. Said differently, to the festival diviners, devotees, and the larger Ayede community, *Èṣù* spiritually represents the possibility of an existential conflict that could not only thwart the *Yemoja* festival, but also jeopardize the well-being of the entire community.

*Ijó iponmi*, the second phase of the Ayede *Yemoja* festival, also contains elements that encode the recognition of conflict as a permanent feature of reality. This recognition is encoded in the community's belief regarding the kind of power housed within *igbá Yemoja* (*Yemoja's* calabash) and the need for *igbá Yemoja* to remain intact while being transported into central Ayede by the *Yèyéolókun*. The recognition of conflict as a permanent feature of reality is also profoundly encoded in the festival's concluding event

in which the *Ọ̀rìṣà Ṣàngó* directs the community of Ayede to perform additional sacrifices (*ẹ̀bọ*) as a means of staving off inevitable future perils. The belief regarding the power inside *igbá Yemoja* is closely related to the “prescriptive” pronouncements made by *Ṣàngó* in that the nature of *Yemoja*’s power is in a sense a reflection of the knowledge undergirding *Ṣàngó*’s call for additional *ẹ̀bọ*. Succinctly put, *Yemoja*’s power is believed to be highly volatile and therefore equally capable of causing death and sustaining life. The Ayede community’s firm belief in the volatility of *Yemoja*’s power accounts for why the *Ìyálòrìṣà* and other shrine devotees go to such great lengths to protect the *Yèyéolókun* and *igbá Yemoja*. The playing of drums and the use of medicinal salt during the *Yèyéolókun*’s procession into Ayede while carrying *igbá Yemoja* are intended to manage the volatility of *Yemoja*’s power so that her power helps instead of harms the community. The volatility of *Yemoja*’s power – which is present inside *igbá Yemoja* – signifies the ever-present possibility of a deadly conflict suddenly and accidentally emerging between *Yemoja*’s power and the interests of the Ayede community. Thus *igbá Yemoja* as a physical object may itself be thought of as an element of the *Yemoja* festival that encodes the motif of conflict.

Similarly, *Ṣàngó*’s sobering call for communal *ẹ̀bọ* in response to the looming threat of future perils also encodes the motif of the permanency of existential conflict. *Ṣàngó*’s call serves as a powerful reminder to the Ayede community that existential conflict is a constant and undeniable reality that must always be addressed despite the successful completion of a major festival such as the *Yemoja* festival. In this particular setting, *Ṣàngó* is a kind of harbinger. However, *Ṣàngó*’s message is not one of complete doom. To the contrary, his aim here is to renew the Ayede community’s commitment to *ẹ̀bọ* as a

lifestyle. *Ẓàngó's* role amplifies the fact that *Yemoja's* acceptance of *ẹbọ ọba*, the successful relocation of *igbá Yemoja* by the *Yèyéolókun*, and the reinvestment of spiritual power in the *Átá* all work together to temporarily render the conflictual landscape of human existence more easily navigable without changing its fundamental structure. Our analysis thus far of the encoding function of *Ẓàngó*, *igbá Yemoja*, and *Èṣù* as elements of the *Yemoja* festival invites further reflection on the issue of how we might characterize this encoding function.

The encoding function we have been discussing can be characterized as an *epistemological* encoding function. The *Yemoja* festival encodes the permanency of existential conflict not only as a motif that helps establish the festival's meaning and significance within the Ayede community, but also as a motif that, on a more fundamental level, reflects an approach to understanding and interpreting the world. For example, it is true that commonly-held beliefs regarding the need to propitiate *Èṣù*, the volatile power contained within *igbá Yemoja*, and the need to use salt to protect the *Yèyéolókun* on her journey back into Ayede from the forest all play an important role in generating the specific meaning and social significance of the *Yemoja* festival. However, the *Yemoja* festival would not be such a major part of the social structure in Ayede nor would the festival be treated with such reverence by the Ayede community if the beliefs encoded in the festival were not connected to a wider understanding of the world that informs how the community interprets the festival and its relevance to the life of the community. By encoding the Ayede community's belief in the permanency of existential conflict, the *Yemoja* festival encodes a conceptual aspect of a broader *cultural orientation or logic* that makes sense of reality in a particular way. The *Yemoja* festival facilitates a

recognition of the motif of the permanency of existential conflict as a part of the internal logic of Yorùbá epistemology. As we have indicated in various ways at earlier points in our analysis, this internal logic embraces the reality of existential conflict in a way that positions this reality as a kind of theoretical principle that helps establish Yorùbá epistemology as a mode of knowing. The realities of irresolution and mystery, both of which are also encoded in the *Yemoja* festival, are elements of this internal logic as well.

The motif of irresolution, which is closely related to the motif we just discussed, is encoded in *Ẓàngó's* call for communal *ẹbọ* and in the belief that the *Yemoja* festival must be held every year. The *Yemoja* festival is remarkably ironic in that, while it functions to reinvest the *Àtá* of Ayede with spiritual power and fortify the well-being of the community, the festival accomplishes no lasting resolution with respect to the possibility of misfortune. Even though the successful completion of the *Yemoja* festival results in the renewal of the *Àtá's* power and authority through the reacquisition of *Yemoja's* “protective” support, the possibility of unforeseen misfortune befalling the *Àtá* is in no way eliminated. Moreover, the successful completion of the *Yemoja* festival does not permanently protect the Ayede community from misfortune either. At the end of the festival, *Ẓàngó* urges the community to remain collectively engaged in the practice of *ẹbọ* based upon a shared belief in the idea that while the threatening possibility of existential and spiritual misfortune can be ritually mitigated, it can never be resolved once and for all.

This belief also explains – at least in part – why the *Yemoja* festival is held annually. The purpose of the festival is not to conquer the structure of existence, but rather to routinely counteract the constant threat of danger in the world in order to sustain and

develop human life. The *Yemoja* festival encodes irresolution as a cosmic verity. In addition, the festival functions as an embodied call to construct our lives in a way that seriously acknowledges this truth through the life-giving ritual invocation of spiritual power that enables us to *consciously* live *in* this truth. As an element of the internal logic of Yorùbá epistemology, the motif of irresolution prompts us to approach the dangerous structure of existence as a source of knowledge and spiritual power rather than as an excuse to retreat into indifference or denial. In fact, it is because of the reality of existential irresolution that we become increasingly engaged with and knowledgeable of the spiritual dimension and the volatile yet potentially life-promoting power that flows through it.

In a somewhat more oblique way, the *Yemoja* festival also encodes the motif of mystery. It is easier to see how aspects of the festival such as the propitiation of *Èṣù*, *igbá Yemoja*, and *Ṣàngó's* call for communal *ẹbọ* relate to the notions of perduring existential conflict and irresolution. However, it is a bit more difficult to specify how the festival encodes the concept of mystery. The difficulty lies in the fact that within the context of the *Yemoja* festival the idea of mystery is expressed through an implicitly articulated awareness that one cannot know beforehand whether the *Òrìṣà* invoked during the festival will choose to accept or reject the *ẹbọ* offered to them, or whether something else will go wrong, thereby diminishing or nullifying the ritual efficacy of the festival. This is why during the *ẹbọ* to *Èṣù* at the beginning of the festival a female diviner prayerfully says to the *Òrìṣà*, “Laaro [*Èṣù* Laaro] please let the sacrifice be acceptable . . . .” This is also why *Yemoja* is told during *ẹbọ ọba* to “rise up without mishap,” and why

an *Ìyálòrìṣà* divines with kola nuts after *Yemoja*, her *Òrìṣà*, and ancestral spirits of *Yemoja's* shrine have consumed the ram's blood during *ẹbọ ọba*.

To the degree that it is unknown beforehand whether or not the *Òrìṣà* invoked during the *Yemoja* festival will cooperate or whether or not the festival itself will be ritually successful overall, the festival encodes the motif of mystery. Regardless of how fervently *ẹbọ* is offered or how meticulously other aspects of the festival are carried out, there simply is no guarantee that, for example, *Èṣù* and *Yemoja* will do what is asked of them. Therefore, the long-term success of the festival is never unqualifiedly assured. As *Ṣàngó* warns, the Ayede community *must* remain ritually engaged in order to enhance the protective efficacy of the *Yemoja* festival. The mysterious dimension of ritual understanding is an important part of what compels this ongoing spiritual engagement. As a theoretical feature or principle of the internal logic of Yorùbá epistemology, the motif of mystery forces us to conceptualize (or reconceptualize) knowledge not as a tool with which to ultimately control reality but rather as a tool that enables us to create and develop meanings and resilient connections to the spiritual realm that allow us to live more productive lives. The internal logic of Yorùbá epistemology does not incorporate the motif of mystery for the purpose of intellectual abstraction. Instead, its incorporation serves as a means of enhancing the Yorùbá “world-sense.”

### **Conclusion**

Throughout this chapter, we have phenomenologically explored several related aspects of Yorùbá cosmology in an effort to highlight the permanency of existential conflict, irresolution, and mystery as motifs that shape Yorùbá epistemology. We have variously traced the presence of these and other motifs mainly in Yorùbá originary

narratives, the beliefs and religious symbolism of the *Ògbóni* society, the divinatory system of *Ifá didá*, the Yorùbá community's conceptualization of certain *Òrìṣà*, and in the annual *Ayede Yemoja* festival. This analysis has produced certain important insights that disclose aspects of a Yorùbá grammar of knowing. These important insights include the following:

- As a “mystical technology” of matter, *Ifá didá* serves as an epistemological catalyst that prompts a conceptualization of *Olódùmarè* as a deity whose being can be interpreted within the framework of a materialist ontology that creatively interweaves the cosmological significance of the natural world with that of *Olódùmarè*.
- In a Yorùbá perspective, matter emerges not as inert “stuff” but as a reconfigurable vessel of spiritual power, as a vessel that, by way of engagement, yields knowledge about the natural world as an environment shaped by profound creative potential and flux.
- Yorùbá epistemology suggests that one of the vital functions of human knowledge is to sharpen our awareness of matter as a fundamentally irreducible reality whose deepest meanings always frustrate and elude the powers of human reason.
- The *Ògbóni* conception of the deity *Ilẹ̀* suggests that the greatest depths of human and spiritual meaning are tied to the reality of existential irreducibility.
- For the *Ògbóni*, the fuller meaning of the deity *Ilẹ̀* is generated by the *conceptual and theoretical interplay* resulting from the combination of the notions of sustenance and destruction as well as maleness and femaleness as structural components that help form the idea of *Ilẹ̀*.
- A logic of oppositional/dialectical variation and conceptual irreducibility is an important component of the theoretical structure of Yorùbá epistemology and, as such, gives us a clue as to how meaning is often constructed within the Yorùbá religio-philosophical tradition.
- Dynamism – as opposed to dogmatism – functions as a governing principle of meaning construction in Yorùbá thought.
- Yorùbá thought includes an existential mandate for human beings to engage and carefully utilize spiritual power for life-promoting purposes.
- As an element of the internal logic of Yorùbá epistemology, the motif of irresolution prompts us to approach the dangerous structure of existence as a

source of knowledge and spiritual power rather than as an excuse to retreat into indifference or denial.

- As a theoretical feature or principle of the internal logic of Yorùbá epistemology, the motif of mystery forces us to conceptualize (or reconceptualize) knowledge not as a tool with which to ultimately control reality but rather as a tool that enables us to create and develop meanings and resilient connections to the spiritual realm that allow us to live more productive lives.

By no means are these insights or other aspects of the critical exploration contained in this chapter exhaustive. In many ways, the chapter only scratches the surface of the greater complexity and depth of Yorùbá cosmology. Nevertheless, I have attempted in this chapter to develop a framework for understanding Yorùbá cosmology with a view to constructively addressing the opaque epistemological orientation in African-American religious experience. Our phenomenological exploration of African indigenous epistemology continues along this line in the next chapter, which focuses on Akan cosmology.

### Chapter 3

#### “It is the Spirit that Teaches the Priest to Whirl Around:” A Phenomenological Analysis of Akan Cosmology

Before proceeding, we should note once again that the term “Akan” does *not* refer to a homogeneous ethnic population. The Akan, a West African people whose diverse ethnic subgroups are socially organized largely according to a traditional system of matrilineal descent (*abusua*) consisting of “seven original consanguinal descent groups” known as *Asona*, *Twidan*, *Kɔnna*, *Anɔna*, *Aboradze*, *Asakyiri*, and *Asenee*,<sup>262</sup> make up nearly fifty percent of the total population of Ghana, making them by far the largest ethnic group in the country. Commenting further on the meaning of the term “Akan,” K. Nkansa Kyeremateng writes that “The term ‘Akan’ has been variously interpreted. There are people who would derive it from the Twi word *kan(e)* (first or foremost) to imply the Akans were the first settlers (aborigines) of Ghana.”<sup>263</sup> J. B. Danquah connects the term “Akan” to the term “*Okanni*.” He explains that “The word *Okanni*, ordinarily, means a nice, refined, well-mannered [individual]; a civilised or cultured person.”<sup>264</sup> The Akan are geographically situated mainly in central and southern Ghana, particularly in the Asante, Brong Ahafo, and Eastern Volta regions.<sup>265</sup> Some ethnic subgroups of the Akan include the *Ahanta*, the *Akuapem*, the *Akwamu*, the *Akyem*, the *Abuakwa*, the *Bosome*, the *Kotoku*, the *Asante*, the *Bono*, the *Fante*, the *Kwawu* (or *Kwahu*), the *Sefwi*, and the *Wassa*.<sup>266</sup>

Akan cosmology embraces the belief that the universe is filled with unseen powers that may be described as “mystical” or spiritual in nature.<sup>267</sup> Far from being inert, these diverse powers significantly influence the physical world as well as the lives of human beings. As foundational components of the cosmic structure, the active existence of these

powers is not questioned by the Akan. The existence of these powers (or spiritual beings) is an obvious fact that is no less real to the Akan than the human need for oxygen, food, water, and shelter. Equally real is the existence of persons who have the ability to access and utilize various spiritual powers for salutary or nefarious purposes. In an Akan perspective, to be alive is to be awash in potent spiritual realities that affect the world everyday. Indeed, the unpredictable (*asiane, akrade*)<sup>268</sup> and mysterious (*awawa*)<sup>269</sup> nature of human existence itself compels a lifelong participatory recognition of spiritual realities and the sundry, complex roles they play in the lives of individuals and communities.

In Akan religious philosophy, the material springs forth from or is birthed by the spiritual. This is why the dichotomization of the material and spiritual realms of being is nonsensical to the Akan. The Akan tradition views as misleading the notion that the various levels of human experience should be hermetically and categorically understood either as *sacred* or *profane*. Such a notion is misleading because, according to the logic of Akan thought (*adwen*),<sup>270</sup> it is the nature of spiritual power to suffuse all forms of being in different ways and to varying degrees. Therefore, *everything* comprising the universe contains a measure of sacrality. Furthermore, the Akan believe that, through the agency of spiritual beings and the ritual practices of humans, the spiritual world (*Asamando, Samanadzie, Nsamankyir*)<sup>271</sup> in a sense *feeds* the material world with power. It is in this way that our relationship with the spiritual world is increasingly strengthened, and that the power of the spiritual world is made manifest in any number of ways. These introductory remarks begin to establish a sense of the religio-philosophical orientation

that will frame our phenomenological exploration of the indigenous cosmological beliefs and practices of the Akan.

The analytical approach of this chapter seeks to inhabit the non-dichotomous, sacralizing logic of Akan thought as it relates to spirit (*sunsum*)<sup>272</sup> and matter. Hence we are jettisoning presuppositions regarding the necessary separation of spirit and matter and the “profane” nature of matter in favor of a reconception of spirit and matter as inseverably intertwined *sacred* realities that give rise to a distinct epistemological orientation. As will be shown, the cosmological beliefs and practices of the Akan are indicative of such an orientation. Moreover, the organization of this chapter is in keeping with the Akan’s spirit-based conceptualization of existence. Thus, our analysis will begin with the spiritual dimension. We will first focus our attention on the being known by the Akan as *Onyame* (*Nyame*). As the Akan High Deity, *Onyame* governs the cosmos, and is conceived by the Akan as Absolute Power or “Absolute Reality.”<sup>273</sup> Our discussion of *Onyame* will be followed by an analysis of lesser deities (*abosom*) such as *Asase Yaa* (the earth deity), the *Tete Abosom* (“tutelar” deities that watch over communities), the *Suman Brafoɔ* or *Bosom Brafoɔ* (conjuration, *inspired* implements or objects that are used by individuals either to help or to harm), the *Mmoatia* (forest-dwelling spirits or “little people” who, while sometimes malevolent, are believed to be masters of plant medicine), the *Sasabonsam* (a “monstrous, evil” spirit), and the ancestors (*Nsamanfo* or *Nananom Nsamanfo*).<sup>274</sup> The third stage of our analysis concerns the constitution of the human being and the Akan conception of destiny (*nkrabea/hyebea*).<sup>275</sup> In this stage, we will examine how human beings (*nnipá*)<sup>276</sup> and destiny are understood within the theoretical framework of Akan cosmology. We will conclude the chapter with an analysis of anti-

*bayi boro* rites performed at certain shrines in the Brong Ahafo region of southern Ghana. Anti-*bayi boro* rites represent a counteractive or curative practical response to the deleterious effects of *bayi boro* (which can be thought of as the utilization of spiritual power for harmful purposes) on human beings.

The goal of this chapter is to highlight the presence and function of the permanency of existential conflict, irresolution, mystery, and other important epistemological motifs that are encoded narratively, aphorismally (*mmē*),<sup>277</sup> and ritually in Akan culture. My engagement of these cultural idioms as repositories of the Akan epistemological tradition is consistent with arguments made by esteemed African scholars from Ghana and elsewhere. For instance, former Prime Minister of Ghana and social anthropologist Kofi Abrefa Busia writes that “The African has not offered learned and divergent disputations to the world in writing, but in his expression in conduct of awe, and reverence for nature, no less than in his use of natural resources, he demonstrates his own epistemology.”<sup>278</sup> Specifically concerning African proverbs, Kenyan philosopher John Mbiti states that “It is in proverbs that we find the remains of the oldest forms of African religious and philosophical wisdom.”<sup>279</sup> In addition, Ghanaian philosopher Kwame Gyekye, in his book entitled *African Philosophical Thought: The Akan Conceptual Scheme*, primarily examines Akan proverbs (*mmē*) in an effort to demonstrate that the Akan do in fact have their own robust tradition of philosophical reflection that in many respects is unique.<sup>280</sup> Readers should note that the focus of the present study does not cover the full range of ideas found in Akan cosmology. While we will identify several other ideas in addition to the three central motifs we have been tracing throughout this study, many ideas will not be identified or treated due to the particular way in which this study has been

conceptually delimited. Therefore, we will only be exploring certain elements within the much larger tradition of Akan cosmology.

### ***Onyame***

#### *An Account of Onyame's Withdrawal from the Intimacy of Human Contact*

In considering the meaning and significance of *Onyame*, the Akan High Deity, it is important to remain mindful of the fundamental philosophical orientation of the Akan. As suggested previously, Akan philosophy affords the invisible spiritual domain an ontological status that is decidedly greater than that of the visible material domain. Gyekye makes this point when, in explicating the rudiments of Akan thought, he states that “What is primarily real is spiritual. It must be noted, however, that the world of natural phenomena is also real, even though in ultimate terms the nonperceivable, purely spiritual world is more real, for upon it the perceivable, phenomenal world depends for sustenance.”<sup>281</sup> Gyekye explains further that

There is no distinction between the sensible (perceivable) world and the nonsensible (nonperceivable) world in the sense of the latter being real and the former being unreal, as in other metaphysical systems. The distinction lies entirely in the perceivability of one and the unperceivability of the other. But the perceivability of the one – namely the world of nature – does not in any way detract from its reality. From this perspective, it would seem that reality in Akan conceptions is one and homogeneous. But this in fact is not the case. For the characteristics of the physical world are different from those of the spiritual world. The Akan metaphysical world is thus a dual world, notwithstanding the fact that the activities of the inhabitants of the spiritual world extend to, and are ‘felt’ in, the physical world.<sup>282</sup>

Gyekye’s analysis of Akan cosmology emphasizes the idea that, while the spiritual and material worlds are each qualitatively distinct, they nevertheless exist together in a state of meaningful and effective interrelation. The spiritual world is integral to the material world despite the fact that the former is not available to human sense perception in the way that the latter is. It can even be said that the primary significance of the spiritual

world lies in its unperceivable nature. For the unperceivability of the spiritual world signals a mode of knowing that is not bound by the limitations of material experience, thereby making possible the development of relationships between human beings and incorporeal entities as well as the acquisition of knowledge stemming from regular interaction with spiritual realities.

A recognition of the Akan cosmos as principally spiritual in nature enables a clearer understanding of what *Onyame* signifies to the Akan community. It is unquestionably the case that the meaning of *Onyame* in Akan belief is multidimensional. However, the multidimensional conceptualization of *Onyame* in Akan cosmology is rooted in the idea that *Onyame* is a ubiquitous being who is ontologically singular and therefore unlike any other being in the universe. The tradition of Akan originary narration inscribes the belief in *Onyame* as an uncontainable being. We find in the following originary narrative an explanatory account of *Onyame*'s uncontainable nature:

To the Akan, [Onyame] and [humans] once lived very close together, and [humans] could reach, touch, and feel [Onyame]. Then an old woman began to pound her *fufuu* regularly, using a mortar and a long pestle. She hit [Onyame] every time she pounded *fufuu*, so [Onyame] moved further and further away from [humans] and went into the skies. When the people realized what had happened they tried to find a way to bring [Onyame] back into their midst. The old woman suggested that they should all bring their mortars together and pile them one on top of another to form a 'ladder' to reach [Onyame]. They discovered that they needed just about one more mortar to make a ladder long enough. The old woman then suggested that they pull out the bottom-most mortar and put it on top. When they attempted to do this the whole construction collapsed on them and killed many.<sup>283</sup>

This narrative contains three elements that are especially intriguing: 1) *Onyame*'s decision to retreat beyond or transcend the boundaries of human contact is the result of human activity; 2) Human beings assume that it is within their power to physically reach *Onyame*; 3) The previous assumption is proven to be both erroneous and fatal.

*Onyame*'s retreat beyond the intimate relationship once shared with the human world is precipitated by a conflict occasioned by the human activity of food preparation. According to the narrative, *Onyame*'s intimate relationship with the human world is disturbed by repeated strikes from a "long pestle" used "regularly" by an old woman to pound *fufuu* (a staple dish in Ghana usually consisting either of pounded yams and plantains or pounded cassava root, each of which is served with a stew or soup containing various vegetables, meat and/or fish). While it seems as if the old woman does not intend to strike and thus offend *Onyame* during the preparation of her *fufuu*, she nevertheless *does* strike and offend *Onyame*, and the result – *Onyame*'s transcendent retreat – is something with which she must reckon. The old woman's apparently unwitting error and its unintended result together point to the importance of remaining mindful not only of the presence of the spiritual world among us, but also of the less-than-desirable, conflictual effects our actions as human beings can have on the spiritual world. This is one of the narrative's primary motifs. As suggested in the case of the old woman pounding *fufuu*, even though the possibility of human beings accidentally entering into conflict with the spiritual world is an ever-present one, it is nonetheless incumbent upon human beings to remain acutely aware of how their actions impact their relationship with the spiritual world. Maintaining this acute awareness entails the ongoing cultivation of a certain kind of spiritually-oriented knowledge that engenders a heightened sensitivity to the interactions and exchanges that occur between the material and spiritual worlds. In this sense, human intercourse with the spiritual world is epistemologically significant. I would posit further that the old woman's decision to build a "ladder" to *Onyame* bespeaks an underdeveloped knowledge of the spiritual world.

Once the old woman and the other members of her community notice that *Onyame* has retreated beyond their physical reach, they immediately set about the business of trying to traverse the physical distance that now exists between them and *Onyame*. This project is embarked upon at the suggestion of the old woman. The old woman's suggestion is based on the assumption that *Onyame's* will can be counteracted and even undone by the will of human beings. This general assumption is made possible by the more basic assumption that it is within the community's power to traverse the distance separating the community from *Onyame* and thus bring *Onyame* back into close contact with the community. However, both of these assumptions are flawed because *Onyame's* status as the Akan High Deity – as Absolute Power – means that *Onyame's* will cannot be reversed or nullified by the will of human beings.

Yet the old woman and her community appear unaware of this reality. This lack of awareness indicates an insufficiently developed knowledge of the spiritual world. The narrative gives the impression that the old woman is so preoccupied with the preparation of her *fufuu* that she is largely oblivious both to *Onyame's* presence and to *Onyame's* gradual retreat. Therefore, inasmuch as *Onyame* moves beyond the physical boundaries of the human community, *Onyame* becomes the uncontainable High Deity, the knowledge of which human beings can seek after but never fully possess. *Onyame* emerges in the narrative as an apical symbol of the need for human beings to be attuned at all times to the spiritual world. *Onyame* also functions in the narrative as an apical symbol of the permanency of mystery (*awawa*) and of the limitations of human knowledge. The decision on the part of the old woman and her community to construct a “ladder” tall enough to reach *Onyame* suggests that the old woman and her community

are more attuned to a sense of shared human capability than to a sense of the spiritual world. Moreover, this shared sense of human capability apparently includes a belief in the power of human beings to physically travel to *Onyame*, the source of existence, despite *Onyame's* decision to live somewhat apart from the human world. The misguided nature of this belief is revealed when the community's plan to physically reach *Onyame* fails.

The mortar "ladder" built by the community is unable to reach *Onyame* and in fact "collapses," resulting in multiple deaths. The assumption made by the old woman and her community regarding their shared human capability as it pertains to *Onyame* and the spiritual world is therefore shown to be an assumption that is both false and fatal. An important implication to consider here is that failure on the part of human beings to sufficiently attune themselves to the spiritual world is not conducive to the maintenance of human life. We can further infer that the maintenance of human life requires the cultivation of a certain kind of knowledge that accompanies the condition of being properly attuned to the spiritual world. Hence it can be asserted that *Onyame's* retreat beyond but not away from the quotidian realities of human existence stimulates an acknowledgement of the following epistemological principle: The spiritual world is a source of life-promoting knowledge. *Onyame's* momentous retreat then is not merely an act of exasperation. I would argue, rather, that *Onyame's* retreat encodes the Akan epistemological principle just mentioned. Thus, while the narrative explaining *Onyame's* status as an uncontainable deity may at first blush seem irrelevant to our understanding of Akan epistemology, careful analysis discloses that this narrative is in fact of great relevance to our understanding of Akan epistemology. The story of *Onyame's*

uncontainability therefore does much in the way of helping us to begin to unpack the significance of *Onyame* within the Akan community as well as the Akan cosmological tradition. In light of what has been discussed thus far, we would not be off-base in suggesting that *Onyame* determines the scope of Akan epistemology. We will explore this idea further at a later juncture in our study.

Our analysis up to this point has focused on the epistemological significance of *Onyame*'s uncontainable nature, which transcends even the intimacy of human contact. However, one would be seriously mistaken in concluding that *Onyame*'s meaning within the Akan community is similar or reducible to that of a kind of *deus otiosus*. As stated previously, Akan belief holds that *Onyame* is ubiquitous. Put otherwise, *Onyame* is both everywhere and nowhere. The Akan make this point emphatically when they say, *Wope asem aka akyere Onyame a, ka kyere mframa* ("If you want to say something to *Onyame*, say it to the wind").<sup>284</sup> The wind, which swirls around us and greets us each day when we venture out into the world, is inescapable. It is a fundamental and uniquely powerful aspect of the natural world to which we as human beings must relate. *Onyame* is both like and unlike the wind. As Gyekye notes regarding *Onyame* and the wind, "The analogy . . . is obviously incomplete, for the wind can be physically felt whereas *Onyame* cannot."<sup>285</sup> Still, *Onyame* pervades every conceivable level of being. In this sense, *Onyame* is *in* everything while being reducible to or containable within nothing. One will not find in Ghana any shrines or temples dedicated to *Onyame*.<sup>286</sup> This is because, in the words of Professor Elom Dovlo of the University of Ghana, "To harness the pure spirit of *Onyame* and restrict it to a place defaults the Akan idea of the essence of *Onyame*."<sup>287</sup> Furthermore, the reality of *Onyame*'s unmatched power and ubiquity means

that human beings do not need a diviner (*Ɔkɔmfɔ*)<sup>288</sup> to facilitate connection or communication with *Onyame*. *Onyame*'s power and vastness are such that *Onyame* "is available to all without the assistance of human intermediaries."<sup>289</sup> These observations point to the fact that *Onyame* elicits the deepest sense of reverence among the Akan.

#### *Appellational and Aphorismal Conceptions of Onyame*

The Akan tradition of originary narration helps establish *Onyame* as the theoretical anchor of Akan religious philosophy. Every conceptual aspect of the Akan religio-philosophical system ultimately relates to *Onyame*. This is so because the Akan conceive of *Onyame* as the primordial, uncreated source through which all things come into existence and to which all things are inseparably connected. The Akan belief in *Onyame*'s boundless power and uncontestable status as the uncreated source of all being is also conveyed through various popular appellations traditionally associated with *Onyame*.

Some of these appellations include *Nana Onyankopɔn* ("Grandfather or Grandmother, Nyame who alone is the Great One"),<sup>290</sup> *Tweduampɔn* ("The Dependable"), *Amowia* ("Giver of the sun or light"), *Amosu* ("Giver of rain"), *Totrobonsu* ("The One who causes rain to fall abundantly"), *Amɔamee* ("Giver of sufficiency"), *Brekyirihunuade* ("The One who sees all, even from behind"), *Abɔmmubuwafrɛ* ("Consoler"), *Nyaamanekose* ("The One in whom you confide troubles which come upon you"), *Tetekwaframo* ("The One who is there now as from ancient times"), *Nana* ("Grand Ancestor"), *Bɔrebɔre* ("Excavator, Hewer, Creator, Originator, Carver, Architect"), *Ɔdomankoma* ("Creator, Boundless, Absolute"), *Ɔbɔadeɛ* ("Creator"), *Obiannyew* ("Uncreated"), *Enyiasombea* ("Ever-present"), *Otumfo* ("The Powerful One"), and *Atoapem* ("Unsurpassable").<sup>291</sup>

The appellations just listed articulate attributes that give a degree of functional definition to *Onyame* as a religio-philosophical concept. Appellations such as *Nana Onyankopɔn*, *Tetekwaframoɔ*, *Nana*, and *Atoapem* evince an understanding of *Onyame* as a quintessentially *sui generis* deity who is the ground of all that is actual and possible. *Onyame* is the originary fount of all realities and experiences, be they material or spiritual. The Akan implicitly acknowledge this when, before attempting any major task, they make an appeal to *Onyame* by saying, *Onyame boa me* (“Onyame, help me!”).<sup>292</sup> This acknowledgement is also implicit in the customary practice among Akan healers (*Aduruyɛfo* or *Ayaresafɔ*)<sup>293</sup> of reminding ailing clients that their healing is contingent upon *Onyame*’s permission (*Sɛ Onyame pɛ a*, “If it is the will of Onyame”).<sup>294</sup>

Other appellations such as *Brekɔyirihunuade* (“The One who sees all, even from behind”), *Bɔrebɔre* (“Excavator, Hewer, Creator, Originator, Carver, Architect”), *Ɔdomankoma* (“Creator, Boundless, Absolute”),<sup>295</sup> *Ɔbɔadeɛ* (“Creator”), *Obiannyɛw* (“Uncreated”), *Enyiasombea* (“Ever-present”), *Otumfo* (“The Powerful One”), and *Atoapem* (“Unsurpassable”)<sup>296</sup> reveal an understanding of *Onyame* as a deity possessing immeasurable power. It is this immeasurable power that enables *Onyame* to “see” all things, to be “present” to all beings, and to dynamically create (and perhaps re-create) the known – and unknown – world free of the limitations according to which lesser beings must live. An important point must be made here regarding the types of realities that the Akan attribute directly to *Onyame*’s generative power. As the origin of existence itself, *Onyame* is believed to be an entirely benevolent deity. We therefore find sayings in the Akan tradition such as *Onyame a ɔbɔɔ me anyɛ me bɔne sɛ ɔtan a ɔwoo me a ɔde fɛree hyɛɛ me mu sɛ menkɔ ahua mmra ma yenni* (“Onyame who created me did not

make me bad like my mother who bore me and who kept me in disgrace so that I should go and collect food from other people so that we could eat”).<sup>297</sup> In the perspective of Ghanaian religious scholar Kofi Asare Opoku, *Onyame*’s fundamentally benevolent nature positions *Onyame* as the “Final Guardian of the moral code of law and order” in Akan society.<sup>298</sup> In this perspective, realities that the Akan regard as “good” (*papa*) such as the human expression of generosity (*ayamyie*), honesty (*nokwardi*), compassion (*mmɔbrɔhunu*), and hospitality (*ahɔhoyɛ* or *adɔɛ*) are reflections of the immutably moral orientation of *Onyame*’s generative power.<sup>299</sup> We should note however that Opoku’s perspective is challenged by Gyekye, who argues that

In Akan thought goodness is not defined by reference to religious beliefs or supernatural beings. What is morally good is not that which is commanded by God [Onyame] or any spiritual being; what is right is not that which is pleasing to a spiritual being or in accordance with the will of such [a] being . . . In Akan moral thought the sole criterion of goodness is the welfare or well-being of the community.<sup>300</sup>

Gyekye, who writes as a philosopher, roots Akan moral philosophy in humanly-contrived behavioral codes that are not necessarily related to *Onyame* or to other spiritual beings. In Akan thought, the moral or ethical assessment of any given act is governed by whether the act promotes or threatens the perdurance and “welfare” of the community. Moreover, as both Opoku and Gyekye argue, acts that may be considered morally “evil” (i.e., acts that jeopardize the survival, stability, and collective prosperity of the community) are not attributable to *Onyame*. Moral “evil” (*bɔne*) is a reality whose origin is found in the social theater of human decision and action.<sup>301</sup> The Akan belief in *bɔne* as a *human* reality is encoded in the common saying, *Onyame mpe bɔne* (“Onyame does not like evil,” or “Onyame is against evil”).<sup>302</sup> Also encoded in this saying is the notion that *Onyame*’s nature is inclined not toward moral “evil” (*bɔne*) but toward “the good”

(*papa*), regardless of whether or not human beings consider *Onyame* to be the creative source of “the good.” Other traditional appellations used to articulate *Onyame*’s meaning and significance in Akan cosmology are highly suggestive of the moral inclination of *Onyame*’s nature.

The terms *Tweduampɔn* (“The Dependable”), *Amowia* (“Giver of the sun or light”), *Amosu* (“Giver of rain”), *Totrobonsu* (“The One who causes rain to fall abundantly”), *Amɔamee* (“Giver of sufficiency”), *Abɔmmubuwafrɛ* (“Consoler”), *Nyaamanekose* (“The One in whom you confide troubles which come upon you”), all of which are also appellations associated with *Onyame*, reflect a belief in *Onyame* as a being for whom it is a primary concern to provide that which is necessary to nurture and sustain life. The sun and rain, both of which are vital to life on Earth, are provisions from *Onyame*. These provisions and others can be relied upon because *Onyame* is *Tweduampɔn* (“The Dependable”) and *Amɔamee* (“Giver of sufficiency”). The belief in *Onyame*’s power as a provider is deeply embedded in Akan religious culture. The following Akan maxims (*mmɛ*) evidence this belief and its importance in the conceptualization of *Onyame* and in the larger theoretical framework of Akan cosmology: A) *Onyame bɛma woamee a, ennim sɛ woatua kɔntɔmoa kɛsɛɛ* (“If *Onyame* is going to satisfy you, it does not matter if you take a big portion of fufu”); B) *Nyame ma wo ɛsono kotokuo a, ɔmma wo deɛ wode behyɛ mu* (“If *Nyame* [*Onyame*] gives you a bag made of elephant hide, *Nyame* gives you something to fill it with”); C) *Onyame na ɔwɔ basin fufuo ma no* (“It is *Onyame* who pounds fufu for the armless one”); D) *Onyame ma wo yareɛ a, ɔma wo ano aduro* (“If *Onyame* gives you an illness, *Onyame* also gives you medicine”).<sup>303</sup> The maxims just identified document the belief that human life is a relentlessly needful reality that

requires the prodigious and intimate involvement of *Onyame*. However, the Akan are also very clear in their belief that the involvement of *Onyame* in the maintenance of human life in no way guarantees an easy existence devoid of suffering. Hence the Akan sayings, *Onyame soma wo a, ɔma wo fa monkyimɔnka kwan so* (“If Onyame sends you on an errand, [Onyame] makes you walk on a difficult [literally, ‘smelly and dirty’] road”), and *Qbra ye ku* (“Life is war”).<sup>304</sup> These maxims indicate a profound acknowledgement of travail as a permanent feature of the human condition. They also manifest the notion that the sustenance provided by *Onyame* in no way exempts human beings from the vicissitudes and constant risks of life. Rather, the pluriform sustenance provided by *Onyame* constitutes the means by which human beings can gain the power necessary to effectively manage the dangerous unpredictability of life.

Our discussion thus far has focused mainly on how *Onyame* is conceptualized in Akan cosmology. We have found that the Akan tradition of originary narration, traditional religious appellations, and oral philosophical literature in the form of wise sayings (*mmē*) reveal *Onyame* as a being encompassing a wide range of meanings, all of which are related to the construction of religious knowledge in Akan culture. What still remains to be addressed in a more in-depth way is the question of *Onyame*’s epistemological significance within the theoretical framework of Akan cosmology. In the interest of greater clarity and structure, we will thematically frame our phenomenological discussion of *Onyame*’s epistemological significance in terms of some of the related motifs that are present in the originary narrative, appellations, and maxims examined above. We will focus specifically on three of these motifs. The first motif we will consider has to do with the belief that Onyame’s meaning and power encompass more than parochial human

concerns. We may think of this particular motif as the illimitability of spirit. The second motif to be explored is related to *Onyame's sui generis* ontological status and to *Onyame's* creative aspect. This motif can be described as prolific singularity. The third motif to be discussed highlights travail as a fundamental reality of human existence. We can conceive of this motif as existential travail. The discussion to follow will treat in turn each of these motifs.

### *The Illimitability of Spirit*

The Akan originary narrative examined earlier introduces us to a distinct tradition of religio-philosophical thought embedded within the traditional stories (such as those featuring the famous character Ananse the Spider [Kwaku Ananse] who is reverently regarded by the Akan),<sup>305</sup> beliefs, concepts, maxims (*mmē*), songs, ritual structures and practices that both constitute and encode Akan cosmology. The Akan originary narrative referenced above addresses the issue of *being* as it relates both to *Onyame* and to the theater of human existence. Another way of saying this is that the narrative can be framed conceptually and perhaps also theoretically as a response to the following question: How might we understand *Onyame's* being vis-à-vis that of humankind? Readers will remember that the narrative begins with the assertion that *Onyame* once lived in intimate contact with the human community, so much so that *Onyame's* immediate presence was tangible. However, a disturbance arises when an old woman's preparation of *fufuu* results in *Onyame* being repeatedly struck by the "pestle" the woman uses to pound her *fufuu*. Consequently, *Onyame* gradually departs from the immediate presence of the old woman and her community. *Onyame's* departure fundamentally alters the way in which the old woman and her community relate to *Onyame*. Instead of

the members of this community continuing to more or less take *Onyame*'s immediate presence for granted as they go about the business of managing their daily affairs, they now find themselves immersed in a rather desperate struggle to re-establish the intimacy they once shared with *Onyame*, a struggle that tragically ends in multiple accidental deaths.

I would suggest that one of the primary trajectories of meaning in this narrative is epistemological in nature. It is possible to interpret *Onyame*'s departure not as an exasperated and final retreat away from the concerns and needs of the human community, but rather as an ontological assertion of spiritual illimitability vis-à-vis the innumerable problems, pressures, and anxieties that circumscribe the human condition. In this perspective, *Onyame*'s departure is not so much about frustration with or disinterest in the human world as it is about the creation of an opportunity for humans to inhabit a particular mode of knowing. This mode of knowing has to do with the power of *Onyame* as a purely spiritual being to exist independently of the restrictive burdens of human life. It is precisely the autonomous spiritual power of *Onyame* as depicted in the narrative that signals a form of knowledge that reaches beyond the determinative boundaries imposed by existential or earthly realities. *Onyame*'s departure signals a form of knowledge that interfaces with the world of spirit despite the limitations attending the human condition. We can therefore understand *Onyame*'s momentous departure in the narrative as a unique gesture that implicitly reveals the epistemological principle of the illimitability of spirit. The motif of the illimitability of spirit as expressed through *Onyame* reflects an epistemological orientation that instates the spiritual domain as the cardinal source of knowledge that both tempers and deepens forms of knowing that are germane to the

idiosyncracies and subjectively motivated myopias that often characterize human experience.

Indeed, one could argue that *Onyame's* departure in the narrative is the consequence of a kind of myopia demonstrated by the old woman in her vigorous effort to sate her hunger and perhaps that of others as well by obliviously preparing *fufuu*. *Onyame's* departure and the community's ill-fated attempt to reach *Onyame* by constructing a mortar "ladder" make possible the realization that knowledge of the spiritual domain involves an understanding of the spiritual domain as an unbounded reality that can greatly enhance the substance and function of knowledge in the human domain. Framed in different language, it is by virtue of *Onyame's* decisive departure that human modes of knowing merge or collide with spiritual modes of knowing. Thus, in Akan religious philosophy, epistemologies of human existence fold into a spiritual epistemology that reverently acknowledges *Onyame* as the source of the deeper understandings of reality that ensue as a result of this epistemological enfolding or intermingling. It is in this sense that we can think of *Onyame* as the root or beginning (and end) of epistemology in the Akan tradition. In simpler terms, *Onyame* is the beginning and end of knowledge.

The originary narrative treated above represents one of the primary cultural idioms through which the epistemological significance of *Onyame* is encoded and transmitted. However, we would be mistaken in assuming that *Onyame's* status as a chief source of epistemological meaning is not encoded elsewhere as well. Traditional Akan appellations used to refer to *Onyame* represent a second cultural idiom linking *Onyame* to Akan epistemology. We have noted that many traditional Akan appellations for *Onyame* highlight *Onyame's sui generis* ontological status as the sole matrix of existence as well

as *Onyame*'s role as the creative provider and sustainer of life. Given their relevance to the current discussion of *Onyame* as a major source of Akan epistemology, it would be helpful to list again some popular appellations used in reference to *Onyame*. They include the following: A) *Nana Onyankopɔn* ("Grandfather or Grandmother, Nyame who alone is the Great One"), B) *Tetekwaframo*a ("The One who is there now as from ancient times"), C) *Nana* ("Grand Ancestor"), D) *Atoapem* ("Unsurpassable"), E) *Brekɔyirihunuade* ("The One who sees all, even from behind"), F) *Bɔrebɔre* ("Excavator, Hewer, Creator, Originator, Carver, Architect"), G) *ɔdomankoma* ("Creator, Boundless, Absolute"), H) *ɔbɔadee* ("Creator"), I) *Obiannyew* ("Uncreated"), J) *Enyiasombea* ("Ever-present"), K) *Otumfo* ("The Powerful One"), L) *Tweduampɔn* ("The Dependable"), M) *Amowia* ("Giver of the sun or light"), N) *Amosu* ("Giver of rain"), O) *Totrobonsu* ("The One who causes rain to fall abundantly"), P) *Amɔamee* ("Giver of sufficiency"), Q) *Abɔmmubuwafrɛ* ("Consoler"), and R) *Nyaamanekose* ("The One in whom you confide troubles which come upon you"). While we have already given attention to the importance of these titles in the Akan conceptualization of *Onyame*, we have not yet specified how they help to establish *Onyame* as a central aspect of Akan epistemology. It is to this consideration that we now turn.

### *Prolific Singularity*

I would posit that the appellations under discussion collectively signify a motif that further buttresses the epistemological position of *Onyame* in Akan religious philosophy. We can term this motif prolific singularity. The motif of prolific singularity is useful in that it calls attention to two of *Onyame*'s essential attributes: limitless creative power and complete ontological uniqueness. When considered within the context of Akan

cosmology, appellations like *Tetekwaframo*, *Bɔrebɔre*, *Ɔdomankoma*, *Amowia*, and *Amosu* serve a very specific conceptual and theoretical function with respect to *Onyame*. This function involves the religio-philosophical identification of *Onyame* as the sole fount of existence. As the sole fount of existence, *Onyame* is the source of the human capacity for knowledge and of knowledge itself. The motif of prolific singularity can serve as another conceptual tool that illumines *Onyame*'s significance as a formative element of Akan epistemology. Inasmuch as *Onyame* is a primary basis for various modes of knowing among the Akan, *Onyame* is integral to a phenomenological conception of knowledge that encompasses the origin, development, functions, capabilities, and limitations of knowledge. When framed within the context of Akan epistemology, an understanding of *Onyame* as the primordial and quintessential expression of prolific singularity engenders a distinct perspective on knowledge.

In this distinct perspective, the meaning of *Onyame* as articulated in the motif of prolific singularity helps shape the very conceptualization of knowledge in Akan epistemology. Hence, when considered phenomenologically, knowledge in the Akan context cannot be viewed only as a social product of the human mind that structures consciousness and enables human communities to create and develop systems of meaning. On an even more basic level, knowledge is related to the boundless and entirely unique creativity of *Onyame*; indeed, knowledge at this level is a generative function of *Onyame*'s being. As such, knowledge is a reality to be conceptualized and understood in connection with the characteristics that distinguish *Onyame* in Akan cosmology. We can therefore think of knowledge in a way that takes seriously the relevance of cosmologically-derived motifs such as prolific singularity. Our discussion

of the cosmological foundation of knowledge in Akan culture elicits the following question: What is the relationship between the motif of prolific singularity and the conceptualization of knowledge in Akan epistemology? It seems to me that the most helpful approach to responding to this question involves careful reflection on some of the implications of the motif of prolific singularity for the conceptualization of knowledge in Akan epistemology.

The first thing to note along this line is that, as a descriptor that references *Onyame* who is the source of knowledge, the motif of prolific singularity implies the idea that knowledge in Akan epistemology includes an *originative* spiritual dimension that variously informs all other dimensions of knowledge. Although it is certainly the case that knowledge plays a crucial role in the creation of, for example, language, meaning, and the social structures and institutions that influence how human communities function and develop, knowledge is nevertheless a reality that is rooted in spirit. In the perspective of Akan epistemology, it is imperative that one never lose sight of the formative spiritual ingredient of knowledge. For to do so is to disregard the active role of *Onyame* in the provision of knowledge as well as the need to remain relationally connected to the spiritual world. The point here is that to the degree that the very possibility of knowledge emerges from the creative largesse of *Onyame*, *spirit* is the ultimate *seat* of knowledge, not materiality or human beings' experience of materiality. However, this is not to say that the material world is irrelevant to knowledge as understood within the Akan epistemological scheme. On the contrary, the material world is highly relevant because it is a primary theater for the development and enactment of knowledge. Put shortly, materiality is the stage for the physical realization of knowledge.

Materiality is the stage for the expression of knowledge as a vast and complex range of diverse ideas and practices. It is through the performance or actualization of the numerous forms of knowledge in the material domain that the *prolific* aspect of *Onyame's* being is made manifest. If we view knowledge as a manifestation of the prolific aspect of *Onyame's* being, then it comes as no surprise that knowledge, or the pursuit thereof, has given rise and continues to give rise to countless debates on such topics as the origin of human life, the role of spiritual power in the constitution of the human being, sexuality, and the political organization of human societies. Akan epistemology acknowledges that the phenomenon of human debate is a significant, necessary, and natural part of the process of knowledge production. Hence the existence of the Akan adage (*εβε*), *Anyansafoɔ baanu goro a, ntoto ba* (“If two wise people play together, discord arises”).<sup>306</sup> The following Akan adage also signals the important role of difference in the production of knowledge: *Anyansafoɔ nko ara kyekyere kuro a, εgu* (“If only wise people build up the town, it breaks apart”).<sup>307</sup> These adages suggest both an acknowledgement and a fundamental embrace of the role of disputation and difference in the production of knowledge. In Akan epistemology, the differential complexification of knowledge is a reflection of the complex differentiation that exists among human beings. The idea of human differentiation is expressed in the Akan adage, *Nnipa nyinaa tirim adwene nse* (“All [human beings'] thoughts are not alike”).<sup>308</sup> This complex differentiation among human beings on the level of thought as well as on many other levels reflects (albeit imperfectly) the limitless complexity of *Onyame's* prolific nature. It can be posited therefore that the motif of prolific singularity underscores the centrality

of complex differentiation as a formative element of the concept of knowledge in Akan epistemology.

It is fairly clear at this point that the role of difference and complexity in the Akan conception of knowledge should be an essential consideration in any discussion of Akan epistemology. However, it should also be acknowledged that the motif of prolific singularity as an exploratory tool in our critical reflection on the Akan conception of knowledge implies more than difference and complexity. The motif of prolific singularity also implies a sense or idea of unity that emerges from an acute awareness of *Onyame's* vital status in Akan cosmology as a *sui generis*, purely spiritual being. This notion of singularity or unity is evoked by such appellations as *Nana Onyankopɔn* (“Grandfather or Grandmother, Nyame who *alone* is the Great *One*”), *Tetekwaframo* (“The *One* who is there now as from ancient times”), *Atoapem* (“Unsurpassable”), *Brekirihunuade* (“The *One* who sees all, even from behind”), and *Otumfo* (“The Powerful *One*”). If we accept the closely related assertions that these appellations help shape the conception of *Onyame* in Akan cosmology and that *Onyame* represents the fecund ground of knowledge in Akan religious philosophy, then we must accept as well the assertion that *Onyame* as a *singular* being of pure spirit is also relevant to our understanding of the Akan conception of knowledge in that *Onyame's singularity* simultaneously connects and tempers the disparate forms and expressions of knowledge that occur in the material world. What this means is that, regardless of how disparate they may be, the various permutations of knowledge found in the material world are connected to *Onyame* in that, in an ultimate sense, they are manifestations of *Onyame's* singularly creative nature. From this we can infer that it is not knowledge alone that

influences the actions of human beings. Rather, the spiritual ingredient of knowledge (an ingredient whose permanent and active presence is a function of *Onyame's* primordial and limitless creative power) also influences the actions of human beings. The Akan belief in the decisive influence of spirit on human action gives rise to the following Akan adage: *Ɔbosom na ɛkyere ɔkomfoɔ ntwaɔ* (“It is the spirit that teaches the priest to whirl around”).<sup>309</sup> Of particular interest in this adage is the idea that spirit is involved in the act of teaching, which is an act that engages the mind and the body. An important implication of this adage then is that knowledge and the human body are both vessels of spiritual power and influence.

The singular dimension of *Onyame's* being also serves to temper knowledge. As indicated by two of the traditional Akan appellations we have been considering throughout this discussion, *Onyame's* ontological singularity is “boundless” (*Ɔdomankoma*) and “unsurpassable” (*Atoapem*). Further critical reflection on the relevance of these appellations to our understanding of the conception of knowledge in Akan epistemology suggests that *Onyame* is the terminus beyond which knowledge cannot go. Although *Onyame* is the source of knowledge, knowledge is not equivalent to *Onyame*. The power of knowledge to facilitate the creation and development of meaning in the human world (a power we may also refer to as the theoretical grasp of knowledge) does not encompass *Onyame*. *Onyame* is not searchable or available to knowledge in the way that, for example, the medicinal qualities of the herbaceous plant known in Twi as *Ssome* are available to knowledge,<sup>310</sup> or in the way that the cellular biology of the *odum* tree and the horned adder is available to knowledge. This idea is conveyed in the Akan saying, *Onipa adwene nyɛ Onyame adwene* (“A person’s mind is not the mind of

Onyame”).<sup>311</sup> *Onyame* represents the limit of what knowledge can deliver to human understanding and consciousness. Even though, as we have seen, *Onyame* is very much a part of the Akan tradition of originary narration and is also the subject of numerous Akan appellations and adages, *Onyame* is nonetheless ultimately mysterious to knowledge. Somewhat paradoxically, *Onyame* at once makes possible and delimits the conceptual and theoretical reach of Akan epistemology.

Before moving on to a discussion of the motif of existential travail, which is the third motif under consideration, it is important that we note the status of wisdom (*nyansa*)<sup>312</sup> relative to knowledge (*adwen*) in Akan epistemology. In Akan thought, knowledge is not synonymous with wisdom. Thus a person can be knowledgeable and yet lack wisdom. However, all wise persons are necessarily knowledgeable. Another way of explaining this is that the attainment of knowledge by human beings does not necessarily lead to wisdom. In the Akan philosophical tradition, wisdom involves patient, careful discernment and the judicious application of knowledge. Wisdom entails a mature astuteness that does *not* accrue *de facto* to human beings through the mere acquisition of knowledge. The following adages point to the special quality and status of wisdom in Akan thought: *Onyansafoɔ nko na ɔdwendwenfoɔ nko* (“A wise [person] is one thing and a thinker another”); *Onyansafoɔ, yemmɔ no pɔ* (“A wise [person], we do not tie [him/her] a knot”); *Onyansafoɔ na ɔtumi bɔ dua pɔ* (“It is a wise person who can tie a tree in a knot”); *Onyansafoɔ na ɔtwa akwammee* (“It is a wise person who cuts the roots across the path or gets around an obstacle”).<sup>313</sup> The qualitative and practical distinction between wisdom and knowledge attested in these four adages engenders a sense of *Onyame*’s distinctiveness. Moreover, I would hazard the claim that, for the Akan, the plurifom

manifestation of *Onyame*'s creative power in the world reflects a depth of knowledge *and* wisdom for which there is no approximation. Given that the Akan associate wisdom with ancestorhood and ancestral power,<sup>314</sup> it is perhaps to be expected that among the Akan *Onyame* is *Nana* ("Grand Ancestor").

### *Existential Travail*

We can identify at least one other motif that helps bring into view the epistemological significance of *Onyame* within the theoretical framework of Akan cosmology. The Akan cultural materials we have been discussing – particularly the originary narrative and some of the maxims – communicate something fundamental and important regarding the nature of the human condition. This fundamental and important communication is mediated through a certain characterization of the human condition within the theater of material existence. I would argue that a major aspect of this mediating characterization can be understood in terms of the motif of existential travail. The motif of existential travail underscores the Akan belief that hardship is a reality endemic to the human condition.

As a "provider" (*Amɔamee*) and "consoler" (*Abɔmmubuwafrɛ*), *Onyame* is not unaware of or unconcerned about the many forms of existential travail that beset human beings. However, *Onyame*'s awareness and concern notwithstanding, existential travail remains a reality that human beings must squarely confront and manage as best they can. This sober realization is strongly implicit when the Akan utter the pithy statements, *Onyame soma wo a, ɔma wo fa monkyimɔnka kwan so* ("If *Onyame* sends you on an errand, [*Onyame*] makes you walk on a difficult ['smelly and dirty'] road"), and *Qbra ye ku* ("Life is war"). I would further suggest that also implicit within an Akan perspective on the human condition is the notion that human beings' management of the reality of

existential travail should involve the acceptance and cultivation of a mode of knowing or practical logic rooted in this reality. For the Akan, existential travail is not to be used as justification for the decision made by some human beings to simply withdraw from life or to not face the challenges that life inevitably presents. Instead, the reality of existential travail is to be acknowledged as part of the very structure of life itself. As a structural component not only of the human condition specifically but also of the condition of all life in the material domain, existential travail functions as a source of knowledge that significantly informs our understanding of ourselves as well as the world in which we live.

The following Akan maxims bespeak the structural status and role of existential travail in Akan epistemology: *Mumokyire na shyeɛ na mumokane deɛ enhye* (“Adversity in later life is painful [literally, ‘hot’] but adversity at its beginning is not painful”); *Mmusuo di adwini* (“Adversity practices a trade”).<sup>315</sup> What is important to notice in the first maxim is that even though adversity (or existential travail) is believed to be easier to manage early in life and more difficult to manage later in life, adversity is nevertheless depicted as a perduring reality that affects all stages of life. In the second maxim, adversity plies a “trade.” Given the meanings expressed in the first maxim and in other maxims we have referenced that address the reality of adversity, it is reasonable to conclude that a goal of the “trade” plied by adversity in the second maxim is to affect or “mold” human experience.<sup>316</sup> Adversity or existential travail is epistemological to the extent that it influences or “molds” human experience in a manner that contributes to the production and development of ways of knowing about life and about the world. Far from simply being a problematic and burdensome truth of the human condition,

existential travail is an important ingredient of knowledge that helps determine how the Akan comport themselves in the world. It is also in this somewhat more practical sense that existential travail plies a “trade.” The nature of existential travail is such that it exerts a considerable influence on the cultivation of knowledge as well as the practical implementation thereof. Existential travail thus represents a significant dimension of the Akan “world-sense.”

Furthermore, the substantial part played by existential travail in the cultivation of knowledge and practice within Akan communities suggests the hermeneutical relevance of existential travail. This is to say that the reality of existential travail can in some cases inform how the Akan interpret human experience as well as the human condition. The previous point can be brought to bear on the following Akan maxims: *Ohia de wo na emfaa wo nnuruu de ebeduru a, onnyae wo* (“If poverty has overcome you but it has not taken you to where it is going to take you, it won’t leave you”); *Ohia hia wo a, na woto nsuonwunu mu a, ehye wo* (“If you are suffering from poverty and you fall into cold water, it scalds you”).<sup>317</sup> One observation we can make about these two maxims is that they associate poverty with existential travail. In other words, the Akan view poverty as a form of existential travail. A second observation we can make has to do with those experiences in life that are characterized by periods of unusually acute suffering. The first maxim explains that there are phases in life when suffering besets human beings and, despite all alleviatory efforts, remains with them for a designated period of time. The second maxim explains that there are times in life when, instead of dissipating, suffering multiplies such that one form of suffering is compounded by another form of suffering in an unmitigated fashion.

The emphasis in the first maxim upon a kind of chronologic suffering is a reflection of the Akan's firm but varied belief in destiny (*nkrabea* or *hyebea*),<sup>318</sup> a belief we will examine in greater detail later in the chapter. The emphasis in the second maxim upon compounded suffering sheds more light on the meaning of the Akan saying, *Obra ye ku* ("Life is war"). The second maxim helps us to see that the "war" of life entails not only existential conflict but also suffering which, I would suggest, is in most (if not all) cases causally related to existential conflict of one form or another. Moreover, with respect to both maxims, I would advance the argument that they each manifest the Akan belief in existential travail as a structural component of being. I would further argue that it is this very belief in the structural status and significance of existential travail that helps make possible the kind of interpretations found in the two maxims we are currently considering. The interpretations found in these two maxims may be thought of as interpretations of life experience. If one accepts the notion that existential travail is an important part of what *structures* the world in which human beings live, then it makes sense to also take seriously the possibility that, as indicated in the first maxim, there exist some forms of human suffering that cannot be ended prematurely. Taking such a possibility seriously would likely involve the adoption of interpretations that emerge from a fundamental belief in the structural reality of existential travail. Similarly, an acceptance of the structural import of existential travail vis-à-vis the earthly domain would also mean taking seriously the second maxim's point regarding compounded suffering. Taking this point seriously would in turn mean allowing for interpretations of human experience and of reality that are consistent with an understanding of the structural role of existential travail in the earthly domain.

Our discussion highlights one of the ways in which we might speak of existential travail in hermeneutical terms. When understood as a constituent element of the Akan philosophical system, it is also possible to think of existential travail as a kind of hermeneutical *principle*. As such, existential travail participates in a much larger theoretical framework through which the Akan apprehend the material world. Akan philosophy does not eschew the reality of existential travail in favor of some utopian vision that seeks to ignore or escape the uncertainty and terror that so often attends the human condition. Rather, as the aforementioned maxims illustrate, the reality of existential travail is embedded in Akan modes of thought and perspectives on the nature of the material world and human life. In the Akan intellectual tradition, existential travail functions both as a dangerously formidable reality with which human beings must deal and as a locus of epistemological meaning.

The last several pages have been devoted to the question of *Onyame's* epistemological significance within the context of Akan cosmology. Through further critical reflection on the Akan originary narrative explaining *Onyame's* withdrawal from direct human contact, traditional Akan appellations often used in reference to *Onyame*, and various Akan maxims, we have attempted to establish a sense of how *Onyame* may be understood as a source of knowledge in Akan religious philosophy. The reflection has been framed in terms of three motifs we have described as the illimitability of spirit, prolific singularity, and existential travail. We have tried to show how these motifs are expressed in the Akan cultural idioms listed above. We have also tried to specify what these three motifs might suggest regarding *Onyame's* relevance to Akan epistemology. The task before us now is to explicitly connect our discussion of *Onyame* to the dissertation's basic

conceptual framework which consists of the motifs of the permanency of existential conflict, irresolution, and mystery. My argument here is that the motifs of the illimitability of spirit, prolific singularity, and existential travail signal the importance of the permanency of existential conflict, irresolution, and mystery as motifs that further enlarge our understanding of Akan cosmology as a religious or spiritual epistemology. In the discussion to follow, one motif will be coupled with another motif based upon the particular implicative link between them. We begin with the motifs of existential travail and the permanency of existential conflict.

*Existential Travail and the Permanency of Existential Conflict*

The motif of existential travail brings to light the Akan notion that the human condition is often a strife-ridden condition. For the Akan, strife represents what is on many levels a primary context of human life. The reality of strife seems to be endemic to human existence, so much so that the Akan interpret existence itself as a kind of “war” (*Obra ye ku*). Furthermore, as pointed out previously, the Akan are very clear in their belief that acts performed by human beings in the name of or in service to *Onyame*, the “architect” of existence, are also subject to the reality of existential travail (*Onyame soma wo a, ɔma wo fa monkyimɔnka kwan so* [“If Onyame sends you on an errand, Onyame makes you walk on a difficult road”]). The motif of existential travail calls attention to the fact that the world is fundamentally structured such that it often functions in a way that is antagonistic to the realization of human motives and agendas. Therefore, human beings must struggle daily for what they need and want. The same is true on a somewhat more primal level for all other creatures of the natural world. The antagonistic aspect of

the structure of being suggests that the motif of existential travail can also be translated and understood in terms of conflict.

Existential travail is often the result of conflict. For example, the communal upheaval that occurs in the Akan originary narrative examined earlier is causally related to the conflict that arises between the old woman and *Onyame*. The old woman's preparation of *fufuu* is obviously intended to promote human survival and well-being through the provision of food. Even so, the old woman's preparation of *fufuu* physically impinges upon *Onyame*, thereby creating a conflict that occasions *Onyame's* withdrawal. Moreover, the Akan maxim *Obra ye ku* ("Life is war") suggests that conflict is a ubiquitous reality that all material beings must learn to effectively manage if they are to survive and attain well-being and prosperity. The ubiquity of conflict as attested in the statement *Obra ye ku* brings into view the motif of the permanency of existential conflict as an important aspect of Akan epistemology. The motif of the permanency of existential conflict is a serious acknowledgement of the fact that on many levels life is an almost constant struggle against countervailing forces and circumstances. This should not, however, be taken to mean that Akan epistemology celebrates conflict, or that within an Akan epistemological framework life is reducible to conflict. Instead, what this motif affirms is the idea that a critical acknowledgement of the permanency of conflict in the world is one way of rendering the frequently paradoxical complexity and messiness of life more intelligible.

The concept of perduring existential conflict is encoded in the Akan maxim *Obra ye ku* and in some of the other maxims we have referenced in this section, particularly the maxims *Onyame soma wo a, ama wo fa monkyimɔnka kwan so* ("If Onyame sends you on

an errand, [Onyame] makes you walk on a difficult road”), *Ohia de wo na emfaa wo nnuruu deε ebeduru a, onnyaε wo* (“If poverty has overcome you but it has not taken you to where it is going to take you, it won’t leave you”), and *Mmusuo di adwini* (“Adversity practices a trade”). These maxims seem to reflect a cultural logic in which the motif of perduring existential conflict plays an important role. Put differently, these maxims disclose an Akan grammar of knowing that foregrounds the reality of perduring conflict as a formative aspect of the human condition. As opposed to eliding or ignoring the reality of perduring conflict in the world, an Akan grammar of knowing suggests that much can be known *through* conflict. The “trade” plied by adversity (*Mmusuo di adwini*) has an epistemological dimension in that it promotes not only the practical development of human beings, but also the development of human understanding. It is in this sense that existential travail is simultaneously and integrally related both to conflict and to the production and development of knowledge.

One could still press the issue here by requesting that we specify examples of the kind of knowledge that results from a serious recognition of the reality of perduring conflict in the world. The four maxims mentioned at the beginning of this paragraph are specific examples of knowledge derived from a sober awareness of existential conflict. For it is an awareness or recognition of conflict as a fundamental component of the very fabric of existence itself that enables the Akan to metaphorically interpret life as “war” and to incorporate conflict into their conceptions of adversity and destiny as expressed in the last two maxims. Likewise, a recognition of the structural status of conflict helps give rise to the maxim which articulates the Akan understanding of what it means experientially for human beings to run “errands” for *Onyame*. Furthermore, as it relates

to practical knowledge derived from the reality of perduring conflict, we could also specify Akan anti-*bayi boro* rites, as these rites are expressly performed to address conflictual and deleterious situations created by the negative utilization of spiritual power (*bayi boro*). We will treat Akan anti-*bayi boro* rites more extensively later in our analysis. The point in briefly listing these examples is simply to show that the Akan's recognition of conflict as a structural component of existence is in fact philosophically and practically actualized in Akan culture.

*The Illimitability of Spirit and Irresolution*

Another important thematic coupling to be explored includes the motifs of the illimitability of spirit and irresolution. It was suggested earlier in our discussion that the story of *Onyame*'s withdrawal from the intimacy of human contact can also be interpreted as a narrative that communicates something very distinct about the nature of *Onyame* as well as that of the spiritual world; namely, that it is the nature of *Onyame* specifically and of spiritual realities generally to elude all forms of containment. *Onyame* and the spiritual world (*Asamando*) are always more than the fabricated concepts human beings rely upon in order to describe and categorize *Onyame* and other spiritual realities. This point helps to further establish an idea of what is meant by the term "illimitability of spirit." The motif of the illimitability of spirit is linked to the motif of irresolution in that the former signals the latter. The idea of spiritual illimitability is a way of articulating the Akan belief that the powers and meanings of the spiritual dimension are not reducible to or resolvable within any humanly-contrived conceptual or theoretical configuration. This is part of what is expressed by the Akan maxim, *Wope asem aka akyere Onyame a, ka kyere mframa* ("If you want to say something to *Onyame*, say it to the wind"). The

purposeful association of *Onyame* with the wind indicates that, in an Akan perspective, spiritual power and meaning has less to do with resolution and more to do with unpredictable complexity and expanse. In some ways, the unpredictable complexity of the spiritual dimension in Akan belief positions this dimension as the ultimate seat of paradox. The Akan therefore say, *Ɖbosom a ɔma mma, na ɔfa mma* (“The spirit which brings children also takes children”).<sup>319</sup> In Akan cosmology, the spiritual dimension is a repository of power capable of altering human circumstances that may otherwise seem unalterable. I would posit that this radically disruptive, re-directive power is to some degree a function of the irresolvable complexity of the spiritual dimension. A firm belief in the *transformative* potential and intentionality of spiritual power enables the Akan to declare, *Ɖbosom kɔm a, na ɛmfiri nnyegyesoɔ* (“If the spirit [alights], it is not because of adulation”).<sup>320</sup>

Also relevant to our discussion is the following question: What does the motif of irresolution imply concerning the status of knowledge in Akan epistemology? We can begin our response to this query by noting that the motif of irresolution suggests a correlative link between the spiritual dimension and the material dimension. This link has its origin in the Akan belief that the material emanates from the spiritual via the creative power of *Onyame*. Thus the reality or condition of irresolution is also applicable to the material world, although the scope of the *material* condition of irresolution is not limitless, as is the case in the spiritual world. The epiphenomenal status of the material world relative to the spiritual world means that, to the extent that *Onyame* is the ontological progenitor of knowledge, all knowledge is participatorily rooted in the irresolvability of spirit.

The correlative link between the spiritual and material worlds also suggests that neither knowledge nor materiality is homogeneously conceptualized in Akan epistemology. Rather, knowledge as well as the material domain of which knowledge seeks to make sense are understood in heterogenous terms. This is suggested, for instance, by the maxims *Nnipa nyinaa tirim adwene nse* (“All men’s thoughts are not alike”), and *Nnipa nyinaa wɔ ti, nso wontiri nse* (“All people have heads, but their heads are not alike”).<sup>321</sup> What is more, the inclination in Akan epistemology toward recognizing heterogeneity and complexity in the material domain helps facilitate the apperception and philosophical integration of, for instance, paradoxical realities. The following Akan maxims are indicative of such philosophical integration: *Papa akatua ne bɔne* (“The reward of goodness is evil”); *Papa asusu de rekɔ no, na bɔne di akyire rekɔgye* (“While goodness is thinking where he will go, evil is following him to frustrate his efforts”).<sup>322</sup> Interestingly, paradoxical realities such as the ones identified in these maxims do not necessarily emerge in Akan epistemology as logical problems to be resolved and forgotten. The Akan appear *not* to see paradox as inimical to the development of a coherent religio-philosophical system. To the contrary, in an Akan point of view, critical engagement of the reality of paradox contributes to the production of knowledge while also rendering knowledge a more authentic expression of human experience. This is one way in which we can think of paradox as a source of knowledge in Akan epistemology.

The reality of paradox and the motif of irresolution both signal the “elasticity” and dynamism of knowledge in Akan epistemology. As we will see later in our discussion, the Akan tradition affords a sacral status to certain forms of knowledge that bear a more

direct relation to spiritual realities. However, no form of knowledge can ever be as sacrosanct as the spiritual world it aims to signify and understand. Hence the Akan aver, *Onipa adwene nyɛ Onyame adwene* (“A person’s mind is not the mind of Onyame”). In Akan epistemology, ossified dogma is not the goal of knowledge production. Instead, knowledge must remain pliant enough to constructively and usefully address the ever-changing realities of the spiritual and material worlds. For this reason, knowledge can never be a perfect or closed system of ideas and theories. For the Akan, knowledge makes sense only if understood as a necessarily fragmentary phenomenon that maintains a posture of adaptation rather than a posture of stagnation or domination. It is quite difficult to imagine how the paradoxical sensibilities documented in the maxims *Papa akatua ne bɔne* (“The reward of goodness is evil”) and *Papa asusu de rekɔ no, na bɔne di akyire rekɔgye* (“While goodness is thinking where he will go, evil is following him to frustrate his efforts”) could ever be cultivated and expressed in an epistemological framework that was not fundamentally oriented toward adaptation.

In the Akan context, knowledge production alone is not an end in itself, nor is the aim of such production abstract reflection purely for the sake of abstract reflection. Knowledge production in the Akan context is an ongoing process in which the irresolvable, mysterious realities that constitute the spiritual and material worlds play a decisive and primary role in shaping *functional* modes of perceiving and knowing that help organize the lives of human communities in meaningful and empowering ways. To be clear, I am not claiming that Akan religio-philosophical thought is devoid of abstract conceptualization or contemplation. The specious nature of such a view has been convincingly revealed in the groundbreaking scholarship of J. B. Danquah, W. E.

Abraham, Kwame Gyekye, and others.<sup>323</sup> What I am claiming is that a major distinguishing element among the various modes of thought that comprise the Akan religio-philosophical tradition is an emphasis on developing knowledge that has functional import within human communities and that promotes the well-being of human communities. The functional quality of knowledge in Akan culture will be more evident when we engage in a detailed discussion of Akan ritual practices later in the analysis.

*Prolific Singularity and Mystery*

The above discussion of the coupled motifs of the illimitability of spirit and irresolution is a helpful segue into a consideration of the conjoined motifs of prolific singularity and mystery. We noted earlier that the motif of prolific singularity is primarily associated with *Onyame*. This motif calls to mind some of the traditional Akan appellations for *Onyame* such as *Otumfo* (“The Powerful One”), *Amowia* (“Giver of the sun or light”), *Amosu* (“Giver of rain”), *Totrobonsu* (“The One who causes rain to fall abundantly”), *Ɔdomankoma* (“Creator, Boundless, Absolute”), and *Atoapem* (“Unsurpassable”). The Akan conceive of *Onyame* as a “boundless” primordial being whose creative scope is also beyond measure. As mentioned previously, *Onyame*’s creative scope includes the *knowledges* upon which human beings rely. Ironically, however, *Onyame*’s *sui generis* ontological status means that *Onyame* is never the subject of any definitive or comprehensive form of knowledge.

The Akan do not include *Onyame* within the realm of realities that are entirely available to knowledge and thus entirely knowable. As a foundational element of Akan epistemology, *Onyame*, who may be thought of as *the* ultimate and unknowable prolific singularity of existence, introduces the motif of mystery. The motif of mystery as

expressed in the Akan conceptualization of *Onyame* represents one way of contextualizing how knowledge itself is understood in the Akan tradition. An important principle of Akan epistemology is the idea that all knowledge is tempered by limitations naturally imposed upon it by the spiritual world which, as indicated earlier, is simply not knowable in the way that the material world through which it is expressed is knowable. Part of what this suggests is that the range of meanings and understandings that knowledge yields does not completely encompass the realities of the spiritual world, all of which lie beyond the scope of what knowledge can fully grasp conceptually and theoretically. In the Akan tradition of thought, knowledge does not depart from its spiritual moorings. It can therefore be asserted that, in Akan thought, spirit is the foundational context of knowledge. In this sense, knowledge is never more than spirit. In its most salutary form, knowledge is a tool that promotes ever-more meaningful and constructive relation with the spiritual world. The necessarily limited range of knowledge in the human domain is attested in the Akan maxim, *Wopɛ sɛ wohunu nneema nyinaa a, w'ani fura* (“If you want to see everything, you become blind”).<sup>324</sup> Human beings cannot lay claim to the entire spectrum of knowledge pertaining to the material and spiritual worlds. In Akan belief, *Onyame* alone is the one who can lay claim to those aspects along the spectrum of knowledge that remain mysterious to the human mind. This belief also acts as a reminder that the spectrum of knowledge itself is a function of *Onyame*'s creative largesse.

Paradoxically, it is out of mystery then that knowledge emerges as a spiritually-rooted tool upon which human beings depend for fundamental orientation and survival in the material world. Mystery is both the ground of knowledge and the recondite hinterland

that knowledge cannot penetrate. As a highly multifarious and functional expression of *Onyame's* fecund nature, knowledge both illumines and confounds. It is quite interesting to note that, in the perspective of Akan epistemology, the confounding aspects of knowledge are not elided or devalued, as one might expect. The confounding aspects of knowledge signify the limits of knowledge. One finds in Akan thought the idea that limited knowledge can be beneficial to human beings. The following Akan maxims encode this idea: *Nyansa bebrebe ma ɔman bɔ* (“Too much wisdom spoils the state”); *Nyansa dodoɔ gyae aboa* (“Too much wisdom lets the animal go”).<sup>325</sup> Another interesting observation to be made here is that these maxims challenge the notion that the value of knowledge lies solely in its critical ability to aid human beings in the process of translating their experience of the world into coherent, articulable explanations. This is not to suggest that the Akan see no value in the explicative power of knowledge. We should always bear in mind that the functional importance of knowledge in Akan culture has much to do with the role that knowledge plays in organizing human communities in ways that are morally desirable and practically efficacious. However, one could nonetheless suggest that the inherent limitations of knowledge also bespeak its value.

The inherent limitations of knowledge are of value because they uniquely signify the spiritual world (*Asamando*). Put otherwise, the spiritual world powerfully (and perhaps disruptively) comes into view when knowledge reaches the terminus of its explanatory power. An acute awareness of the explanatory limits of knowledge underscores the need for human beings to forge strong relationships with the spiritual world. For, as the limits of knowledge suggest, the power of the spiritual world far exceeds that of knowledge. Just as the achievements of knowledge function to orient human beings in the world, so

too do the failures of knowledge orient human beings in the world. The latter form of spiritual orientation which arises in part from an encounter with that which knowledge cannot address is reflected in the Akan maxim, *Me a meda ayeya menhunu Nyame, na wo a wobutu ho* (“If I who lie on my back cannot see Nyame, how can you who lie on your stomach?”).<sup>326</sup> This maxim implies that not everything is subject to explanation, and not all problems can be solved. A cardinal insight of Akan epistemology that relates closely to the point just made is that spirit constitutes the possibility of knowledge while also confounding knowledge. However, this confounding of knowledge need not lead to frustration or disillusionment with the human process of knowledge production. Such malcontent need not occur because the confounding of knowledge can lead to deeper forms of human growth and empowerment made possible only by the mysterious yet educative activity of the spiritual world (*Obosom na ekyerε akomfoε ntwaho* [“It is the spirit that teaches the priest to whirl around”]).

Thus far our analysis of Akan cosmology has focused on the conceptualization of *Onyame* and on how this conceptualization relates to Akan epistemology. We have considered narrative, appellational, and aphorismal expressions of *Onyame*’s meaning in Akan cosmology, and in so doing we have identified some of the ways in which these cultural idioms illumine important dimensions of Akan epistemology. We will now transition into a discussion of the role and epistemological significance of the lesser deities within the Akan cosmological tradition. These lesser deities are members of the spiritual community over which *Onyame* presides. Additionally, some of these lesser deities serve as spiritual intermediaries between human beings and *Onyame* and therefore are often more directly involved in the affairs of the human world.

## Lesser Deities (*Abosom*)

### *Sunsum and the Lesser Deities*

We may think of *sunsum* (“spirit”) as a foundational principle in Akan cosmology that frames how the lesser deities (*abosom*) and other created beings are understood by the Akan. However, we must note that there is considerable disagreement among Akan scholars as to the meaning of *sunsum*. The disagreement seems to center mainly on the nature of *sunsum*. For instance, while not disavowing the immaterial or spiritual dimension of *sunsum*, J. B. Danquah and K. A. Busia afford *sunsum* a considerable measure of materiality by placing great emphasis on its apparent connection to the more externally perceivable reality of human personality or “ego.” Danquah writes that “we now know the notion which corresponds to the Akan ‘*sunsum*’ namely, not ‘spirit’ as such, but personality which covers the relation of the ‘body’ to the ‘soul’ (*ɔkra*).”<sup>327</sup> Similarly, Busia describes *sunsum* as the basis or essence of the human “ego.”<sup>328</sup>

Kwame Gyekye challenges the perspective of Danquah and Busia as well as anthropologists and sociologists who prefer to interpret *sunsum* solely in materialist terms.<sup>329</sup> Gyekye concedes that Danquah and Busia are correct in highlighting the fact that there is evidence in Akan culture to suggest that *sunsum* does seem to relate on some level to the idea of personality. This evidence exists in the form of common sayings among the Akan. For example, when a person has a strong personality, the Akan often say, *ne sunsum yɛ duru* (“[Her] *sunsum* is ‘heavy’ or ‘weighty”). Likewise, if a person is in the presence of someone with an especially “impressive” or powerful personality, the Akan may say, *ne sunsum hyɛ me so* (“[She] has an overshadowing *sunsum*”), or *ɔwɔ sunsum* (“[She] has *spirit*”). Persons may also be described as having a “submissive” or

“weak” *sunsum*.<sup>330</sup> However, in Gyekye’s view, it does not follow from the adduced evidence that *sunsum* is understood by the Akan as a fundamentally material reality. Gyekye makes three main points in support of his view of *sunsum*: 1) The Akan widely and generally use the term *sunsum* in reference to realities that are believed to be fundamentally “mystical, nonempirical,” or spiritual, such as *sunsum yare* (“spiritual disease”);<sup>331</sup> 2) As an immaterial “force” or “power” that the Akan believe constitutes spiritual entities and inhabits and affects all other created things, including human beings and the natural world, *sunsum* is ultimately an expression of *Onyame*’s power. Unlike *ntoro* (a “semen-transmitted characteristic” that stems from a human father), *sunsum* “derives” only from *Onyame*;<sup>332</sup> 3) The Akan identify the *sunsum* as the part of the self that is active during human dream states, which the Akan believe to be purely non-physical experiences.<sup>333</sup>

Gyekye’s perspective is compelling particularly because it seems more consistent with the fundamentally spiritualistic (or spiritualizing) orientation of Akan cosmology. His interpretation of *sunsum* helps us to understand the lesser deities of Akan cosmology both as non-empirical instances of *sunsum* and as active agents whose *sunsum* helps to enable their efficacious presence in the physical world. Gyekye explains that

The spiritual beings are said to be invisible and intangible, but they are also said to make themselves felt in the physical world. They can thus interact with the physical world. But from this it cannot be inferred that they are physical or quasi-physical or have permanent physical properties. It means that a spiritual being can, when it so desires, take on physical properties. That is, even though a spiritual being is nonspatial in essence, it can, by the sheer operation of its power, assume spatial properties.<sup>334</sup>

*Sunsum* participates in the tangible world. Yet in no way is *sunsum* a fundamentally tangible reality. Absent the principle of *sunsum*, it would be quite difficult to imagine –

much less understand – the lesser deities included in the Akan cosmological scheme. *Sunsum* establishes the lesser deities' inseverable relationship to *Onyame* as well as the ontological conditions under which these deities interact with and influence the physical or “spatial” world. As Gyekye, Danquah, and Busia in various ways indicate in their respective interpretations, *sunsum* is a source of spiritual meaning and activity that, among countless other things, undergirds the human personality. However, Gyekye's interpretation of *sunsum* is more helpful than Danquah's and Busia's because Gyekye's interpretation clarifies the basic notion that, as a fundamentally numinous reality, *sunsum* is never reducible to the human personality nor to the material realities and experiences related thereto. The religio-philosophical category of *sunsum* lends a measure of intelligibility to the lesser deities of Akan cosmology. However, this intelligibility is not exhaustive; as beings that have their origin in *Onyame*, the lesser deities are only partially available to human knowledge. One cannot know all that there is to know about the lesser deities because the full scope of what can be known about these deities necessarily eludes measure.<sup>335</sup> Part of what is known though is that, as instances of *sunsum*, the lesser deities are *vital, active* agents that play a major role in helping human beings to achieve and maintain moral rectitude and well-being.

What follows is an analysis of the lesser deities of Akan cosmology that is significantly informed by the concept of *sunsum*. An understanding of *sunsum* as a numinous yet animative outgrowth of *Onyame*'s power or being is useful in helping to establish a working sense of what *Asase Yaa*, the *Tete Abosom*, the *Suman Brafoɔ*, the *Mmoatia*, the *Sasabonsam*, , and the *Nsamanfo* (“ancestors”) mean within the larger religio-philosophical framework of Akan cosmology. The idea of *sunsum* establishes this

working sense by creating a conceptual context within which we can think about the lesser deities of Akan cosmology in relation to both the spiritual and material worlds. We commence our analysis with a consideration of *Asase Yaa*.

### *Asase Yaa*

The term “*Asase Yaa*” is an expression of the Akan idea that the earth itself is a spirit being. Unlike *Onyame*, *Asase Yaa* (known by the Fante as *Asase Efua*) is a gendered being and thus also carries the name *Aberewa* (“old woman/mother”).<sup>336</sup> Within the cosmological traditions of the Asante and the Fante as well as those of other Akan groups, *Asase Yaa* is “outranked” only by *Onyame*. Therefore, during the offering of libations (which involves the pouring out of millet-infused water and/or some other alcoholic beverage as a demonstration of respect and gratitude for a particular deity as well as the protection or other services that deity provides),<sup>337</sup> *Asase Yaa* is given her “drink” immediately after *Onyame* is shown the initial “drink.” As is the case with *Onyame*, no shrines or temples are erected in honor of *Asase Yaa*, nor are there any priestly traditions related specifically or exclusively to her. This is so because the Akan believe that “everyone has direct access to her and her bounty is accessible to all.”<sup>338</sup> Hence, unlike other “oracular” deities in the Akan tradition, *Asase Yaa* is not sought after for guidance or assistance in times of great travail. She alone constitutes a unique class among the various deities/spirits that populate the Akan cosmos. This belief gives rise to the Akan saying, *Asase nye bosom, ɔnkyere mmusu* (“The Earth is not a god, she does not divine”).<sup>339</sup>

Her unmediated accessibility notwithstanding, *Asase Yaa* is the subject of sacred days of observance. In communities where the earth deity is known as *Asase Yaa*, Thursday is

designated as the sacred day of observance. In communities that know the earth deity as *Asase Efua*, Friday is designated as the sacred day of observance. On these sacred days, the cultivation of land is expressly disallowed as a “taboo,” the violation of which could expose the community to harm or “evil.” Opoku adds that “It is also believed that anyone who ventures into the forest on these special days will encounter the most unpleasant things imaginable and may not even survive to tell his experience.”<sup>340</sup>

*Asase Yaa* is also the focus of various forms of sacrifice (*afɔre* or *afɔrebɔ*),<sup>341</sup> some of which have to do with farming, burial of the dead, and appeasement due to the violence of human bloodshed. For instance, before planting their crops, Akan farmers “sprinkle” the blood of sacrificed fowls on the land they wish to cultivate. Additionally, these farmers cook different foods which they then “scatter” in four directions (north, south, east, and west) as another offering to *Asase Yaa*. The belief undergirding both of these rituals is that the farmers cannot cultivate the land unless granted permission to do so by the “owners” of the land – namely, *Asase Yaa* and the ancestors (*Nsamanfo*).<sup>342</sup>

Sacrifice is also made to *Asase Yaa* prior to the digging of graves. This is so because the Akan believe that human beings originally entered the realm of physical existence through the “bowels” of the earth and therefore must return to the earth in death. Hence, before the digging of any grave, the Akan pour a libation. This ritual gesture serves as a formal request for “permission” from *Asase Yaa* to dig a grave “so that a child of *Asase Yaa* may be buried in her womb.”<sup>343</sup> This practice re-inscribes the Akan belief in the sacrality of the earth and of human beings’ relationship with the earth. Moreover, to the extent that this practice seeks to maintain a harmonious relationship with the natural world, it promotes an existential condition of balance. The same can also be said of

large-scale sacrifices made to *Asase Yaa* due to human bloodshed, which she “abhors.”<sup>344</sup> Failure to appease *Asase Yaa* after the shedding of human blood can result in communities suffering tremendously from “untold calamities.”<sup>345</sup> Harmonious relation with the natural world is also contingent upon a commitment on the part of human beings to the virtue of honesty, as *Asase Yaa* is viewed by the Akan as a “keen upholder of truth.” Thus, when the truthfulness of a statement made by a person is called into question, that person is “challenged” by the community to touch the tip of his/her tongue with soil in order to “prove” that the statement he/she made is in fact accurate.<sup>346</sup>

### *Tete Abosom*

The *Tete Abosom* stand as one of the most important classes of deities in Akan cosmology. As the “children” of *Onyame* (*Onyame mba*), the *Tete Abosom* are said to be “ancient” and have been a major focus of religious veneration since perhaps as early as the inception of Akan society.<sup>347</sup> The religious veneration of the *Tete Abosom* stems from their relationship to *Onyame*. The Akan believe that, as “children” of *Onyame*, the *Tete Abosom* are commissioned by *Onyame* to serve the interests of human communities (villages, towns, states, etc.) who in turn offer regular veneration. As *Onyankopon akyeame* (“linguists and mouthpieces of *Onyame*”),<sup>348</sup> the *Tete Abosom* communicate with human beings and *Onyame*, thereby functioning as intermediaries between the two.

While the *Tete Abosom* are believed to be ambulant, they are also closely associated with particular local sites as well as natural objects such as mountains, hills, rocks, trees, plants, brooks, lakes, and rivers.<sup>349</sup> As “communally owned” deities, the *Tete Abosom* can be sub-categorized based upon the sector of society with which particular *Tete Abosom* are traditionally affiliated.<sup>350</sup> For instance, the river/thunder deity commonly

referred to as *Tanɔ* (or *Ta Kora*)<sup>351</sup> is traditionally affiliated with the large-scale socio-political institutions of the Asante, and is therefore categorized as a State deity. Other *Tete Abosom* are affiliated with, for example, A) specific clans or lineages, B) professions such as hunting, fishing, farming, artisanry, and entrepreneurship, or C) fertility. These *Tete Abosom* are therefore appropriately categorized as clan, patron, or fertility deities.<sup>352</sup> However, regardless of their respective societal affiliations, all *Tete Abosom* share the common goal of protection, which is to say that the primary role of the *Tete Abosom* involves safeguarding human communities from danger and “misfortune.”<sup>353</sup> This is precisely why the *Tete Abosom* are often described as “tutelar” deities.<sup>354</sup> These “tutelar” deities are essentially functionaries of *Onyame*. Thus, strictly speaking, the *Tete Abosom* are not fully autonomous agents.

Although it has been said that there are “hundreds” of *Tete Abosom*,<sup>355</sup> it seems nearly impossible to precisely determine how great the *Tete Abosom* are in number, as some of these deities are believed to be capable of “birthing” new deities in response to “the needs of their subjects.”<sup>356</sup> As shown above, the *Tete Abosom*’s field of operation is quite extensive. The degrees of importance attributed to the various *Tete Abosom* correlate with the kinds of human “needs” for which particular *Tete Abosom* are responsible. Due to the fact that state or “national” deities serve the needs of larger Akan political institutions upon which small towns and villages depend, these deities are typically believed to be of greater importance than the more localized *Tete Abosom* that directly serve the needs of small-scale communities and families.<sup>357</sup> For instance, of prime *national* importance among the Asante are the river/thunder deity *Tanɔ*, the lake deity *Bosomtwe*, the earth deity *Asase Yaa* (or *Asaase Yaa*), and the rock deity *Mmem Boɔ*;

*Tanɔ* is associated with the river *Tanɔ* and with thunder, *Bosomtwe* with a lake of the same name, *Asase Yaa* with the earth, and *Mmem Boɔ* with the rock of Mmem.<sup>358</sup> However, deities such as *Mmee Sasa* (known also as *Abɔfoɔ Mmee*), *Kobiri*, *Oboɔ*, and the sea deity *Bosompo* (to whom Tuesdays are “dedicated” and to whom sacrifices (*afɔrebɔ*) are offered annually so as to “ensure an abundant fish harvest as well as safe passage for the fishermen who venture out to sea”) are considered to be of lesser importance because they do not operate on a national level.<sup>359</sup> It is very important to note again that the natural objects and phenomena with which these and other *Tete Abosom* are associated are simply dwelling places. The fact that the deity *Tanɔ*, for example, is believed to reside in the river *Tanɔ* (and perhaps also in thunderstorms)<sup>360</sup> and the deity *Abɔfoɔ Mmee* is believed to reside in the rock of Mmem should not be taken to mean that the river *Tanɔ*, thunderstorms, and the rock of Mmem are deities, despite the common practice among devotees of making no spoken distinction between these deities and the natural objects or phenomena in which they reside.<sup>361</sup> This belief also applies to physical shrines built by human devotees or spiritual medium-priests (*Akɔmfo*, pl. *Ɔkɔmfo*) for particular *Tete Abosom*.<sup>362</sup>

In addition to serving as *Onyankopɔn akyeame* (“linguists and mouthpieces of Onyame”), the *Tete Abosom* also serve as “spokespersons” of the ancestors (*Nsamanfo*). The Akan believe that ancestors act as spiritual custodians of society’s moral “order” or “code.”<sup>363</sup> Opoku writes that

The ancestors are believed to have the power to punish or reward the living. They punish those who violate the traditionally sanctioned [moral] code, and reward those who keep it. The traditionally sanctioned code includes the customs and traditions of the society . . . which constitutes what is acceptable in the community.<sup>364</sup>

It is therefore of paramount importance that human beings maintain a working knowledge of the traditional moral obligations to which they are subject. The *Tete Abosom* play a major role in helping human beings to maintain such knowledge. They do so by communicating to or clarifying for human beings the “wishes” of the ancestors, thereby helping human beings to appease the ancestors and thus procure their protection and favor. This is one of the reasons that the veneration of the *Tete Abosom* in the form of prayers, songs, offerings (*afɔrebɔ*), etc. is so integral to Akan spirituality. The function of the *Tete Abosom* relative to the ancestors makes clearer their role as morally-inclined deities who buttress human beings’ relationship to *Onyame* and to the spiritual world. The former function also underscores the role of the *Tete Abosom* as a spiritual bulwark against “calamities” such as “bad crops, poverty, and sterility.”<sup>365</sup>

The *Tete Abosom* who are believed to be of national significance function in much the same way as those that operate on smaller local or familial levels. These nationally-affiliated *Tete Abosom* are often relied upon to provide information regarding the future “welfare” of a nation.<sup>366</sup> This is especially true during periods of war. Foreknowledge of the result of a particular armed conflict can provide a nation with a strategic advantage that increases its chances of success. In reference to the *Tete Abosom*’s wartime prognostications, Peter Kwasi Sarpong writes that “Should they [the *Tete Abosom*] foresee defeat, it becomes incumbent on them to prescribe the necessary ‘medicines’ for victory.”<sup>367</sup> Similar expectations are placed upon national *Tete Abosom* amid other forms of social crisis as well. Sarpong explains further that “When a nationwide epidemic breaks out, all eyes and hopes turn to them [the *Tete Abosom*] for relief and solace. If a chief falls sick, he is left at the mercy of his divisional gods to find out why he is sick and

how to cure him. Certain calamitous events are attributed to angry gods, and so, not infrequently, people go to them to propitiate them.” The usefulness of the *Tete Abosom* in various situations of conflict or “catastrophe” speaks to their adaptability.<sup>368</sup> The seemingly inherent adaptability of the *Tete Abosom* accounts for why “War-gods turn into agricultural gods when adopted by farming people, agricultural gods beat their hoes into spears in time of war, [and] a black-smith-god becomes a fishing-god when he falls into the hands of fishermen.”<sup>369</sup>

Periodically, specific *Tete Abosom* are the focus of communal worship at local shrines in Ghana. Such worship may take place on a deity’s (*ɔbosom*’s) “sacred day” or during the *Adae* festival, which occurs on “unlucky days.” The state festivals of *Ohum*, *Odwira*, and *Ahobaa*, all of which are characterized by “thanksgiving and rejoicing,” are also occasions for communal worship. In addition, festivals held yearly in honor of certain deities involve communal worship.<sup>370</sup>

Communal worship of the *Tete Abosom* is a rhythmically-charged, highly performative event in which “drumming,” “singing,” and “dancing” are all central features. Having been ritually “purified” through sexual abstinence and other traditional means prior to devotees’ arrival at the shrine, the priest or priestess (*Ɔkɔmfo*)<sup>371</sup> plays an integral role in the worship experience as the main “actor,” and therefore, accompanied by “attendants,” positions him/herself in the center of the worship area as songs are sung. The songs performed during communal worship at Akan shrines are usually drawn from a deity-specific repertoire that celebrates a certain deity’s “origin, prowess, and dependability.”<sup>372</sup> When communal worship commences, the *Ɔkɔmfo* has usually already entered an altered “state” or “trance” (*kom*) in which the *Ɔkɔmfo* “carries” a single deity

or multiple deities who then use the body and mind of the *Ɔkɔmfɔ* to express themselves to those present.<sup>373</sup> Once the deity “alights” (*nsie-ye*) on the “head” of the *Ɔkɔmfɔ*, the *Ɔkɔmfɔ* performs *Akɔm* (“ritual dancing”) for much of the ceremony while dressed in a *dɔsɔ* (“raffia skirt”) or *batakari* (“smock”).<sup>374</sup> Before performing *Akɔm*, the *Ɔkɔmfɔ* will sometimes toss *hyirew* (“white clay”) into the air above and then look upward. This symbolic gesture expresses the *Ɔkɔmfɔ*’s “recognition” of and “dependence” upon *Onyame*. The *Ɔkɔmfɔ* then tosses some of the *hyirew* on the ground as a way of recognizing *Asase Yaa* (the earth deity) and human beings’ dependence upon *Asase Yaa*. During other worship ceremonies, the *Ɔkɔmfɔ* may make the same gesture of recognition and dependence with a knife or sword by pointing the knife or sword upward and then down toward the ground below, at which point the *hyirew* is used to draw a white circle on the ground. The *Ɔkɔmfɔ* will then dance within this drawn circle.<sup>375</sup>

*Akɔm* is highly structured and is pregnant with meaning. The dancing may “re-enact some period or incident in the sacred history of the deity or the tribe,” or “depict the characteristics and idiosyncrasies of the deity which distinguish him [or her] from others.”<sup>376</sup> As suggested earlier, the principal goal of *Akɔm* is communication. The communication that takes place during *Akɔm* is mediated by movement. As Opoku explains, “There is communication between the priest and the deities as well as between the worshipers and the priest. Through the dance movements the priest communicates, and the movements say more than verbal utterance.”<sup>377</sup> *Akɔm* highlights the “dramatic” element of communal worship among the Akan. This “dramatic” element compels worshipers to be active participants in the worship ceremony, responding verbally and perhaps physically to the communications of *Akɔm*, to the singing, and to the drumming.

Generally speaking, *Akɔm* consists of several different dances (at least twelve according to J. H. Nketia),<sup>378</sup> most or all of which are performed throughout the communal worship ceremony. Typically the first dance performed during *Akɔm* is *ntwaaho*. While performing *ntwaaho*, the *Ɔkɔmfo* spins around continuously as singers invoke the appropriate deity. The following is an example of the kind of song that is sung during *ntwaaho*:

Obɔɔnyame ee,  
Asase oo nyee.  
Obɔɔnyame aboa me.  
Asase aboa me,  
Akɔm ba.

Hail Onyame, the Creator.  
Hail the Earth.  
Onyame, the Creator has helped me.

Earth has helped me,  
Child of cult.<sup>379</sup>

Working in conjunction with the singing and drumming of other shrine worshipers, *ntwaaho* helps to set the stage for the continued arrival and manifestation of spiritual power in the form of a particular deity or multiple deities. The Akan firmly believe that without communal singing, drumming, and the performance of *ntwaaho*, a deity will neither manifest itself nor communicate with assembled worshipers.

*Ntwaaho* is normally followed by another ritual dance called *adaban*. In this dance, the *Ɔkɔmfo* moves back and forth in a somewhat linear manner while songs of “invocation and supplication” are sung.<sup>380</sup> *Adaban* is important in the sequence of *Akɔm* movements. Its importance lies in the fact that it helps to further create a worshipful atmosphere that is conducive to the arrival and manifestation of spirit. During the performance of *adaban*, the following song may be sung:

Nyee ee!  
 Yee Akyena e, bra oo.  
 Bribi reye me oo,  
 nyee, nsuo a snyaa agyinaeε,  
 Tanɔ, bra oo.  
 Bribi reye wo mma.  
 Nyee ee!  
 Yee Akyena e, bra nne oo.  
 Bribi reye yen oo.

All hail.  
 Yes, Akyena, come along.  
 Something is happening to me.  
 Hail the water that found a stopping place.  
 River god, Tanɔ, come along:  
 Something is happening to your children.  
 All hail.  
 Yes, Akyena come today,  
 for something is happening to us.<sup>381</sup>

*Adaban* is often followed by two dances known as *abɔfoɔ* and *abɔfotia*, both of which are similar. The movements of *abɔfoɔ* and *abɔfotia* simulate those of a hunter pursuing prey. The spiritual significance of these movements is that they symbolize the *Tete Abosom*'s role as "hunters" of evil.<sup>382</sup> It is paramount that we, like the Akan, interpret the movements of *abɔfoɔ*, *abɔfotia*, *adaban*, *ntwaaho*, and the various other movements from the many dances comprising the *Akɔm* repertoire as signs of the presence of spirit. Said differently, the movements of *Akɔm* serve as perceivable points of contact between shrine worshipers and the spiritual realm. Nketia's analysis is quite helpful here:

The dance motions are interesting to watch, but the combination of these with trembling motions, leaps and gesticulations instills awe and terror into the onlookers. For believers, there is assurance of the divine presence in all these, for while trembling and falling into ecstasy a priest is no longer himself but the embodiment of the spirit of his god working through him. The words that fall from his lips, his suggestive gestures, and any features he introduces into the drama such as impersonations of creatures, climbing of trees, etc., are carefully noted.<sup>383</sup>

Communal worship – and hence *Akɔm* – may last for an entire day or night. However, there are “periods of rest” during which the *Ɔkɔmfo* might “walk around the circle and shake hands with worshipers and onlookers” while sharing messages from his/her deity via an interpreter or linguist (*ɔkyeame*).<sup>384</sup> Also, it is during this time that physically ill persons are brought to the *Ɔkɔmfo* for healing. The *Ɔkɔmfo* may then communicate with the spiritual world through the utilization of divinatory techniques (*ebisadze* -“to ascertain or inquire”)<sup>385</sup> in order to precisely determine what specific ritual procedures or medicines are required to help these ailing individuals.

Communal worship ends when the particular *Tete Abosom* that has been present during the ceremony concludes its communication with the assembled worshipers. The deity departs from the *Ɔkɔmfo*, who immediately “collapses into the arms of attendants.”<sup>386</sup> Gradually, the *Ɔkɔmfo* regains his/her original personality which was previously “displaced” by that of the visiting deity. As a malleable vessel of spiritual power and insight who, when visited by a deity, behaves as the deity wishes, an *Ɔkɔmfo* typically has little or no recollection of what takes place while he/she is being visited by a deity during communal worship. Having communed with a deity (or deities) and among themselves over a meal (food and drink are often served during public worship) and through dancing, singing, and drumming, worshipers are spiritually reinvigorated at the end of a worship ceremony and therefore may choose to dance along with the drumming and singing even after the *Ɔkɔmfo* has exited the worship area. Communal worship of the type just described is an important means of fortifying the Akan belief in the “tutelar” function of the *Tete Abosom*.<sup>387</sup>

*Suman Brafoɔ (Bosom Brafoɔ)*

The *Suman* or *Bosom Brafoɔ* are a second class of deities in Akan cosmology. They are said to originate from northern Ghana and, as historical developments related to an “intermingling of societies” that some believed required “additional protection,” are “more recent” than the *Tete Abosom*.<sup>388</sup> It is somewhat misleading for one to conceive of the *Suman Brafoɔ* as deities in the same way that one conceives of the *Tete Abosom* as deities. This is so because, as Opoku puts it, these deities (some of whose names include *Tigare*, *Kune*, and *Nana Tongo*) are actually “physical objects or instruments used in the practice of magic which have been elevated to the status of gods.”<sup>389</sup> Though there may be instances in which the *Suman Brafoɔ* as deified “objects or instruments” are believed to achieve an ontological position or status that rivals or “merges” with that of the *Tete Abosom*, the *Suman Brafoɔ* nevertheless continue to generally be regarded as a distinct class of deities.<sup>390</sup> As deities whose shrines are privately owned and who are sometimes described as “medicine,”<sup>391</sup> the *Suman Brafoɔ* are not necessarily “tutelar” in the way that the *Tete Abosom* are. Unlike the *Tete Abosom*, the *Suman Brafoɔ* “can be influenced to kill or bring sickness upon one’s enemies.”<sup>392</sup> However, it seems the *Suman Brafoɔ* are most commonly utilized to guard against interference from and harm caused by the activity of “evil powers.”<sup>393</sup>

As an inspirited “instrument,” a *Suman* can be composed of any number of materials. Often included among the materials used to construct a *Suman* are elements extracted from plants and/or trees, both of which are considered to be an important source of a *Suman*’s power.<sup>394</sup> In some cases, a *Suman*’s power may also stem from the *Mmoatia* (forest-dwelling spirits who, while unpredictable and at times malevolent, are believed to

be masters of plant medicine), the *Sasabonsam* (a “monstrous, evil” spirit that is also said to dwell in forests), *abayifo* (pl. *ɔbayifo*, human beings who regularly utilize spiritual power in ways that are often harmful to others), or from communication with the non-ancestral dead.<sup>395</sup> A person seeking assistance from a *Suman* may elect to visit the shrine of a *Bosom Brafoɔ* and place herself “under the protection” of a deity associated with a particular *Suman*.<sup>396</sup> After obtaining a *Suman* from a shrine or purchasing one from a priest (*Ɔkɔmfo*) or an *Mmoatia*-trained herbalist (*Sumankwafo*), for example,<sup>397</sup> the person will likely be expected to privately worship the *Suman* at home on a daily basis in order to “ensure the continued protection” of the *Suman*. This daily home worship, which requires moral rectitude on the part of the worshiper,<sup>398</sup> may involve the “offering” of prayers, libations, kola nuts, or the “sprinkling” of sacrificial animal blood on the *Suman*/“object of worship.”<sup>399</sup>

It is also important to recognize that several smaller religious communities among the Akan have organized themselves around the worship of the *Suman Brafoɔ*. Priests of the *Suman Brafoɔ* and devotees declare their “allegiance” to these deities, and in so doing make themselves subject to strict moral regulations prohibiting “adultery, thieving, scandal-mongering,” and the like.<sup>400</sup> Historically, the penalty for violating the moral code associated with the worship of the *Suman Brafoɔ* has involved large fines and, in the most severe cases, death by the power of a *Suman*. Moreover, due to the fact that *Suman* priests are the only persons capable of communicating directly with the *Suman Brafoɔ* via divination (*ebisadze*), it is common for members of the community to have private shrine “interviews” with *Suman* priests in order to request personal “favours” from a *Suman* such as “prosperity in trade, increased cocoa yield,” “cures for barrenness and illness,” and

“victory over enemies.”<sup>401</sup> Such requests are accompanied by “promises” of payment in the form of “money, fowls, sheep,” etc. Failure to “pay” a *Suman* for services rendered will result in serious punishment by the *Suman*.<sup>402</sup>

### *Mmoatia*

Unlike the *Suman Brafoɔ*, the *Mmoatia* tend to be associated more frequently with malevolence rather than benevolence or neutrality. The *Mmoatia* (“little people”) are said to be forest-dwelling spirits that assume the form of exceedingly short creatures that are no more than twelve inches tall. Also, according to traditional Akan lore, the *Mmoatia* “have curved noses and yellowish skins” and feet that “point in the opposite direction.”<sup>403</sup> The *Mmoatia* are said to rely on a “whistle language” in order to communicate with one another. Furthermore, of the various foods they eat, bananas are the favorite of the *Mmoatia*.<sup>404</sup>

The *Mmoatia* are hostile towards those who wittingly or unwittingly enter their forest home uninvited. Trespassers are often “beaten” by the *Mmoatia* and temporarily held in “rocky” locales that are “favored” by the *Mmoatia*. In most cases the *Mmoatia* are sure to keep trespassers alive while in captivity by providing them sustenance in the form of bananas. After a period of time, captives are “released” by the *Mmoatia* and instructed to return to their respective homes.<sup>405</sup>

As suggested previously, the *Mmoatia* are not entirely malevolent. They are renowned among the Akan for their expertise in plant medicine. Furthermore, instead of selfishly hoarding their great knowledge of the medicinal properties of trees, herbs, and other plants, the *Mmoatia* often share this knowledge with human beings, most if not all of whom later become specialists in plant medicine (*Sumankwafo*) who are able to

“acquire” highly potent cures for “unusual diseases.” When juxtaposed with their more malevolent tendencies, this rather generous educative practice among the *Mmoatia* indicates that their relationship to the human world is somewhat ambivalent.<sup>406</sup>

### *Sasabonsam*

Distinguishing the *Sasabonsam* from the *Mmoatia*, the *Suman Brafoɔ*, and the *Tete Abosom* is the *Sasabonsam*'s characterization in Akan cosmology as a categorically “evil spirit.” The *Sasabonsam* tends to take on the form of a “forest monster.” It is also believed that the *Sasabonsam* prefers to reside in trees like the *odum* (*chlorophora excelsa*) and *onyaa* (*ceiba pentandra*). Moreover, it is common knowledge among the Akan that the *Sasabonsam* keeps company with those who utilize spiritual power for negative or destructive purposes (*abayifo*).<sup>407</sup> Hence the Akan saying, *Sasabonsam kɔ ayi a, ɔsoɛ ɔbayifo* (“When *Sasabonsam* attends a funeral, it lodges with the *ɔbayifo*”).<sup>408</sup>

The appearance of the *Sasabonsam* is widely regarded as terrifying. It is described as having “the head of an animal with long black hair, a flaming mouth and a long tongue which sticks out most of the time.”<sup>409</sup> The *Sasabonsam*'s traditional description also includes hooves, wings, and a unique tail, at the end of which is attached a snake head. It is said that this creature wraps its “long,” snake-like tail around the trees on which it perches, and uses its formidable wings to fly into the “deepest recesses of the forest.” The *Sasanbonsam* preys on “hunters,” “travellers,” and other persons who enter forests intentionally or wander into them accidentally.<sup>410</sup>

### *Nsamanfo* (“Ancestors”)

In Akan cosmology, the ancestors (*Nsamanfo* or *Nananom Nsamanfo*) function collectively as a source of spiritual connection between the living and the dead. As

deceased humans who now live as spiritual beings in the world of the ancestors (*Nsamankyir*) and are now wiser and more powerful than humans, the ancestors' presence can be felt "everywhere" and "at any time."<sup>411</sup> The ancestors are believed to live in very "close" relation to *Onyame* and, after *Onyame* and *Asase Yaa*, are held in the highest esteem among the Akan.<sup>412</sup> We should be very clear in noting that not all deceased humans become ancestors. The Akan believe that the attainment of ancestorhood depends upon the kind of life that a person led prior to death. As the collective "backbone" of Akan society, the ancestors consist only of persons who have lived "exemplary" lives. The ancestors are individuals who have "lived in anticipation of the end [death]," acquiring "material opulence" and demonstrating the socio-cultural norms and moral "virtues that are extolled by the matrikin."<sup>413</sup> Furthermore, ancestorhood in the Akan tradition is reserved exclusively for those persons who reach old age, produce children, and die what the Akan regard as a "good death." A "good death" is a death that is not the result of an accident, suicide, cowardly violence, or so-called "unclean" diseases such as "lunacy, dropsy [edema], leprosy and epilepsy."<sup>414</sup>

While the ancestors are considered to be important members of the spiritual community, they are also considered to be authoritatively and influentially involved in the life of earthly communities as well. As powerful members of the spiritual community who regularly "visit" their "matrikin" as family elders,<sup>415</sup> sharing their accumulated wisdom in order to help uplift and develop their families and communities, the ancestors are frequently the recipients of prayers/petitions, libations, and many other offerings. These sacred practices signify the ancestors' role as spiritual intermediaries who can "negotiate boons for their living descendants."<sup>416</sup> However, it is also important to

recognize that, in Akan tradition, the significance of the ancestors encompasses more than their role as spiritual intermediaries. The Akan perspective on the ancestors also includes an understanding of them as “moral symbols” and as “founders” of the various societal groups that comprise the Akan.<sup>417</sup> As “moral symbols” and societal “founders,” the ancestors are very concerned about the well-being of their families as well as that of the larger human communities of which they are a part. For this reason, the ancestors are very protective of their communities and will “punish” anyone whose behavior threatens the well-being of their communities.<sup>418</sup>

The presence of the ancestors in the lives of Akan communities is especially manifest in traditions relating to the treatment of a particular category of ancestors known as “stool ancestors.” “Stool ancestors” are Akan chiefs (*Ahenfo*)<sup>419</sup> who are former occupants of stools, which in the Akan tradition are not just pieces of furniture used for sitting but, more importantly, are “symbols of office for kings and chiefs.”<sup>420</sup> Like other candidates for the more general category of ancestorhood, candidates for stool ancestorhood must meet certain socio-culturally defined criteria. Opoku discusses these criteria as follows:

A stool ancestor must have died on the stool, that is, he must not have been destooled or removed from office. He must also have led an exemplary life and conducted himself in accordance with the prescribed rules of society concerning chieftaincy and the precedents of his forbears; his rule must also have been marked by peace and general prosperity for the entire society.<sup>421</sup>

If a chief (*Ohene*)<sup>422</sup> meets these criteria, then, upon his death, his stool is stored in a secure location until it is “blackened” in memory of him during his “funeral celebrations” by the “chief stool-bearer” (*nkonguasofohene*) with the assistance of additional “stool-bearers” (*nkonguasofo*).<sup>423</sup> The “blackening” of chiefs’ stools is a very important ritual

that “saturates” these stools with the “spirits of the individual chiefs,” thereby marking the perduring ancestral presence of past chiefs within Akan communities.

The “blackening” of ancestral stools is a private ceremony that is conducted “at night in a sacred grove” by the *nkonguasofohene* (“chief stool-bearer) and the *nkonguasofo* (“assistant stool-bearers”). All previously blackened stools in the community are physically transported to the ceremonial site so that the new stool “may be added to their number.”<sup>424</sup> After being washed, the new stool is then “blackened” using a mixture of soot and egg yolk. Later in the ceremony, the blood of a sheep is also smeared on the stool, after which point a piece of animal fat is positioned on the central part of the stool. When the ceremony concludes, all of the stools are carried back to a “stool-house” where they are safely stored together.<sup>425</sup>

As “shrines” to the ancestral spirits of former chiefs, “blackened” stools are offered sacrifices including various foodstuffs and beverages, part of the idea being that, due to the significant similarities between life prior to death and life after death, ancestral spirits are regularly in need of sustenance in the form of physical food and drink.<sup>426</sup> The belief among the Akan that the ancestral spirits of past chiefs inhabit or “saturate” “blackened” stools accounts for why these stools are the focus of such Akan traditions as the *Adae* festival, which occurs twice every forty-two days on a Sunday (*Akwaside*) and a Wednesday (*Wukudae*).<sup>427</sup> A current living chief presides over the *Adae* festival as the primary representative of his people who, during this festival, celebrate the perduring presence of the ancestral spirits that dwell within the “blackened” stools. After humbly “baring his shoulders and removing his sandals as a sign of respect [for the ancestors],” the chief conducts rituals on behalf of the community in an effort to effectively solicit the

ongoing protection and support of the “stool ancestors.”<sup>428</sup> The *Adae* festival is one of the more public and widely-known traditions in Akan society that acknowledges the unique and authoritative role of the ancestors in the everyday lives of the Akan.<sup>429</sup>

Traditions such as the stool-blackening ritual and the *Adae* festival help to strengthen and maintain the vital connection between Akan societies and the ancestral community that diligently watches over them.

### *The Lesser Deities and Akan Epistemology*

The following question could be posed in response to our discussion of the lesser deities of Akan cosmology: What does the Akan conceptualization of the various lesser deities suggest regarding the nature of knowing in an Akan perspective? Put another way, what epistemological insights are brought into view by our discussion of the lesser deities of Akan cosmology? I would posit that one can distill three principal insights from the foregoing discussion of the lesser deities of the spiritual world (*Asamando*) as understood within the Akan tradition. These three insights can be usefully and succinctly listed in the following manner: 1) knowing as a function of regular contact with the spiritual world; 2) knowing as a heterogeneous and paradoxical experience marked both by power and limitation; 3) knowing as an ethical mandate. Let us now expound upon these insights sequentially.

### *Knowing as a Function of Regular Contact with the Spiritual World*

The Akan conceptualization of the lesser deities suggests that a knowledge of the world, or a mode of knowing, ensues from regular contact with the spiritual realm. This contact, which, far from being irrelevant or superficial, is profoundly relational and directly influences what the Akan think about the world and how they conduct

themselves in the world. Take for example the Akan conceptualization of the *Tete Abosom* as “tutelar” deities who safeguard the well-being of communities, communicate with the ancestors (*Nsamanfo*) and *Onyame* on behalf of human beings, and, when propitiated, can be of great assistance to human beings in the pursuit of a wide range of material goals such as success in one’s chosen profession and childbirth. Relationship with the *Tete Abosom*, whether as a worshiper or as a highly trained medium-priest (*Ɔkomfo*) onto whose head these deities “alight” and are “carried” during sacred festivals such as the *Ahobaa* festival, makes available a mode of knowing that affirms the existence of the *Tete Abosom* as a meaningful presence in the world whose power can be ritually enlisted to positively affect the challenging realities with which human beings must deal. Relationship with the *Tete Abosom* also underscores the preeminence of a primordial sensibility or cultural logic in which physical realities are meaningful only to the extent that they are pervaded and ultimately shaped by spiritual realities. In Akan society, this cultural logic is operative not only on the more general communal level but also at the state level, as we have seen in the case of the Asante political establishment and its long-standing veneration of the river/thunder deity *Tanɔ*, the lake deity *Bosomtwe*, and the rock deity *Mmem Boɔ*. An implication of this cultural logic is that to know anything in the world is to know spirit. Perhaps this is in part why an *Ɔkomfo* will say, *Ɔbosom na ɛkyere ɔkomfoɔ ntwaho* (“It is the spirit that teaches the priest to whirl around”).

We would be remiss in not mentioning *Asase Yaa* (the earth deity), the *Bosom Brafoɔ* (also *Suman* or *Suman Brafoɔ*), the *Mmoatia*, the *Sasabonsam*, and the ancestors (*Nsamanfo*) as deities who also play an important part in making available the kind of

spirituo-centric knowing we have identified. While relationship with, for example, *Asase Yaa*, the *Bosom Brafoɔ*, and the *Nsamanfo* can be beneficial to human beings in any number of ways, all of these deities nevertheless share in common the potential to inflict serious harm. In an Akan perspective, then, knowing is not without a significant element of danger. Earlier we noted that harmonious relation with *Asase Yaa* (the earth deity) is contingent upon appeasement, especially prior to the cultivation of land and following the shedding of human blood, which *Asase Yaa* detests. Such appeasement is of paramount importance, for failure to do so will likely result in “communities suffering tremendously from ‘untold calamities.’”

Also carefully noted were the malevolent possibilities and tendencies associated with the *Bosom Brafoɔ*, the *Mmoatia*, and the *Sasabonsam*. Moreover, we learned that the role of the ancestors (*Nsamanfo*) involves, among other things, “punishment” of those who jeopardize the well-being of communities by disregarding the traditional values and ethical norms to which communities adhere in order to function effectively and develop in a salutary, prosperous manner. To the degree that one’s relationship with *Asase Yaa*, the *Bosom Brafoɔ*, and the ancestors (*Nsamanfo*) could potentially become dangerously or lethally conflictual due to a failure to respect ritual protocol or to human misbehavior, knowing through regular contact with the spiritual world is always accompanied by serious risk. Furthermore, whereas the *Sasabonsam* is inherently malevolent in a way that is more or less consistent (and maybe even predictable), the malevolence of the *Mmoatia* seems somewhat inconsistent and unpredictable, as evidenced by the fact that the *Mmoatia* are known to have served in some cases as “tutors” to expert *Sumankwafo* (herbalists).<sup>430</sup> Therefore, the risk of spirituo-centric knowing in the Akan context is

generated also by the malevolence and unpredictability of such spirit beings as the *Sasabonsam* and the *Mmoatia*.

Our discussion suggests that the risk of knowing through relationship with the spiritual world as constituted by the Akan cosmological tradition is very much an *existential* risk. Within the framework of Akan cosmological thought, non-existent is the possibility of gaining knowledge about oneself and the world through a purely casual relationship with the spiritual realm that is devoid of practical and ethical demands. The epistemological orientation that arises through an ongoing relationship with the spiritual world requires a courageous investment of self as well as a careful understanding of and commitment to the various obligations that must regularly be fulfilled in order to properly nurture and develop such a relationship. Put otherwise, knowing through relationship with the spiritual world is literally a matter of life and death in the sense that responsible management of one's relationship with the spiritual world tends to be life-sustaining, whereas irresponsible management of this relationship can be life-threatening. It can be said then that spirituo-centric knowing as seen from an Akan point of view is an experience of "endangerment."<sup>431</sup> However, this epistemological experience of "endangerment" is undoubtedly sacral in nature because it is an effect of exposure to the complex and sometimes tempestuous spiritual community, a community whose diverse and limitless repertoire of power is often supportive of human life and well-being.

*Knowing as a Heterogeneous and Paradoxical Experience Marked Both by Power and Limitation*

The complex spiritual community attested by Akan cosmology also signals another important aspect of knowing through relationship with the spiritual world that contributes to the critical perspective on Akan epistemology being developed in this chapter. Upon

considering the diversity of type and purpose that exists among the spiritual beings that populate the Akan cosmos, it becomes clear that any artificial reduction or narrowing of the experience of knowing through relationship with these spiritual beings would be a mistake of the first order. Such reduction would be erroneous and misleading because, as we have seen, the spiritual community as understood in Akan religious philosophy is marked by heterogeneity. Deities such as *Asase Yaa*, the *Tete Abosom*, and the ancestors (*Nsamanfo*) operate primarily as guardians of the natural world and of human well-being. However, this somewhat custodial role is not commonly shared among the *Bosom Brafoɔ*, the *Mmoatia*, and the *Sasabonsam*.

While it is possible that, for example, the *Bosom Brafoɔ* and the *Mmoatia* may at times act in ways that are salutary for individuals and communities, they can just as easily behave in ways that militate against human well-being, as is routinely the case with the *Sasabonsam*. Therefore, the experience of knowing through relationship with the spiritual world cannot be characterized solely as a comforting or hope-inspiring experience. Within the theoretical framework of Akan cosmology, to know the protective power of the *Tete Abosom* or the *Nsamanfo* is to simultaneously know the antagonistic, threatening power of the *Bosom Brafoɔ* (depending upon what they are enlisted to do by devotees), the *Mmoatia*, and the *Sasabonsam*. This heterogeneity within the spiritual community of the Akan cosmos creates a potentially volatile environment that underscores the importance of regular spiritual engagement for human beings. Such engagement is important because relationship with the more positively inclined spirit beings provides humans with access to the spiritual power required to counteract the constant threat posed by the more negatively inclined spirit beings. Thus, rather than

being passive in nature, knowledge of the spiritual world and its heterogeneity is an *active* knowledge that requires persons to make engagement of the spiritual world an integral part of their daily lives.

The experience of knowing through relationship with the spiritual world also contains an element of paradox. This paradoxical element stems from the multifaceted personalities of, for instance, *Asase Yaa* (the earth deity), the ancestors (*Nsamanfo*) and the *Mmoatia*, and from the diametrically oppositional possibilities made available by the *Bosom Brafoɔ*. As discussed previously, the Akan believe that *Asase Yaa* is a primary source of life and sustaining power upon which all human beings depend. Yet if not propitiated before the cultivation of land, after the shedding of human blood, or in other situations requiring a sacrificial response, *Asase Yaa* can become a destroyer of life. Furthermore, in a similar discussion the point was made that out of a commitment to the well-being of their living descendants and in response to the proper forms of veneration, the ancestors work to procure “boons” for their living descendants. However, if their living descendants behave in ways that violate the ethical norms and values of Akan society or fail to remember and provide offerings for the ancestors, then the ancestors “punish” their living descendants as they see fit. Readers will also remember that the *Mmoatia* are inclined to physically assault and kidnap anyone who ventures uninvited into the forest home of the *Mmoatia*. Yet in other cases the *Mmoatia* elect to extensively train particular humans in the science of plant medicine, thereby enhancing the human community’s capacity for lasting well-being. Somewhat similarly, the *Bosom Brafoɔ* function within Akan communities as sources of spiritual power that can be ritually enlisted to help others or to visit harm – or even death – upon them.

The paradoxical element of knowing through relationship with the spiritual world highlights the dynamic nature of such knowing. Far from being a static mode of knowing or epistemological orientation, knowing through relationship with the spiritual world is remarkably fluid, often oscillating between an acute awareness of the ever-present specter of mortal danger and an equally keen awareness of the ceaseless quest for human well-being. This paradoxical ingredient requires a pliability of mind that embraces the tensive realities and possibilities of existence in a non-resolutional manner while also acknowledging the simultaneously uncertain, dangerous, and salutary spiritual power that inheres within these tensive realities and possibilities. The previous point helps to establish a sense of the seriousness and depth involved in knowing through relationship with the spiritual world. Knowing through relationship with the spiritual world, or spirituo-centric knowing, is not a means of escaping or avoiding the heavy demands and challenges that are part and parcel of material existence. Rather, spirituo-centric knowing helps individuals and communities to remain connected to spiritual resources that possess the power necessary to effectively manage the demands and challenges of material existence. Spirituo-centric knowing sacralizes and makes meaningful use of the complexities and ambiguities of the spiritual and material worlds instead of eliding them. This may shed further light on why, before the performance of *Akɔm* (“ritual dancing”), an *Ɔkɔmfo*, with full knowledge of *Asase Yaa*’s ability to both sustain and destroy life, tosses *hyirew* (“white clay”) on the ground as a way of respectfully acknowledging *Asase Yaa* and her multifaceted power. This may also help to explain, for example, why the Akan believe so strongly that the continued efficacy of a particular *Suman* is contingent upon a devotee offering daily worship to the *Suman*.

Thus far in our analysis we have discussed the experience of relationship with the spiritual world as an experience of relationship with spiritual *beings* such as the *Tete Abosom*, *Asase Yaa*, and the ancestors (*Nsamanfo*). We can also think of and discuss the experience of this relationship in terms of power. However, this should not be taken to suggest that the various personalities of these and other spiritual beings discussed above are ultimately insignificant, or that our analysis is somehow now departing from the basic framework through which the Akan conceptualize these beings. What we are doing here is simply acknowledging the centrality of power in the experience of relating to the spiritual world as understood by the Akan. Relationship with the spiritual world of Akan cosmology has everything to do with human beings gaining access to an economy of power that enables them to more effectively manage the often unpredictable vicissitudes, challenges, and existential threats imposed upon them by the material world. Thus we can speak, for instance, of communal worship in the form of the *Adae* festival and of a person choosing to place him/herself under the protection of a *Suman* as practices intended to aid in fortifying a lasting connection to the economy of power that helps organize the spiritual world (*Asamando*).

This connection is vital not only to the production and acquisition of knowledge in Akan society but also to the very survival of Akan communities. From within an Akan perspective, it is quite difficult to imagine how the construction of meanings could occur in a material world entirely devoid of spiritual presence and connection. Equally difficult if not impossible to imagine in such a spirit-less scenario is how human beings could exist at all, much less pursue lives characterized by productivity and well-being. Akan epistemology is predicated on an abiding belief in the existence of an unseen economy of

power that is manifest in the purposeful activities of a community of diverse spiritual beings, and on a belief in human beings' fundamental existential need for access to this unseen economy of power. Importantly, however, Akan epistemology is also predicated on the belief that knowing through relationship with the power of the spiritual world involves an experience of limitation.

Relationship with the spiritual world and its power does not bestow upon human beings a knowledge of all things, nor does this relationship lead to humans becoming infinitely powerful beings. For the Akan, human relationship with the spiritual world does *not* amount to a transaction wherein the knowledge and power of the spiritual community are simply delivered in toto to the human world in exchange for ritual offerings or other forms of worship. Ontologically speaking, human beings are not equivalent to spirit beings. Therefore, human beings are necessarily incapable of knowing all that is known by spirit beings, and of possessing in full the power that spirit beings possess and utilize.

In Akan religious philosophy, humans are construed as “dependent” beings whose knowledge and power are limited. This belief among the Akan in the “dependent” condition of human beings does not stem from or lead to a belief that humans are in some way inherently defective beings who must be rescued from themselves by the spiritual world. Rather, the “dependent” condition of human beings is regarded by the Akan as an innate existential or ontological characteristic that engenders a certain relational orientation to the spiritual world that in turn connects humans to powers greater than themselves. The recognition of *Asase Yaa* (the earth deity) reflected in the tossing of *hyirew* (“white clay”) onto the ground by an *Ɔkɔmfo* prior to the performance of *Akɔm*

(“ritual dancing”) therefore emerges as a practice that encodes the “dependent” and limited condition of human beings.<sup>432</sup> In addition, the Akan belief in the crucial and instructive role played by the *Mmoatia* in human beings’ attainment of expertise in the science of plant medicine also functions to encode the “dependent” and limited dimension of the human condition. The same can be said of situations in which a person enlists the power of a *Suman* (*Bosom Brafoɔ*) as protection against a threat that the person alone lacks the power to neutralize. Moreover, this understanding of the experience of knowing through relationship with the spiritual world as an experience of “dependence” and limitation is operative even at the highest levels of spiritual training and practice, as evidenced by the previously referenced Akan maxim, *ɔbosom na ekyere ɔkomfoɔ ntwaɔ* (“It is the spirit [not another human being] that teaches the priest to whirl around”). In an Akan point of view, our lives are contingent upon our relationship with the spiritual world. Hence, if we choose to ignore this relationship and the knowledge and power that ensue from it, we do so to our own peril.

#### *Knowing as an Ethical Mandate*

In Akan thought, the significance of knowing through relationship with the spiritual world is not restricted to an experience of paradoxical heterogeneity, limited power, or human well-being. The significance of such knowing is found also in its ethical dimension. The knowledge that accrues to individuals and communities through regular contact with the spiritual world is not intended to be hoarded or to become a kind of theater for religio-philosophical reflection or speculation that has no relevance to the well-being and growth of one’s community. For the Akan, the experience of knowing through relationship with the spiritual world should always involve a serious concern for

the well-being of oneself, one's family, and the community in which one lives. In this sense, spirituo-centric knowing in the Akan tradition is very much a shared phenomenon that ideally should serve to strengthen rather than weaken human communities. The highly ethical orientation of the Akan tradition helps us to understand why, for example, the Akan deem it important (perhaps even compulsory) to be in relationship with and venerate the *Tete Abosom*, whose "tutelar" powers serve as a spiritual bulwark against internal and external forces that threaten the well-being of communities. Therefore, persons with knowledge of the "tutelar" powers of the *Tete Abosom* are compelled to enlist these powers not solely for their own benefit but also for the benefit of their community. This ethical ingredient also figures significantly in the knowledge that develops through relationship with *Asase Yaa* (the earth deity), who must be shown proper ritual respect before land is cultivated, and who "abhors" human bloodshed, in the knowledge that develops through relationship with the ancestors (*Nsamanfo*), who demand that their living descendants faithfully adhere to the ethical values and norms of Akan society, lest they be "punished," and, interestingly enough, in the knowledge that develops through relationship with the somewhat ambiguous *Mmoatia*, who share their mastery of plant medicine with herbalists (*Sumankwafo*) so that it may benefit the human community.

We might also note that the ethical dimension of knowing through relationship with the spiritual world is also quite salient in the role that Akan priests (*Akɔmfo*) are expected to perform in Akan society. Having been "entrusted with the esoterica of their professions" and having "mastered the secrets of the universe," *Akɔmfo* are believed to be in possession of the "spiritual and medical knowledge needed to address [the] magico-

medical, psychosomatic, and spiritual welfare of society.”<sup>433</sup> By way of their natural spiritual talents and the rigorous training (*nkom-mu* or *akom-mu*)<sup>434</sup> they undergo during initiation into the Akan priesthood, *Akomfo* can claim a uniquely intimate relationship with and knowledge of the spiritual world (*Asamando*) that enables them to function as expert spiritual servants within the public and private spheres of their community. While some *Akomfo* use their power and social position in ways that are less than ethical, the clear traditional expectation among *Akomfo* and within Akan society is that the knowledge that *Akomfo* acquire through their relationships and communications with the spiritual world will be utilized in a manner that is consistent with the “moral standards” and behavioral norms of Akan society.<sup>435</sup> The ritual discussed below (*Nhyia*), which is sometimes performed by an *Okomfo* in situations involving the “suspicious” death of a local family’s elder relative, is an example of how an *Okomfo* may use his/her spirituo-centric knowledge in a way that the Akan community would consider ethically appropriate:

. . . deaths of elders believed to have occurred under suspicious circumstances, prompts family members to meet the posthumous abstract personality of the deceased (Osaman), when a medium undertakes a highly dramatic ritual encounter called *nhyia* (meeting) of the deceased. The reason for *nhyia* rituals may be necessitated by a family’s need to ascertain vital information from the deceased about cause of death. This rite called for a special ritual perfume ablution by an *okomfo*, because the *okomfo* must journey to the ancestral world . . . in order to bring the dead (Osaman) back to the mundane. The preferred perfume is *Samanadzie ye sum* (the *Samanadzie* is dark). In other words, to enter *Samanadzie* (the world of the ancestors), an *okomfo* must be sprayed with this particularly strong perfume to enable her to return without being contaminated by the unique odor of the ancestral world. To enter a world utterly different from the mundane, one required a special protective shield or aura of perfume otherwise a medium became [defiled] by the unique odor of *Samanadzie*, characteristic of the metamorphism of the residents of the ancestral world. In the same way as an *okomfo* carried a deity, she/he must also “carry” an *Osaman*. For this reason, the journey to and fro the *Samanadzie* must be conducted in a way that would not prevent the *okomfo* from carrying other deities, hence the perfume.<sup>436</sup>

The *Nhyia* ritual is a compelling example of the kind of communally-oriented, ethically motivated service that reputable *Akɔmfo* dutifully provide in Akan villages, towns, and cities. The Akan believe that in order to successfully navigate through life and effectively manage the crises that will inevitably befall them, they must rely on the most potent forms of spiritual power and knowing which are accessible only to well-trained *Akɔmfo*. The reliance of the Akan upon *Akɔmfo* bespeaks the status of *Akɔmfo* as integral spiritual and ethical components of the fabric of Akan society.

In the preceding discussion, we have highlighted some of the ways in which the conceptualization of the lesser deities (*Abosom*) of Akan cosmology contributes to what may be described as a spirituo-centric mode of knowing. Such elements as ongoing relationship with the spiritual world, heterogeneity, paradox, power, limitation, and ethical obligation have been identified as important attributes of this spirituo-centric mode of knowing. While the Akan conception of the human being has been touched upon somewhat obliquely in the above discussion of the lesser deities and in earlier sections of the chapter, we have yet to engage in a more focused discussion of how human beings are constituted within the framework of Akan cosmology. It is to this discussion that we now direct our attention.

### **Human Beings (*Nnɔ́pá*)**

In a previous section the point was made that in the Akan cosmological scheme, spiritual power infuses the entire created order, including all forms of matter. As a form of matter, humans (*nnɔ́pá*) therefore exist within the created order as beings that, while certainly constituted in part by perceptible material realities, are *fundamentally* constituted by imperceptible spiritual realities. In the broadest and most ultimate sense,

human beings are the product of *Onyame*'s creative will. Hence the Akan saying, *nnipa nyinaa ye Onyame mma, obiara nnye asase ba* ("All [human beings] are the children of Onyame; no one is a child of the earth").<sup>437</sup> In a more immediate or specific sense, however, the Akan also associate the origin of their humanity "with the *NaSaman* (Ancestral Mother) in the ancestral world (*Samanadzie*)."<sup>438</sup> For the Akan, "consanguinal" connection to the traditional system of "matrilineal kinship descent" (*abusua*), which the "Ancestral Mother" (*NaSaman*) is believed to have originated, is important because such connection "confers" upon the Akan "citizenship, by virtue of having an Akan mother [*awo*]; political rights, by acceding to a mother's stool; and inheritance, by owning property acquired by a mother's children."<sup>439</sup> The belief that the Akan share a common spiritual origin in the ancestral realm of *Samanadzie* invites further exploration of the Akan's traditional understanding of how human beings (*nnipá*) are constituted. According to this understanding, each individual human being is made up of five basic elements which include the *ɔkra* ("soul"), *sunsum* ("spirit"), *ntoro* ("semen-transmitted characteristic"), *mogya* ("blood"), and *honam* or *nipadua* ("body").<sup>440</sup> While all of these elements work together to comprise the human being, the *ɔkra* is of particular importance, as it is what most distinguishes human beings from other forms of material life on earth. Let us then first consider the concept of *ɔkra* in conjunction with *sunsum*.

#### *ɔkra* ("Soul") and *Sunsum* ("Spirit")

I use the translation of *ɔkra* as "soul" advisedly, as there is some debate among Akan scholars regarding how best to understand the concept of *ɔkra*. Scholarly disagreement about the conceptualization of the *ɔkra* has tended to revolve around three primary

questions: 1) What is the relationship between the *ɔkra* and the Akan concept of destiny (*nkrabea* or *hyɛbea*)? 2) Is the *ɔkra* in any sense a physical reality, or is it a purely immaterial or spiritual reality? 3) Can the *ɔkra* be linked to the activity of thought (*adwen*)? Kwasi Wiredu interprets *ɔkra* in a way that addresses these questions. For instance, Wiredu contends that the relationship between the *ɔkra* and the Akan concept of destiny is an inextricable one because, in his view, it is the *ɔkra* that “receives” destiny from *Onyame* prior to a human being’s physical birth.<sup>441</sup> Regarding the second question, Wiredu interestingly argues that what differentiates the Akan concept of *ɔkra* from Western formulations that interpret the soul only in non-physical terms is that the *ɔkra*, despite being imperceptible to the “naked eye,” is nevertheless a “quasi-physical” reality that has “paraphysical properties” with which “highly developed” diviners can, through extrasensory perception, enter into communication.<sup>442</sup> With respect to the question of thought (*adwen*), Wiredu concludes that “The *ɔkra* is postulated in Akan thought to account for the fact of life and of destiny *but not of thought*.”<sup>443</sup> Along with what has just been noted concerning Wiredu’s perspective on the concept of *ɔkra*, it is also important to bear in mind more generally that Wiredu’s scholarship reflects a commitment to the project of “conceptually decolonizing African philosophy.”<sup>444</sup> Wiredu seeks to rescue African philosophy from dominant Western paradigms of thought through a critical reevaluation and engagement of indigenous African paradigms of thought as primary frameworks for studying African philosophical traditions.

Kwame Gyekye challenges Wiredu’s interpretation of the *ɔkra*. Gyekye agrees with Wiredu’s claim that the *ɔkra* “receives the individual’s destiny” from *Onyame* and is thus the “bearer” of each human being’s destiny.<sup>445</sup> However, unlike Wiredu, Gyekye is

unconvinced that the idea of destiny must play an integral role in the Akan understanding of the *ɔkra*. He is unconvinced mainly because there exists little or no cultural evidence to support the notion that the idea of destiny is always a central aspect of Akan conceptualizations of the *ɔkra*. Gyekye writes, “I do not think . . . that the concept of destiny is an essential feature of the Akan definition of the soul, even though the concept of the soul is an essential feature of the Akan conception of destiny . . . .”<sup>446</sup> Thus, for Gyekye, the concept of *ɔkra* can be understood apart from the concept of destiny, but the concept of destiny cannot be understood apart from the concept of *ɔkra*. Destiny is an important idea in Akan cosmology and will therefore be discussed later in this section.

Gyekye is even more unconvinced by Wiredu’s suggestion that the *ɔkra* is “quasi-physical” in nature. According to Gyekye, the suggestion that the *ɔkra* is in any sense a physical reality is entirely inconsistent with Akan metaphysical belief, which holds that the *ɔkra* lives on after the death of the body (*nipadua*). In response to Wiredu’s description of *ɔkra*, Gyekye explains that

Such description of the *ɔkra* (soul) in Akan thought runs counter to the belief of most Akan people in disembodied survival or life after death. For a crucial aspect of Akan metaphysics is the existence of the world of spirits (*asamando*), a world inhabited by the departed souls of the ancestors. The conception or interpretation of the *ɔkra* as a quasi-physical object having parapsychical properties would mean the total or ‘near total’ . . . extinction of the *ɔkra* (soul) upon the death of the person. And if this were the case, it would be senseless to talk of departed souls continuing to exist in the world of spirits (*asamando*).<sup>447</sup>

Moreover, Wiredu’s attempt to buttress his physicalistic interpretation of the *ɔkra* by citing the ability of trained diviners (*Akɔmfɔ*) to clairvoyantly perceive and engage in communication with the *ɔkra* is, in Gyekye’s view, misleading at best. Gyekye writes,

It must be noted . . . that these phenomena [perception and communication with *ɔkra*] do not take place in the ordinary spatial world; otherwise anyone would be able to see or communicate with the *ɔkra* (soul). This must mean that what those with special

abilities see or communicate with is something non-spatial. Thus, the fact that the *ɔkra* can be seen by such people does not make it physical or quasi-physical . . . since this act or mode of seeing is not at the physical or spatial level.<sup>448</sup>

Gyekye's basic point is that clairvoyant perception of and communication with the *ɔkra* does not occur in the material dimension. To suggest otherwise is to adopt a position that is fundamentally incompatible with Akan metaphysical conceptions of the afterlife.

Hence, in Gyekye's perspective, Wiredu's physicalistic (or quasi-physicalistic) interpretation of the *ɔkra* is culturally unsubstantiated.

Furthermore, Gyekye objects to Wiredu's contention that the *ɔkra* is in no way involved in the activity of thought (*adwen*). Wiredu interprets the Akan conception of *ɔkra* in this manner in an attempt to distinguish it from Western conceptions of the soul that associate the soul with human intellect. Wiredu avers,

The *ɔkra* is postulated in Akan thought to account for the fact of life and of destiny *but not of thought*. The soul, on the other hand, seems in much Western philosophy to be intended to account, not just for life *but also for thought*. Indeed, in Cartesian philosophy, the sole purpose of introducing the soul is to account for the phenomenon of *thinking*.<sup>449</sup>

Although Gyekye fails to address Wiredu's claim regarding how the soul is understood in the wider tradition of Western philosophy, he strongly addresses Wiredu's specific interpretation of the Cartesian conception of the soul. Gyekye argues that Wiredu's interpretation of the soul as understood by the French philosopher and mathematician René Descartes is far too "narrow" in that it appears to construe Descartes' conception of the soul only in terms of "ratiocination or cognition."<sup>450</sup> Consequently, Wiredu's interpretation elides the fact that, as Gyekye and other interpreters such as moral philosopher Bernard Williams have noted, Descartes' conception of the soul views "ratiocination or cognition" as encompassing all forms and dimensions of

consciousness, the latter being a precondition for the activity of thought.<sup>451</sup> Hence, for Descartes, the concept of the soul is not merely a means of explaining human intellection. Rather, the idea of the soul provides another way of conceptualizing consciousness in all of its variation and complexity; indeed, the soul *is* consciousness. In Gyekye's point of view, the notion of the soul as consciousness represents a better translation of *ɔkra* than notions such as Wiredu's which depict the *ɔkra* as something largely unrelated to the human activity of thought.

More importantly, it is Gyekye's analysis of Akan cultural data related to *ɔkra* ("soul") and *sunsum* ("spirit") that convinces him of the flawed nature of Wiredu's perspective. The ways in which the Akan speak about the *ɔkra* and *sunsum* indicate that the two concepts are not synonymous. The following statements are examples of how the Akan often speak about the *ɔkra*:

- 1) *Ne 'kra afi ne ho* ("His '*kra* [*ɔkra*] has withdrawn from his body").
- 2) *Ne 'kra dii n'akyi, anka owui* ("But for [her] '*kra* that followed [her], [she] would have died").
- 3) *Ne 'kra di awerɛhow* ("[Her] '*kra* is sad"); "never, '[Her] *sunsum* is sad.'"
- 4) *Ne 'kra ye* ("His '*kra* is good"), "referring to a person who is lucky or fortunate." ["The negative of this statement is 'His '*kra* is not good.' If you used *sunsum* in lieu of '*kra*, and made the statement 'His *sunsum* is not good' (*ne sunsum nnye*), the meaning would be quite different; it would mean that his *sunsum* is evil, that is to say, he is an evil spirit . . . ."].<sup>452</sup>

*Sunsum* tends to be spoken of by the Akan in a different fashion, as illustrated by the expressions listed below:

- 1) "[She] has *sunsum*" (*Ɔwɔ sunsum*), "an expression they [the Akan] use when they want to refer to someone as dignified and as having a commanding presence. Here they never say, '[She] has *ɔkra*,' soul, for it is believed that it is the nature of the *sunsum* (not the *ɔkra*) that differs from person to person; hence they speak of 'gentle *sunsum*,' 'forceful *sunsum*,' 'weak or strong *sunsum*,' etc."

- 2) “His *sunsum* is heavy or weighty” (*Ne sunsum yɛ duru*), “that is, he has a strong personality.”
- 3) “[Her] *sunsum* overshadows mine” (*Ne sunsum hyɛ me so*).
- 4) “Someone’s *sunsum* is bigger or greater than another’s” (*Obi sunsum so kyɛn obi deɛ*). “To say ‘someone’s *kra* is greater than another’s’ would be meaningless.”<sup>453</sup>

On the basis of these and other common Akan expressions concerning *okra* and *sunsum*, Gyekye concludes that the Akan understand *okra* and *sunsum* to be different but related and ontologically connected entities. Furthermore, for Gyekye, what makes this semantic distinction between *okra* and *sunsum* authentic and not merely “idiomatic” is the fact that “the substitution of one for the other of the two terms [*okra* for *sunsum*, or vice versa]” in the above expressions would either render the expressions nonsensical or drastically alter their meaning. Another significant characteristic of these expressions, especially the ones that relate directly to *sunsum*, is that they identify *sunsum* as a formative factor in the manifestation of human personality, which of course is, to a large degree, a function of a person’s psychological make-up. The psychological function of *sunsum* attested in these expressions enables Gyekye to connect *sunsum*, as an aspect or “part” of the *okra*, to the phenomenon of human intellection, thereby impugning Wiredu’s assertion that the *okra* is not involved in the activity of thought (*adwen*). Gyekye’s position on *okra* and *sunsum* is articulated perhaps most clearly in the following passages:

The *sunsum* appears to be the source of dynamism of a person, the *active* part or force of the human psychological system; its energy is the ground for its interaction with the external world. It is said to have extrasensory powers; it is that which thinks, desires, feels, etc. It is in no way identical with the brain, which is a physical organ. Rather it acts upon the brain (*amene, hon*). In short, people believe that it is upon the *sunsum* that one’s health, worldly power, position, influence, success, etc. would depend. The attributes and activities of the *sunsum* are therefore not ascribable to the *okra* . . . .

. . . insofar as things asserted of the *okra* are not assertable of the *sunsum*, the two

cannot logically be identified. However, although they are logically distinct, they are not *ontologically* distinct. That is to say, they are not independent existents held together in an accidental way by an external bond. They are a unity in duality, a duality in unity. The distinction is not a relation between two separate entities. The *sunsum* may, more accurately, be characterized as a *part* – the active part – of the *ɔkra* (soul) . . . The fact that we can speak of the inherence of the *sunsum* in natural objects as their activating principle means that in some contexts reference can be made to the *sunsum* independently of the *ɔkra*. This, however, is not so in the context of the human psyche: In [human beings] *sunsum* is part of the *ɔkra* (soul).<sup>454</sup>

Part of what our discussion demonstrates is that even though the *ɔkra* and *sunsum* are, as Gyekye says, “logically distinct” entities, it is quite difficult to describe, for instance, *sunsum* within the context of the human condition, without also making reference in some way to the *ɔkra*. This speaks to the interrelational manner in which *ɔkra* and *sunsum* are conceptualized in Akan cosmology. We have specified above how Gyekye’s interpretation of what may be called the *ɔkra-sunsum complex* is somewhat at odds with Wiredu’s interpretation. However, this is not to suggest that Gyekye’s interpretation is unusual. On the contrary, Gyekye’s interpretation is fairly compatible with that of Kofi Asare Opoku, who sheds even more light on the Akan conceptions of *ɔkra* and *sunsum*.

Gyekye’s interpretation of *ɔkra* (“soul”) is more or less continuous with Opoku’s interpretation, which also appears not to disassociate the *ɔkra* from the activity of human intellection. Opoku understands the *ɔkra* to be the animating or life-giving part of *Onyame* within all human beings (*nnípa*) that separates them ontologically from other mundane creatures. The unique ontological status that possession of an *ɔkra* confers upon the human being is reflected in the difference between how the Akan refer to more than one animal and how they refer to more than one human being. When referring to “two fowls,” for example, the Akan say *nkokɔ abien*, whereas when referring to two human beings they say *nnípa baanu* (the prefix *ba*, which may be translated in noun form

as “child” or “offspring,” is attached to the numeric term *anu* when reference is made to two persons).<sup>455</sup> The phrase *nnípa abien* would never be used in reference to fowls or other animals because, unlike human beings, animals do not possess an *ɔkra*. Instead, animals (and certain plants) possess a “kind of spirit” called *sasa* that can be controlled by human beings.<sup>456</sup> Thus it can be said that *sasa* connotes a non-human, animalistic mode of being, while *ɔkra* connotes a distinctly human mode of being.

The Akan believe that the *ɔkra* is absolutely essential to human life and to the survival of the human body. Therefore, the Akan equate the permanent “departure” of the *ɔkra* from the physical body with death. Yet, somewhat ironically, the permanent “departure” of the *ɔkra* from the physical body also signifies the belief among the Akan that the *ɔkra* itself does not die. This belief regarding death and the perdurance of the *ɔkra* is expressed in the Akan maxim, *Onyame bewu na mawu* (“If *Onyame* dies, I shall die. But since *Onyame* does not die, I shall therefore not die,”).<sup>457</sup> While it is possible for the *ɔkra* to be ritually “called back” to the physical body for the purpose of “communication” immediately preceding the death of the physical body, the final “departure” of the *ɔkra* from the physical body nevertheless involves a momentous return to *Onyame*, at which point it must provide *Onyame* with “an account of its earthly existence.” On the basis of this account, *Onyame* determines whether the *ɔkra* will remain in the spiritual world (*Asamando*) or return to the mundane world.<sup>458</sup>

Furthermore, Opoku’s formulation helps us to see that the concept of *ɔkra* encompasses more than just the idea of the “soul” alone. For example, he notes that every *ɔkra* has a specific name that is given to a child based upon the day of the week on which the child was born. The Akan generally refer to this name as *kradin*.<sup>459</sup> Each

*kradin* has a male and female version. The male and female versions of each *kradin* are normally listed as seven pairs, each of which corresponds to a particular day of the week (see Table 1). It is important to understand that these names are *not* “day-names,” as they are often mistakenly referred to in the West. Rather, they are names given to individual “souls” (*akra*, pl. *akra*) that enter the physical world through human birth on various days of the week.<sup>460</sup>

The idea of *akra* also involves a somewhat complex “tutelar” component. In addition to being conceived as the “soul,” *akra* also functions as a “separate guardian spirit” that seeks to protect the person to whom it belongs. Interestingly, it is believed that, in this “tutelar” role, the *akra* may deliver advice that is either “good” or “bad.”<sup>461</sup> Moreover, there exists the possibility that the *akra* as a “tutelar” entity may fail in its efforts to “guide and protect” the person to whom it belongs. The Akan therefore say, *Ne kra apa n’akyi* (“Her soul has failed to guide her,” or “Her soul has neglected her”). It is also possible for the *akra* to “desert its owner temporarily in the face of danger.” Hence the expression, *Ne kra aguan* (“His *akra* has taken flight from him, leaving him pale with fear”).<sup>462</sup> Conversely, when a person’s *akra* is successful in guiding and providing protection, and the person prospers as a result, the *akra* may become a focus of worship and, as such, “may be given thanks and offerings, just like a deity or spirit, in a ritual called *akraguare*.”<sup>463</sup>

Opoku’s insights also further enlarge our understanding of the Akan concept of *sunsum*. The *sunsum*, which, as mentioned earlier, is widely regarded by the Akan as the “*dramatis personae*” of dreams, is capable of leaving the body during sleep and failing to

Days of the Week	Female Names	Male names
Sunday ( <i>Kwasida</i> )	<i>Akosua</i>	<i>Kwasi</i>
Monday ( <i>Dwowda</i> )	<i>Adwowa</i>	<i>Kwadwo</i>
Tuesday ( <i>Benada</i> )	<i>Abenaa</i>	<i>Kwabena</i>
Wednesday ( <i>Wukuda</i> )	<i>Akua</i>	<i>Kwaku</i>
Thursday ( <i>Yawda</i> )	<i>Yaa</i>	<i>Yaw</i>
Friday ( <i>Fida</i> )	<i>Afua</i>	<i>Kofi</i>
Saturday ( <i>Memeneda</i> )	<i>Amma</i>	<i>Kwame</i>

**Table 1. Associated with each “soul” (*ɔkra*) is a name (*kradin*) given to a human being based upon the particular day of the week that his/her “soul” enters the material world through physical birth.<sup>464</sup>**

return.<sup>465</sup> Moreover, the *sunsum*, as an “educable” factor that can through human effort and discipline be strengthened,<sup>466</sup> is at once the human being’s best defense against spiritual attack and a potential source of spiritual illness (*sunsum yare*). The *sunsum*’s protective aspect is referred to in the Akan statement, *Wo sunsum ye duru a, ɔbayifo ntumi wo* (“If you have a heavy *sunsum*, the [person who utilizes spiritual power in harmful ways] cannot overcome or attack you”).<sup>467</sup>

The utilization of spiritual power in a negative or harmful manner is not the only threat that can adversely affect the *sunsum* and cause a person to become spiritually and physically ill. A person’s own negative or “evil” thoughts can induce such a condition as

well. In a discussion of the Akan's traditional approach to addressing internal factors that negatively influence the strength (and therefore the health) of the *sunsum*, Opoku writes,

. . . confessions usually precede traditional treatment of diseases, because they are regarded as a way of unburdening the encumbered *sunsum*. But that is not all. The Akan have established certain institutions in their society which give recognition to this belief. One such institution is the *Apo* festival celebrated in some Akan areas, such as Asante and Brong Ahafo.<sup>468</sup>

One Akan informant interviewed by Rattray elaborates helpfully both on the problems posed by a "burdened" *sunsum* and on the Akan's institutionalized response thereto:

You know that everyone has a *sunsum* . . . that may get hurt or knocked about or become sick, and so make the body ill. Very often, although there may be other causes . . . ill-health is caused by the evil and hate that another has in his head against you. Again, you too may have hatred in your head against another, because of something that person has done to you, and that, too, causes your *sunsum* to fret and become sick. Our forebears knew this to be the cause, and so they ordained a time, once every year, when every man and woman, free man and slave, should have freedom to speak out just what was in their head, to tell their neighbours just what they thought of them, and of their actions, and not only their neighbors, but also the king and chief. When a man has spoken thus he will feel his *sunsum* cool and quieted, and the *sunsum* of the other person against whom he has spoken will be quieted also.<sup>469</sup>

These comments suggest that effective management of *sunsum* is believed to be a vital consideration in the attainment of individual and communal well-being in Akan society.

We should note as well that *sunsum* does not belong only to individuals. Nations consisting of many families also have their own *sunsum*. A clear example of this is the Asante nation, whose *sunsum* is said to be housed or "enshrined" within the *Sika Dwa* ("Golden Stool").<sup>470</sup> The Asante believe that the legendary priest *Ɔkɔmfo Anɔkye* brought the *Sika Dwa* down from the sky when the Asante nation was under the rule of its founder, Osei Tutu (c. 1680-1717).<sup>471</sup> The *Sika Dwa* is very carefully protected because it is regarded as the sacred source of the unity and power of the Asante nation. The Asante belief in the *Sika Dwa* as the sacred source of the unity and power of the

Asante nation is accompanied by the fervent belief that the well-being of the Asante nation is contingent upon the well-being of the *Sika Dwa*.<sup>472</sup>

*Ntoro* (“Semen-Transmitted Characteristic”) and *Mogya* (“Blood”)

In Akan cosmology, the *ntoro* (“semen-transmitted characteristic”) and *mogya* (“blood”) are also important constituent elements of the human being. There seems to be a consensus among many Akan scholars that the *ntoro* and *mogya* differ from the *ɔkra* and *sunsum* in that they are “inherited” features, whereas the *ɔkra* and *sunsum* are believed to come from *Onyame*.<sup>473</sup> We should mention though that this distinction has been contested by K. A. Busia, who argues that “*Ntoro* is the generic term of which *sunsum* is a specific instance.”<sup>474</sup> However, as Gyekye indicates, Busia’s argument is undercut by the fact that the Akan themselves tend to maintain this distinction, closely associating the *ɔkra* and *sunsum* with *Onyame* and the *ntoro* and *mogya* with human male and female parents.<sup>475</sup>

The Akan believe that a human being is created when “the *ntoro* of the father cooperates with the *mogya* of the mother at the time of conception.”<sup>476</sup> The *ntoro* is the factor that contributes to the formation of a “spiritual bond between a father and his child” which in turn “balances the relationship between the child and its mother.”<sup>477</sup> The father’s *ntoro* is most active and influential in the child before the child reaches puberty. However, after the child reaches puberty, the child’s own *ntoro* becomes active and exerts a more significant degree of control over the child, even though the influence of the father’s *ntoro* never ceases entirely.<sup>478</sup> The *ntoro* is associated with the dynamic constellation of traits that make up the child’s unique personality.<sup>479</sup> Moreover, the

father's *ntoro* determines which of the twelve *ntoro*-based Akan patrilineal groups the child will join.<sup>480</sup>

An Akan's *ntoro* dictates his/her patrilineal group affiliation. The twelve Akan patrilineal groups consist of the *Bosommuru*, the *Bosompra*, the *Bosomtwe*, the *Bosom-Dwerebe*, the *Bosomakɔm*, the *Bosomafi*, the *Bosomafram*, the *Bosom-konsi*, the *Bosomsika*, the *Bosompo*, the *Bosomayesu*, and the *Bosomkrete*.<sup>481</sup> Members of a particular patrilineal group generally share a specific set of behavioral traits associated with the kind of *ntoro* they possess. For instance, members of the *Bosomtwe* group are said to have a *Bosomtwe ntoro* and tend to have a compassionate personality, whereas those persons possessing a *Bosompra ntoro* are characterized by toughness. Furthermore, persons having a *Bosommuru ntoro* are described as "distinguished and noble."<sup>482</sup> Additionally, special names are often attached to the respective *ntoro* groups. Opoku notes, for instance, that "people with *Bosomafram ntoro* are usually called *Afram*, *Peasa*, *Dame*, *Ampɔnsa*, *Awua* and *Anɔkye*; typical names for those with *Bosompra ntoro* are *Agyeman*, *Akyeampɔn*, *Amoako*, *Asare*, *Boaten*, *Boakye*, *ɔkyere*, [and] *Kwakye*."<sup>483</sup> Each *ntoro* group also has a distinctive greeting that is taught to members by their fathers. An example of one of these greetings is, *Wo guare ntoro ben?* ("Which *ntoro* do you wash?").<sup>484</sup> These *ntoro*-based patrilineal connections and behavioral patterns underline the role of *ntoro* in Akan identity formation.

It is also important to mention that every *ntoro* is related to a particular day of the week that is seen as sacred, to various "totems and taboos," and to bodies of water. For example, Tuesday is the sacred day for persons having a *Bosompo ntoro*. Moreover, persons with a *Bosompo ntoro* claim the water buffalo as their "totem," and regard the

consumption of the flesh of a dog or tortoise as a taboo.<sup>485</sup> A second example to which we can refer is the group composed of persons with a *Bosompra ntoro*. Their sacred day is Wednesday, their “totem” is the leopard, and their taboos include the consumption of leopards, *adowa* (a species of antelope), white fowls, tortoises, *kwakuo* monkeys, water yams (*afase*), the *tamiriwa* (a large snail), and the imbibing of palm wine on Wednesdays.<sup>486</sup> In addition, it is believed that the *ntoro* has a sacred relationship with various bodies of water such as rivers, lakes, and oceans. This sacral relationship between the *ntoro* and bodies of water is often formative. An example given by one scholar involving the role of Akan husbands is suggestive of this formative relationship: “The husband has to mould his character after the river sacred to his *ntoro*, and he has to adopt the characteristics which the river (or lake) is believed to possess. For instance, men of the *Bosompra ntoro* endeavor to be as tough, tenacious and resolute as the River Pra . . . .”<sup>487</sup> Here again we see the concept of *ntoro* functioning as a source of Akan identity formation through its establishment of sacred and enduring linkages between individual human beings and larger familial groups and between human beings and the natural world.

Equally important in the Akan conception of the human being is the *mogya* (“blood”). The *mogya*, or blood component, is transmitted from mother to child. The *mogya* is a vital aspect of the physical and social formation of the child. The vital significance of the *mogya* lies both in its role as that which creates a “physiological bond” between mother and child and in its role as the foundation of Akan matrilineage (*abusua* or *ntɔn*). A child’s *mogya* connects the child to its mother’s matrikin by granting the child membership and status within the mother’s matrilineal clan.<sup>488</sup>

Connection to an Akan matrilineage through *mogya* is a major factor in the organization of Akan society. This is so because one's matrilineal connection plays a large part in determining one's social obligations. Within the Akan social structure, members of a single clan (*abusua*), even if spread across various groups, are legally considered siblings and are required to recognize one another as such.<sup>489</sup> Peter Sarpong's explanation of the *abusua* is instructive:

Members of one clan are held to be related to one another and bound together by a common tie. The tie is the belief that all members of the clan descend from one ancestor or ancestress. Hence, members of one clan are held to be relatives – brothers, sisters, mothers, fathers, etc. They are therefore forbidden to marry, irrespective of the degree of the relationship, or the spatial distance separating them. This is referred to as the rule of exogamy.<sup>490</sup>

Sarpong's explanation clearly reiterates the role of the *mogya* as a spiritual and biological agent that irrevocably binds the Akan together one to another, immediately introducing them at birth into an expansive and diverse familial system whose members are expected to honor their mutual bond and consider their collective well-being. The expansive and diverse nature of this familial system is indicated by the number of distinct groups comprising it. The Akan believe that there were seven original clan groups (*abusua asɔn*). Among the Akan, the Fante still adhere to this original number and therefore divide themselves into the following groups: 1) *Nsɔna*, 2) *Anɔna*, 3) *Twidan*, 4) *Aboradze*, 5) *Ntwea*, 6) *Kɔnna*, and 7) *Adwenadze*. However, other Akan groups now recognize eight primary *abusua* divisions and subdivisions (the latter of which appear in parentheses). These groups include the *Dyoko* (*Dako*), the *Bretuo* (*Tena*), the *Aduana* (*Abrade*), and *Asakyiri* (*Amoakaade*), the *Aseneɛ* (*Adonten*), the *Agona* (*Toa*), the *Asona* (*Dwumina*, *Dwum*), and the *Ekɔna* (*Asɔkɔre*).<sup>491</sup> The continued existence and social

influence of these *abusua* groups among the Akan bespeaks the vital importance of the concept of *mogya* in the Akan conception of the human being.

*Nipadua* (“Body”)

The *ɔkra* (“soul”), *sunsum* (“spirit”), *ntoro* (“semen-transmitted characteristic”), and *mogya* (“blood”) do not operate in an immaterial vacuum. Rather, the human body (*nipadua*) is the principal physical theater in which these related elements “interactively” operate.<sup>492</sup> The *ntoro* and *mogya* have been discussed as spirituo-physical factors that are transmitted bodily from parent to child. The *ɔkra* and *sunsum* have been discussed as constituent elements of the human being that are of divine origin. Our analysis thus far has highlighted the role that each of these four components plays in shaping the human being; the *ɔkra*, being perhaps the most essential element of the human being, is the distinguishing marker of humanity; as part of the *ɔkra*, the *sunsum* contributes significantly to the development of a person’s disposition, personality, and moral orientation; the *ntoro* and *mogya* also contribute significantly to the formation of a person by establishing perduring bonds between the person and his/her parents and within the wider familial institutions associated with the *ntoro* and *mogya* (i.e., the *ntoro* and *abusua* groups). The presence and proper operation of these four elements is vital not only to the constitution of the human body, but also to the well-being of the human body. Likewise, the well-being of the body also affects these four elements. Perhaps the clearest example of this mutuality involves the *ɔkra* and the body (*nipadua*).

The Akan believe that the health of the human body is directly affected by the health of the *ɔkra*. Thus, an “unclean” *ɔkra* (e.g., an *ɔkra* that is under attack by an “evil” spirit)

results in an unhealthy body. K. A. Busia addresses this belief in the following statement:

They [the Akan] believed also that spiritual uncleanness was an element of ill-health and that the cleansing of the soul was necessary for health. When, for example, a patient was made to stand on a broom while being treated, it was to symbolize this cleansing. The broom sweeps filth away from the home and keeps it healthy; so the soul must be swept of filth to keep the body healthy.<sup>493</sup>

In other words, if the *ɔkra* is unhealthy, then it is impossible for the body to maintain a favorable condition of health. Hence, the *ɔkra* must be healed by a traditional diviner (*Adunsifo*) before the body can be healed.<sup>494</sup> Moreover, in much the same way, the condition of the *ɔkra* is affected by the condition of the body. The latter belief accounts for why the Akan draw a connection between the behavior of the body and the health of the *ɔkra*. For instance, if a person's behavior gives the appearance of happiness, the Akan say, *Ne 'kra aniagye* ("Her soul is happy"); if a person's behavior suggests unhappiness, the Akan say, *Ne 'kra di awereshow* ("Her soul is sorrowful").<sup>495</sup> These statements reflect an understanding among the Akan that, during a person's bodily lifespan, the *ɔkra* and the body share an interdependent connection that is crucial to the person's well-being.

The Akan also acknowledge the inevitability of the death of the physical body, which involves, among other things, the return of the *ɔkra* to *Onyame* and the departure of the *mogya* down into "Mother Earth."<sup>496</sup> Furthermore, in Akan cosmology, the *mogya* takes on a particular significance at the point of physical death. For it is believed that at the point of physical death the *mogya* becomes the "ghost" (*saman* or *ɔsaman*) of the deceased.<sup>497</sup> The *saman* maintains the bodily form of the deceased person, and may be afforded the opportunity of reincarnation. However, reincarnation of the *mogya* does not

abolish or alter the deceased person's clan (*abusua*) affiliation, as such reincarnation is possible only "through a woman of the same clan."<sup>498</sup> The particular significance of the *mogya* in relation to physical death indicates that the Akan do not interpret physical death as an existential conclusion. Rather, the Akan view physical death as a dynamic transition from a material mode of socially connected existence to an immaterial mode of socially connected existence that involves ongoing interaction with both the spiritual and mundane worlds.

### **Destiny (*Nkrabea/Hyebea*)**

It is appropriate at this point to address the Akan conception of destiny (*nkrabea* or *hyebea*), as it is also considered by the Akan to be an essential aspect of the human being. The Akan view human destiny as a highly "idiosyncratic" reality.<sup>499</sup> The Akan's firm belief in the "idiosyncratic" nature of human destiny suggests that, perhaps more so than the *akra*, *sunsum*, *ntoro*, and *mogya*, destiny emerges as the cosmological ingredient that accounts for the uniqueness of human *individuals*. This perspective is implied by the Akan saying, *Obiara ne ne nkrabea* ("Each person has his/her own destiny").<sup>500</sup> There seems to be general agreement among the Akan on the singular role of destiny in establishing human beings as unique individuals. However, Akan perspectives on, for example, how one's destiny is "received" from *Onyame*, tend to reflect one of two very closely related approaches to understanding human destiny.<sup>501</sup>

The two primary approaches among the Akan to understanding human destiny are related to two words that have traditionally been associated with the idea of human destiny: *nkrabea* and *hyebea*. *Nkrabea* consists of the words *nkra* ("message") and *bea* ("manner"). Thus, the literal meaning of *nkrabea* is "the manner of the message."<sup>502</sup> The

connotative meaning of *nkrabea* is of somewhat greater importance in that it can refer either to the message (*nkra*) given by *Onyame* to the individual soul (*ɔkra*) or to the message given to *Onyame* by the *ɔkra* which, if “approved” by *Onyame*, is considered fateful in the sense that it is “binding.” This message is fateful also because it determines the “manner” in which the individual is to live in the material world.<sup>503</sup> Similarly, *hyɛbea* also consists of two words: *hyɛ* (“to fix or arrange”) and *bea* (“manner”). Hence, *hyɛbea* refers to “the manner in which one’s destiny was fixed or arranged.”<sup>504</sup> The subtle etymological differences between the words *nkrabea* and *hyɛbea* have contributed to the emergence of two main perspectives among the Akan regarding the establishment or reception of a person’s destiny. In the first version, the *ɔkra* appears before *Onyame* and gives *Onyame* a message that conveys to *Onyame* what the *ɔkra* would like its destiny to be. If *Onyame* authorizes the *ɔkra*’s message, then the *ɔkra* is given permission by *Onyame* to enter the material world in order to attempt the realization of this destiny. Once authorized by *Onyame*, the *ɔkra*’s message to *Onyame* becomes a destiny that will shape the *ɔkra*’s passage through its life in the material world. In the second version, the *ɔkra* appears before *Onyame* prior to entering the material world through birth and simply “receives” its destiny from *Onyame*.<sup>505</sup>

Although there are at least two main understandings among the Akan concerning how a person’s destiny is established, there nevertheless appears to be little cultural evidence to suggest that the Akan do not commonly share the belief that *Onyame* ultimately controls human destiny. Many Akan discussants interviewed by Gyekye and Minkus were of the opinion that *nkrabea* and *hyɛbea* “are identical in their referent,”<sup>506</sup> or in other words are synonymous.<sup>507</sup> The synonymous usage of *nkrabea* and *hyɛbea* among the

Akan casts doubt upon arguments made, for instance, by Meyerowitz, Danquah, and Sarpong which suggest that the terms *nkrabea* and *hyebea* represent conceptions of destiny that are ultimately different.<sup>508</sup> Perspectives that promote a dualism or “doubleness”<sup>509</sup> in the Akan conception of destiny are also weakened by the existence of numerous Akan maxims that emphasize *Onyame’s singular* authority and control over an individual’s destiny. Some of these maxims include the following: *Onyame nkrabea nni kwatibea* (“There is no bypass to Onyame’s destiny”); *Onyame hyebea yennae no* (“Onyame’s destiny cannot be altered”); *Ade a Onyame ahyehye εdasani ntumi nsee no* (“No living person can subvert the order [arrangement] of Onyame”); *Se Onyame ankum wo na εdasani kum wo a, wunwu* (“If Onyame does not kill you but a human being tries to kill you, you will not die”); *Se Onyame ankum wo a wunwu* (“If Onyame does not decree your death, you do not die”); *Yetufo, yentu hyeбере* (“We offer advice in order to reform a person, but not to change a person’s destiny”).<sup>510</sup> These maxims show that the idea of *Onyame* as the primary authoritative power in the establishment of human destiny is a salient motif in Akan cosmology.

The following question emerges for our consideration: Is the content of the message (*nkra*) of destiny exhaustive or general? Asked differently, does the message of destiny include every detail and event that will take place in a person’s life, or does the message indicate only the general trajectory of a person’s life? The Akan appear uncertain about the extent of the information included in the message of destiny, although Gyekye’s discussants, for example, were “unanimous” in their belief that the message does in fact include “the time of a person’s death and possibly also the manner and place of death.” Two of Gyekye’s discussants also claimed that “rank and occupation” are included in the

message of destiny as well.<sup>511</sup> Moreover, there was agreement among all of Gyekye's discussants that destiny accounts for the "inexplicable events of one's life, the unalterable and persistently habitual traits of character," and the "persistent actions and behavior patterns of an individual."<sup>512</sup> Also worth mentioning is one discussant's belief that "Accident [*asiane, akwanhyia*] is not in the *nkrabea*" (*Asiane, enni nkrabea no mu*).<sup>513</sup> Nonetheless, it seems that the extent of the information contained in the message of destiny remains largely unknown to the Akan. This may be attributable in part to the belief among the Akan that "the message of destiny cannot be remembered since a large portion of the soul . . . is said to remain unconscious." Therefore, *Onyame* is the only being with full knowledge of a person's destiny.<sup>514</sup> This belief is articulated in the Akan saying, *Obi kra ne Nyame no na obi nnyina ho bi* ("When someone was taking leave of Onyame [i.e., When the *okra* was leaving *Onyame* to enter the material world after having its destiny established or approved by *Onyame*] no one else was standing by").<sup>515</sup> The question of what can be known of a person's destiny from its message (*nkra*) tends to be accompanied by a second question that asks whether or not a person's destiny can be altered after it has been established in the spirit world (*Asamando*).

The question of whether or not human destiny can be altered is an unsettled one. Some Akan researchers such as Sarpong are of the belief that destiny can be changed through the utilization of indigenous spiritual techniques like divination (*ebisadze*) or through other traditional ritual formulae.<sup>516</sup> However, other researchers such as Opoku and Gyekye hold the opposite view.<sup>517</sup> This disagreement notwithstanding, the Akan cultural data studied thus far appear to lend more support to the view held by Opoku and Gyekye. It seems quite difficult to reconcile Sarpong's belief with, for example, the

Akan saying that declares, *Nea Onyame ahyehye no, ɔdasani ntumi nnan ani* (“The order Onyame has settled, no living person can alter”).<sup>518</sup> Other recently cited maxims such as *Onyame nkrabea nni kwatibea* (“There is no bypass to Onyame’s destiny”), *Onyame hyɛbea yennae no* (“Onyame’s destiny cannot be altered”), and *Ade a Onyame ahyehye ɔdasani ntumi nsee no* (“No living person can subvert the order [arrangement] of Onyame”) also trouble Sarpong’s perspective.

Yet perhaps even more troublesome for Sarpong’s perspective is the fact that the Akan belief in the fundamental goodness of *Onyame* and hence destiny forces one to ask if it is appropriate or even necessary to question whether or not destiny is an alterable reality. As observed much earlier, the Akan cosmological tradition abounds with appellations and maxims extolling the fundamental goodness of *Onyame*. Some of these appellations and maxims include *Tweduampɔn* (“The Dependable”), *Amowia* (“Giver of the sun or light”), *Amosu* (“Giver of rain”), *Abɔmmubuwafrɛ* (“Consoler”), *Nyaamanekose* (“The One in whom you confide troubles which come upon you”), *Onyame na ɔwɔ basin fufuo ma no* (“It is Onyame who pounds fufu for the armless one”), *Onyame ma wo yaree a, ɔma wo ano aduro* (“If Onyame gives you an illness, Onyame also gives you medicine”), and *Onyame mpe bɔne* (“Onyame is against evil”). Furthermore, the Akan belief in the inherent goodness of destiny is reflected in the sayings, *Obiara ankra bɔne* (“Nobody’s leave-taking was evil”), *Obiara kraa yie* (“Everyone’s leave-taking was good”), and *Nyame bɔɔ obiara yie* (“Onyame created everyone well”).<sup>519</sup> One ought not lose sight of the possibility that further advanced research into Akan culture could yield data that are consistent with Sarpong’s view concerning the mutability of destiny. However, what

seems likely in any case is that the Akan conception of destiny will continue to play a significant role in how the Akan interpret the human condition.

The existence of Akan expressions such as *Onipa nyini wu na ɔnnyini ntu* (“A person grows in order to die but does not grow in order to fly”)<sup>520</sup> indicates an honest acceptance among the Akan of the fact of human mortality. Yet there appears to be no evidence that this honest acceptance engenders a sense of despair or disillusionment among the Akan. While life in the mundane world is fraught with death, unfortunate accidents (*asiane*, *akwanhyia*), perils, and challenges, human destiny (*nkrabea/hyɛbea*) maintains its status as a fundamentally positive spiritual and existential goal or purpose in life that is worth learning more about and actively pursuing. As noted previously, the Akan value and seek after a life of well-being and prosperity. This is why it is important to the Akan to precisely identify and utilize personal talents and skills that are best suited to the realization of one’s destiny. Hence the expressions, *Anomaa nni nsa, nso ɔde n’ano nwene ne pirebuo* (“A bird has no hands, but it uses its beak to weave its nest”), *Anomaa kɔ asuo a, ɔde n’ano na esa* (“If a bird goes for water, it uses its beak to collect it”), and *Anomaa ahoɔden ne ne ntaban* (“The bird’s strength is in its wings”).<sup>521</sup> The value that the Akan place on a life of well-being and prosperity also compels them to seek protection against negative spiritual practices and powers that threaten such a life. The Akan believe that *bayi boro*, which was dually described in the first chapter as a negative presence of spiritual power and as the specialized utilization of this power for socially destructive ends, represents a serious threat to human life and well-being. Members of the Akan community who believe themselves to be victims of *bayi boro* often enlist the counteractive, protective services offered at local anti-*bayi boro* shrines in the Brong

Ahafo region of southern Ghana. In the next and final stage of this chapter, we will examine the function and significance of anti-*bayi boro* rites held at local anti-*bayi boro* shrines in response to the destructive activities of *abayifo*.

### ***Abayifo and Anti-Bayi Boro Rites***

Readers should be aware as we begin that the examination to follow is in no way intended to be exhaustive or definitive. Rather, the purpose of the examination is simply to establish a firmer sense of what anti-*bayi boro* rites are, of how they function within the context of the Brong Ahafo region of southern Ghana, and of how they relate to Akan epistemology. My decision to focus on anti-*bayi boro* rites in the Brong Ahafo region of southern Ghana is not necessarily due to a lack of such rites in other regions of the country. Instead, my selection of anti-*bayi boro* rites performed in the Brong Ahafo region – particularly within the town of Dormaa-Ahenkro – is a result of the fact that some of the most thorough descriptions of these rites are based on observations made at anti-*bayi boro* shrines located in Dormaa-Ahenkro. Situated in one of the westernmost semi-deciduous areas of Ghana near the Côte d'Ivoirian border, modern-day Dormaa-Ahenkro – capital of the Dormaa district<sup>522</sup> – is a very culturally and commercially active town in which cocoa production has emerged as an important industry. Dormaa-Ahenkro is also home to a considerable number of anti-*bayi boro* shrines which, according to some researchers, may be related to older anti-*bayi boro* shrines that were operative in northern towns like Bole and Wa during the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries.<sup>523</sup> Moreover, anti-*bayi boro* shrines are also found in other regions of contemporary Ghana such as the Asante region.<sup>524</sup> We are therefore treating the phenomenon of anti-*bayi boro* rites in Dormaa-Ahenkro as a local example of a much broader and complex Akan ritual

tradition that countervails *bayi boro* while attempting to rectify its destructive personal and social effects. Our examination of anti-*bayi boro* rites will be preceded by a discussion of persons involved in the practice of *bayi boro*. Such persons are known by the Akan as *abayifo*.

*Abayifo and the “Acquisition” of Bayi Boro*

Persons who are under the influence of *bayi boro* or who themselves utilize *bayi boro* in order to harm individuals or communities are characterized by the Akan as *abayifo*. In Akan society, women tend to be identified most often as *abayifo*, although in rare cases children have confessed to utilizing *bayi boro* to “attack those they do not like.”<sup>525</sup> One immediately wonders why women are identified most frequently by the Akan as *abayifo*. A study produced by one researcher suggests that this pattern of identification may be related to the Akan belief that *bayi boro* stems in part from the presence of a negative or “evil” spirit (*ɔbayi*) in the vagina of a female *ɔbayifo* (sing. *abayifo*) which enables her to clandestinely attack the soul (*ɔkra*) of another person.<sup>526</sup> However, this seems inadequate to account fully for the apparently inordinate identification of women as *abayifo*, especially in light of the fact that, as noted earlier, the Akan hold *all* human beings responsible for moral “evil” (*bɔne*), not just women. Furthermore, the existence of accounts of *bayi boro* that seem to make reference to male *abayifo* also casts doubt on the physiological hypothesis regarding female *abayifo*.<sup>527</sup> In any event, additional research is needed to better clarify the factors informing the Akan’s identification of *bayi boro* with women.

The Akan believe that there are a variety of ways in which an *ɔbayifo* “acquires” the power of *bayi boro*. It is possible, for instance, for a woman who is an *ɔbayifo* to give

birth to a child who also possesses the power of *bayi boro*.<sup>528</sup> In this way, *bayi boro* can be transmitted from one individual to another as a heritable characteristic. Interestingly, though, it is also possible for a woman who is not an *ɔbayifo* to give birth to a child who possesses *bayi boro*. Such transmission is possible because, according to the Akan, *abayifo* bathe in rivers before returning to their homes and families, thereby contaminating local water supplies. Women who unknowingly utilize these rivers for various household purposes after such bathing has occurred expose themselves to *bayi boro*, effectively insuring that the next child to which they give birth will be “invested” with the power of *bayi boro*.<sup>529</sup> However, it is believed that a child who has inherited *bayi boro* will not become aware of this inherited power until the child passes the age of puberty.<sup>530</sup>

Another means by which *bayi boro* is transmitted involves physical contact with a material object other than water that has been infused with the power of *bayi boro* by an *ɔbayifo*. In this scenario, *bayi boro* is transmitted when a person touches, handles, or ingests the infused object. Almost any object can be infused with the power of *bayi boro*. Some objects that are known to have been used in the practice and transmission of *bayi boro* include beads, cloth, eggs, palm-nut soup, towels, wooden statuettes, wooden *ɔbayifo* stools, pots (*abayisenwa*), knives, and the Bible.<sup>531</sup> In some instances, an *ɔbayifo*, when near death, may opt to bestow her *bayi boro* upon a friend or loved one lest it be buried along with the *ɔbayifo*'s body after death. In these instances, the *ɔbayifo* will “present” a *bayi boro*-infused object such as a pot, palm-nut soup, or a piece of cloth to the friend or loved one and, through physical contact with or ingestion of the object, that individual becomes a bearer of *bayi boro*.<sup>532</sup>

*Bayi boro* can also be “acquired” via purchase at local markets in Akan villages and towns. *Bayi boro* is often sold at very affordable – even “cheap” – prices by older female traders.<sup>533</sup> Part of what this means is that *bayi boro* is commercially available to almost anyone, including the indigent. While it is conceivable that a careless purveyor of *bayi boro* may sell *bayi boro* with no concern for a buyer’s practical familiarity with it, what often happens is that the purchase of *bayi boro* will include instructions for how it can be used.<sup>534</sup> The commercial availability of *bayi boro* reflects the Akan community’s widespread belief in the existence and efficacy of *bayi boro*. Even though it is commonly regarded as both dangerous and “evil,” *bayi boro* nonetheless represents a discernible and significant aspect of Akan spiritual consciousness.

A fourth manner in which one can obtain *bayi boro* involves “evil” spirits such as the *Sasabonsam*. *Bayi boro* can be obtained through contact with these spirits in at least two ways: 1) A person can, perhaps with the aid of an *abayifo*, purposefully establish contact with an “evil” spirit in order to gain the power of *bayi boro* from that spirit; 2) An “evil” spirit may obtrude *bayi boro* upon a person, thereby forcing him/her to commit harmful acts against neighbors, friends, and/or loved ones.<sup>535</sup> The possibility of human beings gaining access to *bayi boro* through contact with “evil” spirits may partially account for the negative status of *bayi boro* in Akan society. The unpredictability that attends the “acquisition” of *bayi boro* via an “evil” spirit signals the serious risk to personal well-being that one incurs through such an “acquisition.”

#### *The Behavior of Abayifo*

The behavior of *abayifo* is often described quite emphatically as destructive or “anti-social.”<sup>536</sup> As an “anti-social” *community*, *abayifo* operate corporately rather than

individually. The Akan believe that *abayifo* possess the ability to leave their physical bodies via their *sunsum* while sleeping in order to join other *abayifo* for nocturnal “meetings” held atop trees such as the iroko tree (*Milicia excelsa*), the baobab tree (*Adansonia digitata*), the silk-cotton tree (*Bombax ceiba*), and the odum tree (*Chlorophora excelsa*).<sup>537</sup> It is also believed that, before leaving their bodies, *abayifo* physically invert themselves such that they can walk on their heads and see from eyes that appear on the backs of their ankles.<sup>538</sup> After leaving their bodies via their *sunsum*, some *abayifo* transform themselves into various creatures such as antelopes, leopards, or snakes prior to traveling to their nocturnal destinations, while others move about by “riding” on the backs of other human beings, on spiders’ webs, or on animals such as pythons, lions, birds, black cats, toads, rats, and dogs.<sup>539</sup> There is also the belief among the Akan that *abayifo* can make themselves invisible through the bodily application of special “medicines.” This is done so that they can fly naked from place to place undetected.<sup>540</sup> In addition, *abayifo* are said to emit “flames” or “intermittent light” from their eyes, nose, mouth, ears, and armpits. *Abayifo* exert complete control of this “intermittent light,” sometimes “vanishing” behind it as they travel.<sup>541</sup>

Very often, but not always, the actions attributed to *abayifo* occur on an immaterial or spiritual level. This is frequently true, for instance, of the nocturnal “meetings” regularly held by *abayifo* during which communal rituals are performed and collective plans are made. It is typically the volitional spiritual power or *sunsum* of an *abayifo* that attends and participates in these nocturnal “meetings” before returning to the *abayifo*’s physical body.<sup>542</sup> The nocturnal “meetings” of *abayifo* – which it seems sometimes may physically occur<sup>543</sup> – are considered by the Akan to be a cause for fear. The Akan

therefore say, *Se odum si ho a, ose oye Otanɔ, na obonsam abesi so* (“If the odum tree stands alone, it says that it is as big as Tano [the guardian spirit of the Ashanti state]. But how much more fearful is the odum tree, if an *ɔbayifo* sits down on it”).<sup>544</sup> A central element of *ɔbayifo* meetings is a physical pot (*abayisenwa*) that serves as a repository for the power of *abayifo*.<sup>545</sup> This pot, which has also been described as an element that “protects” *ɔbayifo* communities from public “discovery” and other dangers, functions as a source of power around which communities of *abayifo* organize themselves. In addition, many *abayifo* have their own individual pots (*bayiseaa*) that serve essentially the same function as that of the communal pots (*abayisenwa*).<sup>546</sup> The contents of these pots, which, according to one traditional healer (*Oduruyefɔ*, sing. *Aduruyefo*),<sup>547</sup> are invisible “unless they become visible by the healing power,” can contain such items as a black seed called *abro-bia* that is produced by the red-flowered plant *Canna indica* (this black seed represents the “soul and blood” of victims killed by an *ɔbayifo*), small stones (“one for each victim killed”), a knife, a millipede, human fingers, beads, and palm-oil.<sup>548</sup> While the communal and individual pots of *abayifo* are in some cases buried underground or concealed within the stomach of an *ɔbayifo*,<sup>549</sup> it appears these pots are most frequently found beneath, near, or inside the trees at which *abayifo* meet. This is supported by the following account given by a Ghanaian student:

Sometimes, for the sake of their new members, they [abayifo] will not go up the tree But foregather under the tree, and I remember seeing a pot under one of the Silk Cotton trees . . . In it there were beads, palm oil, the wrist of a human being and a frog. It was really a most exciting sight and no sooner had I left the place than I heard a woman confessing at [an anti-bayi boro shrine], that she was the owner of that pot. She explained that those things were very important and that they were late in conveying them to another place as the day was fast approaching.<sup>550</sup>

The nocturnal “meetings” held by *ɔbayifo* communities empower members of these communities to engage in a wide range of “anti-social” behaviors.

Some of these behaviors include spiritually “feasting” on human blood and flesh, the depletion of other people’s material resources such as money and property, the bringing about of sterility, sexual impotency and disease, adversely affecting the intellect of students and “rivals,” and producing physical injury and death. Such behaviors pose an obvious and direct threat to human well-being, hence the strong aversion among the Akan to *abayifo*. Listed below are several documented accounts of some of the behaviors just mentioned. The purpose of this is to provide readers with a more detailed sense of how these behaviors sometimes manifest themselves in Akan communities:

I remember that a woman was brought to the judgment-place who was charged with being [an *ɔbayifo*]. The articles she used were a crab’s big finger or claw, a steel trap for rats, a black *asanka* pot and a black velvet cloth. She confessed that when the trap was set, she sucked her victim’s blood into the *asanka*, all the time clipping the crab’s claw firmly together. After a time the trap came to be unset by itself and that meant the end (death) of the victim. She would then put on the black velvet cloth for the funeral and no one would know that she had caused the death.<sup>551</sup>

It is said that one day a hunter went to visit his farm to kill animals which destroyed his crops. As soon as the man entered the farm, he saw a bushpig of enormous size, mercilessly rooting out his cassava. The man being a good shot, killed the animal, and to his astonishment it cried: ‘You have killed me! I am your mother-in-law.’ The animal vanished at once, but when the man returned home, he saw his mother-in-law lying dead.<sup>552</sup>

A certain woman who was pregnant wanted to leave her husband in order to attend the meeting of the [*abayifo*]. As she was heavily laden with child, she wanted to lighten her body for the flight. With her supernatural powers she was able to transfer the infant from her womb to her husband’s stomach while he was asleep. The woman then left the house for the assembly. It is believed also that it is the duty of the *obosom* [tutelar deity] to chase [*abayifo*] and bring them under his control, i.e., to make them stop the practice. As this woman left the house, it happened that a local *obosom* was on his beat and struck her with a spear. This weakened her so much that she was unable to return home for her child. In the morning the man to his surprise and amazement found himself to be pregnant. Many people rushed to see this wonderful thing. The story says that the man was operated upon but unfortunately

both the child and the man died after the operation.<sup>553</sup>

A boy who had been exceptionally clever and promising in his class work failed the standard seven examination. The failure was ascribed to the action of a relative who was known to be [an *abayifo*], but who had pretended to have the good of the boy at heart. Thus [bayi boro] is used in learning, seeing examination papers beforehand and passing exams with unspeakable success yet with very little effort. This is especially the case among the Fantis. And for fear that their children are outwitted by the crafty Fantis, parents and guardians in other regions are often loathe to send their wards to the Fanti Secondary Schools. Parents even fear that their children will be killed there, if they managed to shine more than usual by their own efforts.”<sup>554</sup>

A pagan woman asked by her former husband to boil some eggs for him, refused to do so. The man then took two eggs and drank their contents raw before her eyes. Shortly afterwards the woman became ill – a tumour grew in her abdomen, exactly in the shape of two eggs, one beside the other. These naturally are believed to be the two eggs the man had swallowed! In spite of all the endeavours of the quacks the woman died shortly afterwards.<sup>555</sup>

*Abayifo* are also said to engage in other behaviors such as “dancing” and the playing of “football (soccer):”

At the first big junction at Koforidua on coming down from the Akwapim hills is the dancing place of the Koforidua [*abayifo*]. A schoolboy, their secretary, confessed before Tigare [a Suman or Bosom Brafo] that they danced together there. He said that a member of the company stayed at the house where a brass band practiced, and used to bring the invisible spirit of the instruments to the dancing place, and there the [*abayifo*] danced unheard and unseen by ordinary men.<sup>556</sup>

They [*abayifo*] say that their principal game is football. They are said to be able to cut off a man’s head during his sleep to use it as their ball. If they have finished, they put it on again. The story is told that one night the [*abayifo*] cut off the head of a fellow and went to play ball. When they returned it, they put it on again the wrong way round. The next morning the fellow slept on in this twisted way and people greatly wondered at him. In the evening the [*abayifo*] returned and cut off his head again and went to play a game. Afterwards they replaced the head in the right way. The next morning the fellow awoke without knowing what had happened. He was asked what day of the week it was. He said it was Thursday. But it was Friday – the man had slept unconsciously from Wednesday evening till Friday morning. Afterwards they told him all that had happened.<sup>557</sup>

Perhaps with the exception of the story of the dancing *abayifo*, the accounts referenced above illustrate some of the ways in which the behavior of *abayifo* can threaten and

undermine the well-being of individuals and communities within Akan society. These accounts also make clear the communal need in Akan society to counteract and neutralize the behavior of *abayifo* as expressed through the power of *bayi boro*. The Akan religious tradition responds to the constant threat of *bayi boro* and to its deleterious social effects through the performance of shrine-based rites that are referred to in this study as anti-*bayi boro* rites. We move now to an examination of these rites.

#### *Anti-Bayi Boro Rites as Shrine-Based Rites*

The performance of anti-*bayi boro* rites in Dormaa-Ahenkro takes place at or near special shrines that have emerged in response to the problem of *bayi boro*. The deities (*Abosom*) have their own anti-*bayi boro* shrines, even though multiple deities may be worshipped at a shrine belonging to a particular deity.<sup>558</sup> Within these shrines, the power of “tutelar” deities such as *Aberewa*, *Tigare*, *Mframa*, and *Kune* is expressed through inspirited objects (*Asuman*) and/or medicines (*aduro*).<sup>559</sup> While sometimes performed by shrine linguists (*akyeame*, pl. *ɔkyeame*) or assistants, anti-*bayi boro* rites are overseen by priests (*Akɔmfo*) or healers/medicine makers (*Aduruyɛfo*).<sup>560</sup> The Akan believe that specific deities are frequently involved in the creation of anti-*bayi boro* shrines. The involvement of a deity in the creation of an anti-*bayi boro* shrine may occur in the following way: A woman walking through a forest stumbles upon an oddly shaped piece of wood or other unusual object and takes the object for herself because of its uniqueness. The woman is later visited in a dream by a deity who claims to be present in or connected to the unique object she found in the forest. The woman is chosen by the deity to serve as the priestess of a shrine to be erected to this deity using the unique inspirited object from the forest as well as other materials. The woman then undergoes a kind of spiritual

“death” and rebirth in which she disappears into the forest for an extended period of time. She may return from the forest on her own or with the assistance of community elders. This period of “death” and rebirth prepares the woman to more effectively manage her connection to the deity, with whom contact is considered “dangerous.”<sup>561</sup> The deity informs the woman of its taboos, at which point she consults priests of established shrines regarding the proper way to construct her new shrine. The following account from an actual priest of an anti-*bayi boro* shrine is instructive:

I was a Methodist Christian and used to attend services at W [full name not given]. One day I returned from chapel. Suddenly I fell down like a dead man. When I rose, I was still in a trance. For two months I then roamed about in the forest not knowing what I did. The elders all went into the forest after me and drummed. One day we all saw the tutelar spirit which obviously was causing my madness because he wanted to possess me, perched on a kroba tree. He looked like fire. The elders then sacrificed a cow, a sheep and a hen. The tutelary spirit now came down and the elders put him into a brass pan – the spirit was terribly hot and they burnt their hands when they touched him. Gradually I quieted down – but from that time on the tutelary spirit had ‘married’ me. The spirit had been appeased when food was placed before him.<sup>562</sup>

As can be seen in this account, the creation of a new anti-*bayi boro* shrine radically disrupts and transforms the life of the person spiritually chosen to build and care for the shrine.

In Dormaa-Ahenkro, some of the *Ɔkɔmfo*-attended anti-*bayi boro* shrines of major tutelary deities such as *Tigare* and *Kune* often consist of pots containing a mixture of water and black powder or water and roots. Other shrines may contain towels, cowrie shells, blood, clusters of roots, and kola nuts.<sup>563</sup> There are also shrines that have a modestly sized “spirit-house” in which a conical drum is kept. Typically a hole is carved into the base of this drum so that a spirit or deity can enter the drum when it pleases. Additionally, some shrines include a special area near their base for the storage of sacred kola nuts. What is common to many shrines though is that they are housed within a

“temple room” that is often “pitch dark.”<sup>564</sup> It is also common for the area surrounding the temple room itself to be “reserved” for the shrine priest (*Ɔkɔmfɔ*).<sup>565</sup> Another description of *Ɔkɔmfɔ*-attended anti-*bayi boro* shrines in Dormaa-Ahenkro includes several other additional details:

Each shrine is made up of a small altar constructed from several copper pans of different shapes and sizes, made into a structure several feet high. Perched on top is the pan or pot in which the gods are believed to be living. Housed in a room in the compound where the priest lives, the shrine is surrounded by empty bottles of schnapps and eggs. These are remnants of offerings made by clients. Clothes worn by the priest [while ‘alighted’ (*nsie-ye*) by a spirit or by several spirits] hang on the walls, together with various talismans. No one is allowed into this room except the priest, his helpers and clients of the shrine.<sup>566</sup>

An *Ɔkɔmfɔ*-attended anti-*bayi boro* shrine may also include representations of “messenger” or “executioner” spirits that assist the main deity (or deities) of the shrine. Such spirits, who are said to be “children” of the main shrine deities, aid the latter in catching *abayifo* and neutralizing their *bayi boro*-related powers.<sup>567</sup> These spirits are often depicted in anti-*bayi boro* shrines as figures carved from wood or other materials.

At Dormaa-Ahenkro-based anti-*bayi boro* shrines that are attended by *Aduruyefɔ* (“healers” or “medicine makers”), the main tutelary deities are housed within a hut or hut-like structure located a considerable distance from the *Oduruyefɔ*’s living quarters.<sup>568</sup>

The tutelary deities of these shrines are “moulded from a round block about 2ft high consisting of two sections, head and body, shaped from mud, twigs, dirt, and stones which are covered in secret ingredients.” In addition, the deities are “encased in gold” and “surrounded by a clutter of brass pots and pans.”<sup>569</sup> Stored immediately above in a recessed area are a variety of “weapons” used to ensnare *abayifo*. Some of these weapons include sticks, clubs, cutlasses, rifles, machetes, knives, and bows and arrows.<sup>570</sup>

Encircled by several benches, the deities’ huts are each located in a courtyard, at the

center of which is a rock with a pointed end. This rock is one of the most important components of *Oduruyefɔ*-attended anti-*bayi boro* shrines because it is upon this rock that an ensnared *ɔbayifo* is made to perch “uncomfortably under the glare of his or her accusers.”<sup>571</sup>

*Anti-Bayi Boro Rites Conducted by Akɔmfo*

While a person referred to as an *Ɔkɔmfo* and a person referred to as an *Oduruyefɔ* are both regarded by the Akan as priests (*Akɔmfo*),<sup>572</sup> there are some notable differences in how each conducts anti-*bayi boro* rites at their respective anti-*bayi boro* shrines. These differences, which will be discussed in more detail as our examination unfolds, involve such elements as the “alighting” of deities upon the heads of priests (*nsie-yee*) and the utilization of the Bible as a “cleansing” agent.<sup>573</sup> Such differences are significant in part because they help to define two somewhat varying approaches among the Akan to ritually combating the destructive power of *bayi boro*. Let us then begin with anti-*bayi boro* rites not conducted by *Aduruyefɔ*.

Anti-*bayi boro* ceremonies conducted by *Akɔmfo* who are not necessarily considered *Aduruyefɔ* are heavily characterized by spiritual “alighting” (*nsie-yee*) or mediumship (*akom*).<sup>574</sup> Having abided by certain strict shrine rules such as sexual abstinence prior to entering the state of *akom* and the avoidance of collusion with *abayifo*,<sup>575</sup> the *Ɔkɔmfo* serves primarily as a mouthpiece (*ɔkyeame*) through which deities communicate both with the *Ɔkɔmfo* and with shrine clients who themselves are accused of being *abayifo* or who believe themselves to be victims of *abayifo*. Often “induced” by mirrors, rattles, or the stirring of water, the communication of the *Ɔkɔmfo* with the shrine deity (or deities) while in a trance-like state (*kom*) is the primary ritual activity at *Ɔkɔmfo*-attended anti-

*bayi boro* shrines in Dormaa-Ahenkro. This spiritual communication normally takes place once a week at *Ɔkɔmfo*-attended anti-*bayi boro* shrines and typically lasts for two hours.<sup>576</sup> Shrine assistants, town elders, friends of the *Ɔkɔmfo* and clients suffering in some way from *bayi boro* are often present during these weekly two-hour *akom*-oriented ceremonies. If sanctioned by the shrine deity, the chief of the town may also be invited to a particular anti-*bayi boro* ceremony.<sup>577</sup>

When the ceremony begins, the *Ɔkɔmfo* emerges from the shrine having already been “alighted” (*nsie-ye*) by the shrine deity. Wearing a raffia skirt (*dɔsɔ*) to which are affixed a variety of inspirited objects (*Asuman*), the *Ɔkɔmfo* runs through the worship area while tossing white clay or “chalk dust” (*hyirew*) into the air as an acknowledgement and invocation of *Onyame* and *Asase Yaa*. The *Ɔkɔmfo*, who from time to time will vanish into the shrine room and re-emerge, also loudly gives orders and delivers messages in response to questions asked by shrine clients during the previous week. These utterances are frequently made in multiple languages. Trained to translate, interpret, and record the frequently multilingual utterances of the *Ɔkɔmfo* during *akom*, the shrine linguist documents these utterances for the *Ɔkɔmfo*, who typically remembers very little of what is said while he/she is under the direction of a deity that has “alighted.”<sup>578</sup>

A *bayi boro* client seeking a personal consultation with the *Ɔkɔmfo* on the day of a formal ceremony must first give a live fowl to the shrine linguist as an offering to the shrine deity.<sup>579</sup> After having made this offering, the client, in the presence of the *Ɔkɔmfo*, discusses the details of his/her case with the linguist, which may include the names of regular acquaintances, friends, and relatives. After hearing the details of the case, the

*Ɖkɔmfo* presents the information to the shrine deity, who then may instruct the *Ɖkɔmfo* as to what curative rite must be performed in order to effectively address the client's problem. After each consultation, the *Ɖkɔmfo* collapses and reappears shortly thereafter to receive the next client.<sup>580</sup>

*Ɖkɔmfo*-attended anti-*bayi boro* shrines are also open on a daily basis for client consultations. For "walk-in" consultations, clients need only bring a live fowl and at least one bottle of schnapps. Upon arriving at the shrine for a "walk-in" consultation, the client again sacrificially gives his/her live fowl to the linguist, who then cuts the throat of the fowl before tossing the fowl into the air. Based upon how the fowl lands on the ground, the shrine deity may or may not agree to hear the client's case.<sup>581</sup> If the shrine deity agrees to hear the client's case, then the client is escorted to the shrine room after first removing his/her shoes. Upon arriving at the shrine, the linguist pours a libation to the shrine deity using the bottle of schnapps provided by the client. Other persons who may be present are offered a drink as well, and invocations are made to the ancestors (*Nsamanfo*). Next, the client is asked to share detailed information relating to his/her particular problem. This information is recorded, and the client is given the option of purchasing an inspirited object (*Suman*) or medicine (*aduro*) as protection against *bayi boro*. Finally, the client pays a fee that can range between five hundred and five thousand Ghana cedis (the Ghana cedi is the official currency of Ghana), and is told to return for the next scheduled shrine ceremony.<sup>582</sup>

The following published Dormaa-Ahenkro case study involving a woman of forty-five years of age named Mrs. Mensah serves as a concrete example of how anti-*bayi boro*

rites are often utilized in *Ɔkɔmfɔ*-attended anti-*bayi boro* shrines to counteract the negative effects of *bayi boro*:

Mrs. Mensah . . . came to the [Ɔkɔmfɔ-attended anti-*bayi boro* shrine] complaining of a headache that she believed to be caused by her fellow hairdressers, envious of her ability to attract more clients than they. Preliminary questions were asked as to her occupation and to the makeup of her social network. She described how those she suspected of [*bayi boro*] continually complained about their low pay. They did not, she felt, truly appreciate that they had jobs at all, and attached too much prestige to worthless consumer items such as perfume and fashionable shoes, brought for them by young men who earned money via the illegal smuggling of such goods from Côte d'Ivoire.

Sending her away and asking her to come back the next day, the priest meanwhile sent out his linguist to interview her fellow workers. Countering her accusations with claims of their own, two of the other hairdressers believed themselves to be victims of [*bayi boro*]. Mrs. Mensah, they argued, was deceiving herself. She was jealous of their good looks, their youth and their busy social lives, and was trying to cause resentment among the staff so that she could steal their clients from them and make them pay for the time they enjoyed at work together.

Mrs. Mensah returned to the shrine. Hearing the accusations of her fellow workers, she told of how recently she had spent a lot of time on her own, as her headaches made her feel ill. She was asked whether she had been harbouring any bad thoughts about others, now or at any time. . . Mrs. Mensah . . . said no. Nevertheless, the shrine priest was swayed by the evidence of her co-workers. Mrs. Mensah failed to share her tips and abused her fellow workers for quite unwarranted reasons. She failed to participate fully in the day-to-day running of the business, said one woman, and left menial chores to the younger women, who worked well with one another. Three of her newest clients told how she spread rumours about the sex lives of her co-workers and engaged in idle speculation about their social lives.

Ama Adaa Kwa, assistant to the shrine, carried in a fowl. He cut its throat and threw the bird out of the shrine. The fowl died face downwards. Kah Nsiah interpreted this as meaning that the god knew the woman had desired ill towards others. She was again asked to confess but she asked for another fowl to be thrown as proof that her first answer was true. Again the fowl died face downwards.

Two hours had elapsed since the woman first arrived at the shrine. She was asked to confess yet again. This time she answered that she had indeed harboured ill-feeling towards others. A third fowl was killed which landed face upwards. This was believed to indicate that her answer had been accepted. Mrs. Mensah was asked by the *Ɔkɔmfɔ* whether she held any ill-feeling towards anyone at the present time. The woman replied no. A fourth fowl was thrown. It landed face upwards. The *Ɔkɔmfɔ* decided to throw again. The fowl landed face downwards and the woman was asked

to confess again.

It was now early evening. Mrs. Mensah had been at the shrine since before midday. The inference was that until the woman confessed to being an *ɔbayifo* she would remain at the shrine. Unless she eventually confessed to what she was being accused of, she would die. Mrs. Mensah was made aware of the fact that the god was angry with her answers. Eventually she did ‘voluntarily’ confess to harbouring ill-feeling towards others and that she was indeed an *ɔbayifo*.

Five fowls had been thrown. A sixth bird was thrown to see whether the confession had been a full confession and that nothing remained undetected. The fowl landed face upwards, meaning that the *obosom* accepted it. Only after this full confession did Kah Nsiah reveal the cause of Mrs. Mensah’s headache. He had caught her while she was flying one night. The god, Poso, had hit her head with a stick. He demanded 500 cedis to pacify the god, a bottle of schnapps to pacify the river Pamu and a fowl and five eggs to be sacrificed to Pamu.<sup>583</sup>

Of particular note in this case is the absence of inspirited objects (*Asuman*) and medicines (*aduro*). At *Ɔkɔmfo*-attended anti-*bayi boro* shrines, confession, the sacrificial pacification of deities (such as Poso) and sacred natural objects (such as the Pamu river), and communication with shrine deities via mediumship (*akom*) often function together as effective anti-*bayi boro* rites. This contrasts somewhat with the rites performed at *Oduruyefɔ*-attended anti-*bayi boro* shrines. In these shrines, *akom* tends not to be practiced as a means of helping clients suffering from *bayi boro*. Also, these shrines make more use of *Asuman*, the Bible, and *aduro* in order to “cleanse” or “purify” the body of an *ɔbayifo*.<sup>584</sup> Our focus will now shift to anti-*bayi boro* rites conducted by *Aduruyefɔ*.

#### *Anti-Bayi Boro Rites Conducted by Aduruyefɔ*

*Aduruyefɔ* (“healers/medicine makers”) adopt a somewhat different approach to neutralizing the dangerous power of *bayi boro*. At anti-*bayi boro* shrines overseen by *Aduruyefɔ*, primary emphasis is placed on *Asuman* (inspirited objects) and *aduro* (“medicines”) the latter of which are provided by the *Mmoatia* (forest-dwelling spirits

who, while unpredictable and at times malevolent, are believed to be masters of plant medicine) for the express purpose of “cleansing” or healing *abayifo*.<sup>585</sup> Another distinguishing feature of anti-*bayi boro* rites conducted by *Aduruyefo* is the use of the Bible as a kind of “purificatory” *Suman* (a practice that appears in the Dormaa-Ahenkro case study cited below). Moreover, at anti-*bayi boro* shrines attended by *Aduruyefo*, communication with deities tends to occur most frequently through divination (*ebisadze*) in the form of casting beads or cowries. To a trained *Oduruyefo*, the patterns in which the beads and cowries fall are indications of what is being communicated by a particular deity at a particular time. Interestingly, among anti-*bayi boro* shrine-affiliated *Aduruyefo* in Dormaa-Ahenkro, there seems to be a strong preference for *ebisadze* over mediumship (*akom*).<sup>586</sup>

At the anti-*bayi boro* shrines of the *Aduruyefo*, the confession, punishment and “cleansing” of an *abayifo* is a very public matter. Individuals accused of practicing *bayi boro* are often placed under tremendous pressure by their communities to consult an *Oduruyefo* at an anti-*bayi boro* shrine and confess their wrongdoing.<sup>587</sup> As the public pressure on a person accused of *bayi boro* mounts, an *Oduruyefo* will eventually learn of the accusations motivating this public pressure. After learning of such accusations, an *Oduruyefo* may cast beads or cowries in order to ascertain the date and length of the accused person’s confession. Once the accused person comes forth in some way, his/her status as an *abayifo* is publicly confirmed and the person is both punished and “cleansed.”<sup>588</sup> The published Dormaa-Ahenkro case study included below reflects some of the differences between anti-*bayi boro* rites conducted by *Aduruyefo* and

anti-*bayi boro* rites conducted by *Akɔmfo*. The case involves a thirty-four year old woman named Yaa Takyiwaa:

Yaa Takyiwaa . . . was an afflicted victim, originally from Sunyani. Three years before, she had moved with her husband to Wamanafo in Dormaa district. She informed a fellow churchgoer of her visions of [*bayi boro*], which had become increasingly frequent. The news was repeated to other female members of the congregation, who, unbeknown to her, met to discuss the matter. At these meetings – there were several – talk focused on the new house that Yaa Takyiwaa was building with her husband. It was argued that, although she regularly donated to the church financially, her participation in church prayer meetings was less than adequate because she spent too much of her day choosing home furnishings smuggled across the border. It was furiously claimed that her lack of interest in Church activities was a consequence of the time she spent thinking about her new home and illustrated her ‘declining faith in Christian ways.’ It was decided at a meeting that she should consult an *obosom* [deity] in her home town and, duly, an *obosom* in Sunyani heard her predicament and confession. He was paid a fee of 1,000 cedis and she was bathed in herbs and water to rid her of her *ɔbayi* [“evil spirit”].

Three days later her [*bayi boro*] returned and she again experienced frequent visions of flying. She was taken to see another *obosom* . . . and bathed in herbs and water after confession but again her *ɔbayi* returned. Three weeks later she began to experience dizzy spells and stomach cramps. The symptoms persisted. Her husband, worried as to their cause, discussed the situation again with church members. Petrified that, if rumours circulated, planning permission might be denied for the house they hoped to build on the outskirts of the village of Wamanafo, her family decided to visit a medicine shrine at Komfikumikrom in Dormaa district under the pretext of business in Dormaa.

For seven days Yaa Takyiwaa ‘confessed’ at the shrine, the period dictated by the *obosom*. Her day began when she was brought from her temporary living quarters and a mat placed at the edge of the bush, quite early in the morning. On the first day of confession, a Wednesday, she perched on top of a jagged stone specially reserved for the purpose in the middle of the courtyard. The confession consisted, said *Oduruyɛfo* Yaw Kuma, ‘of voluntarily revealing the secrets that only *abayifo* have.’

The gong-gong was beaten to summon spectators. Men turned up at first but later on the crowd became more mixed . . . The crowd numbered forty to sixty people. Insults focused upon Yaa’s bodily appearance . . . An air of apprehension, however, hung over the crowd, despite their abuse. If the accused made a sudden quick gesture the crowd drew back. However, hunched squatting on top of a sharp stone, Yaa Takyiwaa rarely moved. When she attempted to kneel or squat on the ground she was immediately reprimanded by one of the linguists to the shrine, who hit her across the back with a stick.

[Yaa Takyiwaa provided the following account of how she was exposed to *bayi boro*].

‘I think I received my *bayi* in a Bible given to me by a woman who does not follow Christian ways any more. Whenever I handled it I had dreams of myself in flight. Despite my best attempts to rid myself of them, the *bayi* spread to all my personal possessions. Eventually I saw myself flying even when I threw the Bible away. I informed my mother's sister of the bad spirit. She found the Bible and gave it to a powerful *okomfo* [priest]. I attacked twenty people and flew to the meeting place of the coven. I was taken to the riverside and water was sprinkled on my head three times, as in church. I followed the ways of the senior [*abayifo*]. I promised not to break their laws. I was always afraid of capture. Avoiding it is a matter of luck. I still see the other [*abayifo*] at night but I am now unable to fly with them. I am ill because of capture but also because the [*abayifo*] are angry with me.’

It is the voluntary confession of the names of each *ɔbayi* that in the eyes of the god constitutes a full confession. To know the names and to discover the prohibitions of each *ɔbayi* spirit is to break and destroy them . . . Suffice it to say that there were four. Their taboos included various meats, including mutton. Pieces of each kind of meat were placed around the perimeter of the courtyard to contaminate the *bayi* in order that their activating force might be drained. Exposed, the *abayi* depart as lizards or snakes from the *ɔbayifo* and slither out through the vagina.

It is at this point that her Bible . . . becomes the focus of attention. It is whipped with a large stick. Burnt, it metaphorically falls apart at the seams as her [*bayi boro*] is driven from her body . . . Armed with a new Bible specially brought from Sunyani, Kumase, or Accra, passages are read aloud from chosen pages believed to be infused with the Holy Spirit, whose presence drives Satan from the shrine. If the *bayi* are too powerful to be fully destroyed the [*ɔbayifo*] may retain some *bayi*, recover from her cleansing and still fly. If caught a second time, however, an *ɔbayifo* will not be able to get away with another false confession and will die.

Once her verbal confession was over, an egg was smashed on the right side of Yaa Takyiwaa's head by the linguist to the shrine and her head shaved from right to left. Shaving was repeated for seven consecutive days. Later the same afternoon the linguist washed her head, arms and lower legs with a wet sponge drenched with a special cleansing medicine of herbs and waters. Meanwhile, Yaa Takyiwaa's husband brought all her clothes to the shrine. Washed in a similar medicine, these were hung on a line behind the shrine close to the bush . . . This occurred three times every day for the seven days the confession lasted. Indeed, on each day all present were also cleansed with water and given herbs to eat. After the last cleansing of each day Yaa Takyiwaa was sent back to her temporary living quarters, where she was whipped on the palms of her hands and on the back with a strap made of cow tail and leather.

On the seventh day her husband, who had been present throughout, was told that his wife could return home.<sup>589</sup>

The incorporation of such elements as water, herbs, the shaving of the head, whipping, bathing, and the washing of clothes is suggestive of the distinctions that exist between anti-*bayi boro* rites conducted by *Aduruyefɔ* and those conducted by *Akɔmfo*.

Furthermore, the appropriation of the Bible as an inspirited object of sorts as well as the reliance upon divination (*ebisadze*) rather than mediumship (*akom*) for spiritual communication are also elements that distinguish the *Oduruyefɔ*'s approach to neutralizing *bayi boro*. Our goal in specifying some of the differences between anti-*bayi boro* rites conducted by *Aduruyefɔ* and those conducted by *Akɔmfo* is not to pit the two against each other or to imply that one is more effective than or superior to the other. Rather, our goal in specifying these differences is simply to draw attention to the variation and complexity among anti-*bayi boro* shrines in Dormaa-Ahenkro and to underscore the seriousness with which *bayi boro* is regarded in Dormaa-Ahenkro. Based on the apparent taken-for-grantedness of *bayi boro* in Dormaa-Ahenkro as a highly destructive and recurring reality that cannot be ignored, it seems likely that anti-*bayi boro* shrines of various types will play an important role in the future well-being of communities in Dormaa-Ahenkro and perhaps other Akan towns as well.

With our examination of anti-*bayi boro* rites now complete, we are in a position to reflect critically on the significance of these rites vis-à-vis Akan epistemology, which we have been exploring throughout this chapter. Our examination of anti-*bayi boro* rites invites questions regarding how these rites relate to the cosmological frames of knowing that are constitutive of the Akan religio-philosophical tradition. A more specific question that arises can be posed in the following manner: What are some of the ways in which

anti-*bayi boro* rites encode aspects of an Akan *grammar of knowing*? This question will claim our attention in the next section.

### **Anti-Bayi Boro Rites and Akan Epistemology**

Perhaps our most fundamental presupposition in this analysis is that anti-*bayi boro* rites are not unrelated to the knowledges that shape Akan understandings of the world. Stated differently, anti-*bayi boro* rites, like other ritual and ceremonial traditions in Akan society, have an expansive significance that is not limited to their obvious spiritual and practical value. I would suggest that the significance of the anti-*bayi boro* rites examined above also encompasses an Akan *grammar of knowing* that helps shape Akan epistemology. Anti-*bayi boro* rites therefore emerge as integral cultural components of Akan epistemology. As such, these rites actively participate in the dynamic meanings produced within the Akan epistemological framework. I would further suggest that this active participation at the very least involves the encoding of the three aspects of an Akan grammar of knowing that have been introduced earlier and subsequently discussed at various points in this study as the motifs of the permanency of existential conflict, irresolution, and mystery. We will begin by reflecting phenomenologically on how the anti-*bayi boro* rites examined in the previous three sections encode the motif of the permanency of existential conflict as an aspect of an Akan grammar of knowing.

#### *Anti-Bayi Boro Rites and the Permanency of Existential Conflict*

One could assert that the very existence of anti-*bayi boro* rites encodes the motif of the permanency of existential conflict. Such an assertion is possible because these rites exist as a direct response to the constant threat posed by *bayi boro*. To the extent that *bayi boro* stands in antagonistic relation to core Akan values such as ethical

responsibility, respect for kinship ties, concern for the welfare of one's neighbor, and communal well-being, *bayi boro* threatens the very fabric of Akan society. *Bayi boro* contributes to the creation of an existential context that is conflictual in nature. This existential context requires a *proactive* acknowledgment of realities such as *bayi boro* that undermine the possibility of a society marked *primarily* by communal cooperation, well-being, and equitable prosperity. The existence of anti-*bayi boro* shrines and rites in Akan society indicates a serious acknowledgement among the Akan of the world's conflictual nature.

Moreover, anti-*bayi boro* rites encode a recognition of the cosmos as an environment in which the perduring nature of negative forces such as *bayi boro* is often signified by the attempts of these forces to conceal and preserve their activity within human beings. The above-cited case of Mrs. Mensah comes to mind here. Readers will recall that Mrs. Mensah originally consulted an *Ɔkɔmfɔ* in Dormaa-Ahenkro as a means of addressing recurring headaches that she believed were being induced by ill-meaning co-workers under the influence of *bayi boro*. Mrs. Mensah was convinced that *she* was the victim, and that more than likely her co-workers were *abayifo* in whom *abayi* (negative or "evil spirits") were active. However, after conducting an investigation, it became clear to Mrs. Mensah's *Ɔkɔmfɔ* that Mrs. Mensah was in fact the *ɔbayifo* in whom an *ɔbayi* (or *abayi*) had taken residence. Having been convinced of Mrs. Mensah's guilt, her *Ɔkɔmfɔ* made repeated use of an anti-*bayi boro* rite involving the sacrifice and throwing of fowls. The repeated performance of this rite was intended to elicit from Mrs. Mensah a truthful confession acknowledging her culpability as a person engaged in *bayi boro*. The rite was effective, and Mrs. Mensah, after much resistance, confessed.

The repetitive manner in which this rite was used to expose Mrs. Mensah's engagement with *bayi boro* is relevant to our understanding of Akan epistemology. It is relevant because it suggests something important about the *Ɔkɔmfo's* conception of *bayi boro* and the world, namely, that because *bayi boro* is a deceptive and perduring reality that contributes in a formative way to the tensive or conflictual structure of the world, one must struggle regularly (or repeatedly) to expose and counteract *bayi boro*. This kind of awareness helps to constitute an Akan grammar of knowing. Said in a different way, a mode of meaning construction ensues from such an awareness. This mode of meaning construction takes seriously the role of existential conflict in the interpretation of the world. Within an epistemological scheme that includes this mode of meaning construction, existential conflict functions as a source of knowledge and wisdom. This is not to suggest that Akan epistemology condones existential conflict and its frequently destructive effects on living beings and the natural world. However, Akan epistemology would likely regard as problematic a grammar of knowing that is unaware of or intentionally avoids realities such as *bayi boro* that account in part for the conflictual nature of the mundane world. In Akan epistemology, the production of human knowledge is a dynamic process in which a keen awareness of the permanency of existential conflict plays a significant part. It can therefore be confidently claimed that informing the *Ɔkɔmfo's* repeated use of the sacrificial anti-*bayi boro* rite in the case of Mrs. Mensah was the knowledge that "life is war" (*Qbra ye ku*).

#### *Anti-Bayi Boro Rites and Irresolution*

An implication of *bayi boro* as a permanent conflictual reality is that anti-*bayi boro* rites are not rites of resolution. Even after anti-*bayi boro* rites are successfully

performed, the possibility remains that an anti-*bayi boro* shrine client once afflicted by *bayi boro* can be afflicted by it again in the future. This possibility reflects the belief that, while *bayi boro* seems to be a more or less episodic phenomenon, it is nonetheless a permanent reality that efficaciously participates in the structure of existence. This understanding of *bayi boro* helps shed further light on the relevance of anti-*bayi boro* rites to Akan epistemology. The existential permanency of *bayi boro* aids us in seeing that both the successful and unsuccessful performance of anti-*bayi boro* rites encodes the motif of irresolution as an aspect of an Akan grammar of knowing.

We are immediately reminded of the case of the thirty-four year old woman named Yaa Takiwaa. After complaining of visions of *bayi boro* and flying, she was taken to two anti-*bayi boro* shrines, one of which was in her hometown of Sunyani. Despite the fact that anti-*bayi boro* rites involving bodily “cleansing” with a medicinal mixture of water and herbs were performed on her behalf at both of these shrines, her *bayi boro*-related symptoms persisted. She was then taken to the anti-*bayi boro* shrine of *Oduruyefo* Yaw Kuma located in an area of Dormaa-Ahenkro called Komfikumikrom. At this shrine, Yaa Takiwaa underwent a seven-day confession and anti-*bayi boro* rites that included the strategic placement of taboo meats intended to “drain” the “activating” force of the *abayi* affecting her, the “burning,” whipping and discarding of her old Bible, the reading of purificatory passages from a replacement Bible obtained from Sunyani, Kumase, or Accra, the smashing of an egg on the right side of her head, the shaving of her head “from right to left,” the washing of her head, arms, legs, and clothes with a “special cleansing medicine of herbs and waters,” and the whipping of her hands with “a

strap made of cow tail and leather.” It seems the anti-*bayi boro* rites performed at *Oduruyefo* Yaw Kuma’s shrine were successful.

Yet, the successful performance of the anti-*bayi boro* rites performed at *Oduruyefo* Yaw Kuma’s shrine does not guarantee that Mrs. Yaa Takyiwaa will never again be adversely affected by *bayi boro*. Additionally, the unsuccessful anti-*bayi boro* rites that were performed on Mrs. Takyiwaa’s behalf prior to her arrival at *Oduruyefo* Yaw Kuma’s shrine cast further doubt on understandings that would view the anti-*bayi boro* rites performed at this shrine as permanently successful. The case of Yaa Takyiwaa is quite instructive because it engenders an understanding of anti-*bayi boro* rites as practices that, instead of eliminating the problem of *bayi boro* and thus fundamentally altering the structure of existence, expose persons affected by *bayi boro* to forms of spiritual power that can be of assistance in “cleansing” these persons of *bayi boro* while also empowering them to keep at bay and avoid *bayi boro*. From the standpoint of Akan epistemology, both successful and unsuccessful anti-*bayi boro* rites are significant. The significance of successful and unsuccessful anti-*bayi boro* rites lies in the fact that they encode the motif of irresolution as an important element within the framework of Akan epistemology. Through an awareness of the relative impermanency of anti-*bayi boro* rites, irresolution appears as a concept that is integral to an Akan grammar of knowing. Within such a grammar of knowing, the concept of irresolution functions as a matrix of meaning construction. Much like the concept of the permanency of existential conflict, the concept of irresolution operates as a means by which human existence can be theoretically framed, analyzed, and interpreted. Irresolution is not an existential or philosophical problem that *Akɔmfo* and *Aduruyefo* must frantically work to eradicate.

Rather, irresolution represents an aspect of the existential theater within which *Akɔmfɔ*, *Aduruyefɔ*, and all other human beings must strive to function effectively and productively. This idea is evoked when the Akan say, *Papa akatua ne bɔne* (“The reward of goodness is evil”), *Enan bɔne na ɔtia dɔtee mu bɔ nan pa ho* (“A wicked leg collects dirt and smears it on the good leg”), and *Ɔsaman se: Enye enne nko ara ne anadwo* (“The departed spirit says: ‘It is not today alone that night falls’”).<sup>590</sup>

#### *Anti-Bayi Boro Rites and Mystery*

Part of what the preceding section establishes is that anti-*bayi boro* rites are not sources of resolution in Akan epistemology. On the basis of this, we could argue further that from the perspective of Akan epistemology, anti-*bayi boro* rites are sources of uncertainty. We could also formulate the argument along a more negative line by stating that anti-*bayi boro* rites are *not* sources of certainty. Regardless of which formulation one prefers, what confronts us now is the presence of uncertainty or mystery in the performance of anti-*bayi boro* rites.

In the two cited case studies involving Mrs. Mensah and Yaa Takyiwaa, no one seemed to know beforehand what would result from the performance of anti-*bayi boro* rites on behalf of either client. Mrs. Mensah’s case ultimately required the offering and throwing of six fowls, a sacrifice of five hundred Ghana cedis to the deity *Poso*, and an additional sacrifice of one bottle of schnapps, a fowl, and five eggs to the river deity *Pamu*. Yaa Takyiwaa’s case, which began with two unsuccessful medicinal baths at two different anti-*bayi boro* shrines, finally necessitated the performance of a fairly wide range of anti-*bayi boro* rites that included “the strategic placement of taboo meats intended to ‘drain’ the ‘activating’ force of the *abayi* affecting her, the ‘burning,’

whipping and discarding of her old Bible, the reading of purificatory passages from a replacement Bible obtained from Sunyani, Kumase, or Accra, the smashing of an egg on the right side of her head, the shaving of her head ‘from right to left,’ the washing of her head, arms, legs, and clothes with a ‘special cleansing medicine of herbs and waters,’ and the whipping of her hands with ‘a strap made of cow tail and leather.’” As noted previously, in both cases the performance of anti-*bayi boro* rites eventually met with some degree of success.

However, in either case there was no significant indication of how long the successfully- performed anti-*bayi boro* rites would protect Mrs. Mensah and Yaa Takyiwaa from the power of *bayi boro*. What is more, it is not entirely clear why Yaa Takyiwaa’s first two medicinal baths failed to “cleanse” her of *bayi boro*. Equally unclear is why the series of anti-*bayi boro* rites performed at *Oduruyefo* Yaw Kuma’s shrine were more effective. This lack of complete clarity points to the encoding function of anti-*bayi boro* rites vis-à-vis an Akan grammar of knowing.

The cases of Mrs. Mensah and Yaa Takyiwaa suggest that the efficacy of anti-*bayi boro* rites varies. It seems likely that this variation may be related to such factors as the skill levels and ethical orientations of priests, the willingness of clients to comply with what anti-*bayi boro* rites require of them, and the will of the deities worshiped and propitiated at anti-*bayi boro* shrines. Nevertheless, the unpredictability surrounding anti-*bayi boro* rites suggests that meanings associated with these rites include a dimension of mystery. It is in this sense that anti-*bayi boro* rites can be understood as spiritual practices or “technologies” that encode the motif of mystery. When considered from this point of view, one can more easily conceptualize anti-*bayi boro* rites as embodied

reflections of the limitations of humanly-constructed meanings. These limitations are evident when, for example, an *Ɔkɔmfo* or linguist (*ɔkyeame*) sacrifices and throws a fowl out of a shrine not knowing beforehand what the landing position of the dead fowl will disclose regarding the will of the shrine deity, when an anti-*bayi boro* shrine client is medicinally bathed with no absolute assurance from the *Ɔkɔmfo* or *Oduruyefɔ* that the bath will be effective, or when a Bible infused with the power of *bayi boro* is ritually “whipped” with no prior certainty that doing so will necessarily result in the departure of *bayi boro* from the body of a stricken client. In their function as encoders of the motif of mystery as an aspect of an Akan grammar of knowing, anti-*bayi boro* rites help us to imagine how mystery itself can be a source of knowing. The Akan live in a spiritual universe wherein not everything is known. However, rather than inducing frustration or apathy, this knowledge of limitation impels the Akan to develop the ability to relate effectively with the spiritual world (*Asamando*) so that more knowledge and power can be accessed for the betterment of human communities. Therefore, an Akan is unlikely to obsess, for instance, over the mystery involved in not knowing whether or not her *sunsum* will return after departing from her at night while she sleeps, over the possibility of her *ɔkra* delivering “bad” advice, or over the possibility of her *ɔkra* failing in its efforts to “guide and protect” her.”<sup>591</sup> Part of the tremendous theoretical value of anti-*bayi boro* rites as traditional practices that encode mystery as an aspect of an Akan grammar of knowing is that they establish mystery as an integral motif that helps form the conceptual foundation of Akan epistemology.

## Conclusion

In this chapter, a phenomenological approach has been utilized to explore Akan cosmology as a matrix for Akan epistemology. We have engaged cultural data from the Akan narrative, religio-philosophical, and ritual traditions. Some of these data include the story of *Onyame's* withdrawal from the intimacy of human contact, appellations traditionally associated with *Onyame* such as *Nana Onyankopɔn* (“Grandfather or Grandmother, Nyame who alone is the Great One”) and *Amosu* (“Giver of rain”), aphorisms such as *Ɔbosom a ɔma mma, na ɔfa mma* (“The spirit which brings children also takes children”) and *Mmusuo di adwini* (“Adversity practices a trade”), and ritualized practices such as *Akɔm* and the medicinal bathing of persons afflicted by *bayi boro*. While our analysis focused largely on the three central motifs of the permanency of existential conflict, irresolution, and mystery, other motifs have been identified and discussed as well. These motifs include the illimitability of spirit, prolific singularity, and existential travail.

Our phenomenological analysis has also yielded several primary theoretical insights that relate to the understanding of Akan epistemology developed in this chapter. The former are not mere abstractions whose connection to the cultural world of the Akan is only tangential. Much to the contrary, the insights yielded closely reflect aspects of Akan religio-philosophical belief and practice. These primary theoretical insights can be listed as follows: 1) The spiritual world is a source of life-promoting knowledge; 2) Knowing in the Akan context can be described as spirituo-centric knowing; 3) Knowing is a function of regular contact with the spiritual world (*Asamando*); 4) To the degree that one's relationship with *Asase Yaa*, the *Bosom Brafoɔ*, the ancestors (*Nsamanfo*), and other

more volatile beings such as the *Mmoatia* could potentially become dangerously or lethally conflictual due to a failure to respect ritual protocol or to human misbehavior, knowing through regular contact with the spiritual world is always accompanied by serious risk; 5) Knowing is a heterogeneous and paradoxical experience marked both by power and limitation; 6) Knowing is an ethical mandate; 7) The conflictual nature of existence requires a *proactive* acknowledgment of realities such as *bayi boro* that undermine the possibility of a society marked *primarily* by communal cooperation, well-being, and equitable prosperity; 8) Anti-*bayi boro* rites encode the permanency of existential conflict, irresolution, and mystery as integral aspects of an Akan grammar of knowing; 9) Anti-*bayi boro* rites encode a recognition of the cosmos as an environment in which the perduring nature of negative forces such as *bayi boro* is often signified by the attempts of these forces to conceal and preserve their activity within human beings; 10) Anti-*bayi boro* rites are embodied reflections of the limitations of humanly-constructed meanings; 11) Within an Akan grammar of knowing, the motifs of the permanency of existential conflict, irresolution, and mystery function as matrices of meaning construction; 12) Mystery impels the Akan to develop the ability to relate effectively with the spiritual world so that more knowledge and power can be accessed for the betterment of human communities. Some of the implications of these insights with respect to the interpretation of African-American religious consciousness will be explored in the final chapter.

The conclusion of chapters two and three marks the end of our phenomenological analysis of Yorùbá and Akan cosmology. We now direct our attention to the African-American milieu with a particular emphasis on African-American literary culture. We

will focus specifically on Zora Neale Hurston's novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. This novel will be explored phenomenologically as an index of African-American religious experience. Our exploration of this novel will also highlight motifs that are epistemologically cognate with motifs and theoretical insights discussed in the above analysis of Yorùbá and Akan cosmology. The analytical work of chapter four will further prepare us for the more constructive task of the fifth and final chapter of the dissertation – namely, bringing the epistemological and theoretical insights from chapters two, three, and four to bear on the problem of black religious hermeneutics as it relates to the opaque epistemological orientation in black religious experience.

**Chapter 4**  
**”Hard Skies” and Bottomless Questions: Zora Neale Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God* and the Opaque Epistemological Orientation in Black Religious Experience**

Religion has been identified by scholars as a formative factor in African-American history and culture. As such, the role of religion in African-American history and culture has often been explored through various methodological approaches related to historical, sociological, and theological analysis and interpretation. With the exception of scholars like Charles Long and James Noel, phenomenology has not been a major methodological preoccupation among black religious critics. Moreover, although one could certainly point to some of the work of Benjamin Mays, Delores Williams, Josiah Young, Dwight Hopkins, Clarence Hardy, and Monica Coleman as exceptional examples,<sup>592</sup> African-American *fictional* literature has not been a consistent or predominant feature of mainstream scholarly discourse on African-American religion. Clarence Hardy’s groundbreaking phenomenological analysis of the literary corpus of James Baldwin in *James Baldwin’s God* notwithstanding, few – if any – studies produced by black religious scholars on African-American fictional literature explicitly utilize a phenomenological approach.

It is not our aim to specify the reasons accounting for the underutilization of phenomenology in black religious scholars’ examinations of African-American fictional literature. Our concern, rather, is to call particular attention to the status of African-American fictional literature as a creative index of African-American religious consciousness. In this chapter, African-American fictional literature will *not* be treated as a purely imaginative enterprise whose relevance to the spiritual lives of African-Americans and to the critical interpretation thereof is at best questionable or tangential.

Instead, we will treat African-American fictional literature as a vital cultural idiom that poetically documents frequently understudied or elided dimensions of African-American spiritual experience. In other terms, informing our engagement of African-American fictional literature is a strong acknowledgement that the latter can and often does function as an important cultural repository of data on African-American religious existence, thereby aiding investigations into the nuances of African-American spirituality.

The analysis in this chapter will focus upon Zora Neale Hurston's 1937 novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. To be sure, the significance of this novel is not limited to the provocative ways in which it discloses the opaque (i.e., mysterious) epistemological orientation and epic travail attending black religious experience. Other interpreters of this novel have argued, for instance, that autobiography, ambivalence, the subversion of hierarchies, canonization, gothic horror, vodou symbolism, personal and cultural transformation, and ritual are important keys to grasping its significance.<sup>593</sup> Literary critic Nellie McKay contends that, in a multi-perspectival mode, *Their Eyes* exemplifies an "autobiographical impulse,"<sup>594</sup> whereas William Ramsey suggests that the novel is characterized by "unresolved ambivalences" involving, for example, "pastoral romance" and "feminist resistance" as well as a "celebration of the low-down folk" and a "prickly critique of provincial mentality;"<sup>595</sup> Sharon Davie posits that Hurston's text both "inverts" and "questions" "accepted" hierarchical modalities;<sup>596</sup> Joseph Urgo considers the dangerous "collision" between folk and literate patterns of communication within the novel in light of its "uneasy" incorporation into the canon of twentieth-century American literature;<sup>597</sup> Erik Curren puts forth the idea that "Hurston uses the gothic to inoculate black America against the infection of white prejudices just as Hawthorne, Melville, and

Twain used horror to inoculate a young America against the infection of European evils;”<sup>598</sup> Daphne Lamothe claims that Hurston employs vodou imagery in the novel as a means of “comprehending” personal and cultural transformation,<sup>599</sup> while Karla Holloway draws attention to the role of geographical movement and ritual in the “radical configuration” of Janie’s (the novel’s protagonist) “spiritual self.”<sup>600</sup> It is not necessarily our purpose here to challenge such interpretations, as they explore important layers of meaning within the novel that are beyond the scope of our analysis. Our chief purpose, rather, is to *carefully mine particular passages* in order to phenomenologically demonstrate that some of the novel’s themes and insights into the opacity of black religious experience are epistemologically cognate with the three African-rooted motifs explored in chapters two and three of this study. These three motifs have been identified as the permanency of existential conflict, irresolution, and mystery.

The existence of epistemological linkages between the examinations of Yorùbá and Akan cultural data in chapters two and three and Hurston’s novel may seem unlikely to some critics. These critics may contend that the positing of such linkages is questionable given that, unlike Octavia Butler’s 1993 novel *Parable of the Sower*, African cosmology and epistemology do not appear to play salient roles in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. While it is possible to debate the salience of African cosmology and epistemology in the novel, certain factual details of Hurston’s life regarding her experience of Christianity as a child and the context in which *Their Eyes Were Watching God* was written nearly put such a debate to rest. In her autobiography entitled *Dust Tracks on a Road*, Hurston explains that, despite her father John Hurston’s (nicknamed “Jno”) considerable social

stature as a Baptist preacher in her childhood home of Eatonville, Florida, she nevertheless harbored serious doubts about Christian doctrine at a very young age:

You wouldn't think that a person who was born with God in the house would ever have any questions to ask on the subject . . . It was explained to me that Christ died to save the world from sin and then too, so that folks did not have to die anymore. That was a simple, clear-cut explanation. But then I heard my father and other preachers accusing people of sin. They went so far as to say that people were so prone to sin, that they sinned with every breath they drew. You couldn't even breathe without sinning! How could that happen if we had already been saved from it? So far as the dying part was concerned, I saw enough funerals to know that somebody was dying. It seemed to me that somebody had been fooled and I so stated to my father and two of his colleagues. When they got through with me, I knew better than to say that out loud again, but their shocked and angry tirades did nothing for my bewilderment. My head was full of misty fumes and doubt . . . As I grew, the questions went to sleep in me. I just said the words, made the motions and went on.<sup>601</sup>

Moreover, as Hurston's biographer Robert Hemenway notes, *Their Eyes* was written between late September and December 19th of 1936 in Haiti while Hurston was conducting anthropological research on Haitian vodun after being awarded a Guggenheim Fellowship. He states that during this time, Hurston "perfected her Creole, acquired a working knowledge of voodoo gods, attended a number of ceremonies presided over by a voodoo priest," and at times worked on the novel "late at night after a day of collecting."<sup>602</sup> Given Hurston's distrust of Christian doctrine and the circumstances under which *Their Eyes* was written, it is not surprising that renowned African-American philosopher and cultural critic Cornel West classes her among other "Afro-American humanists" such as Jean Toomer, Langston Hughes, Sterling Brown, and Ralph Ellison, all of whom West considers to be "secure" with their folk "heritage, as well as with those of other groups or nations."<sup>603</sup> In addition to supporting readings of *Their Eyes* which link the novel to African and African-derived religious thought and practice, these details – as well as the work of literary scholars like Daphne Lamothe

which interprets *Their Eyes* in light of Hurston's influential experience of Haitian vodun – also lend much credence to readings that view the novel as a critique of Christianity and of mainstream Christian-derived modes of black religious consciousness.

In addition, it is vital to remember that our engagement of *Their Eyes* is both phenomenological and constructive in nature. While the present study is not a black theological or womanist project, its engagement of *Their Eyes* to some degree situates it alongside other studies by womanist and black religious scholars that take African-American literature and expressive culture seriously as resources for the development of constructive discourses on black religion. One of the earliest examples of such a study is womanist ethicist Katie G. Cannon's article entitled "Resources for a Constructive Ethic in the Life and Work of Zora Neale Hurston," which was later included as an essay in her well-known book, *Katie's Canon: Womanism and the Soul of the Black Community*. A central argument of this text is that a liberating womanist ethic must not only be self-critical but must also carefully assess the significance of artistic, cultural, social, and spiritual contributions made by African-American women such as Zora Neale Hurston. Furthermore, Canon maintains that the life and work of Hurston bespeaks an ethical legacy characterized by "unctuous" virtue, and that the African-American community must learn to embrace and celebrate this legacy and others like it.<sup>604</sup>

Other constructive studies – all of which have been discussed in chapter one – include Josiah Young's *Dogged Strength within the Veil*, the fourth chapter of which incorporates an analysis of the Bambaran antelope dance recalled by the character Sethe in Toni Morrison's novel *Beloved*, Clarence Hardy's *James Baldwin's God*, which phenomenologically explores James Baldwin's "tragic" estrangement from black holiness

culture and Christianity, an estrangement famously recounted by Baldwin in his novel *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, and Monica Coleman's analysis of Octavia Butler's novel *Parable of the Sower* in her recent volume *Making a Way Out of No Way*, which seeks to provide a constructive womanist response to the contemporary postmodern situation.

Another constructive study that is important to mention is Josiah Young's 1992 volume *Pan-African Theology: Providence and the Legacies of the Ancestors*. Of particular interest is the fifth chapter of this text entitled "The Religio-Cultural Circle of the Transatlantic World." Although Young does not deal extensively with African-American literature in this chapter, he nonetheless creatively interprets the jazz idiom in a way that strongly complements our analysis of the relevance of *Their Eyes* to the understanding of the opaque epistemological orientation in black religious experience. For example, Young "metonymically" invokes the elements of polyphony, polyrhythm, and dissonance – common elements of jazz performance that are easily recognizable to serious students of jazz music and to jazz artists – as heuristic tools for thinking more expansively about the "varieties of black religion."<sup>605</sup> Drawing on seminal insights from Charles Long as well as legendary jazz musicians such as Mary Lou Williams and Dizzy Gillespie, Young goes a step further, suggesting not only that jazz "offers relatively unexplored expressions of black religion," but also that "jazz *is* [emphasis added] black religion in a transferred sense."<sup>606</sup> The profoundly close, generative relationship Young perceives between jazz as a culturally-rooted, creative musical idiom and black religion is indicative of the generative relationship I perceive between black literature and black religious experience. Much like jazz, black literature calls attention to the deeper, more opaque epistemological dimensions of black spirituality in ways that invite ever more

expansive and nuanced reflections upon and understandings of the latter. Having said this, we would be remiss in not mentioning Albert Murray, whose important insights lend further credence to our specialized utilization of black literature.

### **A Commentary on Albert Murray**

An important voice that should also be mentioned as we begin our exploration of *Their Eyes* is that of Albert Murray. An African-American biographer and novelist as well as an extraordinarily keen critic of jazz/blues culture and twentieth-century American literature, Murray's contribution to our understanding of the significance of African-American music and literature as distinct cultural achievements arising in a hostile social environment dominated by the American "folklore of white supremacy" is considerable.<sup>607</sup> Murray's work covers a wide range of seminal figures and topics, some of which include Louis ("Satchmo," "Pops") Armstrong, Count Basie, Duke Ellington, Ralph Ellison, James Baldwin, Romare Bearden, Ernest Hemingway, black vernacular expression, black studies in the American educational system, and the blues idiom.<sup>608</sup> Murray's careful reflections on these figures and topics as well as many others shed a helpful light on some of the meanings and problems within the African-American community while also examining creative traditions developed and maintained by this community that operate as empowering, transformational resources. Of greatest relevance to the present study, however, is Murray's highly nuanced, dynamic understanding of black experience, which has a lot to do with the blues idiom.<sup>609</sup>

Throughout this study, the spiritual dimension of black experience has been interpreted within a conceptual framework that embraces the material messiness and uncertainty of human life both as existential verities and sources of epistemological

meaning. Murray's thought connects easily with this framework. This connection is evident in his understanding of the African-American narrative tradition. In the prologue of his award-winning book *The Blue Devils of Nada: A Contemporary American Approach to Aesthetic Statement*, he writes that "The Afro-U.S. tradition of idiomatic storytelling . . . is largely concerned with the exploits of epic heroes who are involved with the complexities of human motives and with the contradictions of human nature and with the ultimate inscrutability of nature as such."<sup>610</sup> Murray's statement suggests that, as a part of the "Afro-U.S. tradition of idiomatic storytelling," black fictional literature is not unconcerned with the experience of complexity and mystery as a significant aspect of the African-American condition. Indeed, one might say that, in Murray's view, black *littérateurs* share the common and primary task of crafting narratives, characters, and tropes that compellingly invite readers to come to terms with the epistemological opacity of their being, and to find meaning in that process.

Moreover, for Murray, black experience in America is also characterized by an existential condition caused by a unique presence he figuratively refers to as "the blues."<sup>611</sup> The term "the blues" signifies an elusive yet intractable and ever-present reality (or realities) with which African-Americans must regularly struggle. Murray's poetically eloquent, insightful yet troubling description of the blues is important to consider here:

Sometimes you forget all about them [the blues] in spite of yourself, but all too often the very first thing you realize when you wake up is that they are there again, settling in like bad weather, hovering like plague-bearing insects, swarming precisely as if they were indeed blue demons dispatched on their mission of harassment by none other than the Chief Red Devil of all devils himself; and yet perhaps as often as not it is also as if they squat obscene and vulturelike, waiting and watching you and preening themselves at the same time, their long rubbery necks writhing as if floating.

Not that they are ever actually seen. They are always said to be blue, even as common-variety ghosts are always said to be at least somewhat gray. But being absolutely insubstantial, they are in fact completely invisible for all that everybody seems to have the distinct impression that they are always very small and not only plural but so numerous as to be numberless.

Still even as they are represented as teeming, swarming, and writhing nobody ever describes how they actually look. Because they have no image. Thus they do not appear and disappear. They are there because they have already come, and they linger somewhat as if clinging with tentacles, and they go, mostly when driven. But never soon enough. Nor do they ever seem to go far enough away even so. Once they have been there they only shift from the foreground to the background, and maybe you forget about them for the time being, but only for the time being.

All anybody ever presumes to describe with any precision is how you are likely to feel when they are present. You become afflicted as if infected by some miasma-generating microbe. You feel downhearted and uncertain. You are woebegone and anxiety-ridden. So much so that you would think that their characteristic coloration would be something suggesting the grayness of low-hanging clouds rather than blue. But in truth nobody ever seems to give that matter any thought at all, and there is even less concern about which specific shade of blue is involved. At the same time, however, nobody ever confuses anything about their behavior with the silky blueness of high and cloudless skies either.

They are also absolutely noiseless at all times. Their movements make no sound whatsoever. And they are evidently voiceless. They are said to speak, but only in the silent language of spirits. So even when they are quoted as if verbatim, you know the speaker is paraphrasing, because the accent and tone and even the volume and timbre are always very obvious stylizations of a voice all too obviously his own. Moreover, no matter how concrete the references, you already know very well that the statement is meant only to be taken as allegorical. (Item: When Jimmy Rushing sings, ‘Good morning, blues. Blues how do you do?’ Blues say, ‘I feel all right but I come to worry you,’ the reply is given as if literal but not only is the voice still Rushing’s, there is also no confusion at all when the singular ‘I’ is used instead of the plural “we.”).

Nor do they ever seem to shock and terrify as some specters sometimes do . . . You know they are there only because you feel their presence in the atmosphere once more as you did the time before and the time before that; because everything, which is to say time itself, has somehow become heavy with vague but dire and disconcerting forebodings of impending frustration leading perhaps to ultimate doom. So sometimes at first it is as if you yourself have been draped with a leaden invisible net. Then you realize that you don’t feel so good anymore, not because all at once you have been stricken but because a dull and unspecific ache is beginning to throb. Then sometimes you feel yourself becoming rueful, or glum, or sometimes either sullen, mean, downright evil on the one hand or weak in the stomach and knees on the other.

Sometimes it is as if they themselves actually generate and inflict misery upon their victims much the same as pathogenic bacteria cause infection. But not always. Perhaps most often it is as if their primary purpose is to becloud your outlook by foreshadowing misfortune, and there are also times when they seem to come along with whatever the trouble is, or to issue from it not unlike the side effects that are really only symptoms of far more serious physical ailments.

Also, as is likewise the case with many physical afflictions, sometimes you already know the cause as well as you know the symptoms. Because all too often they are back again for exactly the same reason that they came to be there the times before. Not always, to be sure. But often enough for the consideration to be automatic. Indeed it may well be that the element of *déjà vu* is sometimes the source of as much anguish and hopelessness as the actual causal incident, if not more. Because it almost inevitably suggests (especially to those who have not yet come to realize that even in the best of times the blues are only at bay and are thus always somewhere in the not-too-distant background) that the mishap of the moment is but the latest episode in a string of misfortunes that are so persistent as to amount to a curse, and maybe even an ancestral curse at that.

But no matter how they come to be there again, the main thing about them is all the botheration they bring, and your most immediate concern is how to dislodge them before the botheration degenerates into utter hopelessness. So the very first problem that it all adds up to is as specific as is the ghostlike vagueness of their very existence . . . What it requires is the primordial and ever persistent effort to purify the environment once more.<sup>612</sup>

Murray's formulation of the blues strongly implies that as an existential and spiritual phenomenon, black experience is not reducible to the problem of race, to poverty and disenfranchisement, to the struggle against white supremacist institutions for socio-political power, to mis-education, to inequality and discrimination based on gender, class, or sexuality, or to any of the other vexing issues commonly associated with black life in America. To be sure, Murray is in no way sidestepping or dismissing the panoply of challenges these and other social burdens pose to black Americans in their perennial struggle for cultural identity, meaning, power, and well-being. However, it seems that Murray's probing description of the blues touches on something much deeper and more fundamental than these inveterate social burdens, something perhaps related to the very

structure of being itself. In short, black experience emerges here as a reflection of the nature of reality which, as referenced earlier, Murray regards as “ultimately inscrutable.”

What is also remarkable about Murray’s discussion of the blues is its profound resonance with some of the foundational Yorùbá and Akan principles explored in chapters two and three. Murray’s conception of the blues is evocative of Yorùbá cosmology and its emphasis on the conflictual structure of reality. Just as Yorùbá thought interprets the resolution of conflict through the offering of *ẹbọ* (sacrifice) as a temporary or “aberrant” achievement that does not alter the fundamentally antagonistic structure of reality, Murray likewise interprets the “driving out” of the blues as a temporary achievement that does not prevent the blues from returning at a later time and wreaking more havoc. Said differently, the blues signifies the permanency of existential conflict. Murray’s conception of the blues also brings to mind the Akan maxim *Ọbra ye ku* (“Life is war”). In an Akan perspective, life is very much a “war” in the sense that human beings as well as all other physical creatures are relentlessly confronted with the epic challenge of daily survival and the merciless threat of death. The elusive presence described by Murray as the blues signals the status of life as “war” by participating in the seemingly infinite constellation of forces in the world that militate against human survival. We could speculatively suggest that, for both the Akan and Murray, the blues is a normative part of human experience, whereas the vanquishing of the blues is not, despite the fact that many, if not most or all, greatly desire such vanquishing.

What is more, according to Murray, “the blues” refers to something that is either spiritual or quasi-spiritual in nature. He describes the blues as “absolutely insubstantial, completely invisible, noiseless,” and as having a “ghostlike vagueness.” This calls to

mind the inimical unseen forces known by the Yorùbá as the *Ajogun* ("warriors" or "anti-gods") and by the Akan as *bayi boro* (which signifies both the negative presence of spiritual power and the specialized utilization of this power for socially destructive ends). For both the Yorùbá and the Akan, human experience encompasses a critical awareness of these inimical spiritual forces. To pretend as if these forces are non-existent would be considered a foolhardy decision that further jeopardizes oneself, one's family, and one's community. Murray's description of the blues suggests that he may also hold the view that human experience encompasses (or should encompass) a critical awareness of the blues and of how it affects our lives. If we consider the blues to be an immaterial yet potent reality that significantly affects the quality of human existence, as Murray insists, then we must also acknowledge the status of the blues as an important element that in part constitutes the spiritual dimension of black experience. Additionally, it can be said that Murray's meticulous description implies the utility of the blues as a hermeneutical principle in black religious interpretations that resists the heavy-handed procedure of Christian filtering which is so prevalent among black theologians and religious scholars.

Murray's seminal description of the blues is both creative and phenomenological. As such, in a fundamental yet sophisticated way, his description helps us begin to perceive and grasp – if only provisionally – some of the contours of the opaque epistemological orientation in black religious experience. As we shall see shortly, Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* serves a similar function. The poetic, poignant narration within this novel and its fidelity to portraying aspects of black existence more or less as they are make possible a level of access to the epistemological opacity of black religious experience that few modes of discourse can provide. *Their Eyes Were Watching God*

facilitates an awareness of black spirituality as a phenomenon that is no less concerned with the incessantly vexing questions, uncertainty, and pain of black existence than it is with the essential place of hope, love, and empowerment in the quest for black survival and well-being. Readers will likely make the ironic observation over the course of our interrogation of the black literary imagination that entrée into what are perhaps the most opaque recesses of black religious experience is provided not by black theologians or religious scholars but by black literary artists. Thus begins our exploration of Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*.

### **Structural Note**

Let us pause here momentarily to clarify how our engagement of the novel will be organized. In continuity with the previous two chapters, our examination will be guided by various motifs that emerge within the novel itself. Our discussion of *Their Eyes* will consist of three general phases. The first phase will include a detailed synopsis of the novel's main plot. The second phase will thematically explore the novel's insights into the opaque epistemological orientation in black religious experience through an analysis of relevant passages. In this phase, we will also reflect upon how these insights enlarge our understanding of this orientation. In the third and final phase, we will identify epistemological relationships certain motifs and insights in *Their Eyes* share with the principal motifs examined in chapters two and three vis-à-vis Yorùbá and Akan grammars of knowing. With the structure of our examination having been established, our focus now shifts to Hurston's novel.

### **Synopsis of *Their Eyes Were Watching God***

Likely set in the early 1900s, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* chronicles the life of Janie Mae Crawford and her tortuous quest for self-knowledge, meaning, and personal freedom. Hailing from the small southeastern town of Eatonville, Florida, Janie, a strikingly beautiful African-American woman with Caucasian features whose determination to explore and experience the world on her own terms summons the judgmental suspicion of older members of her community, returns home at the start of the novel after being away for an extended period. Having undergone an intensely personal journey that was both traumatic and transformative, Janie exudes a sense of earned wisdom and self-assuredness that is misunderstood by many people in her community who obviously know nothing of what she has experienced during her absence. Janie's community wonders where her journey has taken her, and what has become of Tea Cake (Vergible Woods), her third husband who is younger than Janie by roughly twelve years. Shortly after arriving back in Eatonville, Janie is visited by her loyal and best friend Pheoby Watson, who is curious to know more about Janie's experience. Through the conversation that ensues, we learn about the earlier years of Janie's life and about the series of events leading up to her return.

We discover, for instance, that Janie, who never meets her biological parents, is raised by her grandmother, Nanny Crawford, a former slave whose rape by her white master results in the birth of Janie's mother, Leafy Crawford. Leafy, whose rape by her schoolteacher results in Janie's birth, apparently becomes an alcoholic and abandons Janie at a very early age. As Janie's guardian, Nanny wants Janie to have a life of financial security and social prestige, and she believes that marriage is the best way for

Janie to attain such a life. Nanny therefore wants Janie to marry as soon as possible. She takes it upon herself to arrange a marriage between sixteen-year-old Janie and a considerably older, respectable farmer named Logan Killicks whose farm sits on a sixty-acre plot of land.

Not long after marrying Logan, Janie finds herself crestfallen. Much to Janie's dismay, Logan turns out to be a man who is lacking in romantic passion. He seems to see Janie more as a farmhand than as a wife. One day while Logan is away, Janie encounters a stylish, eloquently-spoken man named Joe (nicknamed "Jody") Starks who happens to be passing by the farm on his way into town. Jody is a man of lofty ambition who thirsts for status and power. His desire is to become the most prominent man in Eatonville. Janie, drawn to Jody's rare charisma and personal vision, secretly meets with him over the next several weeks. Her marriage to Logan continues to deteriorate, and, after a series of bitter arguments, Janie soon abandons him to marry Jody.

While married to Janie, Jody continues his tireless pursuit of power and prominence in Eatonville. Not only does Jody succeed in becoming a landowner, in opening his own store, and in becoming the town postmaster, but he also at one point is named mayor of Eatonville. Jody satisfies his thirst for status and power many times over. However, it becomes evident fairly early in their marriage that Jody wants to quell Janie's passionate curiosity, her sense of independence, and her desire to be an engaged, active member of the Eatonville community. Jody prefers that Janie play the role of a relatively quiet, obedient wife who supports him and his career regardless of the deleterious impact this has on her own personal development.

After twenty years of marriage to Janie, Jody grows dissatisfied with her appearance and on one occasion publicly derides her. However, instead of continuing to play the submissive, obedient role Jody wants her to play, Janie launches her own emasculating verbal attack against him in return. In a fit of humiliation and fury, Jody physically brutalizes Janie, and their marriage subsequently falls apart. Over the next few months, Jody becomes seriously ill, having not communicated with Janie since their momentous public altercation. Knowing that his illness is in its most severe and final stage, Janie eventually decides to visit Jody. Even in his greatly weakened state, Jody has no interest in seeing or speaking with Janie, and yet another argument consequently develops. Despite his dismissive protestations, Janie castigates Jody for his mistreatment of her during their marriage. As she does this, Jody suddenly dies.

Some time after Jody's death and funeral, Janie meets a very witty, much younger man named Vergible "Tea Cake" Woods. She is intrigued by Tea Cake's bold, unpolished, freewheeling charm, and feels a near-instant connection to him, as if she has known him most of her life. Having essentially ignored other eager suitors, Janie resolves to date Tea Cake, and in so doing invites the disapproving murmurings of fellow townspeople. Completely unphased by the rumormongering of community gossipers, Janie's love for Tea Cake quickly grows, and, less than a year after Jody's death, she marries him. She sells Jody's store, which she has been tending, and moves further north with Tea Cake to Jacksonville, Florida.

During the first seven days of their marriage, Tea Cake leaves Janie alone one night after stealing two hundred dollars from her, most of which he spends in generous, comical, and somewhat reckless ways while cavorting with railroad workers. He returns

to her the following day and explains what happened and why he chose not to include her in his overnight adventure. Tea Cake regrets taking the money, and assures Janie that it was never his intention to abandon her. Janie insists that Tea Cake not hide anything from her ever again and that they both openly share with one another all aspects of their lives. Tea Cake agrees, and they both move south again to the Everglades to take seasonal work harvesting snap beans.

When not working, Tea Cake spends much of his time gambling and socializing with fellow harvesters, and the shack in which he and Janie live becomes a social center. On at least one occasion, Tea Cake beats Janie out of jealousy arising from other men in the community making advances toward her and from Mrs. Turner's (a fair-skinned African-American restaurant owner who covets whiteness, despises phenotypic African features, and thinks little of Tea Cake) decision to introduce Janie to her lighter-skinned brother, whom she believes is a better match for Janie. Janie also becomes jealous at times in response to other women behaving toward Tea Cake in an openly flirtatious manner. However, despite their physical and verbal quarrels, Janie and Tea Cake manage to keep their marriage more or less intact.

Approximately two years into their marriage, Janie and Tea Cake are forced to flee the Everglades due to the appearance of an extremely powerful hurricane that swells the waters of Lake Okechobee and decimates the region. As they are escaping, a rabid dog attacks and bites Tea Cake, who is unaware of the dog's infection. Three weeks after being bitten, Tea Cake falls ill with rabies. One day, while in the violent grip of a rabid fit, Tea Cake accuses Janie of adultery, and proceeds to shoot at her with a pistol. Janie

shoots Tea Cake with a rifle in self-defense, killing him. That same day Janie is arrested and tried for murder, and is found not guilty.

It is after her murder trial that Janie returns home to Eatonville. She ignores the raised eyebrows of the familiar rumormongers in her community who seem desperate to know her story and why Tea Cake is not with her. However, Janie's friend Pheoby is the first and apparently the only person with whom she shares her story. After conversing with Pheoby, Janie rests in the self-knowledge, power, and love that her long and tumultuous journey of many years has given her.

### **Analysis**

#### *The "Horizon" and Janie's "Jewel"*

The above synopsis provides a general narrative context for the various passages we will explore in this section. The first passage to be examined is principally a meditation on boundless possibility (the "horizon") and Janie's struggle to share her sense of being (her "jewel") with the world.<sup>613</sup> The passage appears shortly after the funeral of Janie's second husband, Joe ("Jody") Starks. At this point, Janie is relishing her newfound freedom as the widow of a domineering man who failed to nurture her intractable desire to live fully and freely. Janie also realizes that she harbors "hatred" for her late grandmother, who she feels "whipped" her "like a cur dog" in her efforts to prevent Janie from living her own life.<sup>614</sup> This realization gives rise to the following comments:

Here Nanny had taken the biggest thing God ever made, the horizon – for no matter how far a person can go the horizon is still way beyond you – and pinched it in to such a little bit of a thing that she could tie it about her granddaughter's neck tight enough to choke her. She hated the old woman who had twisted her so in the name of love. Most humans didn't love one another nohow, and this mislove was so strong that even common blood couldn't overcome it all the time. She had found a jewel down inside herself and she wanted to walk where people could see her and gleam it around. But she had been set in the market-place to sell. Been set for still-bait. When God had

made The Man, he made him out of stuff that sung all the time and glittered all over. Then after that some angels got jealous and chopped him into millions of pieces, but still he glittered and hummed. So they beat him down to nothing but sparks but each little spark had a shine and a song. So they covered each one over with mud. And the lonesomeness in the sparks make them hunt for one another, but the mud is deaf and dumb. Like all the other tumbling mud-balls, Janie had tried to show her shine.<sup>615</sup>

This passage can be interpreted as a commentary on the human condition. As such, the passage prompts reflection on two elements in particular related to human experience.

These elements can be described as the divine infusion of boundless possibility and the struggle to actualize our individual sense of being. When viewed as formative dimensions of the human condition or as motifs that lend a measure of intelligibility to the human condition, one begins to discern the way in which the two elements help frame a certain understanding of human experience. We will now treat each element in turn.

#### *The Divine Infusion of Boundless Possibility*

In the above passage, the divine infusion of boundless possibility is signified figuratively by the “horizon.” The association of the “horizon” with divinity stems from the narrator’s identification of God as the creator of the “horizon”. An important implication of this ascription is that God’s creation of the “horizon” imbues the world and human consciousness with possibility. As a symbol of boundless possibility, the “horizon” trope is poignantly expressed in Janie’s ceaseless longing for the unknown yet alluring possibilities offered by a life of her own choosing. For Janie, the “horizon” is very much a source of wonder, inspiration, and power. However, as Janie’s grandmother Nanny demonstrates, not everyone shares Janie’s positive belief in the “horizon” and in what it makes available. Nanny sees the “horizon” ultimately as a threat to Janie’s well-being. Therefore, Nanny tries to “pinch” Janie’s “horizon” “in to such a little bit of a

thing” in order to protect Janie from the inherent and countless dangers of the horizon, about which Janie seems less concerned.

Yet despite their domineering fervency, Nanny’s attempts to “pinch” Janie’s “horizon” prove to be of no avail. The call of the “horizon” and its boundless possibility hold more sway in Janie’s consciousness than anything her grandmother can say or do. The “horizon” resonates with the sense of moreness in Janie, with that part of her that defiantly reaches into the mystery of possibility in search of meaning, unfettered passion, love, and growth. The boundlessness of the “horizon”, which is the “biggest thing God ever made,” does not cause Janie to recoil in fear, nor does it overwhelm her desire to experience the world. Indeed, it is Janie’s unwavering belief in the “horizon” that enables her to transcend her community’s repressive social norms and construct a new life for herself. The “horizon” births in Janie an awareness that the broader arc of her experience as a human being is not reducible to the experiences that her grandmother and others try to impose upon her.

Janie’s consciousness is shaped by the recognition that “no matter how far a person can go the “horizon” is still way beyond you.” This suggests an awareness in Janie that even the meanings arising from her own experience cannot necessarily be considered significant or authoritative for others because the “horizon” and its boundless possibilities always signify something more than the content and scope of her limited, subjective understanding. Another way to put this is that awareness of the “horizon” engenders a tempered, self-reflexive consciousness that does not regard itself as normative for all human beings. The “horizon” humbles human beings just as much as it emboldens them to embrace its measureless array of possibilities while also questing after the complex

truths of themselves. The “horizon” – which we are interpreting as a metaphor for self-discovery, the search for “more,” and the endlessness of the “more” – thus cannot be disassociated from the processes of self-discovery and identity formation. For, as Janie’s narrative teaches us, an experience of the “horizon” energizes the struggle to actualize our individual sense of being.

*The Struggle to Actualize Our Individual Sense of Being*

The passage under consideration asserts that the journey toward actualizing our individual or subjective sense of being is constantly opposed by existential and spiritual forces. Such constant opposition renders this journey a lifelong struggle rather than a largely peaceful transition from personal awareness to outward manifestation. On the existential level, the difficulty we humans have in loving others opposes the goal of actualizing our subjective sense of being. This is keenly suggested when the narrator ironically states that “Most humans didn’t love one another nohow, and this mislove was so strong that even common blood couldn’t overcome it all the time.” Janie’s grandmother Nanny as well as her first two husbands Logan and Jody are glaring examples of the “mislove” that undermines the struggle for subjective actualization. Although Nanny decides to step in as Janie’s guardian and raise her, thereby in a sense saving Janie from her mother’s profound trauma and dysfunctionality, she nevertheless behaves in a way that opposes Janie’s quest to actualize her individual sense of being when she forces her to marry the much older Logan Killicks. Logan in turn participates in this oppositional treatment when, instead of nurturing Janie’s natural passion for and curiosity about herself and the world, he attempts to repress these characteristics by forcing Janie into the endlessly laborious roles of domestic farmhand and dutiful,

unquestioning wife. Janie's third husband Jody Starks only continues this oppositional treatment by expecting Janie to devote the entirety of her being to him and to the development of his entrepreneurial and political career. Janie's individual sense of being then is in direct conflict with three of the people who presumably are closest to her. Nanny, Logan, and Jody represent instances of "mislove" during some of the most intimate stages of Janie's life. They become countervailing existential forces against which Janie must struggle to actualize her unique sense of being.

According to the narrator in our focal passage, the forces undermining the human struggle for subjective actualization extend far beyond the existential or material realm. This struggle is also undermined even at the level of spirit. Consider again the following remarks:

When God had made The Man, he made him out of stuff that sung all the time and glittered all over. Then after that some angels got jealous and chopped him into millions of pieces, but still he glittered and hummed. So they beat him down to nothing but sparks but each little spark had a shine and a song. So they covered each one over with mud. And the lonesomeness in the sparks make them hunt for one another, but the mud is deaf and dumb. Like all the other tumbling mud-balls, Janie had tried to show her shine.<sup>616</sup>

These remarks intimate that there are spiritual forces in the cosmos that are in conflict with humans' efforts to live in a manner that reflects their individual sense of being. The antagonistic spiritual forces to which we refer are metaphorically described by the narrator as "jealous angels" that have "beaten" divinely created human beings into vital "sparks" whose "shine" and "song" are made harder to detect by the angels' desensitizing, suffocating "mud." As a result of this spiritual violence, human beings, as beaten "sparks" suffering from "lonesomeness," must struggle to regain meaningful connections to one another while also resisting the inimical will of the angels. These

added burdens only exacerbate the already formidable and ongoing task of actualizing one's individual sense of being in the world. Yet, even against such daunting odds, human beings must continue to work at "showing their shine," just as Janie does, because to do anything less is to surrender the self.

In brief, the central point of the above-cited remarks is that, on multiple levels, the world challenges who we are and our ability to manifest who we sense or think ourselves to be. This point suggests that, while it is our human right to struggle for such self-manifestation (provided this struggle in no way jeopardizes the well-being of others), there is no guarantee that our struggle will yield success. The reason that the success of our struggle for self-manifestation cannot be guaranteed is simply that on the most fundamental level the world is not structured in a way that ensures this success. The narrator's remarks imply that the world is densely populated with seen and unseen forces that actively and routinely work against the successful manifestation of the self. As human beings who possess a unique "shine," we find ourselves embroiled in an epic struggle to outwardly birth this shine in a world marked by hostility and "mislove." However, this state of affairs need not elicit in us a sense of apathy or disenchantment. It is important to remember, as Janie does, that the "horizon" is also part of the cosmic structure and, as such, makes available the possibility of successful self-manifestation and hence the transcendence (but not the alteration) of the world's antagonistic structure. The fact that the antagonistic structure of the world is not alterable by any human means suggests the importance of protecting and nurturing our desire for self-manifestation.

Our discussion shows that Janie's struggle to actualize her individual sense of being is related to her complex awareness of the spiritual dimension. This facet of the discussion

directs our attention to the matter of religious experience. The fact that Janie as an African-American woman has a complex awareness of the spiritual dimension invites reflection on the opaque epistemological orientation in black religious experience. More specifically, we are prompted to ask the following question: What might Janie's complex awareness of the spiritual dimension as described in the remarks quoted earlier reveal about the opaque epistemological orientation in black religious experience?

*The "Horizon," Self-Manifestation, and the Opaque Epistemological Orientation in Black Religious Experience*

Janie's narrative suggests that the "horizon" and the quest for self-manifestation are constitutive of black religious experience. This is not to say that the latter is reducible to these two elements. Our point, rather, is that the "horizon" and self-manifestation contribute to the epistemological opacity of black religious experience. As a component of this opacity, the "horizon" generates a tensional dynamism that functions to destabilize static notions of black spirituality. The "horizon" is the matrix of dangerous and transcendent possibilities. It is a primary context in which we can paradoxically imagine both the cessation and fulfillment of our being, as well as threatening and salutary forces that could potentially bring about either scenario. The presence of the "horizon" implies that the opaque epistemological orientation in black religious experience involves an oscillating awareness that dynamically shifts between the poles of being and non-being, negative and positive spiritual power, personal freedom and social subjugation, love and "mislove," comprehension and mystery. Janie's narrative signals an epistemological orientation characterized not by a rigid adherence to one pole or another but by a profound internal struggle to bring to fruition the life-giving possibilities of the positive poles despite the ever-looming, destructive specter of the negative poles. Janie's

epistemological orientation is *interstitial* in that it is greatly informed by the disorderly tensions that emerge between life-affirming, transcendent possibilities and non-life-affirming possibilities, both of which exist by way of the divinely created “horizon”.

The presence of the “horizon” should not be taken to indicate that the opaque epistemological orientation in black religious experience is little more than a retreat into theological abstraction. To the contrary, the life-affirming possibilities offered to Janie by the “horizon” compel her to confront antagonistic socio-historical realities plaguing her own existence. Some of these realities include the legacy of American slavery, which involves the rape of Janie’s mother and grandmother (two unconscionable acts of violence that account for Janie’s Caucasian features), the suspicious disapproval Janie’s free-spirited passion for life elicits from her community, racial and gender-based discrimination (recall, for instance, Mrs. Turner’s disdain for Tea Cake’s darker skin and other African features, and Logan Killicks’ assumption that, as a woman, Janie is best suited to the roles of obedient wife and domestic farmhand), and physical abuse at the hands of Jody Starks and Tea Cake. To be sure, the infinite range of possibilities encompassed by the “horizon” includes these antagonistic realities. However, the “horizon” also offers constructive possibilities, and it is an acute awareness of these possibilities that fortifies Janie’s will not to succumb to the antagonistic realities in her life that are capable of destroying her. The “horizon” places *both destructive and constructive socio-historical realities* squarely within the purview of black religious epistemological opacity. Hence, the opaque epistemological orientation in black religious experience is not unconcerned with the material world and the vast range of realities therein involving experiences of tragedy and joy.

The opaque epistemological orientation in black religious experience also entails the struggle for self-manifestation. As Janie's experience shows us, this orientation is conditioned by *all* that the "horizon" signifies, including layers of possibility and meaning that simply cannot be accessed or known due to human finitude. For this reason, I would argue that religious scholar Anthony Pinn's claim that black religious experience can be understood as a human "quest for complex subjectivity" that responds to a thoroughgoing crisis of identity," wrestles with the problems of history in an effort to transform them, and aims for "more life meaning"<sup>617</sup> misses something central about the opaque epistemological orientation in black religious experience. To be clear, I am not asserting that this conception is entirely inaccurate. I agree with the idea that "complex subjectivity" is a concern of black spirituality. I also agree with Pinn's specification of identity, history, and greater "life meaning" as major aspects of black religious experience's opaque epistemological orientation.

However, Pinn's formulation fails to grasp the significance of uncertainty in this orientation. The boundless range of positive and negative possibilities encompassed by Janie's "horizon" lies beyond the scope of human knowledge and control. What is more, the status of the quest for self-manifestation as a fundamentally uncertain quest becomes evident upon realizing that this quest is conditioned by the "horizon." In fact, this quest can be considered a function of the "horizon" in the sense that the quest itself could not exist without the "horizon" which, as suggested earlier, is the matrix wherein the very possibility of such a quest is conceived. Pinn is right to associate the epistemological opacity of black religious experience with a "battle against the terror of fixed identity."<sup>618</sup> Yet, as Janie's experience helps us to understand, we must also recognize that this

opacity is equally – if not more so – a battle against the terror of fixed knowledge and meaning. The opaque epistemological orientation in black religious experience consists of much more than a desire for greater “life meaning” or “fullness.” It also consists of a desire to encounter that which unseats meaning itself, thereby enabling a quest for subjective being shaped not by static or dynamic categories of meaning but by the unremitting mystery of the boundless “horizon.” It is a transformative sense of the mystery of the “horizon” – not simply “more life meaning” – that orients Janie in the world. I would suggest that this transformative sense of the mysterious “horizon” is more fundamental to the opaque epistemological orientation in black religious experience than what Pinn posits as a quest for ever-more meaningful and complex subjectivity.

*“Homage” to “Cruel” Gods*

The second passage we will discuss is a more direct statement about “cruel” gods and the way that human beings relate to them.<sup>619</sup> The context for this statement is an in-depth psychological description of the light-complexioned African-American character named Mrs. Turner who, as noted previously, abhors her own blackness while worshipping whiteness. She cherishes her relationship with Janie mainly because of Janie’s Caucasian features, which are more pronounced than her own. Mrs. Turner deifies whiteness in hopes that she will one day become like the white deity for which she suffers and to which she faithfully pays “homage.”<sup>620</sup> The narrator explains,

It was inevitable that she [Mrs. Turner] should accept any inconsistency and cruelty from her deity as all good worshippers do from theirs. All gods who receive homage are cruel. All gods dispense suffering without reason. Otherwise they would not be worshipped. Through indiscriminate suffering men know fear and fear is the most divine emotion. It is the stones for altars and the beginning of wisdom. Half gods are worshipped in wine and flowers. Real gods require blood.<sup>621</sup>

One could easily interpret this passage in terms of the role of self-hatred in Mrs. Turner's deification of whiteness. However, the meaning of the passage is not limited merely to the theme of low self-esteem. I would argue that the motif of unintelligible human suffering is more central to the meaning of the passage than Mrs. Turner's Eurocentric self-devaluation and her apotheosis of white identity. Let us consider this motif more carefully.

*Unintelligible Human Suffering*

The passage connects unintelligible human suffering to the activity of gods who demand "homage." These gods are said to be "inconsistent" and "cruel." They are also said to "dispense suffering without reason." This description challenges us to think more phenomenologically about the spiritual world and human beings' relationship with the spiritual world. The passage does not allow us to doggedly cling to notions that construe the spiritual world as a preeminent source of solace or peace. We are forced to realize that, if the spiritual world is capable of functioning as a source of solace or peace in the lives of its worshipers, then it is equally capable of functioning as a source of uncertainty, terror, and inexplicable human suffering in the lives of its worshipers as well. The passage introduces the idea that the spiritual world is not a place to which humans should turn for clear, unassailable answers to life's most bewildering questions. It is, rather, a world populated by unpredictable gods who require blood sacrifice in exchange for the power to endure the "indiscriminate" suffering they will inevitably mete out upon their devotees and others. The hope is that the reception of such power and the "fearful" endurance of "indiscriminate," unintelligible suffering will eventually occasion in devotees a deep transformation characterized mainly by greater wisdom.

The passage makes the point unequivocally that access to spiritual power through relationship with the gods comes at a great cost. Human beings require the power of the spiritual world to successfully negotiate the minefield of physical existence and build meaningful lives for themselves. However, as the greatest source of power in the cosmos, the spiritual community is as volatile as it is generative. This volatility often leads to entirely “indiscriminate” and unintelligible human suffering that amplifies the mystery of being. The unintelligibility of human suffering underscores the fact that the motives of the gods are ultimately opaque to human understanding. Similarly, the amplification of existential mystery effected by unintelligible human suffering indicates that mystery is the metaphysical theater of reality, and is thus the “chore” of the gods.<sup>622</sup> Therefore, reality is not something over which human beings can exercise intellectual or spiritual mastery. We are beings with limited agency and understanding struggling to survive in a world whose deepest structures of power and meaning remain largely unavailable to us.

Yet, I would suggest that the unintelligibility often attending human suffering is not devoid of function. Most would agree that Mrs. Turner’s self-hating veneration of whiteness is extremely problematic and thus in need of serious interrogation and critique. However, the unintelligible human suffering informing Mrs. Turner’s veneration of whiteness – suffering which, we might add, can also inform healthy, empowering modes of religious veneration – serves a significant function in that it orients her in the world and influences how she interprets her own experiences as well as her relationships with other people. This prompts reflection on how the motif of unintelligible human suffering

can be brought to bear on our understanding of the opaque epistemological orientation in black religious experience.

*Unintelligible Human Suffering and the Opaque Epistemological Orientation in Black Religious Experience*

Human suffering is not foreign to black religious experience. The former has been explored by many black religious scholars as a major motif in black spirituality. Some representative texts we could mention here include Delores Williams' *Sisters in the Wilderness: The Challenge of Womanist God-Talk*, Emilie Townes' edited volume *A Troubling in My Soul: Womanist Perspectives on Evil and Suffering*, and Anthony Pinn's *Why, Lord? Suffering and Evil in Black Theology*. These texts reflect a commonly shared belief that human suffering (especially black suffering) is a problem that requires a constructive response. However, Pinn's approach in *Why, Lord?* differs from that of the first two texts in one important respect; he does not situate his response to black suffering within a Christian theological framework. Pinn's response involves the adoption of what he calls a "nitty-gritty hermeneutic" grounded in a strong humanism that finds expression in African-American cultural sources such as the folk narrative "Sister Sadie Washington's Littlest Boy," Nella Larsen's novel *Quicksand*, Richard Wright's novel *Native Son*, hip-hop aesthetics and rap music.<sup>623</sup> Pinn describes his "nitty-gritty hermeneutic" in the following manner:

The term nitty-gritty denotes a hard and concrete orientation in which the 'raw natural facts' are of tremendous importance, irrespective of their ramifications. While serving to confine vision and orientation to certain parameters of roughness, it also expands the meaning and possibility of life to its uncompromising and endemic limits. Therefore, nitty-gritty hermeneutics seeks a clear and unromanticized understanding of a hostile world. In a word, nitty-gritty hermeneutics entails 'telling it like it is' and taking risks . . . Aspects of this hermeneutic include a sense of heuristic rebelliousness as well as raw and uncompromised insight. This hermeneutical approach takes the material of life that goes unspoken and hidden, and expresses it.<sup>624</sup>

A “nitty-gritty hermeneutic” emerges for Pinn as a more adequate response to the problem of continual black oppression and suffering in a world presumably under the control of a liberating, righteous God. The introduction of this hermeneutic is also a response to philosopher William R. Jones’s much earlier 1973 volume *Is God a White Racist?: A Preamble to Black Theology*. In this volume, Jones argues that “humanocentric theism,” which “removes God from anyone’s side” and understands history as “open-ended and multivalued” and hence “capable of supporting either oppression or liberation, racism or brotherhood,” is a more intellectually “trustworthy” response to the problem of continual black suffering at the hands of white oppressors.<sup>625</sup> For Pinn, however, theism need not be a component of the hermeneutical formulae utilized by interpreters of the opaque epistemological orientation in black religious and black suffering. In his view, what is needed instead is a strong humanistic perspective which takes seriously the claim that “relatively sustained and oppressive world conditions bring into question the presence of any Being outside of the human realm.”<sup>626</sup>

The hermeneutical frameworks proposed by Jones and Pinn are certainly more conducive to the exploration of “hidden, unspoken” dimensions of black religious experience than most others proffered by black religious critics. Nevertheless, both frameworks fail to give adequate attention to the unintelligible aspect of human suffering.<sup>627</sup> The hermeneutical utility of the above-quoted passage involving Mrs. Turner again comes into view. The passage challenges us to consider an approach to interpreting the opaque epistemological orientation in black religious experience based upon an understanding of black suffering as an ultimately unintelligible reality. The goal of such an interpretive approach would not necessarily be to lend greater intelligibility to

human suffering. Rather, the goal would entail exploring the epistemological and hermeneutical implications of unintelligible human suffering for the conceptualization and understanding of the opaque epistemological orientation in black religious experience. On a more fundamental level, this interpretive approach would also explore the role of unintelligibility itself as a foundational experience in black spirituality. A question that would likely emerge during such an exploration is, “In what way must we recalibrate our approach to reflecting on the opaque epistemological orientation in black religious experience so as to more adequately address the foundational experience of unintelligibility vis-à-vis black oppression, black suffering, the motives and activities of God and other spiritual beings, etc.?”

Furthermore, it is probable that an exploration of this kind would at some point lead back to Albert Murray’s previously cited description of the blues. Murray’s unvarnished yet poetic description signals the need for a mode of reflection on the opaque epistemological orientation in black religious experience that is preeminently phenomenological while also being open to creative insights found in African-American artistic culture. Like Murray, commentators on the opaque epistemological orientation in black religious experience should feel free to embrace vocabularies that better speak to the perplexing, untidy experience of unintelligible black suffering. Therefore, terms like “insubstantial, invisible, grayness, ghostlike vagueness, rueful, glum, sullen, mean,” and “downright evil” should not be avoided due to their lack of precision or unpleasant significations. The same can be said for other terms found in the passage mentioning Mrs. Turner such as “cruelty, indiscriminate suffering, fear,” and “blood.” While these terms and others within the vocabularies suggested by Murray and the referenced passage

do not deliver clear or precise information about the opaque epistemological orientation in black religious experience that can be empirically evaluated, they nonetheless do help to generate a sense of the particular orientation engendered by the experience of unintelligible suffering. The vocabularies and insights found in the work of Murray and in the focal passage of this section play a vital role in equipping us to probe the more opaque epistemological recesses of black religious experience.

### *Questioning Souls*

The next three focal passages occur during the arrival of the novel's climactic hurricane. The first passage comments generally on the harvesting community's attitude regarding the impending cyclone. The subsequent two passages comment mainly on the attitude of Janie, Tea Cake, and their mutual friend Motor Boat, all of whom are gathered in Janie and Tea Cake's shack after a rousing afternoon of dice and dancing with other Everglades harvesters.<sup>628</sup> The passages read as follows:

It [the hurricane] woke up old Okechobee and the monster began to roll in his bed. Began to roll and complain like a peevish world on a grumble. The folks in the quarters and the people in the big houses further around the shore heard the big lake and wondered. The people felt uncomfortable but safe because there were the seawalls to chain the senseless monster in his bed. The folks let the people do the thinking. If the castles thought themselves secure, the cabins needn't worry. Their decision was already made as always. Chink up your cracks, shiver in your wet beds and wait on the mercy of the Lord. The bossman might have the thing stopped before morning anyway. It is so easy to be hopeful in the day time when you can see the things you wish on. But it was night, it stayed night. Night was striding across nothingness with the whole round world in his hands.

They [Janie, Tea Cake, and Motor Boat] huddled closer and stared at the door. They just didn't use another part of their bodies, and they didn't look at anything but the door. The time was past for asking the white folks what to look for through that door. Six eyes were questioning *God*. The wind came back with triple fury, and put out the light for the last time. They sat in company with the others in other shanties, their eyes straining against crude walls and their souls asking if He meant to measure their puny might against His. They seemed to be staring at the dark, but their eyes were watching God.<sup>629</sup>

The arrival of the hurricane disrupts the consciousness of the harvesting community by impugning the power of the community's white authorities. Members of the community suddenly realize that the white authorities in the "big houses around the shore" may not be able to ensure their safety. It becomes apparent that the hurricane is a much greater power against which everyone is virtually helpless. The surging, "hard skies" above bring with them a growing measure of doubt as they remain cloaked in the darkness of night. As Janie, Tea Cake, and Motor Boat prepare to avoid the hurricane's onslaught, they "watch" with "questioning" eyes, wondering what God's purpose is in unleashing such a ferocious storm upon them. This quandary provides us the opportunity to explore a motif that may be described as disruptive wonderment.

*Disruptive Wonderment*

The significance of the hurricane is not limited to the negation of the presumably protective power of white overseers in the Everglades harvesting community or to the physical devastation it causes. The hurricane's significance also lies in its disruption of non-threatening conceptions of the spiritual world. This climactic storm induces in Janie, Tea Cake, and Motor Boat an uncertain wonderment about the nature of God and God's activity in the world. The narrator draws a subtle causal link between God and the hurricane. Consequently, God's will is associated with the hurricane's destructive power. Such an association dislodges any comforting ideas these three characters and others may have about the "mercy of the Lord." Everyone is confronted with the brutal and indiscriminate power of the hurricane and with their own fragile mortality. The question is posed as to whether God intends to "measure" God's power against that of the community, which is "puny" in comparison. However, though Janie, Tea Cake, and

Motor Boat continue to “watch” God in the roiling darkness, no answer to their question is forthcoming.

The deadly chaos of the hurricane peels back the layers of their religious consciousness, imposing an awareness of the more fearsome and mysterious dimensions of the spiritual world. The unanswerable question to which the hurricane gives rise precipitates a crisis of meaning; Janie, Tea Cake, and Motor Boat cannot access the ultimate significance of the hurricane with respect to their own lives. Moreover, they do not know the ultimate purpose of the hurricane, or if there is an ultimate purpose at all. Additionally, there is uncertainty regarding precisely what the hurricane reveals about the nature of God and the spiritual world. Another way to say this is that the hurricane occasions a suspension of meaning in the religious experience of Janie, Tea Cake, and Motor Boat. The hurricane forces them to encounter and consider the impenetrable opacity of spiritual power, and they are left with an acutely disruptive sense of wonderment and a desire for clear meaning that goes entirely unfulfilled. On the level of religious experience, Janie, Tea Cake, and Motor Boat are challenged to come to terms with the sheer mystery signified by the hurricane.

I would suggest further that they experience the hurricane not just as a catastrophic occurrence but also as an instructive event. Through their disruptive experience of the hurricane, Janie, Tea Cake, and Motor Boat are given the opportunity to realize in a more general way that knowing does not represent the primary context of religious experience. Put in other terms, their encounter with the spiritual power manifest in the hurricane does not add to their knowledge of themselves or the world. Instead, this encounter confounds their knowledge, thereby engendering in them an interrogative posture that impugns what

they think they know about the spiritual world. An implication of the hurricane is that the opacity of spiritual power variously manifests itself in other ways as well, thereby generating unanswerable questions and crises of meaning in any number of different settings. These manifestations of spiritual power profoundly reshape the religious consciousness of those who experience them and in so doing revoke the power and status of knowledge as the principal source of human orientation in the world.

As just noted, the relevance of the motif of disruptive wonderment extends beyond the climactic hurricane and the narrative in which it occurs. This motif can also inform our ongoing discussion of the opaque epistemological orientation in black religious experience. After having reflected on the role of disruptive wonderment within the narrative context of *Their Eyes*, we now pose the following question: How does the motif of disruptive wonderment relate to our developing understanding of the opaque epistemological orientation in black religious experience?

*Disruptive Wonderment and the Opaque Epistemological Orientation in Black Religious Experience*

The motif of disruptive wonderment implies that the opaque epistemological orientation in black religious experience is sometimes characterized by intense vexation rather than contentment, by exponentially increasing questions rather than easy or eventual resolution. If we take the motif of disruptive wonderment seriously, we begin to understand that the opaque epistemological orientation in black religious experience is decidedly not marked by exhaustive knowledge or non-threatening relationship with the spiritual world. On the contrary, the opaque epistemological orientation in black religious experience is very much subject to existential anxieties and the host of incessant struggles related thereto. It is helpful here to recall Janie, Tea Cake, and Motor Boat's

experience of the hurricane. They experience the hurricane as an awe-inspiring yet confusing expression of spiritual power that poses a direct and unapologetic threat to their lives. This experience compels the question of whether or not the hurricane is a brutal demonstration of God's utterly superior "might." The impression is given that these characters feel "puny" in the hurricane's presence. The unapologetic threat posed by the hurricane, coupled with the unanswered question it raises for Janie, Tea Cake, and Motor Boat, creates in them a heightened state of existential anxiety. It is while in this state that they can keenly realize that their question serves to fundamentally orient them in relation to the reality to which their question is ultimately directed.

Another important question presents itself at this point: Does the motif of disruptive wonderment imply that the opaque epistemological orientation in black religious experience is entirely bereft of meaning? The simple answer to this question is no. If this orientation was entirely bereft of meaning, it would cease to be humanly recognizable or understandable as an epistemological orientation. However, when considered as a primary dimension of this orientation, disruptive wonderment diminishes the status of human meanings. It does so by provoking the realization that these meanings lack ultimacy. Within the theoretical framework introduced by the motif of disruptive wonderment, human meanings make sense only as constructed, inadequate approximations of material and non-material realities. Therefore, while the construction of meanings is practically necessary for human survival and productivity, the experience of disruptive wonderment nevertheless always functions to highlight the limited power and scope of human meanings, a limitation perhaps most strikingly demonstrated by expressions of spiritual power such as the relentless hurricane through which Janie, Tea

Cake, Motor Boat and others suffer. Spiritually-based experiences of disruptive wonderment – as opposed to experiences of seemingly stable meanings – are a matrix of the opaque epistemological orientation in black religious experience.

What then might the motif of disruptive wonderment suggest regarding the opaque epistemological orientation in black religious experience? I contend the motif suggests that within the context of this orientation, knowing in a stable or absolute sense does not ensue from contact with the spiritual world, nor does it necessarily ensue from engagement with the material world, which is always subject to the power and influence of the former. All knowing that ensues from spiritual or material interaction is necessarily provisional and mutable, as mystery is the metaphysical theater of both spiritual and material reality. Hence, what is of greatest importance with respect to the epistemological purview of black religious experience's opaque orientation is not knowledge as such but one's orientation to knowledge. This is not to say that orientation is immutable, or that orientation is somehow more stable than the meanings that provisional human knowledges produce. What we are saying is that orientation is vital to maintaining a critical perspective on human knowledges that disallows their elevation to the level of or above the very spiritual realities that render them as ultimately provisional and non-authoritative. The spiritual world's provisionalization of human knowledges and orientations facilitates our openness to experiences of disruptive wonderment, thus promoting our epistemological evolution along lines that increasingly sharpen our awareness of the opacity of the spiritual world and of the limitations of human knowing.

*In Need of a “Sign”*

The final passage we will consider from *Their Eyes* appears nearly four weeks after Tea Cake is bitten by a rabid dog while attempting to flee the hurricane. At this point, Tea Cake is displaying symptoms consistent with rabies such as severe headache, mood swings, and difficulty swallowing water.<sup>630</sup> Janie consults a local physician named Dr. Simmons who diagnoses Tea Cake with rabies and informs her that his chances of survival are very slim given that he should have received treatment three weeks earlier. Dr. Simmons also tells Janie that the best thing for Tea Cake is to be “tied down” in the “County Hospital,” a recommendation she knows Tea Cake will not accept.<sup>631</sup> It pains Janie to see Tea Cake suffering, and she is devastated to learn of his poor prognosis.<sup>632</sup> It is in this context that the narrator remarks,

She [Janie] looked hard at the sky for a long time. Somewhere up there beyond blue ether’s bosom sat He. Was He noticing what was going on around here? He must be because He knew everything. Did He *mean* to do this thing to Tea Cake and her? It wasn’t anything she could fight. She could only ache and wait. Maybe it was some big tease and when He saw it had gone far enough He’d give her a sign. She looked hard for something up there to move for a sign. A star in the daytime, maybe, or the sun to shout, or even a mutter of thunder. Her arms went up in a desperate supplication for a minute. It wasn’t exactly pleading, it was asking questions. The sky stayed hard looking and quiet so she went inside the house. God would do less than He had in His heart.

Tea Cake’s rapidly declining condition causes an intense uneasiness in Janie. Their dire situation makes little sense to her, yet she struggles to remain hopeful while also caring as best as she can for Tea Cake. Nevertheless, Tea Cake’s tragic predicament generates a theological crisis in Janie. In response to this crisis, she instinctively turns to the spiritual world under the assumption that some meaning can be found there in the form of a “sign” which will render her circumstances less opaque and less hopeless. However, as it appears no useful result is forthcoming, Janie’s urgent search for spiritual meaning

proves fruitless. Her earnest appeal to God is met with what may be described as divine silence.

*Divine Silence*

Janie seems to hold the belief that her ordeal is not without purpose. She sees God's putatively all-knowing power as the key to unlocking this purpose. Moreover, Janie senses a greater intentionality behind Tea Cake's suffering and her own that is not reducible to a hurricane or to the violent behavior of a rabid dog. Hence her query as to whether or not *God* intends "to do this thing to Tea Cake and her." Janie also realizes that she alone is powerless to change the situation, as is Dr. Simmons. In fact, no one in Janie's community is able to end the suffering she and Tea Cake undergo. Janie therefore concludes that she "can only ache and wait."

While "aching and waiting," Janie searches for a divine sign in the form of a "star in the daytime," a "shouting sun," a "mutter of thunder," or anything else she can interpret as a meaningful response to her "questions." In her own way, Janie petitions the spiritual world for assistance explaining the significance of what she and Tea Cake are experiencing. However, Janie's petition is met only with a "hard looking, quiet sky." She understands this sign-less, "quiet" sky to mean that God is indifferent to her situation and to her petition, and thus will do "less than He has in his Heart." Spiritual power speaks in a threatening way via the destruction of the hurricane and Tea Cake's diseased state. Yet this same power falls silent when presented with Janie's "desperate" petition. Consequently, Janie is forced to come to terms with the horrific reality of Tea Cake's impending, decidedly unpleasant death and with her own suffering.

Janie's experience suggests that human beings are sometimes made to suffer alone in face of divine silence. Her unanswered petition impugns the belief that one can always turn to the world of spirit for succor in times of great travail. Janie has no choice but to confront the existential brutality of her ordeal without the definite knowledge that at some point in the future God will reveal the ultimate significance of her suffering as well as Tea Cake's. Janie's lonely ordeal signals a religious consciousness that understands spiritual power as a force that is not necessarily sensitive or responsive to human suffering. Janie painfully learns through her ordeal that she cannot always expect the spiritual world to rescue her or her loved ones from the innumerable terrors attending material existence. Janie must deal with the world as it is, not as she wishes it to be. The world as it is is a world often characterized by divine silence amid unspeakable human suffering.

Janie's unexpected encounter with divine silence implies that the human capacity to generate meaning in adverse circumstances is limited. The fact that God offers nothing but silence in response to Tea Cake's worsening condition and Janie's fervent petition indicates that religious experience entails a dimension of seemingly meaningless disorientation and loneliness. Janie tries to facilitate Tea Cake's healing through personal nurture and by enlisting the medical expertise of Dr. Simmons. However, these efforts are frustrated, and Janie is essentially left alone in a situation wherein she must struggle mightily to re-orient herself and resist the deadly pull of her hopeless sense of unaided isolation in order to survive. Janie learns she cannot rely on the power of the spiritual world to allay the tragic severity of her circumstances. Janie's efforts to help Tea Cake and to grasp the greater significance of her circumstances are thrown back at her in the

form of Tea Cake's precipitous decline and the spiritual world's refusal to acknowledge her petition for a meaningful "sign." She is forced yet again to confront the chaotic hardness of material existence without a stable framework of meaning through which to interpret it.

Divine silence emerges as a motif that uniquely sheds light on the dynamics shaping the divine-human relationship. Janie's experience reveals that divine agency cannot be controlled or predicted, even in times of unimaginable human "desperation." It is therefore divine agency – not human agency – that dictates the terms of the divine-human relationship. Human beings are dependent upon spiritual power for their very existence. Yet the spiritual world determines how and when this power can be accessed and utilized. Furthermore, Janie's ordeal makes it fairly clear that the spiritual world does not always function in the manner we think it should. In searching the skies for a "sign," Janie hopes to identify something that will soothe her psychological agony by enabling her to apprehend the significance of the mortal struggle she undergoes with Tea Cake. However, no such spiritual balm is found, and as a result Janie's psychological agony holds sway. The motif of divine silence as expressed through the crisis Janie experiences with Tea Cake suggests that the divine-human relationship is both uneven and uncertain. This motif provokes further discussion with respect to the opaque epistemological orientation in black religious experience.

*Divine Silence and the Opaque Epistemological Orientation in Black Religious Experience*

The following question will frame our discussion: What is the significance of divine silence as a dimension of the opaque epistemological orientation in black religious experience? The first point to make in answering this question has to do with ultimate

meaning; the motif of divine silence signifies the inaccessibility of ultimate meaning. This is not to say, however, that the opaque epistemological orientation in black religious experience somehow exists sans meaning. On the contrary, like other orientations, the opaque epistemological orientation in black religious experience is also constituted by the creation and attachment of meanings to many different experiences and events. It is important to remember, though, that, as Janie's "desperate" petition implies, these constructed human meanings never reach the level of ultimacy, for meaning at this level is the exclusive "chore" of the gods. Meaning within the context of black religious experience's opaque epistemological orientation is therefore necessarily functional and dynamic; it is functional in that it contributes to the basic conceptual and theoretical coherence that informs experience itself as a psychical phenomenon; such constructed meaning is also dynamic in that it requires pliancy in order to effectively adapt to the constantly changing realities of the material world. On the most fundamental level then, the meanings shaping the opaque epistemological orientation in black religious experience are non-doctrinaire in nature. Moreover, the tentative status of these meanings suggests that they are subject to ongoing scrutiny and contestation that can weaken their usefulness and influence, result in their eradication, or facilitate their reconstitution along trajectories that better reflect the unmitigated complexity and flux of material existence. The constructed meanings associated with the opaque epistemological orientation in black religious experience are inherently fragile by virtue of their unbreakable connection to the reality of divine silence, which not only determines the scope of these constructed meanings, but also at every moment signifies inaccessible

ultimate meanings deriving from the spiritual world that could potentially render such constructed meanings wholly inaccurate.

The second related point to make in answering the question which began this discussion is that, as tentative constructions permanently bound to the reality of divine silence, the meanings of black religious experience's opaque orientation are always attended by epistemological uncertainty. In other words, the modes of knowing to which these meanings give rise are as unstable as the meanings themselves. This point becomes clearer upon viewing Janie's above-recounted spiritually-oriented response to her ordeal as indicative of a mode of knowing. Janie's response, which is primarily interrogative, begins with a question as to whether or not God is even aware of the dire situation she and Tea Cake face. She concludes that God "must" be aware of the situation given that God "knows everything." She then considers the possibility that her situation is little more than "some big tease" directly orchestrated by God, and she hopes that God will give her a sign to this effect. However, because no signs appear, Janie concludes that God will "do less" than is in God's "heart" and is thus apathetic to her situation. Janie's response shifts rather dramatically from a consideration of the possibility that God may care about her situation to a fairly strong conclusion that God is apathetic to her situation. I would argue that this shift reflects an unstable mode of knowing. I would argue further that this unstable mode of knowing and others like it are inherent within the opaque epistemological orientation in black religious experience, albeit not exclusively. My description of these modes of knowing as "unstable" should in no way be regarded as a pejorative assessment. For, as our analysis implies, these modes of knowing are important in that their instability enhances the creative possibilities of black religious

epistemology by signifying the inaccessibility of ultimate meaning as it relates to black existence.

The third point to make is that the motif of divine silence highlights the chaotic danger of the material world as a primary feature of black religious opacity. Janie's candid acknowledgement of the divine silence with which her petition is met suggests that the opaque epistemological orientation in black religious experience squarely confronts the limitations as well as the myriad hardships and perils of material existence without inordinate recourse to notions of spiritual transcendence. Part of what this indicates is that the opaque epistemological orientation in black religious experience is substantively informed by the harsh rigors of survival in the material world. Hence, this orientation need not involve a withdrawal from the burdens of material reality. To have such consciousness is to participate in an epistemological orientation that engages the material world while also imperfectly perceiving the spiritual world which lies beyond (or is embedded within) its physical counterpart. Janie's experience plays a vital heuristic role in our understanding of the opaque epistemological orientation in black religious experience; her experience is a poignant reminder that, while the spiritual world is at times silent, the perilous material world loudly announces itself on a constant basis, demanding a consciousness marked by engaged attention and courageous action.

***Their Eyes Were Watching God in Light of Yorùbá and Akan Epistemology***

Having completed the second stage in our analysis of Hurston's novel, we now move to the third and concluding stage. In this stage, we will constructively draw upon the phenomenological exploration of Yorùbá and Akan epistemology conducted in chapters two and three. Our examination will be thematically driven in that it will consider certain

motifs from *Their Eyes* in light of some of the motifs discussed in the previous two chapters that relate to Yorùbá and Akan grammars of knowing. The goal of our examination is to explore epistemological relationships between motifs in *Their Eyes* and motifs present in Yorùbá and Akan thought. We begin with two cognate motifs previously described as the divine infusion of boundless possibility and irresolution.

*The Divine Infusion of Boundless Possibility and Irresolution*

The first motif that appears in our analysis of *Their Eyes* is referred to as the divine infusion of boundless possibility. It is discussed in close connection with the “horizon” trope which metaphorically signifies Janie’s awareness of the limitless possibilities of her life. The “horizon” is also interpreted in a broader sense as a spiritually-derived element that generally signifies existence itself as a context of limitless possibilities, both positive and negative. It was noted as well that the motif of the divine infusion of boundless possibility always signifies more than an individual’s subjective experience and understanding. Therefore, the “horizon” is not a function of Janie’s consciousness. Rather, Janie’s consciousness is a function of the “horizon,” which always encompasses more than Janie’s finite subjectivity. The divine infusion of boundless possibility relativizes all human meaning and experience. If the concept of normativity can be applied at all to this motif, it can be applied only in the sense that the divine infusion of boundless possibility normativizes non-normativity. Janie’s “horizon” represents a reality over which human intellect or agency ultimately exerts no control whatsoever. The existential state of affairs signified by the motif of the divine infusion of boundless possibility is not reducible to or resolvable within any human system of meaning. This motif is thus compatible with the motif of irresolution discussed earlier in our respective

analyses of Yorùbá and Akan epistemology. It can be said then that the motif of the divine infusion of boundless possibility is epistemologically cognate with the motif of irresolution – a constitutive element of Yorùbá and Akan grammars of knowing.

*Yorùbá Epistemology, Irresolution, and the Divine Infusion of Boundless Possibility*

It would be helpful at this point to further explore the epistemological relationship shared between the two motifs in question. As readers may recall from chapter two, Yorùbá belief posits a cosmos that, while under the administrative control of the High Deity *Olódùmarè*, is nonetheless irresolvably antagonistic at its most fundamental level. The spiritual cosmology of the Yorùbá pits the malevolent beings known as the *Ajogun* ("warriors" or "anti-gods") against the largely benevolent beings known as *Òrìṣà*. The primordial struggle between these two classes of spiritual beings is regarded by the Yorùbá as a permanent condition that strongly influences all levels of the created order. The conflict between the *Ajogun* and the *Òrìṣà* cannot be resolved, for it is the nature of the *Ajogun* to acrimoniously and tirelessly resist and interfere with the *Òrìṣà*'s largely benevolent agenda which is often beneficial to human beings. The *Ajogun* therefore are also merciless enemies of humanity. According to Yorùbá belief, peace – an idea which, in its purest sense, signifies a lasting condition – is unnatural and hence "aberrant." The originary perspective briefly detailed above grounds Yorùbá epistemology. As our discussion suggests, the motif of irresolution plays a central role in this epistemology.

For the Yorùbá, human knowledge and action should not have as their goal the *permanent* resolution of existential conflict and incongruity. The Yorùbá would consider such a goal problematic for at least three reasons, all of which have their basis in the Yorùbá religio-philosophical tradition: 1) Permanent resolution of existential conflict and

incongruity is a cosmic impossibility; 2) Actively working toward such a goal would contravene the very structure of being itself, which the Yorùbá regard as sacred; 3) The conflictual structure of existence is useful to the human community both as a source of knowing and as a reality that strengthens the human community's relationship with the spiritual world (*Òrun*). The motif of the divine infusion of boundless possibility in *Their Eyes* dovetails effortlessly with the motif of irresolution in Yorùbá epistemology. The cosmic structure of boundless possibility functions as a source of knowing for Janie that frames her liberative response to the suppressive agendas imposed upon her. It is within – and perhaps because of – this context of irresolvable possibility that Janie is able to imagine and pursue new alternatives for her life. With each choice she makes, Janie becomes increasingly aware of new alternatives and life trajectories, and this increasing awareness nurtures and strengthens her spiritual connection to the boundless “horizon.”

In Yorùbá tradition, the experience of irresolution serves a similar connective function in the Ayede *Yemoja* festival. The primary aim of the festival is to promote the well-being of the Ayede community by “replenishing the body politic with fertile women” and “abundant crops” and by reinvesting the *Àtá* (the ruler of Ayede) with the power of *ìgbá Yemoja* (the *Òrìṣà Yemoja*'s calabash into which some of her power is ritually harnessed), thereby fortifying the *Àtá*'s “health” for the upcoming year. Yet, also of importance is the belief among the Ayede Yorùbá that the successful performance of the *Yemoja* festival does not alter the antagonistic structure of being. Therefore, it is imperative that members of the Ayede community continue to maintain and strengthen their connection to the spiritual world through collective and individual sacrifice (*ẹbọ*). A major part of the *Ìyá Ṣàngó*'s (*Ṣàngó* diviner's) role during the final stage of the

festival is to remind the Ayede community of the need to nurture its relationship with the *Òrìṣà* by way of *ẹbọ*. This firm reminder makes it clear to the community that it must persist in cultivating an ability to live efficaciously amid ineradicable existential irresolution. The divine infusion of boundless possibility Janie embraces through her generative, unpredictable relationship with the “horizon” also requires her to cultivate an ability to live efficaciously amid ineradicable existential irresolution. Much like the *Ìyá Ṣàngó* of Ayede, Janie has no interest in trying to somehow mitigate the uncertain complexity of the “horizon” in an effort to downplay the threatening dimensions of existence. She recognizes that the “horizon” is much more than a source of boundless possibility; it is also a source of spiritual power that can aid her in forging the life she wants for herself, despite the inherent existential threats posed by this power and by other non-spiritual forces. Janie understands along with the *Ìyá Ṣàngó* of Ayede that living is a daily act of courage.

*Akan Epistemology, Irresolution, and the Divine Infusion of Boundless Possibility*

Readers may also recall that the motif of irresolution is highlighted as well in chapter three’s analysis of the Akan cosmos. The Akan believe that the cosmos is under the ultimate authority of the High Deity known commonly as *Onyame* who, as the singularly prolific source of being, gives rise to an array of lesser spirit beings as well as countless other realities. We see the motif of irresolution at work in the way that the Akan conceptualize some of these lesser spirit beings. While we could easily point to the *Suman Brafoɔ* (inspired objects/deities who, through sacrificial worship, can be influenced to protect devotees or to “kill or bring sickness upon one’s enemies”) or perhaps even to the *Nsamanfo* (ancestral spirits whose protection of human communities

sometimes involves punishing those who violate “traditionally sanctioned moral codes”), we could just as easily point to the somewhat less frequently discussed deity *Asase Yaa*. *Asase Yaa*, the earth deity, ranks second only to *Onyame* and is known in some contexts as *Aberewa* (“old woman/mother”) and also as *Asase Efua* among the Fante. *Asase Yaa* is the earth itself, and as such her life-giving bounty is accessible to all. Thus, *Asase Yaa* is not the subject of shrine worship.

*Asase Yaa’s* power helps create and sustain the various forms of material life.

However, her power can also be destructive. Both dimensions of *Asase Yaa’s* power are ritually observed on sacred days during which the cultivation of land is disallowed so as not to risk harm or “evil” being visited upon communities as punishment for failing to properly honor *Asase Yaa*. The Akan also believe that persons who enter forests on *Asase Yaa’s* sacred days of observance “will encounter the most unpleasant things imaginable” and may not live to share their experience. An example of another violation said to potentially invite *Asase Yaa’s* wrath is the shedding of human blood, for which large-scale sacrifices of appeasement (*afɔre* or *afɔrebɔ*) must be made lest the guilty community suffer “untold calamities.” The duality of *Asase Yaa’s* power suggests the role of the motif of irresolution in the conceptualization of *Asase Yaa*. *Asase Yaa* is not reducible to the role of creator and sustainer of life, nor is she reducible to the role of punitive destroyer. She simultaneously inhabits both roles, and is therefore an irresolvable spirit being. The destructive dimension of *Asase Yaa’s* power indicates that relationship with her involves a significant element of danger.

Janie’s relationship with the boundless “horizon” involves a similar element of danger. This becomes evident upon recalling the complex abuses and perils she endures

at various points throughout the narrative. These experiences imply not only that the divine infusion of boundless possibility made available by the divine “horizon” paradoxically and equally signifies freedom and bondage, safety and danger, and life and death, but also that each possibility encompassed by the “horizon” contains an element of danger. Therefore, neither the “horizon” nor its numberless possibilities can be reduced to one-dimensional frames of perception. They are irresolvable in that they simultaneously represent salutary and nefarious potentialities for Janie’s life. Furthermore, Janie has no way of predicting how these potentialities will manifest themselves in her life. Janie’s existential condition of irresolvable, dangerous uncertainty bears a connection to the Akan conceptualization of the group of forest-dwelling spirit beings known as the *Mmoatia* (“little people”). On one hand, the *Mmoatia* are regarded by the Akan as having mastered the intricate medicinal properties of herbs, trees, and various other plants, and it is believed that they frequently share their knowledge with human beings, most if not all of whom consequently become practitioners of plant medicine (*Sumankwafo*) whose expertise communities rely upon to aid them in effectively treating rare diseases. On the other hand, however, the *Mmoatia* are notorious for their hostility toward those who purposely or accidentally enter the forests in which the *Mmoatia* live. The *Mmoatia* mete out severe punishment against trespassers in the form of physical assault and temporary captivity. Hence, the *Mmoatia* are at once allies and potential enemies of humankind. Put simply, the Akan conceptualize the *Mmoatia* through the epistemological lens of irresolution. The *Mmoatia* are not properly understood without an awareness of both their positive and negative potentialities. We could assert in figurative terms that Janie’s “horizon” is *Mmoatia*-like in the sense that in

one hand the “horizon” offers Janie boundless possibilities for healing, and in the other she is offered boundless brutality. Like the *Mmoatia* of Akan cosmology, the “horizon” is both Janie’s friend and enemy. Janie’s relationship with the “horizon” exemplifies the idea that to be given life is to be given the sempiternal gift and burden of existential irresolution. This relationship also harkens back to the old Akan adage, *Onyame ma wo yaree a, ɔma wo ano aduro* (“If Onyame gives you an illness, Onyame also gives you medicine”).

*The Struggle to Actualize Our Individual Sense of Being and the Permanency of Existential Conflict*

Another motif discussed in the earlier analysis of *Their Eyes* is the struggle to actualize our individual sense of being. This motif of struggle is expressed through Janie’s epic quest for love, self-knowledge, and knowledge of the world. As previously mentioned, this quest is repeatedly met with opposition from individuals who presumably are close to her. It is also important to remember that Janie believes her quest is opposed by certain spiritual forces as well. This tense portrayal of the relationship between certain spiritual forces and Janie’s struggle to actualize her individual sense of being to some extent reflects a Yorùbá perspective on destiny (*orí* or *orí inú*), the conceptualization of which involves the motif of the permanency of existential conflict.

*Yorùbá Epistemology, the Permanency of Existential Conflict, and the Struggle to Actualize Our Individual Sense of Being*

In our discussion of the motifs of the divine infusion of boundless possibility and irresolution, we noted that the ceaselessly oppositional relationship between the *Ajogun* and the *Òrìṣà* fundamentally informs how the Yorùbá understand the structural organization of the cosmos. Furthermore, I suggested in chapter two that this

understanding constitutes an indigenous theory of existence in which the idea of the permanency of existential conflict functions as a major principle or motif. Not surprisingly, one finds that this motif also plays an important role in the Yorùbá understanding of destiny, which is closely tied to the concept of *orí* or *orí inú*. The *orí inú*, which means “inner head,” is chosen by a person before he or she is born and guides that person through life based largely upon the nature of the *orí inú* itself. The spiritual being known as *Àjàlá* provides each unborn human with an *orí inú* that is either good or bad. The nature of the *orí inú* one chooses cannot be known beforehand. Thus, one chooses one’s *orí inú* somewhat blindly.

While *Òrúnmìlà (Ifá)* – the *Òrìṣà* who has knowledge of each *orí inú* that is chosen – can be consulted in order to learn more about the nature of one’s *orí inú* and the kind of destiny it desires, one nevertheless must constantly struggle toward the attainment of this destiny. The Yorùbá believe that those with a bad *orí inú* must struggle more than those with a good *orí inú*. This need to constantly struggle toward the attainment of one’s destiny with either a good *orí inú* or a bad *orí inú* is conveyed through the principle of *ẹsẹ* (“leg” or “legs”). The principle of *ẹsẹ* is an urgent reminder that the human journey toward destiny is relentlessly opposed by malicious spiritual beings such as the *Ajogun*. Moreover, if we consider humans’ desire for physical well-being to be a significant aspect of the Yorùbá conception of destiny, then it seems that *Òrìṣà-ńlá (Ọbàtálá)*, the “sculptor divinity” who arbitrarily exercises his prerogative to “sculpt” malformed human bodies, must also be regarded as a spiritual being who potentially opposes the human journey toward destiny. The principle of *ẹsẹ* reminds us as well that this journey is

undoubtedly opposed by the material world itself, in which permanent existential conflict is the “order of the day.”

Janie’s struggle to actualize her individual sense of being can be interpreted as an illustration of the Yorùbá principle of *esè*. At a young age, Janie becomes aware of a deeply embedded need to chart a course for her life that veers away from the expectations of her grandmother and from the suppressive social mores of her Eatonville community. However, this deeply embedded need, which exerts the kind of influence on Janie’s life that one may expect from her *orí inú*, places her in conflict with others who appear to have charted different life courses for themselves and for Janie, perhaps in response to the desires of their own respective “inner heads.” She struggles to protect her sense of being and her need for an impassioned life of love, discovery, and greater self-knowledge.

Janie also struggles against spiritual forces in her journey toward actualizing her individual sense of being. We know from earlier analysis that Janie attributes her struggles in part to a cohort of “jealous” angels. We also know that Janie draws what could be a causal link between spiritual agency, the climactic hurricane, and Tea Cake’s fatal illness. If we take Yorùbá epistemology seriously, then we must consider an interpretation that acknowledges that the climactic hurricane and Tea Cake’s contraction of rabies are consistent with occurrences the Yorùbá may associate with the *Ajogun*. Additionally, it is possible that a bad *orí inú* would be implicated in a Yorùbá-based interpretation of Tea Cake’s death and the events leading up to it. Although it occurs only when he is in the grip of rabies, Tea Cake’s attempt to murder Janie proves that, despite his love for her, he nevertheless poses a threat to Janie’s life and therefore is in

conflict with her efforts to actualize her sense of being. This rather ironic threat powerfully accents the permanency of existential conflict. The love that Janie and Tea Cake share ultimately cannot conquer the permanency of existential conflict; the influence exerted throughout the spiritual and material worlds by the tensive structure of being is far too strong to be overcome by human love. Janie's destiny (*orí inú*), no matter how earnestly pursued (*ẹsẹ*), is always subject to and limited by the tensive structure of being.

*Akan Epistemology, the Permanency of Existential Conflict, and the Struggle to Actualize Our Individual Sense of Being*

The Akan maxim *Qbra yε ku* ("Life is war") underscores the motif of the permanency of existential conflict. This seminal maxim also recalls chapter three's discussion of the *abayifo*, an "anti-social" community that practices *bayi boro*, which has been described as the utilization of spiritual power for socially destructive purposes. Typically, the *abayifo* corporately plan their activities in spiritual form at night during meetings held at largely inaccessible locales such as the tops of iroko, baobab, silk-cotton, and odum trees. Some of the planned activities of *abayifo* include "spiritually 'feasting' on human blood and flesh, the depletion of other people's material resources such as money and property, the bringing about of sterility, sexual impotency and disease, adversely affecting the intellect of students and "rivals," and producing physical injury and death." The Akan are therefore highly fearful of *abayifo* meetings, as indicated by the saying, *Se odum si ho a, ose oye Otanɔ, na obonsam abesi so* ("If the odum tree stands alone, it says that it is as big as Tano [the guardian spirit of the Ashanti state]. But how much more fearful is the odum tree, if an *abayifo* sits down on it"). *Bayi boro* is a potentially deadly source of conflict in human society. In response to the ever-present threat posed by *bayi boro* and

*abayifo* communities, the Akan have developed a sophisticated spirituo-ritual apparatus that relies heavily on the specialized utilization of anti-*bayi boro* shrines.

Whether the anti-*bayi boro* rites used at these shrines are conducted by an *Ɔkɔmfɔ* (“priest”) who practices spiritual mediumship (*nsie-yee/akom*) or by an *Oduruyɛfɔ* (“healer/medicine maker”) who prefers divination (*ebisadze*) through the casting of beads or cowrie shells, the goal is the same: the neutralization of *bayi boro*. As an aspect of Akan epistemology, the ongoing battle between *abayifo* and priests (*Akɔmfɔ*) of anti-*bayi boro* shrines sheds light on our understanding of Janie’s struggle to actualize her individual sense of being. First, like anti-*bayi boro* shrine priests, Janie must regularly contend with forces that seem bent on preventing her sense of being from finding healthy expression in the material world. Second, in a manner somewhat consistent with the work of an anti-*bayi boro* shrine priest, Janie must find ways to *neutralize* the effect these antagonistic forces have on her ability to actualize her sense of being. Third, experience teaches Janie, as it likely does anti-*bayi boro* shrine priests, that the struggle to actualize one’s individual sense of and purpose for being – or, if you will, one’s destiny (*nkrabea/hyebea*) – is always vulnerable to the threat of inimical spiritual and existential forces such as *bayi boro*. The formidable problem of *bayi boro* occasions an understanding of destiny as an intractably perilous journey requiring lifelong access to countervailing spiritual power.

This insight comports well with the Akan maxim that asserts, *Onyame soma wo a, ɔma wo fa monkyimɔnka kwan so* (“If Onyame sends you on an errand, Onyame makes you walk on a difficult road”). Prevalent among the Akan is the belief that the *ɔkra* (“soul”) “receives the individual’s destiny [*nkrabea/hyebea*]” from *Onyame* who is

benevolent in nature, as attested by the saying, *Onyame mpe bɔne* (“Onyame is against evil”). Thus, the Akan positively assess human destiny as a reality that issues forth from *Onyame’s* benevolence. Janie’s relationship with her own destiny reflects a similarly positive valuation. She protects her destiny at all costs, even when suddenly confronted with a situation requiring her to kill the love of her life in self-defense.

#### *Divine Silence and Mystery*

Divine silence is an important motif in *Their Eyes* that places before us the stark limits of human understanding. One senses in Janie an awareness that the unmitigated mystery with which she is confronted extends beyond her limited circumstances to being itself. Janie’s confrontation with mystery is evocative of Yorùbá epistemology. The grammar of knowing informing Yorùbá epistemology does not operate under the assumption that human beings somehow have a right to full knowledge of the cosmos and its spiritual inner workings. Moreover, according to Yorùbá thought, even spiritual beings have limited knowledge of the cosmos. For the Yorùbá, knowledge is a shared yet ultimately elusive resource.

#### *Yorùbá Epistemology, Mystery, and Divine Silence*

The Yorùbá tradition of originary narration evinces the fragmentary, elusive nature of knowledge. One narrative in particular that readily presents itself involves *Òrìṣà-ńlá* (*Ọ̀bàtálá*) and his younger brother *Odùduwà*. Readers will remember from our discussion of this narrative in chapter two that, for reasons that remain unknown, *Olódùmarè* decides to create dry land from the primeval water, and originally appoints *Ọ̀bàtálá*, the eldest of the *Òrìṣà*, to lead this process. *Olódùmarè* also sends four hundred other *Òrìṣà* to assist in the process (including *Odùduwà*), equipping them with dust from

*Ọrun* (the “spirit world”), a chameleon, and a ten-fingered hen. Utilizing an iron chain provided by the *Ọriṣà Ọgún*, *Ọbàtálá* travels down to *Ọkè-Àrà* (“mountain of wonders”) to begin work on the land. However, shortly after arriving, *Ọbàtálá* becomes drunk on palm wine and falls asleep, giving his brother *Odùduwà* the opportunity to carry out the task of creating dry land.

*Odùduwà* completes the creation of the dry land, and in so doing summons the ire of his brother *Ọbàtálá* who discovers what he has done after waking from his drunken slumber. The ensuing conflict between the two brothers is eventually resolved by *Olódùmarè*, who essentially endorses the initiative taken by *Odùduwà* and acknowledges *Odùduwà*'s official status as the lead creator of the earth. *Olódùmarè* recommissions *Ọbàtálá* as the molder of human forms to which *Olódùmarè* will give breath (*ẹmi*). In his new role as molder of human forms (or “sculptor divinity”), *Ọbàtálá* devises a plan to learn exactly how *Olódùmarè* vivifies the inanimate forms *Olódùmarè* commissions him to create. However, *Olódùmarè* ironically foils this plan by causing *Ọbàtálá* to sleep through the moment during which *Olódùmarè* insufflates the inanimate forms with life. *Ọbàtálá* is thereby denied the additional knowledge he seeks.

This originary narrative brings to our attention a motif described in chapter two as the *seeking orientation of knowledge*. *Ọbàtálá*'s knowledge includes an awareness of its own limitations, and thus *seeks* to surpass these limitations through the acquisition of more knowledge. Yet, as the narrative suggests, some levels of knowledge remain inaccessible and hence mysterious even to the *Ọriṣà*. The seeking orientation of knowledge then is bound to be a source of frustration for human beings and for the *Ọriṣà* as well. Janie is clearly in possession of knowledge that is not entirely dissimilar from

*Ọbàtálá's* knowledge; both seek access to a greater level of understanding that is simply beyond their reach. The seeking orientation of Janie's knowledge is met with divine silence in the form of a sign-less sky, whereas the seeking orientation of *Ọbàtálá's* knowledge is met with divine silence in the form of an unexpected and unwanted slumber induced by *Olódùmarè*. In seeking an understanding of existence (*wíwà*) at its deepest level, Janie and *Ọbàtálá* find themselves faced with the inescapability of mystery as the ultimate context of being.

One also finds an awareness of the inescapability of mystery in the Ayede *Yemoja* festival. During *ẹbọ ọba* (the “ruler’s sacrifice”), which is the first phase of the festival, female diviners (*Ìyálòrìṣà*) make an offering (*ẹbọ*) of pounded yam and red palm oil to *Èṣù* at his forest shrine in an effort to gain *Èṣù's* support, thereby increasing the likelihood that *Yemoja* will accept the *Àtá's* offering of a ram and “replenish” Ayede with “fertile women, abundant crops,” and a “strong” and “healthy” ruler. However, the *Ìyálòrìṣà* do not know beforehand whether or not the offerings made to *Èṣù* and *Yemoja* will be accepted, nor do they have any foreknowledge of the festival's general outcome. Such knowledge is inaccessible to them. The *Ìyálòrìṣà* therefore pray to *Èṣù* and *Yemoja*, asking *Èṣù* to “let the sacrifice be acceptable,” and imploring *Yemoja* to “rise up without mishap.” Furthermore, the lack of foreknowledge with respect to whether or not *Yemoja* will accept the ram offered by the *Àtá* accounts for why an *Ìyálòrìṣà* performs divination with kola nuts after *Yemoja* and other spiritual beings such as the ancestors (*Egún*, *Egúngún*, *Ará Ọrun*, *Ọkú Ọrun*) consume the ram's blood. The uttering of ritual prayers and the casting of kola nuts do not necessarily yield foreknowledge. Rather, these sacred

techniques aid the *Ìyálòrìṣà* in effectively managing the mysterious dimensions of the Ayede *Yemoja* festival.

Janie can be likened to the *Ìyálòrìṣà* of the Ayede *Yemoja* festival in that her questioning of the spiritual world concerning her ordeal is, in a sense, an attempt to manage mystery. Like the *Ìyálòrìṣà*, Janie is aware that the spiritual world contains the power to adversely or positively affect her situation. Also, as is the case with the *Ìyálòrìṣà*, Janie has no foreknowledge of how her desperate questions will be received by the spiritual world. Yet, despite the seemingly hopeless nature of her situation and the ultimately inaccessible mystery surrounding it, Janie courageously – and perhaps instinctively – tries to petition the spiritual world for assistance. Her petition of course appears to be unsuccessful because it results in silence. However, one could argue that Janie’s experience of petitioning the spiritual world is not without value. For this experience heuristically signifies the fact that, as the reality from which existential mystery is birthed, the spiritual world remains the only source – albeit an unpredictable one – to which Janie can turn for access to the provisional knowledge and power needed to successfully negotiate the uncertainty of life.

#### *Akan Epistemology, Mystery, and Divine Silence*

In chapter three, Akan epistemology is at one point discussed in reference to the motif of *spirituo-centric knowing*. Spirituo-centric knowing is a mode of perception or understanding that emerges and is maintained through relationship with the spiritual world (*Asamando*). Said otherwise, relationship with the spiritual world shapes human knowledge and practice. Hence the Akan statement, *Obosom na ekyere akomfoɔ ntwaho* (“It is the spirit that *teaches* [emphasis added] the priest to whirl around”). A spirituo-

centric mode of understanding involves an element of existential “endangerment” arising from awareness of and exposure to the often unpredictable and “tempestuous” spiritual community. This mode of knowing also squarely and pragmatically recognizes the necessary limitations of human knowledge, as evidenced by the following maxims: *Nyansa bebrebe ma aman bo* (“Too much wisdom spoils the state”); *Nyansa dodoɔ gyae aboa* (“Too much wisdom lets the animal go”); *Wope se wohunu nneema nyinaa a, w’ani fura* (“If you want to see everything, you become blind”). As an Akan epistemological grammar, spirituo-centric knowing also acknowledges the unavoidable sense of mystery attending religious consciousness. This frank acknowledgement is conveyed in the Akan expression, *Me a meda ayeya menhunu Nyame, na wo a wobutu ho* (“If I who lie on my back cannot see Nyame, how can you who lie on your stomach?”). These observations suggest that at the very heart of spirituo-centric knowing lies an ongoing experience of unknowing. Put even more ironically, spirituo-centric knowing requires a continuing experience of and relationship with unknowing.

I would speculatively argue that Janie’s ordeal and her interrogative response thereto may mark the beginning of her transition into a life of spirituo-centric knowing. For Janie, the hurricane and Tea Cake’s subsequent illness compel serious attention to the spiritual world. She approaches the spiritual world desperate for answers to her questions or for anything that will help her make ultimate sense of Tea Cake’s suffering as well as her own. In doing so, Janie seems largely unaware that engagement of the spiritual world – whether in times of desperation or in times of contentment – always involves a significant and unavoidable element of unknowing. The silence Janie experiences leads her to conclude that God will do “less” than is in God’s “heart.” She learns that

desperation does not necessarily grant one special or accelerated access to spiritual power and meaning. Janie also learns that, in addition to the fact that relationship with the spiritual world can sometimes involve silence that human beings experience as indifference or even “cruelty,” such relationship can also involve unpredictability and disorientation.

The unpredictable and disorienting dimension of relationship with the spiritual world is tangibly manifest in the experience referred to by the Akan as *Akomfa*. The experience of *Akomfa* involves being suddenly and unexpectedly “called” or selected by a particular deity to begin training to become a priest (*Ɔkɔmfo*). The two accounts included below from chapter three are powerfully evocative of the *Akomfa* experience. Both accounts are documented by religious scholar Anthony Ephirim-Donkor. However, readers should note that the first account comes directly from an anti-*bayi boro* shrine priest, and the second is Donkor’s version of a first-hand description provided by an older female

*Ɔkɔmfo*:

I was a Methodist Christian and used to attend services at W [full name not given]. One day I returned from chapel. Suddenly I fell down like a dead man. When I rose, I was still in a trance. For two months I then roamed about in the forest not knowing what I did. The elders all went into the forest after me and drummed. One day we all saw the tutelary spirit which obviously was causing my madness because he wanted to possess me, perched on a kroba tree. He looked like fire. The elders then sacrificed a cow, a sheep and a hen. The tutelary spirit now came down and the elders put him into a brass pan – the spirit was terribly hot and they burnt their hands when they touched him. Gradually I quieted down – but from that time on the tutelary spirit had ‘married’ me. The spirit had been appeased when food was placed before him.

An elderly *Ɔkɔmfo* in Winneba informed me [Donkor] that she attended church regularly until she began experiencing what [was] later diagnosed as a call. The final straw came when she was seized by a force that drove her out in the middle of a church service and went on to spend nine years in training in the Volta Region of Ghana.

Each account's description of the *Akomfa* experience is heavily characterized by complete surprise and disorientation; the former "Methodist Christian" abruptly and inexplicably falls "down like a dead man" one day after returning home from chapel, only to awake in an "entranced, mad" state that causes him to wander uncertainly in the forest for a period of two months with little or no recollection of the preceding events; similarly, the woman in the second account, who "attends church regularly," is inexplicably "seized by a force" that *drives "her out in the middle of a church service."* In each account, only later is it revealed to the man and woman that they have been selected by a deity to begin training for the Akan priesthood. Even so, the ultimate reasons underlying their selection remain inaccessible and thus mysterious.

The *Akomfa* experiences discussed above are far from identical to Janie's harrowing experience. Yet all three experiences share similarities; like the two individuals from our focal accounts, Janie, not fully understanding why, is abruptly thrust into a life-threatening situation involving the hurricane and Tea Cake's deadly illness; Janie too finds herself profoundly disoriented – and in a sense displaced – by her situation; answers from the spiritual world regarding Janie's situation are not immediately forthcoming. Moreover, it remains unclear how and to what extent the ordeal Janie undergoes with Tea Cake impacts her relationship with the spiritual world. Perhaps if given the opportunity Janie would go the way of the elderly *Ɔkomfo* in the second account. Or perhaps, even if presented with such an opportunity, she would be more likely to continue pursuing the actualization of her individual sense of being. In either case, it is equally difficult to imagine Janie's experience of divine silence *not* significantly impacting her relationship to knowledge and her perception of reality.

## Conclusion

The focus of the dissertation was broadened in this chapter to include black fictional literature. We discussed various dimensions of the opaque epistemological orientation in black religious experience as creatively portrayed in Zora Neale Hurston's celebrated novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. The novel was treated not only as a theoretically valuable index of black religious experience, but also as a work containing seminal motifs, some of which are epistemologically cognate with motifs discussed in our earlier analyses of Yorùbá and Akan epistemology in chapters two and three. More specifically, our treatment of the novel involved a phenomenological exploration of its relevance to our understanding of the opaque epistemological orientation in black religious experience and of its epistemological resonances with Yorùbá and Akan grammars of knowing. A number of significant insights emerged from this exploration. Some of them include the following:

- The very structure of the world challenges who we are and our ability to manifest who we sense or think ourselves to be. This point suggests that, while it may be our right to struggle for self-manifestation, there is no guarantee that our struggle will yield success.
- The presence of the boundless, dangerous "horizon" implies that the opaque epistemological orientation in black religious experience includes an oscillating awareness that dynamically shifts between the poles of being and non-being, negative and positive spiritual power, personal freedom and social subjugation, love and "mislove," comprehension and mystery.
- The opaque epistemological orientation in black religious experience consists of much more than a desire for greater "life meaning" or "fullness." It also consists of a desire to encounter that which unseats meaning itself, thereby enabling a quest for subjective being shaped not by static or dynamic categories of meaning but by unremitting mystery.
- The amplification of existential mystery effected by unintelligible human suffering indicates that mystery is the metaphysical theater of reality.

- The spiritual world's provisionalization of human knowledges and orientations facilitates our openness to experiences of disruptive wonderment, thus promoting our epistemological evolution along lines that increasingly sharpen our awareness of the opacity of the spiritual world and of the limitations of human knowing.
- To be given life is to be given the sempiternal gift and burden of existential irresolution.
- The modes of knowing to which the opaque epistemological orientation in black religious experience gives rise are as unstable as the meanings themselves. Yet these modes of knowing are quite valuable in that their instability enhances the creative possibilities of black religious epistemology by signifying the inaccessibility of ultimate meaning as it relates to black existence.
- The divine-human relationship is both uneven and uncertain. Meaning within the context of black religious experience's epistemological opacity is therefore necessarily functional and dynamic; it is functional in that it contributes to the basic conceptual and theoretical coherence that informs experience itself as a psychical phenomenon; such constructed meaning is also dynamic in that it requires pliancy in order to effectively adapt to the constantly changing realities of the material world. The tentative status of these meanings suggests that they are subject to ongoing scrutiny and contestation that can weaken their usefulness and influence, result in their eradication, or facilitate their reconstitution along trajectories that better reflect the unmitigated complexity and flux of material existence.
- The opaque epistemological orientation in black religious experience squarely confronts the limitations as well as the myriad hardships and perils of material existence without inordinate recourse to notions of spiritual transcendence.
- The influence exerted throughout the spiritual and material worlds by the tensive structure of being is far too strong to be overcome by human love. This suggests that human destiny (*orí inú*), no matter how earnestly pursued (*esè*), is always subject to the tensive structure of being.
- As the reality from which existential mystery is birthed, the spiritual world is the only source – albeit an unpredictable one – to which we can turn for access to the provisional knowledge and power needed to successfully negotiate the uncertainty of life.

These insights provocatively enlarge our understanding of Hurston's novel as well as the opaque epistemological orientation in black religious experience. They also further prepare us for the constructive work to be done in the concluding chapter to follow.

The first four chapters of the dissertation employ a phenomenological approach in an effort to establish a theoretical framework rooted in the grammars of knowing that inform Yorùbá and Akan epistemology. Chapter one argues for the crucial historical, cultural, and theoretical relevance of indigenous African thought and practice to the study of black spirituality, whereas chapters two and three specifically delve into the religio-philosophical and ritual structures grounding Yorùbá and Akan epistemology. Chapter four seeks to demonstrate the relevance of these structures to the opaque epistemological orientation in black religious experience through a careful reading of *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. It is in no way the aim of the final chapter to provide a definitive account of this orientation. Rather, utilizing motifs and theoretical insights from chapters two, three, and four, chapter five will identify and explore possible discursive trajectories for an African-centered phenomenology of black religious experience. It is with a constructive focus that we now embark upon this work.

## Chapter 5

### Toward an African-Centered Phenomenology of Black Religious Experience

In the main, phenomenological analysis is underutilized in scholarly studies on black religious experience. It is difficult to know fully what accounts for this underutilization. However, I would suggest several contributing factors. Firstly, there is a widely-shared assumption among religious scholars and theologians that black religion is best understood when theorized in light of the historical contexts of transatlantic slavery and the evangelical revivalism of the two Great Awakenings associated with the mid-eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, both of which helped to stimulate the conversion of a large number of slaves to Christianity.<sup>633</sup> Secondly, many scholars are of the opinion that the deculturalizing biblical ideology of colonial missionaries was largely successful in neutralizing the influence of the slaves' ancestral religious traditions.<sup>634</sup> Thirdly, the slaves' clever and often subversive reappropriations of biblical narratives, figures, and symbols seem to function rather frequently in scholarly discourse as a basis for treating black religion as yet another form of Christianity.<sup>635</sup> Fourthly, at the expense of most other methodologies, Christian-based theological methodologies have become the *metodologie francas* for black religious interpretation. These four factors create the misleading impression that our cultural, historical, and theoretical grasp of black religion – and by extension black religious experience – is already quite firm. They also create the impression that indigenous African traditions are at best only of tangential relevance to the study of black religious experience, and that phenomenological interpretation similarly adds very little to the latter endeavor.

The above factors are compelling indications that, as a cultural phenomenon, black religion has been co-opted by Christian theology, particularly black theology. The effect

of this co-opting has been the obfuscation of the broader and more complex morphology of black religion, which includes but is not limited to Christianity. As suggested in chapter one, black theology is adept at discursively dismantling manifestations of white supremacy in American society and in Euro-American religious institutions and theologies. However, following Charles Long, I would argue that black theologians' failure to exercise the internal reflexivity necessary to at least perceive the need to "deconstruct" Christian theology itself as a Western-derived discourse of power has ironically led to the *hegemonic* emergence of black theology as a Christianizing force in the study of black religion. To be sure, certain studies, such as Josiah Young's *A Pan-African Theology: Providence and the Legacies of the Ancestors*, Will Coleman's *Tribal Talk: Black Theology, Hermeneutics, and African/American Ways of "Telling the Story,"* Dianne Stewart's (a.k.a. Diakitè) *Three Eyes for the Journey: African Dimensions of the Jamaican Religious Experience*, Monica Coleman's *Making a Way Out of No Way: A Womanist Theology*, and my own 2007 article "Engaging the *Òrìṣà*: An Exploration of the Yorùbá Concepts of *Ìbejì* and *Olókun* as Theoretical Principles in Black Theology," open new theoretical and discursive frontiers for black theology that lie beyond the boundaries of Christianity. Nonetheless, there remains an urgent need in black religious scholarship for studies that approach the problem of black religious experience from perspectives other than those of black theology and the Christian intellectual tradition, in which the Bible often functions as the preeminent source of all human knowing. The present study is in part an attempt to respond to this need.

The primary aim of this chapter is to begin to chart a new discursive course for the study of the opaque (meaning not fully knowable or mysterious) epistemological

orientation in black religious experience based upon the constructive, African-centered phenomenological analyses of the last three chapters. Our exploratory discussion will therefore be framed by the central motifs of the permanency of existential conflict, irresolution, and mystery, and will also draw heavily on various epistemological insights related to these motifs. In keeping with the four preceding chapters, this chapter will treat black religious experience as a hermeneutical problem whose opaque epistemological orientation is underexplored and hence inadequately understood. The new discursive course to be proposed is not an attempt to simply Africanize black religious experience, nor is its goal the establishment of a discourse that hegemonically functions as the final exclusionary word on black spirituality. Rather, in proposing this new discursive course, I hope to buttress the notion that indigenous African grammars of knowing and the epistemologies to which they give rise can play a central role in constructive scholarly articulations of the opaque epistemological orientation in black religious experience. Moreover, my hope is that this discursive proposal will also engender a profound re-imagining of black religious experience as an irresolvable phenomenon fundamentally shaped by the relentlessly mysterious, permanently conflictual landscape of being.

Another related goal of the proposal is to create the discursive space necessary to phenomenologically explore discomfiting religious experiences such as that of James Baldwin, whose disenchantment with black holiness culture and with the moral corruption of American civilization led him to declare,

I cannot accept the proposition that the four-hundred-year travail of the American Negro should result merely in his attainment of the present level of the American civilization. I am far from convinced that being released from the African witch doctor was worthwhile if I am now – in order to support the moral contradictions and

the spiritual aridity of my life – expected to become dependent on the American psychiatrist. It is a bargain I refuse.<sup>636</sup>

The creation of such space can generate discourses deeply informed, for instance, by American religious historian Tracey Hucks's crucial point that "Africa . . . today continues to be an important hermeneutical resource for theorizing on African American identity. Throughout history, African Americans have formed ambiguous relationships that recoiled and rejected as well as remembered and re-owned the continent of Africa."<sup>637</sup> These discourses can also further develop social theorist Paul Gilroy's Longian suggestion that "the post-slave cultures of the Atlantic world are in some significant way related to one another and to the African cultures from which they partly derive."<sup>638</sup> Gilroy's suggestion of course invokes the problem of modernity, which Charles Long identified earlier as the paramount problem facing interpreters of black religious culture. Constructive discourses emerging within the space created by the proposal to follow later in the chapter would acknowledge the roles played by the history of transatlantic slavery and by other more recent traumas of modernity in the formation of black religious experience.

While some scholars such as Matthew Johnson *theologically* conceptualize black religious experience in terms of the traumas of modernity, or, to use his language, "tragic vision,"<sup>639</sup> very few scholars since Long have produced studies that explicitly employ *phenomenology* as a means of further probing modernity's role in the formation of this experience. In fact, the only book-length study published within the last several decades that can be placed in this category is James Noel's 2009 volume *Black Religion and the Imagination of Matter in the Atlantic World*.<sup>640</sup> Noel's volume is unique in that it extensively builds upon Long's seminal phenomenological point that black religion

cannot be understood apart from the complex “material contacts and exchanges” which began to occur with increasing frequency between colonizing Europeans and indigenous west central Africans in the first half of the sixteenth century. Informed by nineteenth/twentieth-century French sociologist Marcel Mauss’s famous book *The Gift: Forms and Functions of Exchange in Archaic Societies* (*Essai sur le Don: Forme et Raison de l’Échange dans les Sociétés Archaiques*), and also by descriptions of twentieth-century cargo cults in Papua New Guinea written by Australian anthropologist Frances Edgar Williams and Maltese anthropologist Kenelm Burridge,<sup>641</sup> Long offers an interpretation of the cargo cult phenomenon that illuminates some of the dynamics of the colonial subjugation that ensued from these early interactions between Europeans and coastal west central Africans:

On the one hand, the members of the indigenous cultures must positively undergo their domination on the historical level, but on the other hand they actively participate in and think through the meaning of this historical domination in mythical modes. In other words, members of the cult undertake the mythicization of history, but this time it is not simply the reduction of the new culture to the old mythic categories; the mythic possibility remains, but the old myth has been ruptured by the new power. The cultists now undertake the creation of a new cultural myth that will enable them to make sense of the mythic past and the historical present in mythic terms.<sup>642</sup>

Noel rigorously engages the respective functions of European domination and “imaginative” African agency in the appearance and development of black religion as a creative cultural tradition that perdures despite the genocidal violence of European modernity. The uncommonly perspicacious analysis that defines this engagement is remarkably effective in casting light on largely unexplored frontiers in the study of black religious experience. Also, perhaps more than any other scholar of black religion since Charles Long, Noel utilizes motifs that resonate strongly with the central motifs of our study. We will thus briefly review his important volume.

***Black Religion and the Imagination of Matter in the Atlantic World***

Departing from studies that interpret black religion from a largely theological perspective, *Black Religion and the Imagination of Matter in the Atlantic World* takes its cue from Charles Long's theoretical emphasis on "materialities" associated with the rise of modernity during the "long sixteenth century."<sup>643</sup> Like Long, Noel posits that the origins of race and black religion are "connected" to certain materialities and that "the Atlantic World is the geo-political space where these materialities make their historical appearance."<sup>644</sup> The materialities Noel has in mind include "conquest, slavery, genocide, and colonialism," all of which give structure to a "primitive/civilized dichotomy" heavily relied upon by the Western world as a basis for asserting Western superiority and non-Western (especially African) inferiority. These points reflect Noel's main thesis, which is that "the religious subject and the religious object make their phenomenological appearance simultaneously and the hermeneutical problem in the study of black religion is that of apprehending and describing their mutual appearance."<sup>645</sup> For Noel, the history of modernity – which was shaped in part by destructive European materialities – and the formation (or transformation) of black religious experience on the waters of the Middle Passage are inseverably linked.

Noel is dissatisfied with interpretations of black religious experience advanced by many black theologians. He claims that their interpretations "presume the presence of a people with a black identity before their having undergone the religious experience these theologians seek to describe." As a corrective to such interpretations, Noel advocates a "thicker description" of black religious experience that is attentive to how "black consciousness . . . was historically constituted through religious experience" and through

the Eurocentric “political economy” of the early modern “Atlantic World.”<sup>646</sup>

Furthermore, Noel is clear in stating that this “thicker description” must include the indigenous gods who “accompanied” the enslaved Africans on the Middle Passage.

According to Noel, these indigenous gods “were already undergoing rapid and radical reinterpretation before and concomitant with the exchanges” that resulted in African enslavement. He provides the following example in support of this claim:

For instance, we must pay close attention to the role of blacksmiths as both religious specialists and traders, particularly among the *Mande* speaking group in the Senegambia region of West Africa. The conjunction between the role of blacksmith, trader, and religious specialist within the same person or lineage functioned not only to facilitate the spread of elite religious systems via migration, but also to make the migrating religious system subject, through contact and exchange, to profound metamorphosis. We see this taking place in the nineteenth century, at the height of the slave trade, with the *Agbala* of *Awaka* and *Ibini Okpube* (Long Juju) oracles of the Igbo. The *Agbala* oracle was spread by the *Awaka* blacksmiths who had migrated throughout Igbo territory and the Niger Delta. The *Aro* traders spread the influence of the oracle they presided over, the *Arochukwu*. In their middleman role as slave dealers, “*Aro* traders established settlements and markets throughout Igboland and used the utterances of the oracle to procure slaves.”<sup>647</sup>

Noel also cites as examples the three hundred sixty-two-year-old Lemba cult of what is now the southern region of the Democratic Republic of the Congo as well as the Gaan Tata cult that appeared between 1880 and 1920 “among the Bush Negro and Maroon tribes of Surinam and French Guiana.”<sup>648</sup> The dynamism of these African traditions is formatively associated with that of black religion. In Noel’s view, black religion “overcomes” the religio-cultural (and perhaps even geographical) “continuities and discontinuities” between Africa and the Americas through ritually and culturally mediated “rhythms, intonations, and utterances” whose “multivalent significations simultaneously evoke three realities into being: Africa, America, and the space in the Atlantic Ocean and the Americas where black bodies embodied the hyphenation between their places of

origin and present location.”<sup>649</sup> Black religion emerges then as a “dialectical, embodied” phenomenon that remains connected to antecedent African spiritual modalities while also exhibiting an “eschatological orientation toward something that will be attained in the future.”<sup>650</sup>

A painstaking analysis of the historical “contacts and exchanges” which led to the creation of the Atlantic world further develops Noel’s claim that the latter is the geopolitical matrix for black religion. Unlike many studies of Europe’s religious and political history during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, Noel’s examination links Roman Catholic reform, the Protestant Reformation, the European Counter Reformation, European global expansion via the Atlantic ocean, the “decimation and colonization of indigenous Americans,” and “the enslavement of Africans during the long sixteenth century” as momentous historical phenomena whose “simultaneous interactions comprise modernity.”<sup>651</sup> In Noel’s perspective, Europe’s so-called “Age of Discovery” cannot be properly understood apart from the related issues of European religious identity and the colonization of the non-Western world. Hence his assertion that

The wars of religion in Europe are connected with the wars fought over colonies outside of Europe. Religious identity – either Roman Catholic, Eastern Orthodox, Lutheran, Calvinist, or Anglican – was involved in the development of national identities that in turn legitimated the colonialist projects of European nations by linking colonization and evangelization.<sup>652</sup>

For an excellent example of Europe’s utilization of religion and religious authority as tools of colonial expansion, one need only consider the way in which papal authority was invoked during the fifteenth century regarding “discovered lands.” From 1436 to 1494, several papal bulls were issued in an effort to avoid possible disputes between Portugal and Spain over the rights to such lands. Some of these bulls include *Dudum cum nos*

(1436), *Rex Regum* (1443), *Divino amore communiti* (1452), *Rex Pontifex* (1455), the Treaty of Alcacovas (1480), and *Inter caetera divinae* (1493).<sup>653</sup> According to Noel, the most significant of these bulls is Pope Alexander VI's *Inter caetera divinae*, which granted to Spain full ownership of and control over various territories in the Americas with the expectation that the inhabitants of these territories would be converted to the Catholic faith. Globally speaking, *Inter caetera divinae* is, in Noel's words, "the most important document of the long sixteenth century. It links Christianization and colonization as no previous document had previously done and enshrines the ideological underpinning of Spain's New World conquests."<sup>654</sup> *Inter caetera divinae* established Christianity as the "official ideology for imperial expansion."<sup>655</sup> As the imperial ideology of Europe, Christianity played a major role in England's colonial occupation of multiple Caribbean islands and North American territories in the seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth centuries, and in Portugal's occupation of the Kingdom of Kongo in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, to cite only two examples. It is by way of such expansionist activity and religiously-sanctioned imperialist ideology that "modernity's epistemological categories and orientations" emerge in conjunction with "power inequities" that are "legitimated as the inevitable consequence of progress seen as an inherent feature of Western exceptionalism."<sup>656</sup>

The historical materialities with which Noel is concerned involve an "imagining" of African people as little more than "othered" objects to be exploited in service to the mercantile and political aims of the Western world. This coercive imagining on the part of the West occasions for enslaved Africans a peculiar encounter with "non-being," which in turn engenders in them an "ontological" experience of "nothingness" and its

“phenomenological companion, silence.” Long describes silence as an experience that “forces us to realize that our words, the units of our naming and recognition of the world, presuppose a reality which is prior to our naming and doing.”<sup>657</sup> Noel suggests that the experience of non-being was especially problematic for enslaved Africans, who presumably always had “an urgent existential concern with Being.” While words can give expression to the purpose of silence, non-being – or nothingness – remains largely “ineffable.” He suggests further that descendants of enslaved Africans in North America share their ancestors’ concern with being, but that this concern “has been hidden in the silence of the black experience.”<sup>658</sup> Yet conversations about being within the context of modernity are of great relevance to black Americans because their entrance onto the stage of modernity was characterized by an experience of non-being that “formed the basis for their apprehension of Being.”<sup>659</sup> Thus, Noel feels compelled to draw not on indigenous African cultural sources in his analysis of the African experience of non-being and silence via the Middle Passage, but rather on works such as *The Cloud of Unknowing*, St. John of the Cross’s *The Dark Night of the Soul*, Ludwig Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus*, and Martin Heidegger’s *An Introduction to Metaphysics* and *Being and Time*. Noel’s analysis leads him to the conclusion that “the West must now search for Being among the peoples whose being it sought to obliterate.”<sup>660</sup>

An important implication of this conclusion is that the Western world’s imagining of African people as objectified “others” has rendered the being of these “others” opaque to the Western world. As Noel puts it, whites will likely never “overcome the epistemological divide that always constitutes the Other in their consciousness as an empirical object rather than as a subject.” Even so, whites have little choice but to “see

themselves in the emergence of blackness and black religion because they themselves have no a priori existence relative to blackness. However, they think otherwise and this false notion undergirded their fiction of ‘discovery’ during their conquest, colonization, and enslavement of others.”<sup>661</sup> The “emergence of blackness and black religion” signals another important point concerning the materially-based imaginings that have come to define modernity; namely, that blacks engaged in and continue to engage in their own imaginings (or re-imaginings) of matter. Some examples of this include 1) the utterances of enslaved Africans aboard the slave ships of the Middle Passage, which “became the first vocalizations of a new spiritual vocabulary” rooted in “the Middle Passage’s incommunicability,” 2) Nat Turner’s revolutionary re-interpretation of biblical imagery and the teachings of Jesus stemming from prophetic spiritual visions that served as the basis for his 1831 revolt in Southampton County, Virginia, and 3) the production of African-American art as an objectified expression of the opacity of African-American consciousness whose perceptibly creative impulses and aesthetic modalities “model a hermeneutic for interpreting” this opacity.<sup>662</sup> These examples illustrate that, whether on the slave ships of the Middle Passage or in the so-called New World, blacks’ experience of modernity did not involve the erasure of their agency as human beings. Rather, the violence and terror of modernity necessitated a re-imagining of matter that gave birth to new forms of spiritual, interpretive, and creative/aesthetic agency.

Noel’s phenomenology of black religion and experience disallows simplistic approaches to the problem of black identity that do not include a nuanced understanding of modernity’s decisive role in the formation of black identity. Drawing on W.E.B. DuBois’s theory of double consciousness and on the sense of “indeterminacy” and

“hybridity” elicited by mulatto/”creolized” identity and by the salsa/jazz/blues idiom,<sup>663</sup> Noel firmly concludes that black identity in the twenty-first century must be understood within the historical context of the complex, irreducible, and evolving intercourses of modernity. Noel’s study adroitly shows us that black identity will always be phenomenologically and historically connected to an intricate and traumatic process of religious formation conditioned by a peculiar experience of opacity instigated by the Western world’s dehumanizing re-signification of matter as it relates to African people.<sup>664</sup> The study also compellingly indicates that black identity equally entails the subjective and collective power of humanizing, “creative self-reconfiguration.”<sup>665</sup>

*Black Religion and the Imagination of Matter in the Atlantic World* is a landmark contribution to the study of black religion. As perhaps the most developed phenomenology of black religion to date, this study builds upon the seminal insights found in Charles Long’s volume *Significations* by cogently elucidating the theoretical relevance of modernity to black religion as well as the theoretical relevance of black religion to modernity. However, the primary importance of the book has to do with its interpretation of black religious experience. Following Long, Noel advances a hermeneutical approach to understanding black religious experience that, unlike most black theological formulations, is not circumscribed by Christology or by the motif of socio-political liberation. Noel meticulously wrestles with the rather abstruse meanings of motifs such as opacity, non-being/nothingness, and silence while also positioning these motifs as fundamental theoretical principles in the interpretation of black religious experience. Like Matthew Johnson, Noel takes the traumatic dimensions of black religious experience seriously instead of subsuming them within an overdetermined

eschatological vision of hope. The theoretical motifs of opacity, non-being/nothingness, and silence resonate strongly with the three motifs framing the dissertation's constructive engagement of the opaque epistemological orientation in black religious experience. We have identified these motifs as the permanency of existential conflict, irresolution, and mystery. Like these motifs, Noel's motifs of opacity, non-being/nothingness, and silence represent unexplored (or underexplored) discursive trajectories that have the potential to tremendously enrich our understanding of black religious experience and identity formation.

Its theoretical and hermeneutical significance notwithstanding, Noel's study suffers from a failure to more fully appreciate and utilize epistemological and hermeneutical resources outside of the Western Christian and Western philosophical traditions. This perhaps should not be surprising given that Noel is a student of Long who, despite his strong insistence on the historical, theoretical, and symbolic relevance of Africa to the study of black religion, is himself most conversant with and influenced by the Western disciplines of history of religions and phenomenology and by various canonical exemplars associated with each such as Mircea Eliade, Joseph Mitsuo Kitagawa, Rudolph Otto, Edmund Husserl, and Martin Heidegger. Yet, upon considering Noel's close attention to, for instance, the dynamism and significance of the Lemba cult of lower Congo and the Gaan Tata cult of Surinam and French Guiana during the seventeenth, nineteenth, and twentieth centuries, and to the continually active presence of the *Òrìṣà* in the Americas among Brazilian Candomblists and other practitioners,<sup>666</sup> the above-mentioned failure is more surprising. The highly dynamic aspect of modernity expressed through the profound imaginings of matter by both Africans and colonizing Europeans

seems to lend itself quite readily to the epistemological and interpretive resources implicit in the dynamic beliefs and practices of the Lemba and Gaan Tata cults and in the trans-geographic spiritual efficacy and significance of the *Òrìṣà*. However, Noel seems uninterested in exploring these non-Western cultural resources. It is difficult to fully assess the reason for this. Perhaps he finds the epistemological and hermeneutical orientations reflected in such resources fundamentally and hence ultimately inadequate to the task of mining and interpreting the opacity of black religious experience, and thus relies on the insights of fourteenth and sixteenth-century Western Christian mystics and German philosophers. It is interesting to note that Noel's apparent reliance on the West occurs *despite* his claim that Europeans cannot "overcome the epistemological divide that always constitutes the Other in their consciousness as an empirical object rather than as a subject," and therefore must "see themselves in the emergence of blackness and black religion because they themselves have no a priori existence relative to blackness." This claim renders Noel's reliance on Western traditions at the expense of the ancestral traditions of African people all the more puzzling.

The present study serves in part as a corrective to this inordinate reliance on Western intellectual and cultural traditions in the interpretation of black spirituality. Our phenomenological exploration of the cultural traditions of the Yorùbá and Akan in chapters two and three reveals the presence of robust epistemological traditions of reflection and practice. The presence of these traditions severely undermines the assumption that indigenous Africa is devoid of resources that can both enhance and/or fundamentally shape our understanding of the opaque epistemological orientation in black religious experience. This dissertation parallels Noel's study in the sense that,

while it is informed by Charles Long's phenomenological approach to the study of black religion and is analytically attentive to artistic idioms within black culture as expressions of religious consciousness, it is unlike Noel's study in that I consciously try to situate it within an indigenous African frame of reference rather than a Western Christian and/or Western philosophical frame of reference. Thus, although there are obvious similarities between this dissertation and Noel's study, the former is nevertheless quite distinct in terms of the kinds of intellectual and cultural repertoires it privileges. Said another way, the present study seeks to dislodge Western epistemologies as the sole or primary traditions through which to analyze and interpret the opaque epistemological orientation in black religious experience. Continuing our progression toward this goal, we now enter the final stage of our study, which involves the constructive exploration of possible discursive trajectories for an African-centered phenomenology of black religious experience.

### **Structural Note**

It would be helpful here to explain how our discussion will proceed. Our discussion will be framed in terms of the motifs of the permanency of existential conflict, irresolution, and mystery. We will explore several discursive trajectories related to each motif as well as to the issues of knowledge construction and existential orientation (the latter of which refers to a mode of being that governs how we make sense of ourselves and the world while also influencing how we act in or move through the world). This exploration will be conducted in light of our earlier phenomenological examination in chapters two and three of the epistemologies of the Yorùbá and Akan and their relevance to our understanding of the opaque epistemological orientation in black religious

experience. The exploration will also be informed by insights from our analysis of Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* in chapter four. Let us begin then with a discussion of possible discursive trajectories related to the motif referred to throughout our study as the permanency of existential conflict.

### **Discursive Trajectories Related to The Permanency of Existential Conflict**

#### *Knowledge Construction*

The first thing to note in beginning this discussion is that an African-centered phenomenology of black religious experience as conceived herein would not regard the epistemologies of the Yorùbá and Akan merely as external cultural resources that greatly assist us in addressing the problem of black religious hermeneutics. Rather, the epistemologies of the Yorùbá and Akan would be interpreted in a way that *leaves open the possibility* that their considerable relevance to the opaque epistemological orientation in black religious experience *could* indicate the variable presence of certain aspects of these epistemologies within the subjective and collective psyches of African-Americans. Therefore, discourses emerging from such a phenomenological perspective would be receptive to the ways in which the two epistemologies structure the cosmos. In this phenomenological framework, the incompatible natures of the *Ajogun* and the *Òrìṣà*, for instance, would be regarded not as a problem to be resolved but as a focus of critical discourse. A discourse rooted in an African-centered phenomenology of black religious experience may pose the ontological question, "What does the incessantly antagonistic relationship between the *Ajogun* and the *Òrìṣà* teach us about the nature of being?" In other words, the discursive trajectory implicit in this question would seek to *learn* from conflict as a permanent feature of existence. Such a discursive trajectory would have no

interest in imagining ways in which it can mitigate the often terrifying severity of existential conflict in order to negate its epistemological significance and thereby revoke its status as a source of knowing. To the contrary, this discursive trajectory would both instate and protect the *epistemological* status of conflict as a *primary* source of human knowing.

The discursive trajectory we are describing should not be viewed as an endorsement of human suffering resulting from existential conflict. It is to be viewed in a constructive light as an acknowledgement of the permanent role played by existential conflict in the formation of human experience and knowledge. We are not suggesting, however, that this discursive trajectory would in any way ignore the reality of human suffering. While human suffering is in many cases unjustifiable and tragic, in other cases it promotes human growth and well-being. A discourse on human suffering conceived within an African-centered phenomenology of black religious experience would take as a point of departure the Yorùbá notion that the pursuit of human destiny (*orí inú*) is itself a form of meaningful suffering (*esẹ*) that is potentially salutary. Of equal importance to this discourse would be Akan maxims such as *Qbra yɛ ku* ("Life is war"), *Onyame soma wo a, ɔma wo fa monkyimɔnka kwan so* ("If Onyame sends you on an errand, [Onyame] makes you walk on a difficult road"), *Papa akatua ne bɔne* ("The reward of goodness is evil"), and *Papa asusu de rekɔ no, na bɔne di akyire rekɔgye* ("While goodness is thinking where he will go, evil is following him to frustrate his efforts"). A phenomenological interpretation of the relevance of these maxims to black suffering would lead not to a theodical quandary but to a recognition that black suffering reflects the tensive structure of being, and can therefore facilitate the construction of knowledge

(or knowledges) pertaining to the opaque epistemological orientation in black religious experience.

Another related discursive trajectory may address the possibility of human despair and indifference as a response to the permanency of existential conflict. This discursive trajectory would likely engage the following question: What can help to offset the possibility of African-Americans falling into a state of despair and indifference due to their experience of the permanency of existential conflict? Although this question can be applied to virtually any human community, it is particularly relevant to African-Americans given their collective history of forced enslavement and racial oppression and their ongoing struggle for socio-economic/political equality and power. A discursive trajectory that addresses the question just posed would squarely acknowledge the fact that, as the Akan say, “Adversity plies a trade” (*Mmusuo di adwini*). It would also acknowledge the related Akan expressions, *Ohia de wo na emfaa wo nnuruu dee ebeduru a, ɔnnyae wo* (“If poverty has overcome you but it has not taken you to where it is going to take you, it won’t leave you”), and *Ohia hia wo a, na woto nsuonwunu mu a, ehye wo* (“If you are suffering from poverty and you fall into cold water, it scalds you”). In addition, this discursive trajectory would acknowledge the fact that oppression resulting from various forms of conflict occurs *within* the African-American community in the form of sexism, classism, homophobia, and HIV/AIDS-related discrimination and ostracism, to name just a few examples. The acknowledgement of these maxims and oppressive realities would serve not only as a means of placing forms of African-American oppression within the much wider context of being, but also as a means of calling attention to the *constructive* power that is made available through relationship

with the spiritual world. Such a discourse might invoke the Ayede *Yemoja* festival (which, as readers should recall, promotes the wholistic well-being of the *Àtá* [the ruler of Ayede] and the larger Ayede community) as well as anti-*bayi boro* rites, which are discussed above as spiritual practices among the Akan aimed at the management of *bayi boro* (defined previously as a negative presence of spiritual power as well as the specialized utilization of this power for socially destructive ends).

This discourse would carefully explore ways in which practices such as the Ayede *Yemoja* festival and Akan anti-*bayi boro* rites function in Yorùbá and Akan societies as traditions that engender interpretations of the permanency of existential conflict which do not involve human despair or indifference. Of especial interest would be the manner whereby the epistemologies of the Yorùbá and Akan nurture an understanding of conflict as a reality that signifies the necessity of spiritual relationship and the importance of individual and communal well-being. Moreover, conflict would emerge in this discourse as an existential opportunity to pursue and construct knowledge through engagement with the various beings populating the spiritual community. Without reducing the significance of conflict to human needs and desires, this discourse would also view conflict as a source of vital power because conflict is a primary impetus for human engagement of the material world, which is necessary for human survival. This point is illustrated, for instance, by the fact that we as human beings are unavoidably in conflict with the various animals, plants, and other organisms upon which we depend for sustenance, and they in turn are in conflict with us as they struggle to survive by engaging and making effective use of the material world. Put succinctly, without celebrating the harm resulting from

existential conflict, this discourse would affirm the fact that the unpredictably complex and often generative rhythms and progressions of life *require* existential conflict.

The goal of this discourse vis-à-vis African-American despair and indifference due to an experience of permanent existential conflict would not involve the belittling of psychological, emotional, and/or physical pain related to this experience. Instead, this discourse would seek to offer an African-centered epistemological framework within which to re-conceptualize and re-theorize both the pain and the experience that causes the pain. Emphasis would be placed not on the impossible tasks of altering the conflictual landscape of being or permanently avoiding antagonistic experiences, but on the idea that one can empower oneself to more effectively and salutarily negotiate these experiences through cultivating a lifelong relationship with spiritual powers. A principle that would likely prove quite useful in this discourse is the Yorùbá principle of *ẹbọ* (“sacrifice”), which, as proclaimed by the *Òrìṣà Ṣàngó* in the concluding event of the *Ayede Yemoja* festival, is a primary source of spiritual empowerment as well as a bulwark against existential perils. Through its *ẹbọ*-based re-conceptualization and re-theorization of African-American existential despair and the pain associated with it, this discourse would constructively highlight such despair and pain as an experience that can yield useful knowledge about the nature of the world and about oneself.

### *Existential Orientation*

An African-centered phenomenological discourse related to the motif of the permanency of existential conflict would also be interested in the issue of existential orientation. The main question with which this discourse would be concerned is, “What factors give rise to a person’s particular existential orientation, and how and to what

extent is this orientation practically manifest in his/her life?” As Charles Long and James Noel have argued, the degree to which the historico-cultural forces of modernity have impacted the existential orientations of African-Americans is considerable. For this reason, the latter would be a major focus of an African-centered phenomenological discourse on black religious experience. More specifically, this discourse would concentrate on what has been described above as the opaque epistemological orientation in black religious experience.

The material and spiritual conditions under which the religious experience of blacks came to include an opaque epistemological orientation would be carefully examined in connection with the motif of the permanency of existential conflict. Hence, another question that would surface is, “What kinds of conflictual conditions are implicated in the apparent emergence of the opaque epistemological orientation in black religious experience?” Engagement of this question would involve a phenomenological exploration of the decisive cultural intercourses and incursions that define early modernity. Much attention would be given to encounters between expansionist-minded Europeans and coastal west central Africans beginning as early as at least the fifteenth century. In addition to the aforementioned works by Long and Noel, works by other scholars such as C. A. Bayly (*The Birth of the Modern World: 1780-1914*), J. H. Elliot (*Imperial Spain: 1469-1716*), Linda Heywood (*Central Africans and Cultural Transformations in the American Diaspora*) John Thornton (*Africa and Africans in the Making of the Atlantic World, 1400-1800*), and Maureen Waner-Lewis (*Central Africa in the Caribbean: Transcending Time, Transforming Cultures*) would also likely prove helpful. Scrutinization of these early “material contacts and exchanges” would provide a

clearer sense of the conditions and events that led to the apparent emergence of an opaque epistemological orientation in black religious experience.

Yet, the discursive trajectory under discussion would also pose questions that challenge assumptions about the relationship between Africans' experience of the early modern world and the apparent emergence of an opaque epistemological orientation in black religious experience. These questions may include the following: "Were enslaved Africans already in possession of an opaque, practically-rooted religious orientation that their experience of the Middle Passage only amplified?" "Are Western Christian and Western philosophical categories adequate to the task of theorizing and interpreting this opaque religious orientation?" The theoretical and hermeneutical adequacy of these categories would not be assumed, nor would it be assumed that indigenous African grammars of knowing and the epistemologies to which they give rise are *de facto* inadequate as theoretical and hermeneutical resources. Both the Western and Christian intellectual traditions would be unseated as normative frameworks whose relevance to and authority over all cultural contexts is often generally (and uncritically) presumed and accepted. A phenomenological analysis of the opaque epistemological orientation in black religious experience conducted along this discursive trajectory would explore, for instance, the Akan concept of mystery (*awawa*) and the Yorùbá principles of *ẹ̀bọ* ("sacrifice") and *ẹ̀sẹ̀* (uncertain existential struggle toward the attainment of destiny) as epistemological resources that can shape our understanding of this orientation and its attendant practical traditions. Thus, the attention would be most focused on the role of existential conflict as an unalterable cosmic verity rather than as a mere product of Euro-Christian imperialism. An exploration of this kind would dovetail with similar

explorations that relate more closely to the motif of irresolution, which we will discuss next.

### **Discursive Trajectories Related to Irresolution**

#### *Knowledge Construction*

An African-centered phenomenology of black religious experience would also facilitate reflection on the motif of irresolution. Such reflection would be significantly informed by a recognition that, like conflict, irresolution is a structural feature of being that formatively influences human experience. A discursive trajectory informed by reflection on the motif of irresolution would acknowledge the fact that life, be it material or spiritual, consists of multiple dimensions that, when considered collectively, cannot be resolved within any single conceptual or theoretical scheme. Therefore, life would be construed as an untidy *mélange* of characteristics and forces that exist in a dynamic state of tensive simultaneity. Put another way, this discursive trajectory would evince an understanding of the idea that any given form of life at any given moment in time will always signify more than what it appears to be. The seemingly incompatible characteristics that inhere within a single being and among numerous beings would be regarded as fundamental elements of the existential context in which these beings understand themselves and their environment. This discursive trajectory would identify the task of learning to live amid unremitting tensional dynamism as a principal challenge of existence.

An African-centered phenomenological discourse on irresolution would ask, “As a principle of Yorùbá and Akan epistemology, how does irresolution contribute to the construction of human knowledge?” In responding to this query, the discourse under

consideration would note that the reality of irresolution conditions the religio-philosophical perspectives and ritual practices of Yorùbá and Akan communities. For example, the Yorùbá belief in the presence of both positive and negative spiritual power (i. e. the *Òrìṣà* and the *Ajogun*) as necessary components of the structure of being is conditioned by an experience of the world as an environment in which positive and negative potentialities are equally likely. Furthermore, when we take into account the fact that, despite their benevolence, the *Òrìṣà* are nevertheless fully capable of destructive activity (recall *Èṣù*'s infinitely unpredictable nature and activity in the world as well as the “sculptor divinity” *Ọ̀bàtálá*'s arbitrary creation of malformed human bodies), the conditioning effected by the Yorùbá's experience of the world as an environment of irresolution is made even more salient. Additionally, the Yorùbá concept of destiny (*orí inú*) could be mentioned here because it includes the notion that a person's destiny can be “good” or “bad,” and that there is no way of guaranteeing the reception of a “good” destiny or the alteration of a “bad” destiny.

The religio-philosophical conditioning effected by an experience of the world as an environment of irresolution is also signified within Akan culture. We see this, for instance, in such maxims as *Papa akatua ne bɔne* (“The reward of goodness is evil”), *Enan bɔne na ɔtia dɔteɛ mu bɔ nan pa ho* (“A wicked leg collects dirt and smears it on the good leg”), *Ɔsaman se: Enye enne nko ara ne anadwo* (“The departed spirit says: ‘It is not today alone that night falls’”), and *Ɔbosom a ɔma mma, na ɔfa mma* (“The spirit which brings children also takes children”). We also see this in the portrayal of spiritual entities like *Asase Yaa*, *Suman Brafoɔ* such as the *Gyabom*, the *Mmoatia*, and the *Nsamanfo* (“ancestors”), all of whom can either benefit or punish individuals and communities

based upon whether or not they are shown the proper ethical and ritual respect. These Akan maxims and spiritual entities suggest that one must develop a tensive or dialectical consciousness of the world if one is to effectively negotiate it.

The ritual traditions of the Yorùbá and Akan also signal the influence of an experience of irresolution. As suggested in chapters two and three, the Ayede *Yemoja* festival and anti-*bayi boro* rites performed at special shrines in the town of Dormaa-Ahenkro in southern Ghana are in large part responses to the existential reality of irresolution. The Ayede community's regular participation in the *Yemoja* festival indicates an awareness that the existence of realities inimical to human well-being are not reducible to the human desire for well-being. Put otherwise, the existence and activity of these realities are not circumscribed by human interest in or commitment to the goal of well-being. Therefore, the spiritual power of the *Òrìṣà Yemoja* is sought as a means of buttressing the Ayede community's quest for well-being in face of realities that ultimately are unresolvable within this quest. Similarly, the presence of numerous anti-*bayi boro* shrines in southern Ghana coupled with the fact that effective spiritual management of cases involving *bayi boro* sometimes requires the utilization of multiple ritual formulae and/or the repetitive use of specific spiritual techniques attest to the irresolvability of *bayi boro* as a reality that by its very nature cannot permanently cohere with the Akan goal of communal harmony and well-being. Communally-oriented, specialized ritual practice then is vital for the Yorùbá and Akan as an effective but impermanent response to the experience of existential irresolution.

A phenomenological discourse on irresolution as experienced within Yorùbá and Akan communities would explore ways in which the irresolvable structure of being and

the realities stemming from it influence the form and character of human knowledges. The main point of interest in such a discourse would be the manner whereby existential irresolution renders knowledge construction a tenuously unstable exercise that manufactures provisional meanings upon which human beings depend not only for access to various modes of understanding, but also for a sense of orientation in the world. In connection with the issue of orientation, this discourse would also be particularly attentive to the role played by existential irresolution in the formation of knowledge within the context of black religious experience. A focal topic of exploration would be the relationship between existential irresolution and the opaque epistemological orientation in black religious experience. A guiding question for such an exploration might be framed in the following way: “How have the formation of black religious knowledge and its opaque epistemological orientation been impacted by the irresolvability of the Middle Passage and the unprecedented religio-cultural oppression associated with it?” This question provides a segue into our next discussion, which relates the motif of irresolution to the issue of existential orientation.

### *Existential Orientation*

Given the dehumanizing, deculturalizing, and widespread use of the Bible and Christianity by missionaries and some European slave traders during the era of transatlantic slavery, the discourse we are describing would be forced to examine the long-term impact of Western forms of Christianity on black religious knowledge and its opaque experiential orientation. This discourse would not assume that centuries of exposure to the biblical Christianity of European enslavers on the waters of the Middle Passage and in the so-called New World completely severed the religio-cultural ties

enslaved Africans and New World blacks had to Africa, nor would it assume that the black community's appropriation of the Bible has been without significant epistemological consequences. This discourse would be driven by a curiosity about how the existential orientations of early and modern-day black American communities compare to those of early and modern-day continental African communities and to others found in the Bible. Also to be explored would be the theory that the opaque epistemological orientation in black religious experience has been consciously and/or subconsciously ignored in favor of an eschatological vision that promises eventual existential resolution and divine union. The epistemological implications of this elision would also be a central concern.

In addition, this discourse would comparatively interrogate the compatibility of Christian eschatological and African irresolutional epistemologies with, for example, how black communities and indigenous African communities actually experience the phenomenal and spiritual worlds. The basic hypothesis of this investigation would be that Christian eschatological epistemologies which include notions of existential resolution are fundamentally incompatible with black Christians' experience of the phenomenal and spiritual worlds, both of which, as the Yorùbá and Akan teach us, are patently structured according to the principle of irresolution. This investigation would also explore the significance of the opaque epistemological orientation in black religious experience as a resource that can enlarge our understanding of the latter as well as existence itself. Moreover, by attending to the function of opacity in black religious experience, the investigation would cast light on uncertainty as an aspect of black spirituality. A discursive recognition of uncertainty as an aspect of black spirituality

would challenge liberationist claims about the nature of spiritual power which bear little or no resemblance to black peoples' empirical experience in America or to other material realities. Such a discursive recognition would also serve as an implicit critique of black theologians' and religious scholars' failure to acknowledge the relevance of the experience of mystery to our apprehension of the opaque epistemological orientation in black religious experience.

### **Discursive Trajectories Related to Mystery**

#### *Knowledge Construction*

In an African-centered phenomenology of black religious experience, mystery would not be regarded as a largely meaningless reality having little or no relevance to the construction of knowledge. Instead, mystery would be interpreted as the metaphysical theater of reality. As such, mystery would be acknowledged as the spiritually-rooted intellectual boundary beyond which knowledge cannot reach. An African-centered phenomenological discourse on mystery would view mystery as having an indispensably important instructive relationship to knowledge. Mystery would be understood as instructive because the unsurpassable limitations imposed upon knowledge by mystery serve as an ever-present reminder that knowledge is inherently incapable of fully mastering reality. This profound reminder would protect against the instatement of human knowledges as ends in themselves that lose sight of the reality of mystery and its broader epistemological significance. Ironically, mystery would also be seen as a perpetual source of new knowledge because the intellectual boundaries imposed by mystery signal the fragmentary nature of knowledge and thus the need for knowledge to

maintain a posture of humility and openness to new and disruptive experiences and meanings. Thus, mystery would be inextricably linked to knowledge.

An African-centered phenomenological discourse on mystery might also engage the opaque epistemological orientation in black religious experience in light of the Yorùbá and Akan's relationship to mystery. In Yorùbá and Akan communities, mystery seems not to be a source of consternation. Instead, mystery is believed to be the natural context of being and is therefore clearly acknowledged in Yorùbá and Akan cosmology. This acknowledgement is exemplified by the Yorùbá statement, *Ìsé Olódùmarè, Àwámáridí* (“*Olódùmarè's* action is unfathomable”). It is also exemplified in the *Òriṣà Ifá's* role as holder of “the secret of creation” and as the deity who knows “the hidden identities of all terrestrial and celestial beings.” The above acknowledgement is also expressed by the belief that *Olódùmarè*, whose knowledge is also limited by the mystery of being, regularly seeks *Ifá's* counsel. In Akan cosmology, this acknowledgement is encoded, for instance, in the general understanding that it cannot be known beforehand whether or not a person's *sunsum* (“spirit”) will return should it decide to travel at night while the person sleeps, nor can it be known beforehand whether or not a person's soul (*ɔkra*) will deliver “bad” advice or fail in its attempts to “guide and protect” the person in whom it dwells. For the Akan, these are mysterious realities/potentialities with which people must learn to live if they are to have any chance of attaining well-being.

A discourse informed by the Yorùbá and Akan's relationship to mystery would explore the implications of this relationship for our understanding of the opaque epistemological orientation in black religious experience. The status of mystery in the latter would be assessed. Also to be assessed would be the status of this orientation as a

source of knowledge construction. Additionally, the following questions would be considered: 1) What does the opaque epistemological orientation in black religious experience suggest about the construction of knowledge in black religion? 2) To what extent is this orientation shaped by an awareness of mystery? 3) What does the Yorùbá and Akan's relationship to mystery add to our understanding of this orientation? 4) How might the Yorùbá and Akan's relationship to mystery help us to re-theorize this orientation? 5) What are the limitations of such a re-theorization? A discourse concerned with these questions could potentially move our understanding of black spirituality into largely uncharted territory, all of which I suspect relates in some way to the issue of existential orientation.

#### *Existential Orientation*

The mode of discourse we have in mind here would probe the question of what it means to inhabit an existential orientation grounded in an experience of mystery. A main point of focus would be the process involved in cultivating a disciplined intellectual and religious perspective that recognizes and remains connected to the mysterious foundation of being. This mode of discourse would seek to learn from Yorùbá and Akan epistemological resources that in various ways reflect a connection to the mysterious foundation of being. One item of interest might be the Yorùbá originary narrative in which *Ọbàtálá* unsuccessfully attempts to gain access to the mysterious knowledge associated with *Olódùmarè*'s life-giving power (*ẹ̀mí*). This narrative is significant because *Olódùmarè*'s decision to put *Ọbàtálá* to sleep and thereby deny him the privileged knowledge he seeks implies that even *Ọbàtálá*, as the seniormost *Òrìṣà*, must come to terms with an existence that is to a significant extent characterized by limited

access to knowledge, especially the deepest, most powerful forms thereof. Other items of interest from the Akan epistemological tradition might include the following maxims: *Me a meda ayeya menhunu Nyame, na wo a wobutu hɔ* (“If I who lie on my back cannot see Nyame, how can you who lie on your stomach?”); (*Obosom na ekyerɛ ɔkomfoɔ ntwaho* [“It is the spirit that teaches the priest to whirl around”]); *Nyansa bebrebe ma ɔman bɔ* (“Too much wisdom spoils the state”); *Nyansa dodoɔ gyae aboa* (“Too much wisdom lets the animal go”); *Wopɛ sɛ wohunu nneɛma nyinaa a, w’ani fura* (“If you want to see everything, you become blind”); *Wopɛ asem aka akyerɛ Onyame a, ka kyere mframa* (“If you want to say something to *Onyame*, say it to the wind”). Like the Yorùbá originary narrative, these maxims and others like them would also play a primary role in shaping the discursive trajectory being considered.

Lastly, another closely related discourse might focus more so on the dangers inherent in not maintaining a respectful intellectual and religious connection to the mysterious foundation of being. Careful study of certain religio-culturally-motivated injunctions operative in Yorùbá society would serve this discourse well. One such injunction involves a sacred and mysterious object owned individually by the most highly trained Yorùbá priests (*Babaláwo Olódù*). This object is often referred to as a “pot of *Odù*.” The mysterious contents of this pot are not to be openly discussed by *Babaláwo Olódù*, nor are these contents to be seen by anyone who has not been initiated into this elite class of Yorùbá priests. Violation of this injunction is thought to summon very grave consequences. As *Babaláwo Wándé Abímbólá* explains,

*Any babaláwo who does not have Odù, cannot see another person’s. It is a secret. A babaláwo talks about what is inside his pot of Odù only on pains of death. If somebody who does not have Odù were to open another person’s pot of Odù and peep*

inside it, that person would become blind instantaneously. There is no remedy for it. He would in addition fall into a state of stupor, so that the owner would find the intruder in the same spot upon his return!

One is reminded here of the Akan maxim, *Wope se wohunu nneema nyinaa a, w'ani fura* (“If you want to see everything, you become blind”). Much like the Yorùbá religio-cultural injunction surrounding pots of *Odù*, this maxim serves as a kind of epistemological warning while also modeling a particular relationship to mystery based upon a desire to preserve human well-being and upon a profound reverence for the unknown and for spiritual power. A discourse informed by a constructive phenomenological engagement of such injunctions would display a similar reverence for the singular spiritual and epistemological status of mystery in the world. This discourse might also interpret the opaque epistemological orientation in black religious experience in light of the reverence evinced by these injunctions. Such an interpretation may aid us in re-imagining black spirituality as an experience shaped at least just as much by generative reverence for the unknown as it is by suffering and the struggle for humanization and freedom.

### **Concluding Remarks**

This study represents an attempt to phenomenologically explore grammars of knowing encoded in the religio-philosophical and practical traditions of the Yorùbá and Akan of Nigeria and Ghana. These long-standing yet internally diverse West African traditions were carefully assessed as non-Western cultural resources that can be constructively brought to bear on the general problem of black religious hermeneutics as well as the more specific problem of apprehending the opaque epistemological orientation in black religious experience. The study has been structured around the central motifs of the

permanency of existential conflict, irresolution, and mystery, all three of which are formatively present in Yorùbá and Akan epistemology. As a way of linking Yorùbá and Akan epistemology to the African-American context, we examined what was described as “epistemological cognates” in Zora Neale Hurston’s novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. The novel was treated not as a fanciful and largely irrelevant work of fiction but as an indispensable index of black religious experience. Our purpose in examining the novel was also to suggest that Yorùbá and Akan grammars of knowing are not necessarily foreign to black religious experience. Additionally, in the final chapter we explored possible discursive trajectories for an African-centered phenomenology of black religious experience primarily informed by Yorùbá and Akan grammars of knowing.

A broader implication of this study is that the epistemological and practical richness of Yorùbá and Akan grammars of knowing (and likely other West African grammars of knowing as well) can not only expand and nourish our phenomenological apprehension of spiritual consciousness throughout the African Diaspora and greatly deepen our sense of what it means to be human, but can also enlarge and advance inter-religio-cultural conversations involving other religious traditions and grammars of knowing.

Unfortunately, however, indigenous African religions remain largely underexplored and underutilized as vital epistemological and practical matrices with much to contribute to human knowledge. Even more troubling is the fact that many – if not most – of these religions are facing increasing cultural hostility from heavily evangelical forms of Christianity that have spread along much of the West African coast and into many other regions of the African continent. What is more, as the eldest practitioners, expert philosophical custodians, and transmitters of these religions pass away, the threat of the

latter's eventual extinction looms ever larger. I strongly suspect that the survival of indigenous African religions will depend to a significant degree on the willingness of scholars within the African Diaspora to *phenomenologically* engage these religions. Ideally, this phenomenological engagement will substantively benefit indigenous African communities while also resulting in the production of scholarly discourses that both document and revalue the ancestral religions of these communities. I view this study as a step in such a direction.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Yuri M Lotman, *Universe of the Mind: A Semiotic Theory of Culture*, trans. Ann Shukman (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990), 128. An exemplary study that explores the role that, for instance, musical languages can play in interpreting the complex array of dynamics influencing cultural identity formation across time and geographic space is Juan Flores, *From Bomba to Hip-Hop: Puerto Rican Culture and Latino Identity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000). See also, *Bomba: Dancing the Drum*, directed by Ashley James (Berkeley: Searchlight Films, 2000).

<sup>2</sup> Jon Butler, *Awash in a Sea of Faith: Christianizing the American People* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1990), 157-159.

<sup>3</sup> Raboteau also concludes that the influence of African culture in North America is minimal. See the chapter entitled "Death of the Gods" in Albert J. Raboteau, *Slave Religion: The "Invisible Institution" in the Antebellum South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978).

<sup>4</sup> This is one of the central arguments made by Frazier in Edward Franklin Frazier, *The Negro Church in America* (England: University of Liverpool, 1963).

<sup>5</sup> See especially chapters four through eight of Herskovits's book.

<sup>6</sup> It is important to realize that the illegalization of chattel slavery in America in 1863 via the Emancipation Proclamation did not mark the end of black enslavement. As Pulitzer Prize-winning author Douglas Blackmon compellingly illustrates, enslavement of blacks in America continued in different forms well into the 1940s. See Douglas A Blackmon, *Slavery by Another Name: The Re-Enslavement of Black People in America from the Civil War to World War II* (New York: Doubleday, 2008).

<sup>7</sup> See chapter ten of DuBois's *The Souls of Black Folk: Essays and Sketches*, entitled "Of the Faith of the Fathers."

<sup>8</sup> For two studies that give careful attention to marginal black religious communities of the twentieth century that in different ways engage Christian traditions, see Arthur Huff Fauset, *Black Gods of the Metropolis: Negro Religious Cults of the Urban North* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1944); Joseph R Washington, *Black Sects and Cults* (New York: Anchor Books, 1973).

<sup>9</sup> Dwight N. Hopkins, *Being Human: Race, Culture, and Religion* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005), 8.

<sup>10</sup> See, for instance, chapters one, three, and four of James H Cone, *The Cross and the Lynching Tree* (New York: Orbis Books, 2011).

<sup>11</sup> See James H. Cone, *The Spirituals and the Blues: An Interpretation* (New York: Seabury Press, 1972). Also see chapters two and three of Dwight N. Hopkins, *Shoes That Fit Our Feet: Sources for a Constructive Black Theology* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1993).

<sup>12</sup> See chapters three through five of Delores S. Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness: The Challenge of Womanist God-Talk* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1993).

<sup>13</sup> Dianne Stewart, "Womanist God-Talk on the Cutting Edge of Theology and Black Religious Studies: Assessing the Contribution of Delores Williams," *Union Seminary Quarterly Review* 58, no. 3-4 (2004): 70.

<sup>14</sup> Charles H Long, *Significations: Signs, Symbols, and Images in the Interpretation of Religion* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1986), 211.

<sup>15</sup> Dianne M. Stewart, *Three Eyes for the Journey: African Dimensions of the Jamaican Religious Experience* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 43-44.

<sup>16</sup> Long, *Significations: Signs, Symbols, and Images in the Interpretation of Religion*, 210.

<sup>17</sup> These four thinkers provide seminal insights into language as at once a profoundly deconstructive and creative problem. For additional reading on this topic, see M. M. Bakhtin, *Speech Genres and Other Late Essays*, trans. Vern W. McGee, 1st ed. (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1986); Roland Barthes, *Essais Critiques* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1981); Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998); Paul Ricoeur, *The Rule of Metaphor: Multi-Disciplinary Studies of the Creation of Meaning in Language* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1977); Paul Ricoeur, *Interpretation Theory: Discourse and the Surplus of Meaning* (Fort Worth: Texas Christian University Press, 1976); Paul Ricoeur, *The Conflict of Interpretations: Essays in Hermeneutics* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1974).

<sup>18</sup> The tendency to collectivize the religious experience of African-Americans is perhaps most noticeable in the writings of black theological scholars. Their generalized interpretations of the former typically assume a common connection to the Black Church, paradigmatic biblical narratives such as the Exodus account in

the Old Testament, and the historical realities of white oppression and the black struggle for social and political liberation. One gets a sense of these assumptions in the following statement by J. Deotis Roberts:

"Black consciousness" or "black awareness" describe [sic] something of the concern which presents itself to us. We are assuming that the black man in the United States has undergone a certain kind of treatment which has produced a unique type of spiritual experience both personal and collective – an experience which deserves theological analysis and interpretation. The Negro's experience is similar to Israel's experience of Egyptian bondage . . . . J. Deotis Roberts, "Black Consciousness in Theological Perspective," in *The Black Experience in Religion*, ed. C. Eric Lincoln (Garden City, NY: Anchor Press/Doubleday, 1974), 99. The aforementioned assumptions also undergird James H. Cone's understanding of African-American religious experience:

. . . the black experience as a source of theology is more than the so-called "church experience," more than singing, praying, and preaching about Jesus, God, and the Holy Spirit. The other side of the black experience should not be rigidly defined as "secular. . ." This side of the black experience is secular only to the extent that it is earthy and seldom uses God or Jesus as chief symbols of its hopes and dreams. James H. Cone, *God of the Oppressed* (San Francisco: Harper, 1975), 22. Cone writes elsewhere that

The black experience should not be identified with inwardness, as implied in Schleiermacher's description of religion as the "feeling of absolute dependence." It is not an introspection in which one contemplates one's own ego. Blacks are not afforded the luxury of navel gazing. The black experience is the atmosphere in which blacks live. It is the totality of black existence in a white world where babies are tortured, women are raped, and men are shot. Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation*, 1st ed. (Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1970), 24.

<sup>19</sup> Mays's important volume, *The Negro's God as Reflected in His Literature*, documents a wide range of religious sentiments held by African-Americans over a span of 177 years (1760-1937). Through close analysis of what he calls "classical" negro literature, which consists of slave narratives, biographies, autobiographies, addresses, novels, poetry, and social scientific writings, as well as what he labels "mass" negro literature, which includes Sunday School activities and materials, prayers, sermons, and negro spirituals, he finds that taken together these two literary traditions reflect attitudes ranging from a kind of hopeful Christian monotheism all the way to a seeming rejection of God's existence. With the writers Countee Cullen, Langston Hughes, and Nella Larsen in mind, all of whom appear particularly suspicious of religion – especially Christianity – Mays states that "in the development of the idea of God in Negro literature there is a tendency or threat to abandon the idea of God as a useful instrument in social adjustment." Benjamin Elijah Mays, *The Negro's God as Reflected in His Literature* (Boston: Chapman & Grimes, 1938), 218.

In his classic work, *Black Gods of the Metropolis: Negro Religious Cults of the Urban North*, anthropologist, folklorist, and littérateur Arthur H. Fauset provides a detailed analytic account of the beliefs and practices of five marginal African-American religious "cults" in operation during the middle and last half of the twentieth century. They include the Mount Sinai Holy Church of America, Inc., the United House of Prayer for All People, the Church of God (Black Jews), the Moorish Science Temple of America, and the Father Divine Peace Mission Movement. While, according to Fauset, these cults share the common originary thread of being, in part, responses to rejection by white Christian communities as well as manifestations of "the desire of Negroes to worship in churches where they could feel free to express themselves along the lines which the general condition of their lives prompted," the significant variation he finds among these groups with respect to theology and practice speaks to a religious experience that can only be described as polyvalent. Fauset, *Black Gods of the Metropolis: Negro Religious Cults of the Urban North*, 8.

It is also important to note the work of social ethicist Joseph Washington, Jr., who, in his book, *Black Sects and Cults*, is somewhat critical of Fauset and others – such as E. Franklin Frazier and LeRoi Jones – for, in his view, evaluating black sects and cultic communities against white norms and failing to "look to the inner meaning of black cults and sects in the light of black priorities and presuppositions." Washington argues that "black sects and cults were created and therefore exist for one reason: to be ethical resources for power realization among their creators. This is the distinctive element in black folk religion which requires little debate. The real need is for it to become normative." His earlier-mentioned criticism of Fauset, Frazier (*The Negro Church in America*), and Jones (*Blues People: The Negro Experience in White America*

and the Music That Developed From It), seems a bit ironic given the following comment made at the very beginning of the book: "On the one hand, the variety of black religious activity which parallels whites', along with the forms created by blacks, makes black religion a meaningless term. On the other hand, there is a fundamental and common ethnic ethic shared by black people which gives continuity to their discontinuous religious expressions." Washington, *Black Sects and Cults*, xi, 141. For a more recent study, see Sylvester A. Johnson, "The Rise of Black Ethnics: The Ethnic Turn in African American Religions, 1916-1945," *Religion and American Culture: A Journal of Interpretation* 20, no. 2 (2010).

<sup>20</sup> The biblical categories listed represent major hermeneutical trajectories in black theology. The following is a sampling of texts in which they are variously but prominently engaged: James H. Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation*, 1st ed. (Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1970); Cone, *God of the Oppressed*; James H. Cone and Gayraud S. Wilmore, *Black Theology: A Documentary History*, 2nd ed., 2 vols. (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1993); James H. Cone and Gayraud S. Wilmore, *Black Theology: A Documentary History, 1966-1979*, 2 vols. (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1979); Noel Leo Erskine, *Decolonizing Theology: A Caribbean Perspective* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1981); James H. Evans, *We Have Been Believers: An African-American Systematic Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992); Dwight N. Hopkins and George C. L. Cummings, *Cut Loose Your Stammering Tongue: Black Theology in the Slave Narratives* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1991); Anthony B. Pinn, *Why, Lord?: Suffering and Evil in Black Theology* (New York: Continuum, 1995); J. Deotis Roberts, *Liberation and Reconciliation: A Black Theology* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1971); JoAnne Marie Terrell, *Power in the Blood?: The Cross in the African American Experience* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1998); Emilie Maureen Townes, *A Troubling in My Soul: Womanist Perspectives on Evil and Suffering* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1993); Josiah U. Young III, *A Pan-African Theology: Providence and the Legacies of the Ancestors* (Trenton, N.J.: Africa World Press, 1992).

<sup>21</sup> Three works in which the Christianizing procedure I mention is especially recognizable are Cone, *The Spirituals and the Blues: An Interpretation*; Hopkins, *Shoes That Fit Our Feet: Sources for a Constructive Black Theology*; Hopkins, *Being Human: Race, Culture, and Religion*.

<sup>22</sup> Based upon fieldwork conducted with the aid of his wife Frances in Dahomey, Haiti, and Suriname, Melville Herskovits makes a compelling argument in *Myth of the Negro Past* for the perdurance of West African cultural forms in African America. Moreover, he categorically rejects the notion prevalent during the publication of the book in 1941 that African-Americans could claim no connection to any discernible or meaningful cultural past, and that their supposedly racial characteristics rendered them inferior to Europeans. Conversely, E. Franklin Frazier argues against Herskovits's thesis in positing that the system of American slavery made it impossible for African-Americans to maintain any significant memory of or cultural connection to Africa. Frazier's outright denial of an African cultural connection makes sense because, as a sociologist, his primary concern is the assimilation of African-Americans into American society. Frazier's view is that, given the integral role played by hostile, dehumanizing white American attitudes toward Africa in black racism, maintaining any connection at all to Africa makes African-American assimilation impossible. It is also important to be aware of Arthur Fauset's position in this debate. Herskovits's argument for African survivals involved an assumption of innate religiosity in blacks characterized by highly demonstrative emotionalism. Fauset rejects Herskovits's assumption, focusing instead on the role of social conditions in the formation of diverse black religious cultures. Thus, Fauset sides more with Frazier. The Herskovits-Frazier debate is of tremendous importance because it helped to theoretically frame early studies of black religion. Fauset, *Black Gods of the Metropolis: Negro Religious Cults of the Urban North*; Frazier, *The Negro Church in America*; Melville J. Herskovits, *The Myth of the Negro Past* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1958).

<sup>23</sup> One exception is George B. Thomas. However, his main reason for focusing on African religions – namely, the "enrichment of Christianity," – is diametrically opposed to my reason for doing so. See George B. Thomas, "African Religion: A New Focus for Black Theology," in *Black Theology 2: Essays on the Formulation and Outreach of Contemporary Black Theology*, ed. Calvin E. Bruce and William R. Jones (New Jersey: Associated University Presses, 1978), 81. See also Cecil Wayne Cone, "The Identity Crisis in Black Theology: An Investigation of the Tensions Created by Efforts to Provide a Theological Interpretation of Black Religion in the Works of Joseph Washington, James Cone and J. Deotis Roberts" (Ph.D. diss., Emory University, 1974); Henry H. Mitchell, *Black Belief: Folk Beliefs of Blacks in America and West Africa*, 1st ed. (New York: Harper & Row, 1975); Peter J. Paris, *The Spirituality of African*

*Peoples: The Search for a Common Moral Discourse* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995); Josiah U. Young III, *Dogged Strength within the Veil: Africana Spirituality and the Mysterious Love of God* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 2003); Young III, *A Pan-African Theology: Providence and the Legacies of the Ancestors*.

Furthermore, of immense importance is the work of Dianne M. Stewart (a.k.a. Diakit ). Her work redresses the "phobic," Christocentric dismissal of Africa by black religious scholars through centralizing African and African-derived religions *in their own right* as liberative theoretical matrices in the study of black religious cultures in the Caribbean and other parts of the African Diaspora. See Stewart, *Three Eyes for the Journey: African Dimensions of the Jamaican Religious Experience*; Dianne M. Stewart, "Womanist Theology in the Caribbean Context: Critiquing Culture, Rethinking Doctrine, and Expanding Boundaries," *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 20, no. 1 (2004); Dianne M. Stewart, "Orisha Traditions in the West," in *The Hope of Liberation in World Religions*, ed. Miguel A. De La Torre (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2008). Worth noting as well are the recent doctoral theses of Jawanza E. Clark and Charles M. Sutton, both of which reposition Africa as a primary anthropological and conceptual locus for black theology. See Jawanza Eric Clark, "The Dead Are Not Dead: A Constructive, African-Centered Theological Anthropology" (Ph.D. diss., Emory University, 2008); Charles M. Sutton, "Conceptually and Culturally Redressing Black Liberation Theology" (Ph.D. diss., Temple University, 1999).

<sup>24</sup> Ethicist Victor Anderson emerged fifteen years ago as one of the most compelling critics of the discursive hegemony I mention. Anderson argues that the idea of liberation in black theology relies upon a very limited notion of "ontological blackness" that fails to take into account the dynamism and complexity of black identity evidenced in part by blacks' presence in "differentiated social spaces and communities of moral discourse." He contends further that

The identification of ontological blackness with *ultimate concern* leaves black theology without the hope of cultural transcendence from the blackness that whiteness created. Consequently, black liberation is reduced to the development of a positive racial consciousness that renews black men and women for the defense of black humanity. But black theology remains an existential theology since its primary interest is in identity formation and explicating authentic forms of consciousness. But whatever claims are made for its revolutionary intentions to bring about the amelioration of African American social life remain unfulfilled. Victor Anderson, *Beyond Ontological Blackness: An Essay on African American Religious and Cultural Criticism* (New York: Continuum, 1995), 11, 161.

<sup>25</sup> Large anthologies on black religion have documented this accumulated knowledge about black religious consciousness. See, for example, C. Eric Lincoln, *The Black Experience in Religion* (Garden City, N.Y.: Anchor Press, 1974); Cornel West and Eddie S. Glaude, *African American Religious Thought: An Anthology*, 1st ed. (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox Press, 2003); Gayraud S. Wilmore, *African American Religious Studies: An Interdisciplinary Anthology* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1989).

<sup>26</sup> In one of the foundational texts of black theology, James H. Cone declares that "Jesus Christ . . . in his humanity and divinity, is the point of departure for a black theologian's analysis of the meaning of liberation. There is no liberation independent of Jesus' past, present, and future coming." Cone, *God of the Oppressed*, 127.

<sup>27</sup> Black theologian Cecil W. Cone and humanist philosopher William R. Jones challenge the Christological basis of black theology's claims about liberation and black religious experience. Cone argues that black theology fails to root its methodology and interpretations more firmly in African and African-American cultural realities, preferring instead to rely mainly on the intellectual apparatus of the white Western theological tradition. This failure, according to Cone, reflects a profound crisis of identity. For Jones, black theology's insistence on affirming a liberating God despite the continued suffering of blacks at the hands of whites fails utterly in meeting the rigorous standards even of basic philosophical reason, which demands a thorough answer to the question, "How can God not be a white racist if, in direct contradiction with black theology's assertion of a liberating God who sides with the black oppressed, black oppression persists relatively unabated?" In continuity with Jones, we should also recognize the strong humanistic perspective of Anthony B. Pinn, who proposes a theory of black religion predicated not on the existence of a liberating God but on a black "quest for complex subjectivity." See Cone, "The Identity Crisis in Black Theology: An Investigation of the Tensions Created by Efforts to Provide a Theological Interpretation of Black Religion in the Works of Joseph Washington, James Cone and J. Deotis Roberts"; William R. Jones,

*Is God a White Racist?: A Preamble to Black Theology* (Garden City, N.Y.: Anchor Press, 1973); Anthony B. Pinn, *Terror and Triumph: The Nature of Black Religion* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2003), 173.

<sup>28</sup> Interestingly, Matthew V. Johnson Sr. posits a significant reframing of black theology that emphasizes the tragic dimensions of black Christian experience in particular, dimensions which in Johnson's view remain as vestiges of the trauma endured in the Middle Passage. It is Johnson's position that such a focus is necessary in order for black theology to produce more relevant and accurate renderings of African-American consciousness. The hermeneutical possibilities offered by an epistemology of the tragic in African-American consciousness strike me as promising. See Matthew V. Johnson Sr., "The Middle Passage, Trauma, and the Tragic Re-Imagination of African-American Theology," *Pastoral Psychology* 53, no. 6 (2005); Matthew V. Johnson Sr., *The Tragic Vision of African American Religion* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010).

<sup>29</sup> Most historians of Atlantic slavery agree that variation existed in enslaved Africans' experiences of and responses to the conditions of slavery. For instance, we know that not all enslaved Africans accepted as valid the Christian spiritual revelations foisted upon them by colonial priests. See John Thornton, *Africa and Africans in the Making of the Atlantic World, 1400-1680* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 261. However, the assumption of solidarity in the experience of enslaved Africans is not without merit. Historian of religion Sterling Stuckey and American historians Michael A. Gomez and Jason R. Young argue very convincingly for the development of racialized nationalist consciousness and religiously-based rebellion as elements that served as major unifying forces in the psyches of enslaved Africans. See Michael Angelo Gomez, *Exchanging Our Country Marks: The Transformation of African Identities in the Colonial and Antebellum South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998); Sterling Stuckey, *Slave Culture: Nationalist Theory and the Foundations of Black America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987); Jason R. Young, *Rituals of Resistance: African Atlantic Religion in Kongo and the Lowcountry South in the Era of Slavery* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2007).

<sup>30</sup> Zora Neale Hurston, *The Sanctified Church* (Berkeley: Turtle Island, 1981), 56-57.

<sup>31</sup> In his well-known book *The Souls of Black Folk*, DuBois describes double consciousness in the following manner:

... the Negro is a sort of seventh son, born with a veil, and gifted with second-sight in this American world, — a world which yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world. It is a peculiar sensation, this double consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his two-ness, — an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder. W. E. B. DuBois, *The Souls of Black Folk: Essays and Sketches*, 5th ed. (Chicago: A. C. McClurg & Co., 1904), 2.

<sup>32</sup> The rise of modernity in the sixteenth century brought with it the capitalist enterprise of transatlantic slavery and the attendant racialized objectification of African bodies as marketable commercial property. Conversely, whiteness signified a definite social and ontological condition not reducible to the status or quantifiable value of a mere object of commerce. North America would become one of the most conspicuous examples of this social and symbolic economy. Separate analyses provided by Harris and Painter are highly instructive as demonstrations of how modernity's mercantilization of blackness meant the erasure of African humanity. Thus, I will quote both at length. Harris explains,

Because the "presumption of freedom [arose] from color [white]" and the "black color of the race [raised] the presumption of slavery," whiteness became a shield from slavery, a highly volatile and unstable form of property. In the form adopted in the United States, slavery made human beings market-alienable and in so doing, subjected human life and personhood — that which is most valuable — to the ultimate devaluation. Because whites could not be enslaved or held as slaves, the racial line between white and Black was extremely critical; it became a line of protection and demarcation from the potential threat of commodification, and it determined the allocation of the benefits and burdens of this form of property. White identity and whiteness were sources of privilege and protection; their absence meant being the object of property. Cheryl Harris, "Whiteness as Property," *Harvard Law Review* 106, no. 8 (1993): 1720-1721. Along a very similar line, Painter notes,

Before 1865, the vast majority of African Americans were, literally, property, and they served simultaneously as an embodied currency and a labor force. As workers and as the basis of the

economy in which they toiled, slaves circulated like legal tender. Fetishized as commodities, they embodied their owners' social prestige. Enslaved black people were not simply likened to money, they were a kind of money. As one of my students is finding, slaves not only could be bought (sometimes by the pound), sold, and rented in the market, their sales were also regulated by law and subject to warranties, trials, and return. Even more to the point semiotically, slaves were collateral for commercial, speculative, and personal loans. Nell Painter, "Thinking about the Languages of

Money and Race: A Response to Michael O'Malley," *American Historical Review* 99, no. 2 (1994): 398.

<sup>33</sup> Long's contribution to the study of African-American religious formation is inestimable. Long sets forth the argument that African-American religious formation cannot be understood in isolation from the cultural and symbolic meanings of Africa in African-American consciousness, nor can it be separated from the momentous cultural exchanges that resulted from the expansionist activity of the imperial West, activity that found powerful sanction in biblical ideas and narratives. James Noel is one of very few scholars of black religion whose work builds upon Long's theoretical foundation. Noel theorizes black religion as an historical phenomenon rooted in a fundamental act among enslaved Africans of creatively and aesthetically "re-imagining" the material world in a way that re-invested their existence with meanings that were not imprisoned by the self-negating colonial narratives of modernity. See Long, *Significations: Signs, Symbols, and Images in the Interpretation of Religion*; James A. Noel, *Black Religion and the Imagination of Matter in the Atlantic World* (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009).

<sup>34</sup> Evans' research reveals that the history of thought about African-American religion since the antebellum period is marked either by the endorsement or repudiation of the racist notion of Africans being an inherently – and often wildly – religious people. Evans' work departs from conventional historiographies of African-American religion in that it ultimately seeks to move beyond the protest/accommodation model of interpretation. As a functionalist mode of interpretation, the protest/accommodation model emphasizes the role of African-American agency in the utilization of religion either as a venue for socio-political protest or for the advancement of accommodationist agendas promoting African-American assimilation into white American society. Evans' perspective and others that complement it are invaluable to my research because they create discursive space for the introduction of new thematics through which to theorize and interpret black religious experience. See Curtis J. Evans, *The Burden of Black Religion* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008). See also Wallace D. Best, *Passionately Human, No Less Divine: Religion and Culture in Black Chicago, 1915-1952* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005); R. Laurence Moore, *Religious Outsiders and the Making of Americans* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986); Robert A. Orsi, *Between Heaven and Earth: The Religious Worlds People Make and the Scholars Who Study Them* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2005).

<sup>35</sup> Unique to Thurman's mysticism is its grounding in social realities, particularly the plight of African-Americans. For examples of works by Thurman that demonstrate this grounding as well as studies highlighting the socio-prophetic dimensions of his thought, see Alton B. Pollard, *Mysticism and Social Change: The Social Witness of Howard Thurman* (New York: P. Lang, 1992); Luther E. Smith, *Howard Thurman: The Mystic as Prophet* (Richmond, Ind.: Friends United Press, 1991); Howard Thurman, *The Creative Encounter: An Interpretation of Religion and the Social Witness*, 1st ed. (New York: Harper, 1954); Howard Thurman, *The Luminous Darkness: A Personal Interpretation of the Anatomy of Segregation and the Ground of Hope*, 1st ed. (New York: Harper & Row, 1965); Howard Thurman, *Jesus and the Disinherited* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1996). For works by Thurman that are perhaps more interiorly oriented, see Howard Thurman, *Deep Is the Hunger: Meditations for Apostles of Sensitiveness* (Richmond, Indiana.: Friends United Press, 1973); Howard Thurman, *The Inward Journey*, 1st ed. (New York: Harper, 1961).

<sup>36</sup> Although my focus is on Yorùbá and Akan traditions specifically in the Nigerian and Ghanaian contexts, we should bear in mind that the Yorùbá people are present throughout Nigeria, parts of the Benin Republic, Togo, Ghana, and Sierra Leone, and that the term "Akan" designates at least thirteen ethnic/linguistic subgroups distributed across Ghana and la Côte d'Ivoire.

<sup>37</sup> See, for instance, Robert A. Wortham, "Dubois and the Sociology of Religion: Rediscovering a Founding Figure," *Sociological Inquiry* 75, no. 4 (2005); Phil Zuckerman, "The Sociology of Religion of W.E.B. Dubois," *Sociology of Religion* 63, no. 2 (2002).

<sup>38</sup> While freighted with European-derived perceptions and language, this statement from DuBois illustrates his recognition of the African religio-cultural antecedents that helped shape black religion:

... the transplanted African lived in a world animate with gods and devils, elves and witches; full of strange influences, — of Good to be implored, of Evil to be propitiated. Slavery, then, was to him the dark triumph of Evil over him. All the hateful powers of the Under-world were striving against him, and a spirit of revolt and revenge filled his heart. He called up all the resources of heathenism to aid, — exorcism and witchcraft, the mysterious Obi worship with its barbarous rites, spells, and blood-sacrifice even, now and then, of human victims. Weird midnight orgies and mystic conjurations were invoked, the witch-woman and the voodoo-priest became the centre of Negro group life, and that vein of vague superstition which characterizes the unlettered Negro even to-day was deepened and strengthened. DuBois, *The Souls of Black Folk: Essays and Sketches*, 120.

In his two books, *Darkwater: Voices from Within the Veil* and *The World and Africa: An Inquiry into the Part which Africa Has Played in World History*, DuBois avers that Africa will be the principal ingredient in the attainment of global human equality, peace, as well as moral and ethical "restoration." W.E.B. DuBois, *Darkwater: Voices from Within the Veil* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Howe, 1920), 42. W. E. B. DuBois, *The World and Africa: An Inquiry into the Part Which Africa Has Played in World History* (New York: Viking Press, 1947), 260.

<sup>39</sup> Two exceptions are Yvonne Patricia Chireau, *Black Magic: Religion and the African American Conjuring Tradition* (Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 2003); Stephanie Y. Mitchem, *African American Folk Healing* (New York: New York University Press, 2007).

<sup>40</sup> For example, see Dale P. Andrews, *Practical Theology for Black Churches: Bridging Black Theology and African American Folk Religion* (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002); Hopkins, *Being Human: Race, Culture, and Religion*.

<sup>41</sup> This is well-documented in Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent: The Women's Movement in the Black Baptist Church, 1880-1920* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1993).

<sup>42</sup> Gayraud S. Wilmore, *Black Religion and Black Radicalism: An Interpretation of the Religious History of African Americans*, 3rd ed. (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1998), 170.

<sup>43</sup> Higginbotham's contribution to African-American women's religious history has been widely recognized and celebrated. Again, see Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent: The Women's Movement in the Black Baptist Church, 1880-1920*.

<sup>44</sup> Sylvester A. Johnson argues most compellingly in support of this perception. See Sylvester A. Johnson, *The Myth of Ham in Nineteenth-Century American Christianity: Race, Heathens, and the People of God*, 1st ed. (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004). See also Stewart, *Three Eyes for the Journey: African Dimensions of the Jamaican Religious Experience*.

<sup>45</sup> Stewart, *Three Eyes for the Journey: African Dimensions of the Jamaican Religious Experience*, 43-44.

<sup>46</sup> Sylvester A. Johnson, "Religion Proper and Proper Religion: Arthur Fauset and the Study of African American Religions," in *The New Black Gods: Arthur Huff Fauset and the Study of African American Religions*, ed. Edward E. Curtis and Danielle Brune Sigler (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2009), 158-159.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 160. In addition to the work of Melville Herskovits, Robert Farris Thompson's research also marshals a plethora of data that strengthen arguments in favor of African cultural influences on black religion in America. See Herskovits, *The Myth of the Negro Past*; Robert Farris Thompson, *Flash of the Spirit: African and Afro-American Art and Philosophy*, 1st Vintage Books ed. (New York: Vintage Books, 1984).

<sup>48</sup> Butler, *Awash in a Sea of Faith: Christianizing the American People*, 157.

<sup>49</sup> For example, the ring shout, a ritual practiced since the era of slavery both by enslaved and emancipated African-Americans throughout the southeastern United States and in northern areas as well, has been traced to similar counterclockwise dance ceremonies performed in various parts of West and Central Africa such as Dahomey, Sierra Leone, Nigeria, and what is now the Democratic Republic of the Congo. Eyewitness accounts provide evidence of the ring shout's survival and significance in the African-American community. One of the most famous – or infamous – documentations of the ring shout is found in the writings of Bishop Daniel Alexander Payne of the African Methodist Episcopal Church. Payne is well-known by historians of black religion as one of the most ardent denouncers of African cultural practices. Payne's account of a ring shout ceremony he rudely interrupted while in Philadelphia in 1878 is quite revealing:

... I attended a "bush meeting," where I went to please the pastor whose circuit I was visiting. After

the sermon they formed a ring, and with coats off sung, clapped their hands and stamped their feet in a most ridiculous and heathenish way. I requested the pastor to go and stop their dancing. At his request they stopped their dancing and clapping of hands, but remained singing and rocking their bodies to and fro. This they did for about fifteen minutes. I then went, and taking their leader by the arm requested him to desist and to sit down and sing in a rational manner. I told him also that it was a heathenish way to worship and disgraceful to themselves, the race, and the Christian name. In that instance they broke up their ring; but would not sit down, and walked sullenly away. After the sermon in the afternoon, having another opportunity of speaking alone to this young leader of the singing and clapping ring, he said: "Sinners won't get converted unless there is a ring." Said I: "You might sing till you fell down dead, and you would fail to convert a single sinner, because nothing but the Spirit of God and the word of God can convert sinners." He replied: "The Spirit of God works upon people in different ways. At camp-meeting there must be a ring here, a ring there, a ring over yonder, or sinners will not get converted." This was his idea, and it is also that of many others. Daniel Alexander Payne, *Recollections of Seventy Years* (Nashville, Tenn.: Publishing House of the A.M.E. Sunday School Union, 1888). Not surprisingly, observation of ring shout ceremonies continued to occur as recently as the 1940s and 1950s. Researchers John A. Lomax and Alan Lomax observed ring shout ceremonies in Texas, Louisiana, and Georgia in the 1940s. See John Avery Lomax and Alan Lomax, *Folk Song U.S.A.* (New York: Duell, Sloan and Pearce, 1947), 335. Also, in the 1950s musicologist Marshall Stearns witnessed the ring shout in South Carolina. See Marshall Stearns, *The Story of Jazz* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1956), 12-13.

<sup>50</sup> Two superb examples are Robert Farris Thompson and Joseph Cornet, *The Four Moments of the Sun: Kongo Art in Two Worlds* (Washington: National Gallery of Art, 1981); Lorenzo Dow Turner, *Africanisms in the Gullah Dialect* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1949). See also Ina Johanna Fandrich, "Defiant African Sisterhoods: The Voodoo Arrests of the 1850s and 1860s in New Orleans," in *Fragments of Bone: Neo-African Religions in a New World*, ed. Patrick Bellegarde-Smith (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2005).

<sup>51</sup> Evans, *The Burden of Black Religion*.

<sup>52</sup> Johnson, *The Myth of Ham in Nineteenth-Century American Christianity: Race, Heathens, and the People of God*, 126.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 125.

<sup>54</sup> For a detailed historical account of the role of Europeans in introducing Christianity to both continental and New World Africans, see the first chapter of Sylvia R. Frey and Betty Wood, *Come Shouting to Zion: African American Protestantism in the American South and British Caribbean to 1830* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998).

<sup>55</sup> As discussed in chapter one, Sylvester Johnson contends that white American Christians' identification with ancient Israel is tied to internal anxieties over their self-imputed legitimacy as chosen people of God, an anxiety reflected in their oppositional construction of the black heathen. Johnson's analysis suggests a parallel between this phenomenon and the rise of the ancient Israelite urban elite whose adoption of monotheism meant the denigration of polytheism among rural Israelites. *Ibid.*, 118. Hence biblical scholar Itumeleng Mosala's rejoinder to assertions of God being on the side of the oppressed is "Which God – Baal, or El, or Yahweh? The white God or the black God? The male God or the female God? All were Gods of the Israelites." Itumeleng J. Mosala, *Biblical Hermeneutics and Black Theology in South Africa* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: W.B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 1989), 28.

<sup>56</sup> Albert J. Raboteau, *Slave Religion: The "Invisible Institution" in the Antebellum South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), 122-123.

<sup>57</sup> George Washington Williams, *A History of the Negro Race in America, 1619-1883*, vol. 1 (New York: Putnam, 1883), 88-90. Herbert Aptheker, *American Negro Slave Revolts* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1943), 298.

<sup>58</sup> Owned by Thomas Prosser, Gabriel's revolutionary spirit was very much inspired by the biblical figure of Samson. Gabriel believed himself to be chosen by God to liberate his fellow slaves. Joseph C. Carroll, *Slave Insurrections in the United States, 1800-1865* (Boston: Chapman & Grimes, 1938), 49. Similarly, Vesey's radicalism was also informed by studious engagement of biblical texts, particularly the books of Zechariah and Joshua in the Old Testament. Wilmore, *Black Religion and Black Radicalism: An Interpretation of the Religious History of African Americans*, 82. I mention Boxley because he was able

through his biblically-based religious charisma and visionary experiences to gain the support of a large number of slaves in his attempt to organize a rebellion. Carroll, *Slave Insurrections in the United States, 1800-1865*, 74.

It is also important for one to be aware that slave rebellion – whether biblically-related or not – was much more frequent than is generally realized. The research of Herbert Aptheker, for instance, reveals that at least 250 slave conspiracies and revolts took place during the period of North American slavery. Aptheker, *American Negro Slave Revolts*, 162. Moreover, historian and social theorist C. L. R. James finds that black revolts were continuing to occur as late as 1898, which is thirty-five years after the formal end of American slavery. In this year, a Mende community, responding to acts of violent physical punishment and an unjust poll tax, rebelled, killing all white missionaries within reach as well as blacks they regarded as Westernized. C. L. R. James, *A History of Negro Revolt* (London: Fact, 1938), 42.

<sup>59</sup> Eugene D. Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Made*, 1st ed. (New York: Pantheon Books, 1974), 183-84. Historian Marcus Jernegan also raises doubt about the depth and quality of slave conversion. He cites such mitigating factors as religious indifference among slaveholders and lack of missionary manpower – especially in colonies with larger slave populations – as well as the generally horrid conditions of slavery, which Jernegan sees as antagonistic to the task of living a "real Christian life." Marcus W. Jernegan, "Slavery and Conversion in the American Colonies," *American Historical Review* 21, no. 3 (1916): 518, 525.

<sup>60</sup> Raboteau, *Slave Religion*, 120.

<sup>61</sup> Two examples of the cultural violence about which I speak are given by anthropologist Marimba Ani in her voluminous work, *Yurugu: An African-Centered Critique of European Cultural Thought and Behavior*. She cites the popular 1980s films *The Gods Must Be Crazy* and *Airplane*, both of which portray indigenous Africa as unsophisticated and backward when confronted with the symbols and practices of Western society. Marimba Ani, *Yurugu: An African-Centered Critique of European Cultural Thought and Behavior* (Trenton, N.J.: Africa World Press, 1994), 296.

<sup>62</sup> Johnson, *The Myth of Ham in Nineteenth-Century American Christianity: Race, Heathens, and the People of God*, 10-11. Charles Long makes a related point that buttresses Johnson's argument. He writes, "Whereas almost every other country in the world had some traditions that bound the people together as a unique entity, there was and has never been such a tradition in the United States, in other words, no ancient regime. This has meant that the American nation has had to have recourse to other modes of binding, and for most of its history, it has accepted the implicit notion that it is a nation bound together by the unity of the "white race." To be sure, the notion of a "white race" is vague and highly ambiguous, but it is nonetheless a highly guarded and intensely practiced meaning in the American Republic. This meaning of the religiosity of America is generally discussed under the rubric of "civil religion," though none of the proponents of an American civil religion have dealt with the issue of race as a part of its meaning. Charles H Long, "African American Religion in the United States of America: An Interpretative Essay," *Nova Religio: The Journal of Alternative and Emergent Religions* 7, no. 1 (2003): 17.

<sup>63</sup> Hurston, *The Sanctified Church*, 56-57.

<sup>64</sup> Long, *Significations: Signs, Symbols, and Images in the Interpretation of Religion*, 209-210.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, 151.

<sup>66</sup> For instance, while conducting field research in Ghana on Akan philosophical traditions, Kwame Gyekye found that individual discussants tended to disagree on the meaning of *nkrabea* (or *hyɛbea*), a term typically associated with the Akan concept of destiny. Some discussants understood *nkrabea* as a life trajectory chosen by human beings, while others believed it to be determined by *Onyame*. Kwame Gyekye, *An Essay on African Philosophical Thought: The Akan Conceptual Scheme*, Rev. ed. (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1995), 113.

<sup>67</sup> Okot p'Bitek, *African Religions in Western Scholarship* (Nairobi: Kenya Literature Bureau, 1970), 1-2.

<sup>68</sup> V. Y. Mudimbe, *The Invention of Africa: Gnosis, Philosophy, and the Order of Knowledge* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988), 185.

<sup>69</sup> William R. Bascom identifies twenty-three separate ethnic subgroups, including the Ana, Isha, Idasha, Shabe, Ketu, Ifonyin, Awori, Egbado, Egba, Ijebu, Oyo, Ife, Ijesha, Ondo, Owò, Ilaje, Ekiti, Igbomina, Yagba, Bunu, Aworo, Itsekiri, and the Owu. William Russell Bascom, *The Yorùbá of Southwestern Nigeria* (Prospect Heights, Ill.: Waveland Press, 1984), 5.

<sup>70</sup> Robert B. Fisher, *West African Religious Traditions : Focus on the Akan of Ghana* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1998), 32. Madeline Manoukian, *Akan and Ga-Adangme Peoples* (London: International African Institute, 1964), 9-10, 15.

<sup>71</sup> Among the most well-known writings by some of these authors are Wándé Abimbólá, *Ifá: An Exposition of Ifá Literary Corpus* (Ibadan: Oxford University Press Nigeria, 1976); J. B. Danquah, *The Akan Doctrine of God: A Fragment of Gold Coast Ethics and Religion* (London: Lutterworth Press, 1944); Gyekye, *An Essay on African Philosophical Thought: The Akan Conceptual Scheme*; Jacob K Olúpònà, *Kingship, Religion, and Rituals in a Nigerian Community: A Phenomenological Study of Ondo Yorùbá Festivals* (Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell International, 1991); Kofi Asare Opoku, "Aspects of Akan Worship," in *The Black Experience in Religion*, ed. C. Eric Lincoln (Garden City, N.Y.: Anchor Press, 1974); Kofi Asare Opoku, *West African Traditional Religion* (Accra: FEP International Private Limited, 1978); Oyèrónké Oyèwùmí, *The Invention of Women: Making an African Sense of Western Gender Discourses* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997). See also Mercy Amba Oduyoye, *Daughters of Anowa: African Women and Patriarchy* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1995); Oyeronke Olajubu, *Women in the Yorùbá Religious Sphere* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2003).

<sup>72</sup> Wándé Abimbólá, "Yorùbá Traditional Religion," in *Contemplation and Action in World Religions: Selected Papers from the Rothko Chapel Colloquium "Traditional Modes of Contemplation and Action"*, ed. Yusuf Ibish and Ileana Marculescu (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1978). Gyekye, *An Essay on African Philosophical Thought: The Akan Conceptual Scheme*.

<sup>73</sup> Ngũgĩ Wa Thiong'o, *Decolonizing the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature* (London: James Currey, 1986). My rejoinder to the language-based objection to the dissertation should *not* be interpreted as an evasive rationale that diminishes or erases the need for proficiency in relevant African languages. I fully intend to gain proficiency in at least one pertinent West African language over the course of my academic career.

<sup>74</sup> Linda Tuhiwai Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples* (Dunedin, N.Z.: Zed Books, 1999), 56.

<sup>75</sup> Merata Mita, "Merata Mita On . . ." *New Zealand Listener*, 14 October 1989, 30.

<sup>76</sup> The first thing to note about the Twi concept of *bayi* (or *abayisem*) is that, while it is often misleadingly used to refer only to the utilization of spiritual power for harmful ends (*bayi boro*), its meaning also includes the socially beneficial utilization of spiritual power (*bayi pa*). Opoku, *West African Traditional Religion*, 140. It is also very important to note that the concept of *bayi* presents the would-be interpreter of Akan religion with serious challenges, one of the most formidable being the readiness of many historical and anthropological researchers to understand *bayi* in connection with notions of witchcraft in the West. This is true of African studies scholars such as Natasha Gray, T. C. McCaskie, Jane Parish, and John Parker. See Natasha Gray, "Witches, Oracles, and Colonial Law: Evolving Anti-Witchcraft Practices in Ghana, 1927-1932," *The International Journal of African Historical Studies* 34, no. 2 (2001); T. C. McCaskie, "Anti-Witchcraft Cults in Asante: An Essay on the Social History of an African People," *History in Africa* 8(1981); Jane Parish, "The Dynamics of Witchcraft and Indigenous Shrines among the Akan," *Journal of the International African Institute* 69, no. 3 (1999); John Parker, "Witchcraft, Anti-Witchcraft, and Trans-Regional Ritual Innovation in Early Colonial Ghana: Sakrabundi and Aberewa, 1889-1910," *The Journal of African History* 45, no. 3 (2004). A second major challenge is that little is known about the etymology of *bayi*. One could point to the fact that *bayi* appears to bear an obvious structural relation to the term *ɔbayifo*, which refers to a person under the influence of the destructive power of *bayi*. Another possibility is suggested by John Parker when he writes of *bayi* that "a possible derivation is *oba* (child) + *yi* (to remove), the literal notion 'to take away a child' underscoring the close association of witchcraft with issues of fertility, reproduction, and infant mortality." *Ibid.*, 396. The following comments made by an actual *ɔbayifo* named Yaa Takyiwaa at a medicine shrine in Ghana's Dormaa district provide deeper insight into the meaning of *bayi*:

I think I received my *bayi* in a Bible given to me by a woman who does not follow Christian ways any more. Whenever I handled it I had dreams of myself in flight. Despite my best attempts to rid myself of them, the *bayi* spread to all my personal possessions. Eventually I saw myself flying even when I threw the Bible away. I informed my mother's sister of the bad spirit. She found the Bible and gave it to a powerful *okomfo* [priest]. I attacked twenty people and flew to the meeting place of the coven. I was taken to the riverside and water was sprinkled on my head three times, as in church.

I followed the ways of the senior [*abayifo*]. I promised not to break their laws. I was always afraid of capture. Avoiding it is a matter of luck. I still see the other [*abayifo*] at night but I am now unable to fly with them. I am ill because of capture but also because the [*abayifo*] are angry with me. Parish, "The Dynamics of Witchcraft and Indigenous Shrines among the Akan," 441. These comments, recorded by Jane Parish while conducting fieldwork in Ghana between 1990 and 1991, indicate that while *bayi* certainly has a practical dimension, it also exists independently as a negative mode of spiritual power capable of inhabiting objects and directing human behavior. The latter point is crucial because it signals why the Western concept of witchcraft is in my estimation an inadequate lens through which to understand *bayi*. In Western lore, witchcraft is understood primarily in association with the spiritual or magical practices of persons described as witches, wizards, or warlocks. Emphasis here is on witchcraft as a humanly performed practice rather than as a reality whose existence is not entirely dependent upon practical manifestation, as is the case with *bayi*.

Moreover, with the possible exception of studies like anthropologist T. M. Luhrmann's *Persuasions of the Witch's Craft: Ritual Magic in Contemporary England*, which deals with the social, cultural, and psychological complexities surrounding the development and acceptance of magical beliefs among members of modern-day covens, relatively little scholarly attention has been given to Western witchcraft traditions as ways of knowing. The status of *bayi* as both active manifestation and independent spiritual reality enables Ghanaian scholars Anthony Ephirim-Donkor and Kwame Gyekye to interpret the destructive (or we might say evil) effects of *bayi* as reflections of a cosmic structure wherein the potential for the expression of negative or "anti-social" power is ever-present. For Gyekye in particular, *bayi* is not simply an antagonistic force to be averted. Instead, *bayi* also represents a "mode of cognition." In my perspective, it is more profitable from the standpoint of phenomenological interpretation to conceive of *bayi* in epistemological terms rather than in practical or moral terms only. See Gyekye, *African Philosophical Thought: The Akan Conceptual Scheme*, 201-203. See also chapter four of Anthony Ephirim-Donkor, *African Spirituality: On Becoming Ancestors* (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 1997). In addition, Emmanuel Akyeampong and Pashington Obeng offer a fascinating analysis of the role of Akan belief in spiritual power (including *bayi*) over coercive state power as a source of social and political transformation. See Emmanuel Akyeampong and Pashington Obeng, "Spirituality, Gender, and Power in Asante History," *The International Journal of African Historical Studies* 28, no. 3 (1995). Lastly, as mentioned above, a notable, more recent book for further reading on modern witchcraft in the West is T. M. Luhrmann, *Persuasions of the Witch's Craft: Ritual Magic in Contemporary England* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1989).

<sup>77</sup> This statement was recorded in the journal of one D. Olubi in 1869, and is said to have been cited by a Yorùbá religious convert. A fairly well-known saying in nineteenth-century Ibadan, it is quoted in J. D. Y. Peel, *Religious Encounter and the Making of the Yorùbá* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000), 93.

<sup>78</sup> This particular Akan translation of "Life is war" was provided by Professor Emmanuel Lartey of Emory University.

<sup>79</sup> The total number of *Òrìṣà* is often said to be "400+1," which signifies an infinite number. Yorùbá priest and scholar Wándé Abímbólá writes that

. . . every Alááfin of Òyó ["Emperor of the Yorùbá"], every Qòni of Ifẹ ["representative of Odùduwà," a Yorùbá divinity] who passes, they are all believed to have been transformed into *Òrìṣà*. Not all of them are remembered, but theoretically they could be transformed into *Òrìṣà*. These are the people who are canonized and become *Òrìṣà*. This is how Aganjú and Sàngo became *Òrìṣà*.

Wándé Abímbólá, *Ifá Will Mend Our Broken World: Thoughts on Yorùbá Religion and Culture in Africa and the Diaspora* (Roxbury, MA: Aim Books, 1997), 118-181.

<sup>80</sup> Theoretical physicist Brian Greene's explanation of the four fundamental forces is most revealing:

The strong and weak forces are . . . the nuclear forces . . . The strong force is responsible for keeping quarks [a quark is a subatomic particle existing in six different forms – up, down, charm, strange, top, bottom – and in three colors – red, blue, and green] "glued" together inside of protons and neutrons and keeping protons and neutrons tightly crammed together inside atomic nuclei. The weak force is best known as the force responsible for the radioactive decay of substances such as uranium and cobalt . . . Why are the strong and weak forces confined to operate on microscopic scales while gravity and the electromagnetic force have an unlimited range of influence? And why is there such an enormous spread in the intrinsic strength of these forces?

To appreciate this last question, imagine holding an electron in your left hand and another electron in your right hand and bringing these two identical electrically charged particles close together. Their mutual gravitational attraction will favor their getting close together while their electromagnetic repulsion will try to drive them apart. Which is stronger? There is no contest: The electromagnetic repulsion is about a million billion billion billion billion ( $10^{42}$ ) times stronger! If your right bicep represents the strength of the gravitational force, then your left bicep would have to extend beyond the edge of the known universe to represent the strength of the electromagnetic force. The only reason the electromagnetic force does not completely overwhelm gravity in the world around us is that most things are composed of an equal amount of positive and negative electric charges whose forces cancel each other out. On the other hand, since gravity is always attractive, there are no analogous cancellations – more stuff means greater gravitational force. But fundamentally speaking, gravity is an extremely feeble force. Brian R. Greene, *The Elegant Universe: Superstrings, Hidden Dimensions, and the Quest for the Ultimate Theory*, 1st ed. (New York: Vintage, 1999), 10-12, 420.

<sup>81</sup> The materially-oriented epistemological tradition of the Yorùbá is reflected in the significance of religious festivals such as the *Odun Aje* festival. One of the main goals of the *Odun Aje* festival is to spiritually facilitate the success and prosperity of Ondo marketplace traders, most of whom are women. For a more detailed explanation, see Olúpòná, *Kingship, Religion, and Rituals in a Nigerian Community: A Phenomenological Study of Ondo Yorùbá Festivals*, 154-157.

<sup>82</sup> A likely focus would be Oyotunji Village in Beaufort County, South Carolina. Founded in 1970, Oyotunji Village is a small African-American community that has redefined and reorganized itself in accordance with the historic social systems, philosophical beliefs and spiritual practices of Yorùbá cultures.

<sup>83</sup> Many excellent studies have been produced on this topic by black feminist scholars. Some of them include Nicole R. Fleetwood, *Troubling Vision: Performance, Visuality, and Blackness* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010); Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Sexual Politics: African Americans, Gender, and the New Racism* (New York: Routledge, 2004); Angela M. Gilliam, "A Black Feminist Perspective on the Sexual Commodification of Women in the New Global Culture," in *Black Feminist Anthropology: Theory, Politics, Praxis, and Poetics*, ed. Irma McClaurin (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2001); Carolyn Martin Shaw, "Disciplining the Black Female Body: Learning Feminism in Africa and the United States," in *Black Feminist Anthropology: Theory, Politics, Praxis, and Poetics*, ed. Irma McClaurin (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2001); Judith Wilson, "Getting Down to Get Over: Romare Bearden's Use of Pornography and the Problem of the Black Female Body in Afro-U.S. Art," in *Black Popular Culture*, ed. Gina Dent (Seattle: Bay Press, 1992); Angela M. Gilliam, "A Black Feminist Perspective on the Sexual Commodification of Women in the New Global Culture," in *Black Feminist Anthropology: Theory, Politics, Praxis, and Poetics*, ed. Irma McClaurin (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2001); Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Sexual Politics: African Americans, Gender, and the New Racism* (New York: Routledge, 2004); Carolyn Martin Shaw, "Disciplining the Black Female Body: Learning Feminism in Africa and the United States," in *Black Feminist Anthropology: Theory, Politics, Praxis, and Poetics*, ed. Irma McClaurin (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2001); Judith Wilson, "Getting Down to Get Over: Romare Bearden's Use of Pornography and the Problem of the Black Female Body in Afro-U.S. Art," in *Black Popular Culture*, ed. Gina Dent (Seattle: Bay Press, 1992).

<sup>84</sup> Rudolf Otto, *Das Heilige: Über das Irrationale in der Idee des Göttlichen und sein Verhältnis zum Rationalen* (Gotha: Leopold Klotz, 1926), 5.

<sup>85</sup> Pseudo-Dionysius, *The Mystical Theology*, in *Pseudo-Dionysius: The Complete Works*, trans. Colm Luibhéid (New York: Paulist Press, 1987), 138, 140, 141.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*, 140-141.

<sup>87</sup> In "The Divine Names," Dionysius claims that someone named Hierotheus was his teacher as well as Timothy's. However, there seems to be some debate among scholars as to the actual existence of both Timothy and Hierotheus. Paul Rorem appears to view these individuals as elements of a larger "fiction." See note 128 in Pseudo-Dionysius, *The Divine Names*, in *Pseudo-Dionysius: The Complete Works*, trans. Colm Luibhéid (New York: Paulist Press, 1987), 69. In contrast to Rorem, I. P. Sheldon-Williams suggests that Hierotheus at least may have been an historical personage influenced by Neoplatonism. See I. P. Sheldon-Williams, "The Ps. Dionysius and the Holy Hierotheus," *Studia Patristica* 8, no. 2 (1966).

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*, 135.

<sup>89</sup> Bonaventure, *The Soul's Journey into God*, in *Bonaventure*, trans. Ewert H. Cousins (New York: Paulist Press, 1978), 115.

<sup>90</sup> Marguerite Porete, *The Mirror of Simple Souls*, trans. Ellen L. Babinsky (New York: Paulist Press, 1993), 107, 110.

<sup>91</sup> Horton illustrates the point well in his comparative analysis of the concept of the "High God" or High Deity in African religious thought:

It is true that, in many African cosmologies, we do find the concept of a supreme being who created the world and sustains it. But the other salient attributes of this being are often very different from those of its Judaeo-Christian counterpart. It may not, for instance, have the unambiguous association with the morally good that is always attributed to the Judaeo-Christian supreme being . . . the supreme being may not have the same sex as its Judaeo-Christian counterpart. Among the Ijo-speaking peoples of the Niger Delta, for instance, this being is thought of as a woman and is referred to as "Our Mother" . . . Yet again, the aura of mystery and inscrutability with which the "Devout" tend to clothe the supreme being is remarkable for its absence from many of the more painstaking monographs on the religious thought of particular African cultures. In many such works . . . we find not only the concept of a supreme being, but also confessions of ignorance of many of his/her ways. What we don't seem to find is the sort of positive celebration of his/her mysteriousness and inscrutability that is so characteristic of modern Judaeo-Christian thought. Robin Horton, *Patterns of Thought in Africa and the West: Essays on Magic, Religion, and Science* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 169.

<sup>92</sup> Hegel discusses this dialectic in part four of *Phänomenologie des Geistes*. See Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Phänomenologie des Geistes*, 3. Aufl. ed. (Leipzig: F. Meiner, 1923), 154-205.

<sup>93</sup> Pioneering womanist theologian Jacquelyn Grant identifies racism, sexism, and classism as representing three primary dimensions of African-American women's oppressive experience. See Jacquelyn Grant, *White Women's Christ and Black Women's Jesus: Feminist Christology and Womanist Response* (Atlanta Ga.: Scholars Press, 1989), 217. Kelly Brown Douglas adds to Grant's model homophobia and heterosexism. See chapter four of Kelly Brown Douglas, *Sexuality and the Black Church: A Womanist Perspective* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1999).

<sup>94</sup> One good example of this is chapter seven of Grant, *White Women's Christ and Black Women's Jesus: Feminist Christology and Womanist Response*. See also chapters four and seven of Evans, *We Have Been Believers: An African-American Systematic Theology*.

<sup>95</sup> The term Ifá also signifies a comprehensive divinatory system whose sacred corpus currently exists in two main configurations: In Nigeria, other parts of West Africa, and Cuba, for example, the Ifá corpus consists of 256 books, each containing between 600 and 800 poetic verses (*ese*), while in other areas of the African Diaspora such as Brazil and various other regions within the Americas, one finds *Eḡrindínlogún* (commonly translated as "sixteen cowries"), a seemingly smaller corpus that concentrates the 256 books of Ifá into sixteen books.

<sup>96</sup> Kólá Abímbólá, *Yorùbá Culture: A Philosophical Account* (Birmingham, UK: Iroko Academic Publishers, 2006), 49.

<sup>97</sup> Gyekye, *An Essay on African Philosophical Thought: The Akan Conceptual Scheme*, 70.

<sup>98</sup> Abímbólá, *Yorùbá Culture: A Philosophical Account*, 49. Wándé Abímbólá, "Gods Versus Anti-Gods: Conflict and Resolution in the Yorùbá Cosmos," *Dialogue and Alliance* 8(1994): 76.

<sup>99</sup> Abímbólá, "Gods Versus Anti-Gods: Conflict and Resolution in the Yorùbá Cosmos," 86. Abímbólá, *Ifá Will Mend Our Broken World: Thoughts on Yorùbá Religion and Culture in Africa and the Diaspora*, 173.

<sup>100</sup> See Will Coleman, *Tribal Talk: Black Theology, Hermeneutics, and African/American Ways of "Telling the Story"* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2000); Clarence E. Hardy III, *James Baldwin's God: Sex, Hope, and Crisis in Black Holiness Culture*, 1st ed. (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2003); Hopkins, *Shoes That Fit Our Feet: Sources for a Constructive Black Theology*; Hopkins and Cummings, *Cut Loose Your Stammering Tongue: Black Theology in the Slave Narratives*; Young III, *Dogged Strength within the Veil: Africana Spirituality and the Mysterious Love of God*.

<sup>101</sup> Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness: The Challenge of Womanist God-Talk*, 57.

<sup>102</sup> Hopkins, *Shoes That Fit Our Feet: Sources for a Constructive Black Theology*, 83.

- <sup>103</sup> Much later in her book, Delores Williams soberly writes, "The truth of the matter may well be that the Bible gives license for us to have it both ways: God liberates and God does not always liberate all the oppressed." Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness: The Challenge of Womanist God-Talk*, 199.
- <sup>104</sup> Hardy III, *James Baldwin's God: Sex, Hope, and Crisis in Black Holiness Culture*, xi-xii.
- <sup>105</sup> *Ibid.*, 54-58, 97.
- <sup>106</sup> *Ibid.*, xi-xii.
- <sup>107</sup> Donald Henry Matthews, *Honoring the Ancestors: An African Cultural Interpretation of Black Religion and Literature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 53.
- <sup>108</sup> *Ibid.*, 57.
- <sup>109</sup> Coleman, *Tribal Talk: Black Theology, Hermeneutics, and African/American Ways of Telling the Story*, x.
- <sup>110</sup> Matthews, *Honoring the Ancestors: An African Cultural Interpretation of Black Religion and Literature*, 119-124.
- <sup>111</sup> Young III, *Dogged Strength within the Veil: Africana Spirituality and the Mysterious Love of God*, 49.
- <sup>112</sup> *Ibid.*, 91-102.
- <sup>113</sup> Monica A. Coleman, *Making a Way out of No Way: A Womanist Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2008), 142.
- <sup>114</sup> *Ibid.*, 138-142.
- <sup>115</sup> *Ibid.*, 45-83. This chapter establishes process theology as the study's governing hermeneutical context.
- <sup>116</sup> Oyěwùmí, *The Invention of Women: Making an African Sense of Western Gender Discourses*, 25.
- <sup>117</sup> For a brief but detailed descriptive analysis of the Otin festival, see Olajubu, *Women in the Yorùbá Religious Sphere*, 107-110. For an insightful examination of the critical and sometimes transformative socio-political and archival role of Oroeye songs ("oral texts") in Ayede, see Andrew Apter, "Discourse and Its Disclosures: Yorùbá Women and the Sanctity of Abuse," *Africa: Journal of the International African Institute* 68, no. 1 (1998). Perhaps one of the best phenomenological interpretations of the Ọdun Ọba and Ọdun Ogun festivals appears in chapters three and five of Olúpònà, *Kingship, Religion, and Rituals in a Nigerian Community: A Phenomenological Study of Ondo Yorùbá Festivals*.
- <sup>118</sup> In a discussion of problematic trends present in popular academic discourses produced by Western scholars in the areas of African studies generally and Yorùbá cultural studies specifically, Oyěwùmí writes that these scholars "have assumed that present-day 'customs' [Yorùbá customs] that they encounter are always rooted in ancient traditions. I suggest that their timelessness should not be taken for granted; some of them are 'new traditions.'" Oyěwùmí, *The Invention of Women: Making an African Sense of Western Gender Discourses*, xv.
- <sup>119</sup> See S. O. Biobaku, *The Origin of the Yorùbá* (Lagos: University of Lagos, 1971); J. Olumide Lucas, *The Religion of the Yorùbás* (Lagos: CMS Bookshop, 1948).
- <sup>120</sup> For one of the earliest and most in-depth studies of *Ifá*, see Abimbólá, *Ifá: An Exposition of Ifá Literary Corpus*. See also Abimbólá, *Ifá Will Mend Our Broken World: Thoughts on Yorùbá Religion and Culture in Africa and the Diaspora*.
- <sup>121</sup> For one of the most important and robust ethnographic studies of *Ilé-Ifẹ̀* that deeply explores its religio-cultural history and its current status as a highly contested sacred space, see Jacob K Olúpònà, *City of 201 Gods: Ilé-Ifẹ̀ in Time, Space, and the Imagination* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011).
- <sup>122</sup> Abimbólá, *Yorùbá Culture: A Philosophical Account*, 35.
- <sup>123</sup> Babatunde Lawal, "Èjìwápò: The Dialectics of Twoness in Yorùbá Art and Culture," *African Arts* 41, no. 1 (2008): 25.
- <sup>124</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>125</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>126</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>127</sup> Abimbólá, *Ifá Will Mend Our Broken World: Thoughts on Yorùbá Religion and Culture in Africa and the Diaspora*, 172. Lawal, "Èjìwápò: The Dialectics of Twoness in Yorùbá Art and Culture," 25.
- <sup>128</sup> Abimbólá, *Yorùbá Culture: A Philosophical Account*, 59-60.
- <sup>129</sup> The term *Egúngún* also refers to a Yorùbá society dedicated to the veneration of ancestors. Abimbólá, *Ifá Will Mend Our Broken World: Thoughts on Yorùbá Religion and Culture in Africa and the Diaspora*, 173.

<sup>130</sup> Ibid., 60. Abimbólá, "Gods Versus Anti-Gods: Conflict and Resolution in the Yorùbá Cosmos," 78. Interestingly, P. A. Dopamu translates the term *Ará Ọ̀run* as "visitor from Ọ̀run" (the "spirit world"). P. A. Dopamu, "Traditional Festivals," in *Understanding Yorùbá Life and Culture*, ed. Nike S. Lawal, Matthew N. O. Sadiku and P. Ade Dopamu (Trenton: Africa World Press, 2004), 656. Abimbólá, *Ifá: An Exposition of Ifá Literary Corpus*, 151.

<sup>131</sup> Abimbólá, *Yorùbá Culture: A Philosophical Account*, 51.

<sup>132</sup> E. Bólájí Idòwú, *Olódùmarè: God in Yorùbá Belief* (London: Longmans, 1962), 18-20.

<sup>133</sup> I prefer Oyèrónké Oyèwùmí's use of the term "world-sense" in her deconstructive analysis of European bio-logically based misunderstandings of knowledge production and social organization among the pre-colonial Ọ̀yọ́- Yorùbá. She writes,

The term "worldview," which is used in the West to sum up the cultural logic of a society, captures the West's privileging of the visual. It is Eurocentric to use it to describe cultures that may privilege other senses. The term "world-sense" is a more inclusive way of describing the conception of the world by different cultural groups. In this study, therefore, "worldview" will only be applied to describe the Western cultural sense, and "world-sense" will be used when describing the Yorùbá or other cultures that may privilege senses other than the visual or even a combination of senses.

Oyèwùmí, *The Invention of Women: Making an African Sense of Western Gender Discourses*, 2-3.

<sup>134</sup> Abimbólá, *Yorùbá Culture: A Philosophical Account*, 72.

<sup>135</sup> Babatunde Lawal, "Orí: The Significance of the Head in Yorùbá Sculpture " *Journal of Anthropological Research* 41, no. 1 (1985): 91. Some other related terms include *àyànmọ́* ("choice"), *ipín* ("predestined share"), *kádàrà* ("divine share for man"), and *ipòrí* ("inner head"). Abimbólá, *Ifá: An Exposition of Ifá Literary Corpus*, 113.

<sup>136</sup> Ibid., 114. Abimbólá helpfully elaborates on the significance of *orí inú* when he writes that

Since every man's Orí is his personal god, he is more interested in the welfare of the individual than the other gods. Therefore, if an individual is in need of anything, he should first of all make his desires known to his Orí before he approaches any other god for assistance. If a man's Orí is not in sympathy with his cause, no god will sympathize with him and consequently he will not have the things he wants. Ibid., 142.

<sup>137</sup> The belief in the unalterability of human destiny is buttressed by a closely related belief in the idea that the *Ọ̀riṣà* are unable to change a person's destiny once the choice of *orí inú* has been made. Ibid., 145. It is also important to acknowledge that, according to one verse from *Ọ̀sá Méjì*, most human beings select a bad *orí inú* and consequently fail in life, despite continual efforts to improve their destiny:

Bí ó bá ẹ̀ pé gbogbo orí gbogbo ní í sun pòsì,  
 Ìròkò gbogbo ibá ti tán n'ígbo.  
 A diá fún igba ẹ̀ni,  
 Tí nt'Ìkòlé ọ̀run bọ wá sí t'ayé.  
 Bí ó bá ẹ̀ pé gbogbo orí gbogbo ní í sun pòsì,  
 Ìròkò gbogbo ibá ti tán n'ígbo.  
 A diá fún Ọ̀wèrè,  
 Tí nt'Ìkòlé ọ̀run bọ wá sí t'ayé.  
 Ọ̀wèrè là njà,  
 Gbogboo wa.  
 Ọ̀wèrè là njà.  
 Ẹ̀ni t'ó yan'rí rere kò wọ̀pọ̀.  
 Ọ̀wèrè là njà,  
 Gbogboo wa.  
 Ọ̀wèrè là njà.

("If all men were destined to be buried in coffins,  
 all iròkò trees would have been exhausted in the forest.  
 Ifá divination was performed for two hundred men  
 who were coming from heaven to earth.  
 If all men were destined to be buried in coffins,  
 all iròkò trees would have been exhausted in the forest.

Ifá divination was also performed for Struggle  
 who was coming from heaven to earth.  
 We are only struggling.  
 All of us.  
 We are only struggling.  
 Those who chose good destinies are not many.  
 We are only struggling.  
 All of us.

We are only struggling”). Abimbólá, *Ifá: An Exposition of Ifá Literary Corpus*, 146-147.

<sup>138</sup> It is believed that each of the *Òriṣà* also has his or her own *orí inú*, the “wishes” of which can only be determined through “consultation” with *Òrúnmìlà*. What is more, knowledge of *Òrúnmìlà*’s own *orí inú* does not automatically accrue to him. Instead, like human beings and the other *Òriṣà*, *Òrúnmìlà* must make use of his “Ifá divination instruments in order to find out the wishes of his *Orí*.” Ibid., 115.

<sup>139</sup> Ibid., 147.

<sup>140</sup> Ibid., 27, 147-148, 247.

<sup>141</sup> Ibid., 115.

<sup>142</sup> Abimbólá, *Yorùbá Culture: A Philosophical Account*, 80. Abimbólá, “Yorùbá Traditional Religion,” 234.

<sup>143</sup> Ibid.

<sup>144</sup> Abimbólá, *Yorùbá Culture: A Philosophical Account*, 124.

<sup>145</sup> Ibid., 47.

<sup>146</sup> Ibid., 80.

<sup>147</sup> Kayode J. Fakinlede, “Existence,” in *Yorùbá-English/English-Yorùbá Modern Practical Dictionary* (New York: Hippocrene Books, Inc., 2003), 152.

<sup>148</sup> Kayode J. Fakinlede, “Stuff,” in *Yorùbá-English/English-Yorùbá Modern Practical Dictionary* (New York: Hippocrene Books, Inc., 2003), 411. My use of the term “spiritual technology” reflects a conceptual indebtedness to Dr. Dianne Diakité who, during the course of several personal conversations held with me over the past three years, has innovatively referred to specialized, esoteric African religio-practical systems such as *Ifá* as “mystical technologies.”

<sup>149</sup> Abimbólá, “Gods Versus Anti-Gods: Conflict and Resolution in the Yorùbá Cosmos,” 86. At a lecture given at Emory University in 2007, Professor Abimbólá restated this point in asserting that, for the Yorùbá, peace is merely an “aberration.”

It is also important to be aware of significant differences between indigenous Yorùbá and Yorùbá Diasporic perceptions of *ebò* and ritual practice in the *Ifá* tradition. Abimbólá makes the following comments regarding these differences:

There is an over emphasis on blood in the Diaspora. The emphasis of the religion [Ifá] in the Diaspora is mainly on rituals, and on the visual aspects, such as beads and clothes. Little attention is paid to literature or philosophy. When the descendants of the Yorùbá in the Americas lost the literature they concentrated more on the visual and ritual aspects of the religion. In Africa, a *babaláwo* may have attended to 20 clients in a day without prescribing one animal or fowl. There are so many sacrifices we can do that don’t involve blood at all. When we give food to *Ògún*, it may be prescribed that we give roasted yams or roasted corn. Occasionally a dog may be prescribed, but that may not happen often. When we give food to *Ọbàtálá*, we prepare *iyán* (pounded yam), and *ègúsí* (a type of soup prepared with melon seeds). Abimbólá, *Ifá Will Mend Our Broken World: Thoughts on Yorùbá Religion and Culture in Africa and the Diaspora*, 84.

<sup>150</sup> Through conversation with Nigerian-born Yorùbá speaker Olabisi Animashaun, I learned that the Yorùbá terms *ija* and *rogbodyan* may approximate the idea of conflict as a reality that inheres within the very structure of existence. However, she emphatically noted that the Yorùbá distinguish between different forms of conflict, and that there are several other Yorùbá terms that can be used to describe these different forms of conflict.

<sup>151</sup> Kayode J. Fakinlede, “Well-Being,” in *Yorùbá-English/English-Yorùbá Modern Practical Dictionary* (New York: Hippocrene Books, Inc., 2003), 462. Kayode J. Fakinlede, “Success,” in *Yorùbá-English/English-Yorùbá Modern Practical Dictionary* (New York: Hippocrene Books, Inc., 2003), 413.

<sup>152</sup> Idòwú makes the historical argument that the appearance of this variant is a result of the successful invasion of *Ilé-Ifè* by a man named *Odùduwà* who worshipped a female divinity with the same name. Idòwú explains that

. . . Odùduwà, was therefore, without doubt, a divinity who belonged to the man Odùduwà. It was he who brought this divinity with her own cult to the land. For a period at least, the conflict went against Òrìṣà-ńlá and the Oṛẹ̀lúerẹ̀ party; and that would mean that Odùduwà had prevailed over the indigenous divinity. As *Odùduwà* became established in the land, he would of course make people learn their revised article of belief, namely, that his own goddess was strongest and supreme; that it was she, and not Òrìṣà-ńlá, who created the earth. This must have gone down well with a good section of the people.

Later generations who belonged to both worlds found it not impossible to accept both versions of the story about agent of creation and make a conflation of them. This conflation is the one now generally accepted as the orthodox story of *Ilé-Ifè*: that it was indeed Òrìṣà-ńlá who got the commission from Olódùmarè but, through an accident, he forfeited the privilege to Odùduwà who thus became the actual creator of the solid earth. That this story is accepted without question today by the priests of Òrìṣà-ńlá is not strange: they also have the blood of *Odùduwà* in their veins.

As a result of the conflation, there has taken place in some localities a kind of hybridisation between the cult of Òrìṣà-ńlá and that of Odùduwà, which often appears as if one has been superimposed upon the other. For example, Igbó-Oṛà worships Òrìṣà-ńlá under the very transparent veneer of Odùduwà. One can easily discern the foundation cult to be that of Òrìṣà-ńlá and that the other one has been thinly spread over it. Idòwú, *Olódùmarè: God in Yorùbá Belief*, 25.

<sup>153</sup> Abímbólá, *Yorùbá Culture: A Philosophical Account*, 120.

<sup>154</sup> Ibid.

<sup>155</sup> Idòwú, *Olódùmarè: God in Yorùbá Belief*, 25.

<sup>156</sup> Ibid., 21, 19.

<sup>157</sup> Abímbólá, *Yorùbá Culture: A Philosophical Account*, 121.

<sup>158</sup> Ibid.

<sup>159</sup> Abímbólá, *Ifá Will Mend Our Broken World: Thoughts on Yorùbá Religion and Culture in Africa and the Diaspora*, 14-15. 18-19. A recent discussion with Yorùbá linguistic consultant Olabisi Animashaun revealed that in southwestern Nigeria, *Awùjalẹ̀* is a title commonly reserved for kings. Moreover, Animashaun made the point that the meaning of the words *pèrègún* and *lẹ̀lẹ̀* may be of some relevance in determining the meaning and significance of the word *Pèrègúnlẹ̀lẹ̀*. The word *pèrègún* refers to a plant used by trained Yorùbá healers in the preparation of sacred medicines. Interestingly, the word *lẹ̀lẹ̀*, which means "slender" and/or "malleable," accurately describes the size and flexible body of the *pèrègún*.

<sup>160</sup> Ibid., 21-22.

<sup>161</sup> Lawal, "Èjìwàpò: The Dialectics of Twoness in Yorùbá Art and Culture," 25.

<sup>162</sup> Ibid.

<sup>163</sup> Ibid.

<sup>164</sup> Lucas, *The Religion of the Yorùbás*, 45.

<sup>165</sup> Lawal, "Èjìwàpò: The Dialectics of Twoness in Yorùbá Art and Culture," 25.

<sup>166</sup> Idòwú, *Olódùmarè: God in Yorùbá Belief*, 22-27, 31-32. Ayọ̀ Bámgbòsé, "The Meaning of Olódùmarè: An Etymology of the Name of the Yorùbá High God.," *African Notes: Bulletin of the Institute of African Studies, University of Ibadan* 7, no. 1 (1972): 28-29.

<sup>167</sup> Lawal, "Èjìwàpò: The Dialectics of Twoness in Yorùbá Art and Culture," 26.

<sup>168</sup> Babatunde Lawal, "À Yà Gbó, À Yà Tó: New Perspectives on Edan Ògbóni," *African Arts* 28, no. 1 (1995): 37.

<sup>169</sup> Lawal, "Èjìwàpò: The Dialectics of Twoness in Yorùbá Art and Culture," 26.

<sup>170</sup> Ibid.

<sup>171</sup> William Russell Bascom, *Ifá Divination: Communication between Gods and Men in West Africa* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1969), 322-323. Bámgbòsé, "The Meaning of Olódùmarè: An Etymology of the Name of the Yorùbá High God.," 27.

<sup>172</sup> Abímbólá, *Yorùbá Culture: A Philosophical Account*, 47.

- <sup>173</sup> Lawal, "Èjìwàpò: The Dialectics of Twoness in Yorùbá Art and Culture," 26.
- <sup>174</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>175</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>176</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>177</sup> Idòwú, *Olódùmarè: God in Yorùbá Belief*, 30. Bámgbòsé, "The Meaning of Olódùmarè: An Etymology of the Name of the Yorùbá High God.," 27, 32.
- <sup>178</sup> Idòwú, *Olódùmarè: God in Yorùbá Belief*, 30.
- <sup>179</sup> Lawal, "À Yà Gbó, À Yà Tó: New Perspectives on Edan Ògbóni," 37.
- <sup>180</sup> S. O. Biobaku, "Ogboni: The Ègbá Senate" (paper presented at the Third West African Conference, Ibadan, 1949), 257. Lawal, "À Yà Gbó, À Yà Tó: New Perspectives on Edan Ògbóni," 41.
- <sup>181</sup> Ibid., 37.
- <sup>182</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>183</sup> Lawal, "Èjìwàpò: The Dialectics of Twoness in Yorùbá Art and Culture," 29.
- <sup>184</sup> Ibid., 29. Abímólá, *Ifá Will Mend Our Broken World: Thoughts on Yorùbá Religion and Culture in Africa and the Diaspora*, 176. Another name for *Ilẹ̀* is *Etígbère, Àbẹ̀ni Àdẹ̀*. Ibid., 69.
- <sup>185</sup> Lawal, "À Yà Gbó, À Yà Tó: New Perspectives on Edan Ògbóni," 37.
- <sup>186</sup> Lawal, "Èjìwàpò: The Dialectics of Twoness in Yorùbá Art and Culture," 29.
- <sup>187</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>188</sup> C. Laogun Adeoye, *Igbàgbó Àti Èsin Yorùbá* (Nigeria: Evans Brothers, 1989), 336. Oyèrónkẹ̀ Oyèwùmí would likely challenge the translation of *Obínrin b'Okúnrin* as "manlike woman." She would probably argue that this translation should make use of the terms "anatomic male (anamale)" and "anatomic female (anafemale)," both of which she coins in Oyèwùmí, *The Invention of Women: Making an African Sense of Western Gender Discourses*.
- <sup>189</sup> Lawal, "Èjìwàpò: The Dialectics of Twoness in Yorùbá Art and Culture," 29.
- <sup>190</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>191</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>192</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>193</sup> The multidimensional portrayal of human beings in Yorùbá cosmology is not limited to the story of the establishment and violation of humanity's primordial covenant with the natural world. This multidimensional, "dialectical" understanding of human beings is also evident in beliefs about the actual physical constitution of human beings. Babatunde Lawal writes in his analysis of the Yorùbá conception of the self (*èniyàn*) as both "spirit and matter" that
- The fact that the Yorùbá trace the origin of the human body to a piece of sculpture created by the artist deity Ọ̀bàtálá and then animated with a life force clearly shows that an individual has two aspects as well. The body represents the material self, and the life-force, the spiritual self. Its bilateral symmetry is sometimes said to reflect the contributions of one's parents to the self, the right being identified with the father and the left with the mother. Different parts of the body manifest this twoness as well: bone is identified as male and flesh female; semen male and breast milk female. Even the head is divided into an outer layer (*ori òde*) comprising the hair, forehead, eyes, nose, cheek, mouth, chin, and ears; that is, those features that physically identify a person . . . The inner head (*ori inú*), on the other hand, refers to an inner, spiritual core which, to the Yorùbá, enshrines the *àṣẹ* on which depends one's success or failure in life. Lawal, "Èjìwàpò: The Dialectics of Twoness in Yorùbá Art and Culture," 33.
- <sup>194</sup> Oyèwùmí, *The Invention of Women: Making an African Sense of Western Gender Discourses*, 13-14. For one of the more strident critiques of Oyèwùmí's work, see J. Lorand Matory, "Is There Gender in Yorùbá Culture?," in *Òrìṣá Devotion as World Religion: The Globalization of Yorùbá Religious Culture* ed. Jacob K. Olupona and Terry Rey (Madison, Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press, 2008).
- <sup>195</sup> Abímólá, "Yorùbá Traditional Religion," 222.
- <sup>196</sup> Abímólá, *Yorùbá Culture: A Philosophical Account*, 51.
- <sup>197</sup> Ibid., 52.
- <sup>198</sup> Ibid., 122.
- <sup>199</sup> Lawal, "Èjìwàpò: The Dialectics of Twoness in Yorùbá Art and Culture," 38.
- <sup>200</sup> Abímólá, *Yorùbá Culture: A Philosophical Account*, 51-52.

<sup>201</sup> Ibid., 52. The belief among the Yorùbá that *Olódùmarè* is not all-knowing and therefore regularly seeks the counsel of *Òrúnmilà* (*Ifá*) reminds us of *Òrúnmilà*'s originary status as *ẹlẹ̀rìí ipín a jé ju òdògùn* ("witness of destiny who is more effective than medicine"). *Òrúnmilà*'s originary status as a deity whose power is "more effective than medicine" reinscribes the limitations of human knowledge. While the production of medicines relies to a significant degree on the application of specialized human knowledge, *Òrúnmilà*'s power, which is more potent than any medicine prepared by a human being, lies beyond the grasp of human knowledge and thus cannot be contained within it. In this sense, *Òrúnmilà*'s originary status as *ẹlẹ̀rìí ipín a jé ju òdògùn* plays a considerable role in the conception of knowledge that helps frame Yorùbá epistemology.

<sup>202</sup> Ibid.

<sup>203</sup> Ibid., 118. Abimbólá, *Ifá: An Exposition of Ifá Literary Corpus*, 9.

<sup>204</sup> Wándé Abimbólá, "Aspects of Yorùbá Images of the Divine," *Dialogue and Alliance* 3, no. 2 (1989): 25.

<sup>205</sup> Abimbólá, *Yorùbá Culture: A Philosophical Account*, 118.

<sup>206</sup> Ibid.

<sup>207</sup> Ibid.

<sup>208</sup> Abimbólá, "Gods Versus Anti-Gods: Conflict and Resolution in the Yorùbá Cosmos," 76.

<sup>209</sup> While they possess a human dimension and are capable of benevolence, the *Àjé* (*Ẹlẹ̀yẹ* - "bird people," "Owner of birds," *Eníyán* - "negative people") are, along with the *Ajogun*, regarded by the Yorùbá primarily as negative forces in the universe that are antagonistic to the *Òrìṣà* and to human beings. The *Àjé* are able to travel across the cosmic divide separating the good or positive forces from the negative ones by relying on the "agency" of *Ènìyàn* ("humans") who have abandoned their positive human "nature" in favor of becoming *Eníyán* (*Àjé*). The Yorùbá believe that the *Àjé* "suck human blood, eat human flesh, and afflict human beings with diseases like impotence, stomach disorders, blood and liver diseases, etc."

Furthermore, it is believed that during "nocturnal" meetings in which they plot against humanity, the *Àjé* "take the form" of their "messenger" bird, the *ehuru*. Abimbólá, *Yorùbá Culture: A Philosophical Account*, 71. Abimbólá, "Gods Versus Anti-Gods: Conflict and Resolution in the Yorùbá Cosmos," 78. Another important detail concerning the *Àjé* has to do with the suffering they cause in the lives of human beings; the only hope for the resolution of cases of human suffering stemming from the activity of the *Àjé* lies in a particular form of sacrifice called *eese* and in the power of one's *orí* or *orí inú* (spiritual "head" or "inner head"). The *Ifá* verse cited below highlights the crucial role of one's *orí* in counteracting the power of the *Àjé*:

Ero Ipo,  
Ero Ofa,  
Orí mi ni o gba mi  
Lowo Ẹlẹ̀yẹ.

("Travellers on the road to Ipo,  
travellers on the road to Ofa,  
only your *Orí*  
can save you from the Ẹlẹ̀yẹ"). Ibid., 79.

<sup>210</sup> Ibid., 77-78.

<sup>211</sup> Ibid., 76.

<sup>212</sup> Abimbólá, *Yorùbá Culture: A Philosophical Account*, 118.

<sup>213</sup> Ibid., 119.

<sup>214</sup> Ibid., 47.

<sup>215</sup> Abimbólá, "Aspects of Yorùbá Images of the Divine," 25.

<sup>216</sup> Ibid.

<sup>217</sup> Ibid.

<sup>218</sup> Abimbólá, *Ifá: An Exposition of Ifá Literary Corpus*, 9.

<sup>219</sup> Ibid., 238.

<sup>220</sup> Ibid., 9.

<sup>221</sup> It is important to be aware that *Ifá didá* is predated by two other Yorùbá divination systems known as *Obi* and *Ẹ̀rìndínlógún*. *Obi* utilizes the *Obi Abata*, a sacred kola nut consisting of four sections, two of

which are regarded as male and two of which are regarded as female. This conception of the *Obi Abata* invokes the Yorùbá belief in male and female power as major forces within the cosmos. *Èḗrindinlógún* often involves the casting of cowrie shells and focuses upon the sixteen primary *Odù* of *Ifá*. For more information, see Abímbólá, *Ifá Will Mend Our Broken World: Thoughts on Yorùbá Religion and Culture in Africa and the Diaspora*, 173, 78; Afolabi A Epega, *Obi Divination* (Brooklyn: Athelia Henrietta Press, 2003); Baba Osundiya, *Awo Obi: Obi Divination in Theory and Practice* (Brooklyn: Athelia Henrietta Press, 2000).

<sup>222</sup> Ibid. Abímbólá, *Yorùbá Culture: A Philosophical Account*, 119.

<sup>223</sup> Abímbólá, *Ifá: An Exposition of Ifá Literary Corpus*, 9.

<sup>224</sup> Ibid., 10.

<sup>225</sup> This sense of mystery is also present in the Yorùbá belief that the *Òrìṣà Ifá* and his system of divination are both entirely incapable of predicting a person's death. Abímbólá firmly declares that "... nobody ever knows how or where he will die, or the date he will die. We don't go to Ifá to find out about such specifics. Olódumarè does not tell anybody about that. He is the owner of the Èmí, which also makes us breathe. But he never told anybody the secret of when he would withdraw it." Abímbólá, *Ifá Will Mend Our Broken World: Thoughts on Yorùbá Religion and Culture in Africa and the Diaspora*, 88.

<sup>226</sup> Ibid. *Òḡṣà* is one of the names of the Yorùbá divinity of creation *Òrìṣà-ńlá* (*Òḡṣààlà*, *Qbátálá*).

Abímbólá, *Ifá: An Exposition of Ifá Literary Corpus*, 238. Also, according to Yorùbá linguistic consultant Olabisi Animashaun, *Òḡṣà* is also sometimes used to refer generally to the *Òrìṣà*.

<sup>227</sup> Abímbólá, *Ifá Will Mend Our Broken World: Thoughts on Yorùbá Religion and Culture in Africa and the Diaspora*, 86. It is important to understand that the *Ifá* priesthood is comprised of five "classes."

The first and most important class is made up of priests known as *Babaláwo Olódù*. These are full *Ifá* priests who have been initiated into the secrets of *Odù*, the mythical wife of *Ifá*. They are the most qualified *Ifá* priests being at once both diviners and healers. The second class of *Ifá* priests consists of priests who have not been initiated into the secrets of *Odù* and who have all the paraphernalia of *Ifá* divination and are fully authorized to practise [sic] the art of divination. The third class of *Ifá* priests is made up of people who have all the paraphernalia of *Ifá* divination but who are forbidden to use them to divine for people outside their own households. To the fourth class are consigned those *Ifá* priests who are healers; they are full *Ifá* priests but they divine solely for healing purposes. The fifth class is made up of trained *Ifá* priests who are neither diviners nor healers but who have been trained as *Ifá* priests. They have all the paraphernalia of *Ifá* but they do not use them. Each of them is usually in some full time gainful employment but he attends the regular assemblies of *Ifá* priests and he maintains a disciplined attitude to life which is characteristic of *Ifá* priests. Abímbólá, *Ifá: An Exposition of Ifá Literary Corpus*, 13-14. Each level of the *Ifá* priesthood requires an initiation process that consists of a fairly generalized training program led by a "master-priest." Upon completion of the initiation process, new initiates then typically undergo specialized training in such "areas" as "healing, chanting of *Ifá* texts, and knowledge of rare texts in the literary corpus." Ibid., 18, 25. Additionally, it is interesting to note the relationship between the healing and chanting specialties. Abímbólá describes the relationship thusly: "Yorùbá medicine is very closely connected with incantations and powerful words that one must utter. Sometimes if you do not utter these words, medicines don't come alive. Most of these utterances, which are called *ofò ògèdè* and *àyájó* have their roots in *Ifá*." Abímbólá, *Ifá Will Mend Our Broken World: Thoughts on Yorùbá Religion and Culture in Africa and the Diaspora*, 72.

We should also clarify what it means for a priest of *Ifá* to "have *Odù*." "Having *Odù*" involves initiation into one of the deepest levels of mystical knowledge in the Yorùbá tradition. This special knowledge is regarded as highly sacred and mysterious and is therefore unavailable to the general public as well as most of the priestly classes of *Ifá*. The *Odù* tradition has its origin in the following narrative:

*Odù* was once a woman who was to be the wife of *Òrúnmilà*. She was betrothed to *Òrúnmilà*, but she didn't want to marry him because she said he was too old, so she decided to take her own life, and died. But on a visit of *Òrúnmilà* to *òrun*, he was able to bring her back. When she returned to the earth, she told *Òrúnmilà* to keep her in a secret place [a pot] so that only he could have access to her. Ibid., 86-87. Abímbólá, *Ifá: An Exposition of Ifá Literary Corpus*, 238. Moreover, there is a cultural injunction against the viewing of *Odù* by unauthorized persons, the consequences of which are believed to be quite severe, as reflected in the following statement:

Any *babaláwo* who does not have Odù, cannot see another person's. It is a secret. A *babaláwo* talks about what is inside his pot of Odù only on pains of death. If somebody who does not have Odù were to open another person's pot of Odù and peep inside it, that person would become blind instantaneously. There is no remedy for it. He would in addition fall into a state of stupor, so that the owner would find the intruder in the same spot upon his return! Abimbólá, *Ifá Will Mend Our Broken World: Thoughts on Yorùbá Religion and Culture in Africa and the Diaspora*, 87. The excerpt referenced below from Òfún Méjì, which is the sixteenth *Odù* ("chapter" or "book") of *Ifá*, reinscribes the cultural injunction just mentioned:

Ọmọdẹ̀ ọ̀ fojú bodù lásán,  
 Àgbà ọ̀ fojú bodù ní ọ̀fẹ̀,  
 Ènì ọ̀ bá fojú bodù,  
 Ó sì dawo.

("A child does not behold Odù for nothing, an adult does not see Odù free of charge, anybody who has cast his eyes on Odù, must be an *Ifá* priest"). Ibid. The presence and function of secrecy in the *Odù* tradition of the *Ifá* priesthood lends a considerable degree of credence to my analytical focus on mystery as an important motif in Yorùbá religious epistemology. For a larger, more detailed discussion of *Ifá* divination, the extensive initiatory training process involved in preparing individuals to become competent members of the *Ifá* priesthood, and the specialized training that takes place after initiation, see the first two chapters of Abimbólá, *Ifá: An Exposition of Ifá Literary Corpus*.

<sup>228</sup> Abimbólá, *Ifá Will Mend Our Broken World: Thoughts on Yorùbá Religion and Culture in Africa and the Diaspora*, 86.

<sup>229</sup> The Yorùbá believe that the ancestors (*Egún*, *Egúngún*, *Ará Ọrun*, *Ọkú Ọrun*) are adult human beings who, after having lived a productive, morally praiseworthy life that is acknowledged and respected by the community, become divinities through death. Overall, like the *Ọriṣà*, the *Ọkú Ọrun* function as protectors of humankind. However, the *Ọkú Ọrun* can grow angry if humans "neglect" their "duties" to one another and to the divinities, and under such circumstances the *Ọkú Ọrun* require the offender or offenders to make additional sacrifices in the interest of appeasement and the restoration of social and spiritual balance. Therefore, humans must always remember to honor the *Ọkú Ọrun*. The *Ifá* verse cited below which comes from the twelfth *Odù*, *Ọtúúrípọ̀n Méjì*, includes a narrative that illustrates why it is important to honor the *Ọkú Ọrun*:

Pèpé, awo ilé;  
 Ọtità, awo ọ̀de;  
 Alápáàndẹ̀dẹ̀ ló kọ̀lẹ̀ tán,  
 Ló kojúu rẹ̀ s'ódòdòdo,  
 Kò kanmi,  
 Kò kànkẹ̀;  
 Ó wáá kojúu rẹ̀ s'ódòdòdo.  
 A diá fún Oyěpolú,  
 Ọmọ ọ̀sòrò n'Ifẹ̀,  
 Èyí tí iyáa rẹ̀ ọ̀ fí sílẹ̀  
 Ní ọ̀un nikan soṣo lénje lénje.  
 Igbà tí Oyěpolú dàgbà tán,  
 Kò mọ ohun orò ilée babaa rẹ̀ mọ.  
 Gbogbo ǹkan rẹ̀ wáá dàrú.  
 Ó wá obinrin,  
 Kò rí.  
 Bẹ̀ẹ̀ ni kò rí ilé gbé.  
 Ló bá m'ẹ̀jì k'ẹ̀ẹ̀ta,  
 Ó looko aláwo.  
 Wọ̀n ní gbogbo ǹkan orò ilée babaa rẹ̀  
 T'ó ti gbàgbé

Ló òdà á láàmú.  
 Wọn ní kí ó lọ  
 Sí ojú-oòrì àwọn babaa rẹ,  
 Kí ó máa lẹ́júbà.  
 Igbà tí ó ẹ̀ bẹ̀ẹ̀ tán,  
 Ló wáá bẹ̀rẹ̀ sí í gbádùn araa rẹ.  
 Ó òlájé,  
 Ó lóbìnrin,  
 Ó sì bímọ̀ pẹ̀lú.  
 Ó ní bẹ̀ẹ̀ gégé ni àwọn awo òún wí.  
 Pẹ̀pẹ̀, awo ilé;  
 Òtítà, awo òde;  
 Alápáàndèdè ló kólé tán,  
 Ló kojúu rẹ̀ s'òdòdò,  
 Kò kanmi,  
 Kò kànkè,  
 Ó wáá kojúu rẹ̀ s'òdòdò.  
 A díá f'Óyèpolú;  
 Ọmọ̀ isòrò n'Ifẹ̀.  
 Oyèpolú ò mọ̀kan.  
 B'ótí lẹ̀ ẹ̀ kọ̀ọ̀ ta á lẹ̀ ni,  
 Èmi ò mò.  
 Oyèpolú ò mọ̀kan.  
 Gbogbo isòrò ọ̀run,  
 Ẹ̀ sure wá,  
 Ẹ̀ wáá gb'orò yíi ẹ̀.

("Pèpè is the Ifá priest of the House;  
 Òtítà is the Ifá priest of Outside;  
 It is the Ethiopian swallow who builds his nest  
 and curves its entrance downward.  
 The nest is neither on water  
 nor clearly on dry land.  
 Its entrance just droops down in a curve.  
 Ifá divination was performed for Oyèpolú,  
 offspring of sacrifice-makers at Ifẹ̀  
 whose mother would die and leave him  
 all alone in his early childhood.  
 When Oyèpolú grew up,  
 he did not know the sacrifices and taboos of his father's household.  
 His life became confused.  
 He looked for a wife to marry,  
 but he found none.  
 In addition, he had no comfort at home.  
 He added two cowry-shells to three,  
 and went to an Ifá priest for divination.  
 He was told that the sacrifices and taboos of his father's household  
 which he had neglected  
 were the cause of his troubles.  
 He was told to go  
 to the graves of his ancestors  
 to beg for power and authority.  
 After he had done as he was ordered,  
 he started to enjoy his life.

He started to have money.  
 He had a wife.  
 And he had children.  
 He said that was exactly what his Ifá priest had predicted.  
 Pèpé is the Ifá priest of the House;  
 Òtìtá is the Ifá priest of Outside;  
 It is the Ethiopian swallow who builds its nest  
 and curves its entrance downward;  
 The nest is neither on water  
 nor clearly on dry land.  
 Its entrance just droops down in a curve.  
 Ifá divination was performed for Oyěpolú,  
 offspring of sacrifice-makers at Ifẹ.  
 Oyěpolú does not know anything.  
 Whether palm-oil is the first thing to spill on the ground,  
 I do not know.  
 Oyěpolú does not know anything.  
 Whether alcohol is the first thing to spill on the ground,  
 I do not know.  
 Oyěpolú does not know anything.  
 All sacrifice-makers of heaven  
 come quickly  
 and help to perform this sacrifice"). Abimbólá, *Ifá: An Exposition of Ifá Literary Corpus*, 27, 151-

160, 248.

<sup>230</sup> Abimbólá, *Yorùbá Culture: A Philosophical Account*, 119-120.

<sup>231</sup> Andrew Apter, *Black Critics and Kings: The Hermeneutics of Power in Yorùbá Society* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 99.

<sup>232</sup> The facilitation of social cohesion and communal well-being seems to be a relatively common function of Yorùbá festivals in many regions of southwestern Nigeria. Professor Jacob Olúpòná's analysis of the *Odun Oba* festival, which takes place in the forest town of Ondo, brings to mind the function of the *Yemoja* festival:

To all intents and purposes the ceremony exhibits the characteristics of a new year celebration 'when the life forces are at their lowest ebb,' thus making the rejuvenation of the cosmos absolutely necessary. The intent of the festival is to energize the cosmos, to transform its profane nature into a life-supporting sacred power through a recreation of the 'primordial age,' the pure time of origin.

Olúpòná, *Kingship, Religion, and Rituals in a Nigerian Community: A Phenomenological Study of Ondo Yorùbá Festivals*, 70.

<sup>233</sup> Abimbólá, *Yorùbá Culture: A Philosophical Account*, 128. *Yemoja*'s earlier name appears in some of the originary narratives from the *Ifá* literary corpus.

<sup>234</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>235</sup> Apter, *Black Critics and Kings: The Hermeneutics of Power in Yorùbá Society*, 100.

<sup>236</sup> Cornelius O. Adepegba, "Associated Place-Names and Sacred Icons of Seven Yorùbá Deities," in *Òrìṣà Devotion as World Religion: The Globalization of Yorùbá Religious Culture* ed. Jacob K. Olupona and Terry Rey (Madison, Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press, 2008), 109.

<sup>237</sup> Abimbólá, *Yorùbá Culture: A Philosophical Account*, 128.

<sup>238</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>239</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>240</sup> Apter, *Black Critics and Kings: The Hermeneutics of Power in Yorùbá Society*, 99, 104.

<sup>241</sup> *Ibid.*, 98.

<sup>242</sup> *Ibid.*, 100.

<sup>243</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>244</sup> *Ibid.*, 101.

<sup>245</sup> *Ibid.*, 100-101.

<sup>246</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>247</sup> Ibid. Regarding the structure of these prayers, Apter writes that “Each prayer consists of two basic components; an opening invocation, either a praise (*oriki*) or a proverb (*òwe*) in parallel construction, and the specific request itself. Both components can be uttered in sequence by one senior priestess, or they can be shared between two priestesses.” Ibid.

<sup>248</sup> Ibid.

<sup>249</sup> Ibid. See the final paragraph of page 101 in Apter’s *Black Critics and Kings* for a more thorough discussion of the *Àtá*’s retinue and the symbolic significance of his paraphernalia.

<sup>250</sup> Ibid., 102-103. For one of the actual praise chants uttered by diviners during the *Àtá*’s arrival, see pages 102 and 103 of Apter’s *Black Critics and Kings*.

<sup>251</sup> Ibid., 103-104. Apter uses the negatively charged Western-derived term “witchcraft/wizardry” in his translation of the first line of this chant. In place of the term “witchcraft/wizardry,” I have substituted the term “spiritual power,” which I think is less rooted in Western cultural assumptions and inclinations.

<sup>252</sup> Ibid., 104.

<sup>253</sup> Ibid.

<sup>254</sup> Ibid., 104-105.

<sup>255</sup> Wándé Abímbólá challenges the widespread tendency in the West to associate the idea of “mounting” with “spirit possession” in Yorùbá ritual practice. He asserts that

‘Climb’ is the best translation for the idea of “possession.” The idea of “mounting” is misleading.

This probably comes from the Christian idea that the angels reside in the sky and the Holy Spirit

which also dwells in the sky ‘perches’ on people like a bird. But in the case of Yorùbá religion, the

Òriṣà reside inside the earth from where they would ‘climb’ their devotees. The word ‘gùn’ in

Yorùbá, which means ‘to climb,’ is applied to every occasion a person lifts himself up or ascends to a

higher level. There is a separate word for ‘to mount,’ like to mount a baby on your back, and that

word is ‘pòn.’ ‘Gùn,’ which means ‘to climb,’ is the appropriate word for what is usually translated

as ‘possess.’ Abímbólá, *Ifá Will Mend Our Broken World: Thoughts on Yorùbá Religion and*

*Culture in Africa and the Diaspora*, 152-53. Apter, *Black Critics and Kings: The Hermeneutics of Power in Yorùbá Society*, 104-05.

<sup>256</sup> Ibid.

<sup>257</sup> Ibid. See the second to last paragraph on page 105 of Apter’s *Black Critics and Kings* for a discussion of some of the praise language exuberantly uttered on behalf of the *Yèyéolókun* during her procession into Ayede.

<sup>258</sup> Ibid.

<sup>259</sup> Ibid., 105-106.

<sup>260</sup> Ibid.

<sup>261</sup> Some other epistemologically significant concepts or motifs encoded in the *Yemoja* festival may include rhythmic knowing, spirit knowing (by virtue of being “climbed” by an *Òriṣà*), the need for the material management of spiritual power, and knowing through the practice of sacrifice (*ebò*).

<sup>262</sup> Ephirim-Donkor, *African Spirituality: On Becoming Ancestors*, 17. Anthony Ephirim-Donkor, “Akom: The Ultimate Mediumship Experience among the Akan,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 76, no. 1 (2008): 57. Opoku, *West African Traditional Religion*, 99.

<sup>263</sup> K. Nkansa Kyeremateng, *The Akans of Ghana: Their Customs, History, and Institutions* (Accra: Optimum Design and Publishing Service, 2004), 26.

<sup>264</sup> Quoted from Kyeremateng, *The Akans of Ghana: Their Customs, History, and Institutions*, 26.

<sup>265</sup> The Volta river is the largest river in Ghana, extending one thousand miles with a basin that contains close to eighty percent of the country’s total surface area.

<sup>266</sup> Kyeremateng, *The Akans of Ghana: Their Customs, History, and Institutions*, 9.

<sup>267</sup> Opoku, *West African Traditional Religion*, 140. It should be acknowledged that not all members of the Akan community share the belief in a world filled with spiritual beings whose existence is not dependent upon the human imagination. For example, Nana Boafo-Ansah, a traditional Akan elder interviewed by Kwame Gyekye, holds the view that the *ɔkra* (“soul”) and *sunsum* (“spirit”) do not exist, and that *Onyame*, the ancestors (*Nsamanfo*) and other lesser deities (*abosom*) are nothing more than “mental constructs.” Gyekye, *An Essay on African Philosophical Thought: The Akan Conceptual Scheme*, 48.

<sup>268</sup> What I intend to convey in using the term “unpredictability” is expressed by the combined meaning of the Akan terms *asiane* (unfortunate “accident”) and *akrade* (“luck” or “fortune”). The presence of these

concepts discloses a belief among the Akan in the role of chance in human existence. However, as Gyekye observes, it is important to be aware that the idea of chance in Akan thought is always connected to a strong belief in causality. In an analysis of being and causality in Akan philosophy, Gyekye writes that “accident . . . and luck . . . are believed to operate solely on the level of human nature and purpose, not on the level of the order of nature. That is to say, in nature there are no chances or accidents. For them [the Akan] . . . a chance event as such would in fact be an event whose cause is unknown, not one lacking a cause.”

Gyekye, *An Essay on African Philosophical Thought: The Akan Conceptual Scheme*, 82.

<sup>269</sup> In a discussion with Ghanaian Professor Emmanuel Lartey, I learned that the meaning of the Akan concept of *awawa* is most closely associated with the idea of mystery as a spiritual or cosmological principle.

<sup>270</sup> Gyekye, *An Essay on African Philosophical Thought: The Akan Conceptual Scheme*, 87.

<sup>271</sup> Ibid., 86. Ephirim-Donkor, *African Spirituality: On Becoming Ancestors*, 4. Ephirim-Donkor, "Akomi: The Ultimate Mediumship Experience among the Akan," 75.

<sup>272</sup> Gyekye, *An Essay on African Philosophical Thought: The Akan Conceptual Scheme*, 72.

<sup>273</sup> Ibid., 70.

<sup>274</sup> Ibid., 68. Opoku, *West African Traditional Religion*, 55-56, 72-73. Ephirim-Donkor, *African Spirituality: On Becoming Ancestors*, 4.

<sup>275</sup> Opoku, *West African Traditional Religion*, 100.

<sup>276</sup> Paul A. Kotey, "Human Beings," in *Hippocrene Concise Dictionary: Twi-English/English-Twi* (New York: Hippocrene Books, 1998), 236.

<sup>277</sup> Gyekye, *An Essay on African Philosophical Thought: The Akan Conceptual Scheme*, 16. Gyekye discerns an important etymological relationship between the Akan term for “proverb” (*ēbē*, the plural form of which is *mmē*), and the Akan term for “palm tree” (*abē*, the plural form of which is also *mmē*):

It turns out that there is an affinity between the characteristic features of the palm tree (*abē*) and those of the proverb (*ēbē*). Products like palm oil, palm wine, broom, palm-kernel oil, and soap can be derived from the palm tree. The point to note is that these products all result from processes such as distillation. The palm-kernel oil or the palm wine is not immediately obvious to the eye as the juice of the orange is, for instance; they lie deep in the palm tree. In the same way, when someone says something that is not immediately understandable, the Akans say *wabu ebe*, “he has created or uttered a proverb.” In such a case one must go deeply into the statement in order to get at its meaning. The meaning of a proverb is thus not obvious or direct; it is profound, not superficial, the distillate of the reflective process. Ibid., 16-17.

<sup>278</sup> K. A. Busia, "The African World-View," in *African Heritage: Intimate Views of the Black Africans from Life, Lore, and Literature*, ed. Jacob Drachler (New York: Crowell Collier and Macmillan, 1963), 149.

<sup>279</sup> John S. Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy* (New York: Doubleday, 1970), 86.

<sup>280</sup> See also K. A. Agyakwa, "Akan Epistemology and Western Tradition: A Philosophical Approach to the Problem of Educational Modernization in Ghana" (Ph.D. diss., Columbia University, 1975). In addition, see W. E. Abraham, *The Mind of Africa* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962); Danquah, *The Akan Doctrine of God: A Fragment of Gold Coast Ethics and Religion*.

<sup>281</sup> Gyekye, *An Essay on African Philosophical Thought: The Akan Conceptual Scheme*, 69.

<sup>282</sup> Ibid.

<sup>283</sup> Opoku, *West African Traditional Religion*, 23-24.

<sup>284</sup> Gyekye, *An Essay on African Philosophical Thought: The Akan Conceptual Scheme*, 70.

<sup>285</sup> Ibid.

<sup>286</sup> The *Onyamedua* (“tree of Onyame”) may be the lone exception to this rule. Opoku notes that

The only visible symbol of worship for Onyame was the “Onyamedua” (tree of God), which stood outside houses, shrines, and palaces, and served as a visible symbol of the people’s dependence on him [Onyame]. A pot was put in the forked branch of the “Onyamedua” and rain water gathered in the pot. This water, “Nyankonsu” – God’s water – was used by the head of the household to sprinkle the inmates of the house daily, or as the occasion demanded it, and bless them. Women who had to leave the houses during their monthly period would be purified at the end of the period before they returned home, by having the water in the pot sprinkled on them. At the “Onyamedua” sacrifices of

food and palm wine were made to Onyame occasionally. Opoku, "Aspects of Akan Worship," 297. Opoku also makes the point that, in Akan belief, *Onyame* is the "ultimate Recipient" of all "sacrifices and offerings," regardless of "whether the people who make them are aware of it or not." Ibid.

<sup>287</sup> This point was made by Professor Dovlo during an informal lecture on African religions that I attended at the University of Ghana, Legon in the summer of 2007.

<sup>288</sup> Paul A. Kotey, "Okomfo," in *Hippocrene Concise Dictionary: Twi-English/English-Twi* (New York: Hippocrene Books, 1998), 121.

<sup>289</sup> Opoku, *West African Traditional Religion*, 30.

<sup>290</sup> Professor Dovlo noted during the 2007 lecture mentioned above that the Akan conceive *Onyame* as "pure spirit." Thus, in much of Ghana, *Onyame* is understood to be a gender-less being.

<sup>291</sup> Opoku, *West African Traditional Religion*, 15. Gyekye, *An Essay on African Philosophical Thought: The Akan Conceptual Scheme*, 70. Some of Gyekye's English translations of these Akan religious appellations are very familiar to the Christian theological tradition (one example is his translation of *Brekirihunuade* as "omniscient"). One wonders if such translations are the result of the conscious or subconscious adoption of Christian categories that have been forcibly and extensively disseminated in Ghana and throughout the rest of the African continent.

<sup>292</sup> Ibid., 71.

<sup>293</sup> Paul A. Kotey, "Healer," in *Hippocrene Concise Dictionary: Twi-English/English-Twi* (New York: Hippocrene Books, 1998), 233; Jane Parish, "The Dynamics of Witchcraft and Indigenous Shrines among the Akan," *Africa: Journal of the International African Institute* 69, no. 3 (1999): 442.

<sup>294</sup> Gyekye, *An Essay on African Philosophical Thought: The Akan Conceptual Scheme*, 71.

<sup>295</sup> J. B. Danquah nuances our understanding of *Onyame* as *Ɔdomankoma*. In response to the assertion made by German missionary and philologist Johann Gottlieb Christaller and others that the appellation *Ɔdomankoma* refers to the idea of *Onyame* as the creator of *all things*, Danquah writes that

. . . this is going a little beyond the Akan original. It is absolutely imperative that the student should, from the very beginning, see into the depth of the Akan mind and recognize that the phrase [*Oboo Ade Nyinaa*] is not "*Oboo nneema nyinaa*," "he created all things," but rather, "*Oboo Ade Nyinaa*," "he created all (the) thing." There is no distributiveness about the created universe of *Odomankoma*. If there were, it would not be spoken of as a *uni*-verse, a single thing turning upon itself, a wheel within its own gigantic wheel. And yet the Akan speaks of the undistributed, undimensional "Thing" with the adjective of plurality and severality – *all, nyinaa*. Ordinarily, *all, nyinaa*, goes with the plural *nneema*, things, not the singular *Ade*, Thing. But the Akan considered it superfluous to force a comparison where there is indeed none. The intention is to call attention to the underlying unity of created universe: it is the Thing, the absolute Thing, beyond which there is nothing else, apart from nothing itself, that *Odomankoma* created. Danquah, *The Akan Doctrine of God: A Fragment of Gold Coast Ethics and Religion*, 64.

<sup>296</sup> Akan conceptions of *Onyame* and other important cultural meanings in Akan society are often conveyed in *adinkra* symbols. The name "adinkra" is associated with a national cloth of Ghana that bears the same name. One theory of the origin of the term "adinkra" holds that it derives from the Twi words *di* and *nkra*, which together mean "to say goodbye." In Ghana, *adinkra* cloth is customarily worn to bid farewell to the deceased and to display sympathy for their grieving families. Frequently embellished with symbols that express a range of ideas regarding the nature of existence, *adinkra* cloth is often worn at funerals and other ceremonies commemorating the dead. The *adinkra* symbol pictured here is *Gye Nyame* ("Only *Onyame*" or "Except *Onyame*"). It signifies the singular, "unsurpassable" nature of *Onyame* as well as *Onyame's* "dependability." N. K. Dzobo, "African Symbols and Proverbs as Sources of Knowledge and Truth," in *Person and Community: Ghanaian Philosophical Studies, I*, ed. Kwasi Wiredu and Kwame Gyekye (Washington, D.C.: Council for Research in Values and Philosophy, 1992), 89-90. For more on the history of *adinkra* symbols and the various meanings they convey, see A. Kayper Mensah, *Sankofa: Adinkra Poems* (Tema: Ghana Publishing Corporation, 1972); A. K. Quarcoo, *The Language of Adinkra Patterns* (Lagon: Institute of African Studies, University of Ghana, 1972).

<sup>297</sup> Peggy Appiah, Kwame Anthony Appiah and Ivor Gyeman-Duah, *Bu Me Be: Proverbs of the Akans* (Banbury: Ayebia Clarke Limited, 2007), 214. For important earlier works on Akan oral traditions, see C. A. Akrofi, *Twi Mmbosem* (London: Macmillan, 1958); J. G. Christaller, *Three Thousand Six Hundred Ghanaian Proverbs: From the Asante and Fante Languages* (Basel: Basel Evangelical Missionary Society,

- 1879); K. Y. Daaku, *Oral Traditions of Adanse, Assin-Twifo, Dankyira, Sefwi, Ahwiaso and Bekwai* (Legon: Institute of African Studies, University of Ghana, 1974); J. S. Mensah, *Asantesem Ne Mmɛbusem Bi* (Kumasi: Private Printing, 1966); R. S. Rattray, *Ashanti Proverbs* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1916).
- <sup>298</sup> Opoku, *West African Traditional Religion*, 153.
- <sup>299</sup> Gyekye, *An Essay on African Philosophical Thought: The Akan Conceptual Scheme*, 132.
- <sup>300</sup> *Ibid.*, 131-32.
- <sup>301</sup> *Ibid.*, 133. Gyekye identifies two “categories” of moral “evil” in Akan thought: *bɔne* and *musuo*. *Bɔne*, which Gyekye describes as “ordinary moral evil,” includes such acts as “theft, adultery, lying, backbiting (*kɔkɔnsa*), and so on.” The second category, *musuo*, which Gyekye terms “extraordinary moral evil,” consists principally of taboos (*akyiwade*) – that is, acts that not only “bring shame to the whole community, but also . . . invite the wrath of the supernatural powers.” The avoidance of *musuo* among the Akan is implied by the saying, *musuo ye ade a yekyi* (“*musuo* is something we abominate”). *Musuo* includes acts such as “suicide, incest, having sexual intercourse in the bush, rape, murder, stealing things dedicated to the deities or ancestral spirits, etc.” *Ibid.*
- <sup>302</sup> *Ibid.* Opoku, *West African Traditional Religion*, 153.
- <sup>303</sup> Appiah, *Bu Me Be: Proverbs of the Akans*, 215.
- <sup>304</sup> *Ibid.* The English translation of *Qbra yɛ ku* is found in Kwame Gyekye, *African Cultural Values: An Introduction* (Accra, Ghana: Sankofa Publishing Company, 1996), 46.
- <sup>305</sup> During an informal lecture that I attended in July of 2011 in the Anansekwa forest of Mampong, Ghana, Professor Kofi Asare Opoku stressed the point that the tendency in the West to reduce the significance of Kwaku Ananse to that of a trickster figure is highly misleading. For among the Akan (especially the Asante), Kwaku Ananse functions as a “metaphor” for the autonomous creative power of *Onyame*, the power from which springs everything comprising the natural world. Hence, according to Professor Opoku, in lieu of directly referring to *Onyame* in everyday speech, which is considered to be “disrespectful,” the Akan refer instead to Kwaku Ananse as *Ananse Kokuroko*, which means “the Big or Great Spider.”
- <sup>306</sup> Appiah, *Bu Me Be: Proverbs of the Akans*, 216.
- <sup>307</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>308</sup> *Ibid.*, 204.
- <sup>309</sup> *Ibid.*, 62.
- <sup>310</sup> G. T. and L. Enu-Kwesi Odamtten, “Conservation and Cultivation of Medicinal Plants in Ghana,” (Legon: Department of Botany, University of Ghana, 2001), 60.
- <sup>311</sup> Appiah, *Bu Me Be: Proverbs of the Akans*, 201.
- <sup>312</sup> Ephirim-Donkor, *African Spirituality: On Becoming Ancestors*, 76.
- <sup>313</sup> *Ibid.*, 216-17.
- <sup>314</sup> Kwasi Wiredu, “Death and the Afterlife in African Culture,” in *Person and Community: Ghanaian Philosophical Studies, I*, ed. Kwasi Wiredu and Kwame Gyekye (Washington, D.C.: Council for Research in Values and Philosophy, 1992), 143.
- <sup>315</sup> Appiah, *Bu Me Be: Proverbs of the Akans*, 191.
- <sup>316</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>317</sup> *Ibid.*, 123.
- <sup>318</sup> Gyekye, *An Essay on African Philosophical Thought: The Akan Conceptual Scheme*, 48.
- <sup>319</sup> Appiah, *Bu Me Be: Proverbs of the Akans*, 61.
- <sup>320</sup> *Ibid.*, 62.
- <sup>321</sup> *Ibid.*, 204.
- <sup>322</sup> *Ibid.*, 222.
- <sup>323</sup> Abraham, *The Mind of Africa*; Danquah, *The Akan Doctrine of God: A Fragment of Gold Coast Ethics and Religion*; Gyekye, *An Essay on African Philosophical Thought: The Akan Conceptual Scheme*; Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*.
- <sup>324</sup> Appiah, *Bu Me Be: Proverbs of the Akans*, 225.
- <sup>325</sup> *Ibid.*, 216.
- <sup>326</sup> *Ibid.*, 189.
- <sup>327</sup> Danquah, *The Akan Doctrine of God: A Fragment of Gold Coast Ethics and Religion*, 66.

<sup>328</sup> K. A. Busia, "The Ashanti of the Gold Coast," in *African Worlds: Studies in the Cosmological Ideas and Social Values of African Peoples*, ed. Daryll Forde (London: Oxford University Press, 1968), 197.

<sup>329</sup> For examples of materialist interpretations, see M. Fortes, *Kinship and the Social Order* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1969), 199; Robert A. Lystad, *The Ashanti, a Proud People* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1958), 155; Peter Kwasi Sarpong, *Ghana in Retrospect: Some Aspects of the Ghanaian Culture* (Accra: Ghana Publishing Corp., 1974), 37; P. A. Twumasi, *Medical Systems in Ghana* (Accra: Ghana Publishing Corp., 1975), 22.

<sup>330</sup> Gyekye, *An Essay on African Philosophical Thought: The Akan Conceptual Scheme*, 90.

<sup>331</sup> *Ibid.*, 72-73.

<sup>332</sup> *Ibid.*, 72, 91, 93, 252.

<sup>333</sup> *Ibid.*, 91.

<sup>334</sup> *Ibid.*, 93.

<sup>335</sup> On a practical level, this is all the more true if we accept as valid an observation made by Madeline Manoukian:

At any time a new *obosom* [sing. *abosom*] may be 'created' by a priest ordering a man or woman possessed by a spirit to make a shrine: the possessed one will dance sometimes for two days to drums and singing, and then suddenly leap up and catch something in his hands or plunge into a river and bring up something; this object will be 'cooled' by sprinkling water on it, placed in the brass pan and quickly covered. Various ingredients will then be added, while special prayers are repeated and sacrifices made. The possessed person will become a priest of this new *obosom*. Manoukian, *Akan and Ga-Adangme Peoples*, 56.

<sup>336</sup> Opoku, *West African Traditional Religion*, 56.

<sup>337</sup> During the lecture I attended in Ghana in 2007, Professor Elom Dovlo identified millet-infused water as a beverage traditionally used in the pouring of libations in Ghana and other parts of West Africa.

<sup>338</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>339</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>340</sup> Opoku, *West African Traditional Religion*, 56.

<sup>341</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>342</sup> This translation was provided by Professor Emmanuel Lartey of Emory University.

<sup>343</sup> Opoku, *West African Traditional Religion*, 56.

<sup>344</sup> *Ibid.*, 56-57

<sup>345</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>346</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>347</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>348</sup> *Ibid.*, 55. John Pobee, "Aspects of African Traditional Religion," *Sociological Analysis* 37, no. 1 (1976): 11.

<sup>349</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>350</sup> *Ibid.*, 10. Gyekye, *An Essay on African Philosophical Thought: The Akan Conceptual Scheme*, 73.

<sup>351</sup> Opoku, *West African Traditional Religion*, 55. Drawing on some of the work of the British colonial captain and anthropologist R. S. Rattray, Madeline Manoukian offers the following analysis of the *Tete Abosom*:

Among the Ashanti . . . the four main *abosom* are *Tano*, *Bea*, *Apo*, and *Bosomtwe*. *Tano* is the greatest of these. They were all sons of 'Nyame, sent by him to earth to receive and confer blessings on mankind. They became the principal lakes and rivers of Ashanti. All other rivers are regarded as being 'sons of 'Nyame' and as containing some of his essence or spiritual power, which is transmitted through water . . . All other *abosom* are lineally descended from the four main ones, though the association of them with 'Nyame is neither self-evident nor easy to discover. Manoukian, *Akan and Ga-Adangme Peoples*, 55-56. R. S. Rattray, *Ashanti* (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1923), 145-146.

<sup>351</sup> Opoku, *West African Traditional Religion*, 65. The following background information on *Tano* provided by Opoku is indicative of the robustly complex cultural beliefs and traditions associated with individual deities in Ghana:

The worship of *Tano*, the river god, is prominent in Ghana and the Ivory Coast, especially among people of Akan origin. *Tano* is believed to be a son of God and, according to an Akan myth, an arch-rival of his elder brother, *Bea*, also a river god. *Bea* was the favourite of Onyame, who wanted

to reward his dutiful son by giving him the fertile and well-wooded lands when he reached manhood; the dry and infertile lands would go to his disobedient son, *Tanɔ*. God disclosed his intentions to his messenger, the goat, and asked him to summon the boys to come and receive their lot. It turned out, however, that *Tanɔ* was the goat's favourite. The goat disclosed the secret to *Tanɔ* and told him to go to his father's house early in the morning, disguised as Bea, his brother, to receive his lot. Afterwards, the goat went to deliver the message to Bea, but added that there was no need to hurry because God was busy. Bea, therefore, took his time, feeling sure that he would get his just share. Early the next morning, *Tanɔ* dressed up and went to God, disguised as his brother, and was given the rich fertile lands. Later on, Bea went to his father and the mistake was discovered, but nothing could be done about it. Bea was, therefore, given the dry and infertile lands as his inheritance. To this day, the goat is taboo to all worshippers of Bea and *Tanɔ*.

*Tanɔ* . . . is believed to be the father of such gods as *Ta Mensa*, and *Ta Kese*. He is not only a river god; evidence from Asante shows that he is also regarded as the god of thunder and is propitiated during thunderstorms. In the olden days he was also consulted in times of war and was regarded as a protector of the Asante nation. *Tanɔ* is still an important deity and is consulted in times of crisis.

Ibid.

<sup>352</sup> Pobee, "Aspects of African Traditional Religion," 10.

<sup>353</sup> Ibid., 11.

<sup>354</sup> Opoku, *West African Traditional Religion*, 55.

<sup>355</sup> Manoukian, *Akan and Ga-Adangme Peoples*, 55.

<sup>356</sup> Peter Kwasi Sarpong, "The Sacred Stools of Ashanti," *Anthropos* 62(1967): 9.

<sup>357</sup> Ibid.

<sup>358</sup> Ibid.

<sup>359</sup> Ibid., 9-10. Opoku, *West African Traditional Religion*, 60-61.

<sup>360</sup> Ibid., 65.

<sup>361</sup> Sarpong, "The Sacred Stools of Ashanti," 10.

<sup>362</sup> Ibid. Ephirim-Donkor, "Akom: The Ultimate Mediumship Experience among the Akan," 59. For a detailed discussion of the extensive process of traditional priestly initiation in Akan culture, see pages 74-90 of Opoku, *West African Traditional Religion*.

<sup>363</sup> Ibid., 155.

<sup>364</sup> Ibid.

<sup>365</sup> Sarpong, "The Sacred Stools of Ashanti," 10.

<sup>366</sup> Ibid.

<sup>367</sup> Ibid.

<sup>368</sup> Ibid.

<sup>369</sup> M. J. Field, "Some New Shrines of the Gold Coast and Their Significance," *Africa* 13(1940): 145.

<sup>370</sup> Opoku, "Aspects of Akan Worship," 288-289.

<sup>371</sup> Anthony Ephirim-Donkor argues that the term *Ɔkomfo*, which is used to refer to a priest or priestess who is also a trained medium, is to be distinguished from the terms *Ɔsofo* ("priest/priestess") and *Ninsenyi* ("doctor"). This is so because, according to Donkor,

. . . the *okomfo* alone was uniquely trained to enter into a trance (*kom*). These ancient references, especially *osofu*, have been usurped by western-trained Akan clergy, to the extent that they now refer condescendingly to their more ancient counterparts as "fetish priests" rather than traditional priests.

Yet, among the many clients of the *akomfo* are some western-trained clergy, who visit *akomfo* surreptitiously for fear of being labeled hypocrites . . . . Ephirim-Donkor, "Akom: The Ultimate

Mediumship Experience among the Akan," 59. Donkor identifies another distinction when he writes that "Privately . . . an *okomfo* is more a diviner than an *osofu* (priest) proper, since an *osofu* does not prophesy (*kom*) like a medium, at least not in public." Ibid., 65.

<sup>372</sup> Opoku, "Aspects of Akan Worship," 289.

<sup>373</sup> Ibid., 291. Ephirim-Donkor, "Akom: The Ultimate Mediumship Experience among the Akan," 59, 73.

The *Ɔkomfo* is trained to adjust his/her performance in response to the arrival of multiple deities. Opoku writes, "It should be mentioned that at such gatherings for public worship, it is not only the deity being worshiped who makes his appearance; other deities, who are believed to be attracted by the music, descend

on the priest, who at once changes his dress and varies his steps to portray the characteristics of the visiting deity." Opoku, "Aspects of Akan Worship," 291.

<sup>374</sup> The word *Nsie-ye* ("the act of a spirit alighting on an okomfo") comes from the root word *sie* ("to alight"). Ephirim-Donkor, "Akom: The Ultimate Mediumship Experience among the Akan," 71, 73.

Opoku, "Aspects of Akan Worship," 289.

<sup>375</sup> Ibid.

<sup>376</sup> Ibid.

<sup>377</sup> Ibid.

<sup>378</sup> J. H. Nketia, *Drumming in Akan Communities of Ghana* (Legon: University of Ghana, 1963), 99.

According to Nketia, these dances include *Ntwaaho* ("whirling"), *Adaban* ("circling"), *Abɔfoɔ* ("hunters' dance"), *Abɔfotia* ("minor hunters' dance"), *Ta ksse bekɔ Takyiman* ("the great Ta will go to Techiman"), *Akamu* ("outburst"), *Sapa* ("dance of enjoyment"), *Dwenini katakyi* ("valiant ram"), *Denkyemkye* ("hat of the crocodile"), *Asɔnkɔ, Okwaduɔ bedi mpreɔ* ("the antelope will receive shots"), and *Samrawa*. Ibid., 94-99.

<sup>379</sup> Ibid., 94.

<sup>380</sup> Opoku, "Aspects of Akan Worship," 290.

<sup>381</sup> Nketia, *Drumming in Akan Communities of Ghana*, 94-95.

<sup>382</sup> Opoku, "Aspects of Akan Worship," 290.

<sup>383</sup> Nketia, *Drumming in Akan Communities of Ghana*, 99.

<sup>384</sup> Opoku, "Aspects of Akan Worship," 291.

<sup>385</sup> Ephirim-Donkor, "Akom: The Ultimate Mediumship Experience among the Akan," 60, 71. In pre-colonial Ghana, *ebisadze*-related techniques were used in the detection and ensnarement of *abayifo*. One such technique involved the bark of the *odum* tree (*chlorophora excelsa*). This technique required a person accused of *bayi boro* to "chew the bark of the odum tree or drink a tincture made of it. If they vomited, they were innocent. If not, they died with their guilt proven." Gray, "Witches, Oracles, and Colonial Law: Evolving Anti-Witchcraft Practices in Ghana, 1927-1932," 340. In another technique, the dead corpse of a person believed to have been murdered by an *ɔbayifo* (or *abayifo*) is physically "carried" with the expectation that the corpse itself will lead those "carrying" it to the guilty individual or party. R. S. Rattray, *Religion and Art in Ashanti* (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1969), 167-170.

<sup>386</sup> Ephirim-Donkor, "Akom: The Ultimate Mediumship Experience among the Akan," 71.

<sup>387</sup> Opoku, "Aspects of Akan Worship," 291-292.

<sup>388</sup> Ibid., 287. Sarpong, "The Sacred Stools of Ashanti," 11.

<sup>389</sup> Ibid. Opoku, *West African Traditional Religion*, 55-56.

<sup>390</sup> Manoukian, *Akan and Ga-Adangme Peoples*, 57.

<sup>391</sup> Opoku, *West African Traditional Religion*, 55.

<sup>392</sup> Opoku, "Aspects of Akan Worship," 287.

<sup>393</sup> Sarpong, "The Sacred Stools of Ashanti," 11.

<sup>394</sup> Manoukian, *Akan and Ga-Adangme Peoples*, 57.

<sup>395</sup> Ibid; Parish, "The Dynamics of Witchcraft and Indigenous Shrines among the Akan," 440.

<sup>396</sup> Opoku, "Aspects of Akan Worship," 287.

<sup>397</sup> Manoukian, *Akan and Ga-Adangme Peoples*, 57. Additionally, Manoukian claims that the most significant *Suman Brafoɔ* among the Asante is the *Gyabom*, which is primarily associated with war and is owned by important chiefs. She claims further that in times past human sacrifices (including children) were made to the *Gyabom* as a means of ensuring that the deity would bestow its power upon the Asante kingdom. Ibid. Opoku makes the following statement regarding the history of human sacrifice in Ghana:

In the olden days human beings were sacrificed in extreme cases. Human sacrifice was the maximum sacrifice and it was offered in situations affecting the whole tribe or nation. It was the gravity of the situation which called for such a supreme sacrifice . . . But with the development of religion, man came to a better knowledge of the will of the deity, and animals, instead of humans, came to be sacrificed. An example of this is the annual "Aboakyer" Festival of the Winneba [an important fishing community in southern Ghana], popularly called the Deer Hunt Festival. Tradition has it that in the olden days a member of the royal family was sacrificed annually. After some time the people consulted the deity, Penkye Otu, who requested that a leopard should be sacrificed instead of a prince. Later on, the people consulted the deity again who said that he would from then on settle

for the blood of a bush buck (Ɔwansan), and that is how we came to have the “Aboakyer.”

In addition to the sacrifice of humans to deities in the olden days, there was also the sacrifice of human beings on the death of kings and chiefs. This kind of sacrifice was quite different from the first category discussed above, for here the main purpose was not appeasement of a deity but rather that the king and chief may have servants and wives to accompany him to the land of the spirits so that they may serve him. There is an Akan saying that in the realm of the dead there are kings as well as servants (slaves). This practice came into being as a result of the conception which was held of life beyond the grave. It was believed that after death people continued to live the same kind of life as they lived on earth, and the idea was not just to spill as much blood as possible on the death of a king or chief but rather to make it possible for the king or chief to continue to live as he did in the world.

This practice has been stopped without much damage to the ideas of the afterlife which is held among the Akans, for the idea of the afterlife did not need such a practice to sustain it. Opoku,

"Aspects of Akan Worship," 295-296.

<sup>398</sup> Ibid., 288.

<sup>399</sup> Opoku, "Aspects of Akan Worship," 288.

<sup>400</sup> Manoukian, *Akan and Ga-Adangme Peoples*, 57.

<sup>401</sup> Ibid. Opoku, "Aspects of Akan Worship," 288. "Interviews" with *Suman* priests are held confidentially in a room that is considered sacred. Therefore, both the *Suman* priest and the client remove their shoes prior to entering this room. Ibid.

<sup>402</sup> Ibid. Manoukian, *Akan and Ga-Adangme Peoples*, 57.

<sup>403</sup> Opoku, *West African Traditional Religion*, 73.

<sup>404</sup> Ibid.

<sup>405</sup> Ibid.

<sup>406</sup> Ibid.

<sup>407</sup> Ibid., 72.

<sup>408</sup> Ibid., 73.

<sup>409</sup> Ibid., 72.

<sup>410</sup> Ibid., 72-73.

<sup>411</sup> The famed Senegalese poet Birago Diop poignantly expresses the significance of the ancestors in the following poem:

Those who are dead are never gone:  
they are there in the thickening shadow.

The dead are not under the earth:  
they are in the tree that rustles,  
they are in the wood that groans,  
they are in the water that runs,  
they are in the hut, they are in the crowd,  
the dead are not dead.

Those who are dead are never gone:  
they are in the breast of the woman  
they are in the child who is wailing  
and in the firebrand that flames.

The dead are not under the earth:  
they are in the fire that is dying,  
they are in the grasses that weep  
they are in the whimpering rocks,  
they are in the forest, they are in the house,  
they dead are not dead.

This poem appears in Janheinz Jahn, *Muntu: An Outline of Neo-African Culture* (London: Faber and Faber, 1961), 108.

<sup>412</sup> Opoku, *West African Traditional Religion*, 36.

<sup>413</sup> Ephirim-Donkor, *African Spirituality: On Becoming Ancestors*, 130.

<sup>414</sup> Opoku, *West African Traditional Religion*, 36.

<sup>415</sup> *Ibid.*, 37.

<sup>416</sup> This explanation was given by Professor Elom Dovlo during his 2007 lecture on African religions at the University of Ghana, Legon.

<sup>417</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>418</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>419</sup> Paul A. Kotey, "Chiefs," in *Hippocrene Concise Dictionary: Twi-English/English-Twi* (New York: Hippocrene Books, 1998), 189.

<sup>420</sup> Opoku, *West African Traditional Religion*, 39.

<sup>421</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>422</sup> Paul A. Kotey, "Chief," in *Hippocrene Concise Dictionary: Twi-English/English-Twi* (New York: Hippocrene Books, 1998), 189.

<sup>423</sup> Opoku, *West African Traditional Religion*, 39. It is interesting to note that all "enstooled" Akan chiefs actually carve their own stools. These stools are often carved using wood from the tree known as *ɔsɛsɛ* (*Funtumia africana*) or from the tree known as *Onyamedua* (*Alstonia boonei*). *Ibid.*

<sup>424</sup> *Ibid.*, 40.

<sup>425</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>426</sup> *Ibid.*, 37, 40.

<sup>427</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>428</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>429</sup> For a fuller discussion of the *Adaɛ* festival, see pages 39-43 of Opoku, *West African Traditional Religion*. Also, for additional information on how the Akan understand and relate to the ancestors, see chapter ten of Ephirim-Donkor, *African Spirituality: On Becoming Ancestors*.

<sup>430</sup> *Ibid.*, 73.

<sup>431</sup> My use of the term "endangerment" is informed by the Dagara diviner and scholar Malidoma Somé's notion of the "sanctity of endangerment." During a lecture given at Boston University on November 1, 2011, Somé discussed the "sanctity of endangerment" within the context of ritual initiation among the Dagara people of Burkina Faso, West Africa. As one who has undergone the highly "supernatural," "frightening," and permanently transformative experience of Dagara initiation, Somé was emphatic in asserting that a sense of true "endangerment" is a vital component in all successful Dagara initiation rituals. One specific experience he mentioned as an example of what he underwent during initiation involved him having to physically jump into a cowhide. While inside the cowhide, he encountered beings and "incomprehensible" levels of reality that were entirely unlike anything he had encountered previously. This profoundly disorienting "supernatural" encounter played a major role in Somé's evolution as a diviner and healer who understands both viscerally and intellectually that the world encompasses infinitely more than is perceivable by the five senses. The lasting impact this foundational initiatory experience has had on Somé is evident when he writes, for instance, that "A Westerner will say . . . that water always makes you wet, yet a native healer who gets into a river and stays for hours doing what healers do might get out just as dry as if he had been working in the Sahara Desert," and that "true Spirit is a frightening thing to embrace." Malidoma Patrice Somé, *The Healing Wisdom of Africa: Finding Life Purpose through Nature, Ritual, and Community* (New York: Tarcher/Putnam, 1998), 11, 25. Also see Malidoma Patrice Somé, *Of Water and the Spirit: Ritual, Magic, and Initiation in the Life of an African Shaman* (New York: Tarcher/Putnam, 1994).

<sup>432</sup> Opoku, "Aspects of Akan Worship," 289.

<sup>433</sup> Ephirim-Donkor, "Akomo: The Ultimate Mediumship Experience among the Akan," 59, 68. Belief in the efficacious power of the *abosom* (deities) is widespread among the Akan, including pastors of Christian congregations and other prominent individuals who publicly decry their indigenous religious traditions. Consider the following observation made by Donkor:

Visiting a diviner invariably entailed various fees and propitiatory sacrifices. Moreover, all my discussants insisted that their clients included Christian pastors, politicians, and other government

officials [such as] judges, police, and army officers, etc., seeking holistic healing from them. A trend among the intelligentsia is that they assiduously but secretly seek traditional healing, because they do not want members of the public identifying them as visiting traditional practitioners. So, these high-profiled individuals visited their *Akɔmfo* at night, sometimes inviting the *Akɔmfo* to visit them instead, all in a bid to avoid being associated with what they consider to be pagan or unchristian acts. Information gathered on these high-profile individuals suggests that they [are] suffering from the Nicodemus syndrome, whereby certain influential persons dissociate themselves from some controversial leaders in public, but then turn around and embrace them privately or secretly. Ibid.,

71.

<sup>434</sup> Ibid., 64. The experience of being selected or, to use Donkor's language, "called" (*Akomfa*) into the Akan priesthood by a deity is a singularly profound and pivotal moment in the lives of individuals who undergo this experience. This is reflected in the following accounts:

I was privy to a 'call' of a teenage girl in the early 1990s in Winneba, which often resulted with the girl taking off into the forest for days. One of my interviewees, Elizabeth, maintained that she had one day gone with Essoun, the medium, to fetch water from a pond near the Winneba Water Work due to the chronic water shortages in the past. *Ɔkɔmfo* Essoun had her baby on her back and while they were drawing water, the next thing she realized was that Essoun had disappeared, leaving her baby there alone and crying. Terrified, she took the child and ran to Essoun's family and narrated what had just taken place. Initially, people thought that Essoun was insane or in the process of becoming mad, in spite of the fact that her grandfather was a noted *Ɔkɔmfo*. We crossed paths again in the late 1990s, becoming involved in rites leading to her graduation, as the *Ɔkɔmfo* of the leading deity of the Effutu of Winneba, Penkyae Otu. She had been in training in the town of Famanyah near Kwanyanko for over six years due to her family's inability to raise the necessary money for graduation.

An elderly *Ɔkɔmfo* in Winneba informed me that she attended church regularly until she began experiencing what [was] later diagnosed as a call. The final straw came when she was seized by a force that drove her out in the middle of a church service and went on to spend nine years in training in the Volta Region of Ghana.

When I was in middle school a classmate of mine, Comfort, experienced what everyone thought was a call. At one time, for example, she disappeared for about a week and [was] later found inside a rocky hill not [far] from our middle school. She later claimed to have been abducted by a group of dwarfish men. It was the consensus among us, her classmates at least, that she would be sent away to train, but her educated parents adamantly refused. Her father, a lecturer at one of the local colleges in Winneba and a church elder at a local Christian church, would never allow his daughter to become an *Ɔkɔmfo*, perhaps, for fear of being ostracized. Comfort loved to sing and would sing for hours. As far as I know Comfort never turned out like her other siblings. Actually, she was never really the same person after her teenage experiences and could not progress educationally as her other siblings. Ibid., 60, 63.

It is also interesting to note that "graduation" from *nkom-mu* (the training process for *Akɔmfo*) involves the performance of certain challenging physical acts that are believed to "activate" the *Ɔkɔmfo-ba*'s ("novice" priest's) ability to perceive spiritual realities, thereby enhancing his/her connection to the spiritual world. One such ritual act involves ingesting the eyes of a dog. In a description of a very similar "graduation" ritual practiced among the Igbo of the village of Akanu, Ohafia, anthropologist John McCall writes,

When the dog had been killed, its eyes were removed and taken into the quarters where the initiate was sequestered. After a short time he was carried out, apparently unconscious, with blood-soaked leaves covering his face. It was explained that his eyes had been replaced by those of the dog so that 'he will be able to see spirits just as dogs are able to see spirits.'

John C. McCall, "Igbo Shamanism (Nigeria)," in *Shamanism: An Encyclopedia of World Beliefs, Practices, and Culture*, ed. Mariko Namba Walter and Eva Jane Neumann Fridman (Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, 2004), 926. Donkor adds that, in the Akan version of this ritual, the eyes of the dog are "plucked out" and "swallowed wholly by the medium-to-be." Donkor is careful to point out, however, that in the Akan ritual, "it is the concomitant prayers and

ritual formulae, which may include massaging certain herbs and squeezing the sap into the eyes and ears as drops that actually activates a medium-to-be's clairvoyance." Ephirim-Donkor, "Akom: The Ultimate Mediumship Experience among the Akan," 68-69.

<sup>435</sup> Opoku, *West African Traditional Religion*, 75.

<sup>436</sup> Ephirim-Donkor, "Akom: The Ultimate Mediumship Experience among the Akan," 75.

<sup>437</sup> Gyekye, *An Essay on African Philosophical Thought: The Akan Conceptual Scheme*, 85.

<sup>438</sup> Ephirim-Donkor, "Akom: The Ultimate Mediumship Experience among the Akan," 57.

<sup>439</sup> Ibid. Stools are not used exclusively by Akan chiefs (*Ahenfo*). They are also sometimes used, for instance, by mothers. N. K. Dzobo notes that "In some cases, a mother is given a new stool on the birth of a child. This act is to reinforce the continued stay of her soul in her husband's house." Dzobo, "African Symbols and Proverbs as Sources of Knowledge and Truth," 90-91. Paul A. Kotey, "Mother," in *Hippocrene Concise Dictionary: Twi-English/English-Twi* (New York: Hippocrene Books, 1998), 261.

<sup>440</sup> Opoku, *West African Traditional Religion*, 94. Gyekye, *An Essay on African Philosophical Thought: The Akan Conceptual Scheme*, 85.

<sup>441</sup> Kwasi Wiredu, "The Akan Concept of Mind," *Ibadan Journal of Humanistic Studies* 3(1983): 119-20.

<sup>442</sup> Ibid., 119.

<sup>443</sup> Ibid., 127.

<sup>444</sup> See, for example, Kwasi Wiredu, "Conceptual Decolonization as an Imperative in Contemporary African Philosophy: Some Personal Reflections," *Rue Descartes* 36(2002).

<sup>445</sup> Gyekye, *An Essay on African Philosophical Thought: The Akan Conceptual Scheme*, 104.

<sup>446</sup> Ibid., 86.

<sup>447</sup> Ibid., 86-87.

<sup>448</sup> Ibid., 86.

<sup>449</sup> Wiredu, "The Akan Concept of Mind," 127.

<sup>450</sup> Gyekye, *An Essay on African Philosophical Thought: The Akan Conceptual Scheme*, 87.

<sup>451</sup> Williams states,

It is an important point that in Descartes' usage the Latin verb *cogitare* and the French verb *penser* and the related nouns *cogitatio* and *pensée*, have a wider significance than the English *think* and *thought*. In English such terms are specially connected with ratiocinative or *cognitive* processes. For Descartes, however, *cogitatio* or *pensée* is any sort of conscious state or activity whatsoever; it can as well be a sensation (at least, in its purely psychological aspect) or an act of will, as judgment or belief or intellectual questioning. Bernard Williams, *Descartes: The Project of Pure Enquiry* (London:

Pelican Books, 1978), 78.

<sup>452</sup> Gyekye, *An Essay on African Philosophical Thought: The Akan Conceptual Scheme*, 95.

<sup>453</sup> Ibid., 95-96.

<sup>454</sup> Ibid., 87, 97-98.

<sup>455</sup> Opoku, *West African Traditional Religion*, 95. Paul A. Kotey, "Ba," in *Hippocrene Concise Dictionary: Twi-English/English-Twi* (New York: Hippocrene Books, 1998), 45.

<sup>456</sup> Opoku, *West African Traditional Religion*, 95.

<sup>457</sup> Ibid.

<sup>458</sup> Ibid., 96.

<sup>459</sup> Ibid.

<sup>460</sup> Ibid., 95-96.

<sup>461</sup> Ibid., 96.

<sup>462</sup> Ibid.

<sup>463</sup> Ibid.

<sup>464</sup> Opoku, *West African Traditional Religion*, 95.

<sup>465</sup> Ibid., 96-97. Abraham, *The Mind of Africa*, 60.

<sup>466</sup> Ibid., 61.

<sup>467</sup> Opoku, *West African Traditional Religion*, 97.

<sup>468</sup> Ibid.

<sup>469</sup> Rattray, *Ashanti*, 153.

<sup>470</sup> Opoku, *West African Traditional Religion*, 98.

<sup>471</sup> Adu Boahen, *Topics in West African History* (London: Longman Group Limited, 1966), 73-76.

- <sup>472</sup> Opoku, *West African Traditional Religion*, 98.
- <sup>473</sup> Ibid., 98. See also Abraham, *The Mind of Africa*, 60; Gyekye, *An Essay on African Philosophical Thought: The Akan Conceptual Scheme*, 94.
- <sup>474</sup> Busia, "The Ashanti of the Gold Coast," 197.
- <sup>475</sup> Gyekye, *An Essay on African Philosophical Thought: The Akan Conceptual Scheme*, 94.
- <sup>476</sup> Opoku, *West African Traditional Religion*, 99.
- <sup>477</sup> Ibid., 98.
- <sup>478</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>479</sup> Abraham, *The Mind of Africa*, 61.
- <sup>480</sup> It is difficult to be certain of the total number of *ntoro* groups. For instance, K. A. Busia identifies seven *ntoro* groups, Danquah twelve, and Rattray nine. See Busia, "The Ashanti of the Gold Coast," 197; J. B. Danquah, *Akan Society* (Accra), 12; Rattray, *Religion and Art in Ashanti*, 48.
- <sup>481</sup> Opoku, *West African Traditional Religion*, 98. See also J. B. Danquah, *Okanniba Abotafowa* (London: University of London Press, 1954), 55; A. A. Opoku, *Obi Kyere* (Tema: Ghana Publishing Corporation, 1973), 20-23. The *Asafo* among the Fante is another example of a patrilineal group that contributes to the organization of the Akan social system. J. C. DeGraft Johnson writes that the *Asafo* is the parallel patrilineal organization to the matrilineal clan organization known as *ebusua* [or *abusua*]. It is distinct from the *Ntoro* or *Nton* divisions in that it is not an exogamous institution. On the other hand in certain towns local endogamy is encouraged. Membership in the *Asafu* is by birth or adoption – every child nominally belongs to its father's *Asafu*, in the same way it belongs to its mother's *Ebusua*; but by adoption a stranger may belong to either the *Ebusua* or the *Asafu*. J. C. DeGraft Johnson, "The Fanti Asafu," *Africa: Journal of the International African Institute* 5, no. 3 (1932): 311-12. Similarly, Ansu Datta notes that Fante kinship is "characterized by matrilineal descent, inheritance, and succession to major offices. But this is counterbalanced partly by patrilineal cults (*egyabosom*) and the *asafo*, the affiliation to which is through the father. The Fante have about twenty traditional states, each of which possesses one or more *asafo* group . . ." Ansu Datta, "The Fante "Asafo": A Re-Examination," *Africa: Journal of the International African Institute* 42, no. 4 (1972): 305-306.
- <sup>482</sup> Opoku, *West African Traditional Religion*, 98.
- <sup>483</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>484</sup> Philip F. W. Bartle, "The Universe Has Three Souls: Notes on Translating Akan Culture," *Journal of Religion in Africa* 14, no. 2 (1983): 97. Bartle's analysis suggests that there exists some degree of connection between the concept of *ntoro* and notions of "purity" and the "avoidance of pollution." This appears consistent with the *ntoro* greeting cited in the body of this chapter which assumes that the *ntoro* is something that can be "washed." Ibid.
- <sup>485</sup> Opoku, *West African Traditional Religion*, 98.
- <sup>486</sup> Eva L. R. Meyerowitz, "Concepts of the Soul among the Akan of the Gold Coast," *Africa: Journal of the International African Institute* 21, no. 1 (1951): 30.
- <sup>487</sup> Ibid., 29.
- <sup>488</sup> Opoku, *West African Traditional Religion*, 99.
- <sup>489</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>490</sup> Sarpong, *Ghana in Retrospect: Some Aspects of the Ghanaian Culture*, 36.
- <sup>491</sup> Opoku, *West African Traditional Religion*, 99.
- <sup>492</sup> Gyekye, *An Essay on African Philosophical Thought: The Akan Conceptual Scheme*, 101.
- <sup>493</sup> K. A. Busia, *The Challenge of Africa* (New York: Frederick A. Praeger, 1962), 19.
- <sup>494</sup> Gyekye, *An Essay on African Philosophical Thought: The Akan Conceptual Scheme*, 101.
- <sup>495</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>496</sup> Opoku, *West African Traditional Religion*, 99.
- <sup>497</sup> Abraham, *The Mind of Africa*, 61. Paul A. Kotey, "Ghost," in *Hippocrene Concise Dictionary: Twi-English/English-Twi* (New York: Hippocrene Books, 1998), 227. Abraham identifies three types of *saman*. He characterizes them as follows:
- There was the *samanpa* or good *saman*. A *saman* was deemed good if the death of the man was not followed either by a run of general bad luck, including further deaths, for his family or even community, or if his death was followed by the cessation of a previous run of bad luck. These ghosts are shy, and hide round corners when they see a man.

There was the *saman-twen-twen*, the ghost which could not be laid. Such a ghost was seen at intervals by living persons around the man's old haunts. They were incapable of going to the spirit world where their like are. They hung around dark corners and back-yards. They hung around the earth as a temporary or everlasting punishment. They had not much power for harm and contented themselves with scarifications.

Finally, there was also the *tofo*, the ghost of a man who met a violent death. As being unlucky, such a man was given specially deprecatory burial rites. These ghosts cannot get on with the good ones; they wander about, painted with white clay, and clothed in white raiment. But unlike the good ones, they are bold and aggressive.

Ghosts were associated with a particular odour said to be like that of *nunum*, a certain aromatic plant. A ghost is, when visible, always dressed in white. It is not an object of friendship; and you are cautioned that if one should offer you its hand, you quickly bend yours away. A good ghost, however, showers blessings on its orphan. Ghosts have analogues of human senses and passions, including those of hunger, thirst, and anger. Quite impolitely, they sometimes invite themselves to meals, a sure sign of their activity being the too-rapid disappearance of food and drink with which everyone is familiar. To forestall this people often drop a morsel on the ground to distract ghosts. Stools are often tilted when not in use to prevent stray and tired ghosts from sitting on them; and should a person sit on one before a ghost can get away, he contracts pains in the waist. Abraham,

*The Mind of Africa*, 61-62.

<sup>498</sup> Abraham, *The Mind of Africa*, 61.

<sup>499</sup> Gyekye, *An Essay on African Philosophical Thought: The Akan Conceptual Scheme*, 107.

<sup>500</sup> Ibid.

<sup>501</sup> Opoku, *West African Traditional Religion*, 100.

<sup>502</sup> Gyekye, *An Essay on African Philosophical Thought: The Akan Conceptual Scheme*, 108.

<sup>503</sup> Ibid. Opoku, *West African Traditional Religion*, 100.

<sup>504</sup> Gyekye, *An Essay on African Philosophical Thought: The Akan Conceptual Scheme*, 108.

<sup>505</sup> Ibid. Opoku, *West African Traditional Religion*, 100.

<sup>506</sup> Gyekye, *An Essay on African Philosophical Thought: The Akan Conceptual Scheme*, 112; Helaine K. Minkus, "Causal Theory in Akwapim Akan Philosophy," in *African Philosophy: An Introduction*, ed. Richard A. Wright (Washington, D. C.: University Press of America, 1979), 118.

<sup>507</sup> Gyekye, *An Essay on African Philosophical Thought: The Akan Conceptual Scheme*, 108.

<sup>508</sup> In a manner somewhat consistent with Danquah's argument, Meyerowitz attempts to dichotomize *nkrabea* and *hyebea* by associating conscious volition with *nkrabea* and *sunsum*, and unconscious volition with *hyebea* and the *okra*. Her reasons for making these associations are not entirely clear. See Meyerowitz, "Concepts of the Soul among the Akan of the Gold Coast," 26-27; Eva L. R. Meyerowitz, *The Sacred State of the Akan* (London: Faber and Faber, 1951), 87. In Danquah's formulation, destiny is divided into two separate components: "the *nkrabea* of the *sunsum*" and "the *hyebea* of *Onyame*." This formulation suggests that destiny can consist of two "messages" that are inconsistent with one another. See Danquah, *The Akan Doctrine of God: A Fragment of Gold Coast Ethics and Religion*, 86. Sarpong also sharply distinguishes between *nkrabea* and *hyebea* when he writes that "Neither the divinely imposed Fate (*Nkrabea*) nor the self-determined Destiny (*Hyebre*) is avoidable . . ." Peter Kwasi Sarpong, "Aspects of Akan Ethics," *Ghana Bulletin of Theology* IV, no. 3 (1972): 42. See also Sarpong, *Ghana in Retrospect: Some Aspects of the Ghanaian Culture*, 37-38.

<sup>509</sup> Gyekye, *An Essay on African Philosophical Thought: The Akan Conceptual Scheme*, 112.

<sup>510</sup> Ibid., 110, 113; Opoku, *West African Traditional Religion*, 100.

<sup>511</sup> Gyekye, *An Essay on African Philosophical Thought: The Akan Conceptual Scheme*, 115.

<sup>512</sup> Ibid.

<sup>513</sup> Ibid., 118.

<sup>514</sup> Ibid., 117.

<sup>515</sup> Ibid.

<sup>516</sup> Sarpong, "Aspects of Akan Ethics," 42.

- <sup>517</sup> Gyekye, *An Essay on African Philosophical Thought: The Akan Conceptual Scheme*, 115-116; Kofi Asare Opoku, "The Destiny of Man in Akan Traditional Religious Thought," *Conch* VII, no. 1 and 2 (1975): 21.
- <sup>518</sup> Opoku, *West African Traditional Religion*, 100.
- <sup>519</sup> Gyekye, *An Essay on African Philosophical Thought: The Akan Conceptual Scheme*, 116.
- <sup>520</sup> Appiah, *Bu Me Be: Proverbs of the Akans*, 202.
- <sup>521</sup> *Ibid.*, 208-209.
- <sup>522</sup> We should note that in 2008 former Ghanaian president John Kufuor established Dormaa East as a second Dormaa district in the Brong Ahafo region. However, our focus is on the older Dormaa district whose capital town is Dormaa-Ahenkro.
- <sup>523</sup> See, for instance, Hans Werner Debrunner, *Witchcraft in Ghana: A Study on the Belief in Destructive Witches and Its Effect on the Akan Tribes* (Kumasi: Presbyterian Book Depot, 1959), 107. Also see John Parker, "Witchcraft, Anti-Witchcraft and Trans-Regional Ritual Innovation in Early Colonial Ghana: Sakrabundi and Aberewa, 1889-1910," *Journal of African History* 45, no. 3 (2004).
- <sup>524</sup> See M. McLeod, "On the Spread of Anti-Witchcraft Cults in Modern Asante," in *Changing Social Structure in Ghana: Essays in the Comparative Sociology in a New State and Old Tradition*, ed. J. Goody (London: International African Institute, 1975).
- <sup>525</sup> Opoku, *West African Traditional Religion*, 142.
- <sup>526</sup> Parish, "The Dynamics of Witchcraft and Indigenous Shrines among the Akan," 434.
- <sup>527</sup> For instance, in a rather sexist characterization of female and male *abayifo*, Hans Debrunner writes that the "difference between male and female witches may have something to do with the different temperaments of the sexes – male witchcraft being considered as the intensification of a man's aggressiveness, female witchcraft as a 'turning upside down' of the normal feminine behavior." See Debrunner, *Witchcraft in Ghana: A Study on the Belief in Destructive Witches and Its Effect on the Akan Tribes*, 20.
- <sup>528</sup> Opoku, *West African Traditional Religion*, 143.
- <sup>529</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>530</sup> *Ibid.*, 143-144.
- <sup>531</sup> Debrunner, *Witchcraft in Ghana: A Study on the Belief in Destructive Witches and Its Effect on the Akan Tribes*, 29; Opoku, *West African Traditional Religion*, 144; Parish, "The Dynamics of Witchcraft and Indigenous Shrines among the Akan," 433. According to Parish's findings, the Bible is also used in some cases to help purge or "cleanse" an *abayifo* of *bayi boro*. *Ibid.*, 438.
- <sup>532</sup> Opoku, *West African Traditional Religion*, 144.
- <sup>533</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>534</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>535</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>536</sup> *Ibid.*, 145.
- <sup>537</sup> *Ibid.*, 142; Debrunner, *Witchcraft in Ghana: A Study on the Belief in Destructive Witches and Its Effect on the Akan Tribes*, 24.
- <sup>538</sup> *Ibid.*, 20; Opoku, *West African Traditional Religion*, 142. Debrunner's research appears to reveal a difference in the way that male and female *abayifo* travel about. Quoting one of his informants, Debrunner notes that "Whilst the females walk on their heads, the males walk normally on their legs at terrific speed." "The males travel, moving vigorously by doing cartwheels or somersaults." Debrunner, *Witchcraft in Ghana: A Study on the Belief in Destructive Witches and Its Effect on the Akan Tribes*, 20.
- <sup>539</sup> *Ibid.*, 22-23; Opoku, *West African Traditional Religion*, 142.
- <sup>540</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>541</sup> *Ibid.*; Debrunner, *Witchcraft in Ghana: A Study on the Belief in Destructive Witches and Its Effect on the Akan Tribes*, 20-21.
- <sup>542</sup> Opoku, *West African Traditional Religion*, 142.
- <sup>543</sup> Debrunner, *Witchcraft in Ghana: A Study on the Belief in Destructive Witches and Its Effect on the Akan Tribes*, 32-34.
- <sup>544</sup> *Ibid.*, 25.
- <sup>545</sup> *Ibid.*, 28.
- <sup>546</sup> *Ibid.*, 27-28.

<sup>547</sup> Parish, "The Dynamics of Witchcraft and Indigenous Shrines among the Akan," 440.

<sup>548</sup> Debrunner, *Witchcraft in Ghana: A Study on the Belief in Destructive Witches and Its Effect on the Akan Tribes*, 28.

<sup>549</sup> Ibid.

<sup>550</sup> Quoted in Debrunner, *Witchcraft in Ghana: A Study on the Belief in Destructive Witches and Its Effect on the Akan Tribes*, 27. For more accounts of this kind, see pages 24-29 of Debrunner, *Witchcraft in Ghana: A Study on the Belief in Destructive Witches and Its Effect on the Akan Tribes*.

<sup>551</sup> This account, which was provided by a Ghanaian student, appears in Debrunner, *Witchcraft in Ghana: A Study on the Belief in Destructive Witches and Its Effect on the Akan Tribes*, 39.

<sup>552</sup> Ibid., 42.

<sup>553</sup> Ibid., 44.

<sup>554</sup> Ibid., 45.

<sup>555</sup> Account quoted in Debrunner, *Witchcraft in Ghana: A Study on the Belief in Destructive Witches and Its Effect on the Akan Tribes*, 47, from the missionary report, Dominique Zahan, *The Religion, Spirituality, and Thought of Traditional Africa* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979). Of particular interest in this account is the depiction of a male as an *ɔbayifo*. One wonders if and to what degree such depictions would appear in other accounts of *bayi boro* yet to be documented.

<sup>556</sup> Debrunner, *Witchcraft in Ghana: A Study on the Belief in Destructive Witches and Its Effect on the Akan Tribes*, 31.

<sup>557</sup> Ibid.

<sup>558</sup> Debrunner, *Witchcraft in Ghana: A Study on the Belief in Destructive Witches and Its Effect on the Akan Tribes*, 121.

<sup>559</sup> Ibid., 106, 121; Parish, "The Dynamics of Witchcraft and Indigenous Shrines among the Akan," 428-431.

<sup>560</sup> Ibid., 432.

<sup>561</sup> Debrunner, *Witchcraft in Ghana: A Study on the Belief in Destructive Witches and Its Effect on the Akan Tribes*, 111.

<sup>562</sup> Ibid.

<sup>563</sup> Ibid., 121.

<sup>564</sup> Ibid., 122. In the summer of 2011, I personally visited an elder priestess in the region of Kwahu and was invited into her deity's shrine room to receive a ritual blessing. Much to my astonishment, the shrine room was completely dark, despite being open to a rather large lighted area.

<sup>565</sup> Ibid., 122-123.

<sup>566</sup> Parish, "The Dynamics of Witchcraft and Indigenous Shrines among the Akan," 429-430.

<sup>567</sup> Debrunner, *Witchcraft in Ghana: A Study on the Belief in Destructive Witches and Its Effect on the Akan Tribes*, 122.

<sup>568</sup> Parish, "The Dynamics of Witchcraft and Indigenous Shrines among the Akan," 432.

<sup>569</sup> Ibid., 432-33.

<sup>570</sup> Ibid.

<sup>571</sup> Ibid.

<sup>572</sup> Parish, "The Dynamics of Witchcraft and Indigenous Shrines among the Akan," 432.

<sup>573</sup> Ibid., 438.

<sup>574</sup> Ephirim-Donkor, "Akom: The Ultimate Mediumship Experience among the Akan," 65.

<sup>575</sup> O Ladrach, *Der Sturz Eines Afrikanischen Lugengottes* (Basel, 1919), 27.

<sup>576</sup> Parish, "The Dynamics of Witchcraft and Indigenous Shrines among the Akan," 430.

<sup>577</sup> Ibid., 431.

<sup>578</sup> Ibid. Donkor draws an important distinction between the phenomenon of Pentecostal and charismatic Akan Christians "speaking in tongues" and an *Ɔkɔmfo* speaking in different languages while "alighted" by a deity:

From my experiences, usually it was the same select church folks who claimed to be possessed and spoke in "tongues," which were also decipherable by the same select few. What is curious is the routine and "timed" manner in which the possessed spoke in tongues. That is, per the signal of the pastor, the possessed commenced speaking in tongues and per another signal they ceased immediately. This is radically different from Akom, because when alighted upon, a medium became

the deity or ancestor, speaking in a language of understanding, that is, a deity, not a medium, engaged in normal conversation in a language that was spoken by everyone. Even where a deity spoke a different language, people knew exactly which language was being spoken and consequently found someone around who also spoke the same language as an interpreter. Ephirim-Donkor,

"Akomi: The Ultimate Mediumship Experience among the Akan," 55.

<sup>579</sup> Ibid.

<sup>580</sup> Ibid.

<sup>581</sup> Ibid.

<sup>582</sup> Ibid.

<sup>583</sup> Ibid., 443-444.

<sup>584</sup> Ibid., 432, 444.

<sup>585</sup> Ibid., 432.

<sup>586</sup> Ibid. One wonders if this preference is related to the influence of Pentecostal Christianity in the Dormaa district and elsewhere in the Brong Ahafo region.

<sup>587</sup> Ibid., 440.

<sup>588</sup> Ibid.

<sup>589</sup> Ibid., 440-442.

<sup>590</sup> Appiah, *Bu Me Be: Proverbs of the Akans*, 193, 234.

<sup>591</sup> Ibid., 96.

<sup>592</sup> See Coleman, *Making a Way out of No Way: A Womanist Theology*; Hardy III, *James Baldwin's God: Sex, Hope, and Crisis in Black Holiness Culture*; Hopkins, *Shoes That Fit Our Feet: Sources for a Constructive Black Theology*; Mays, *The Negro's God as Reflected in His Literature*; Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness: The Challenge of Womanist God-Talk*; Young III, *Dogged Strength within the Veil: Africana Spirituality and the Mysterious Love of God*. See also Hopkins, *Being Human: Race, Culture, and Religion*.

<sup>593</sup> See, for example, Erik D. Curren, "Should Their Eyes Have Been Watching God? Hurston's Use of Religious Experience and Gothic Horror," *African American Review* 29, no. 1 (1995); Sharon Davie, "Free Mules, Talking Buzzards, and Cracked Plates: The Politics of Dislocation in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*," *PMLA* 108, no. 3 (1993); Karla F. C. Holloway, "Holy Heat: Rituals of the Spirit in Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*," *Religion and Literature* 23, no. 3 (1991); Daphne Lamothe, "Vodou Imagery, African-American Tradition and Cultural Transformation in Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*," *Callaloo* 22, no. 1 (1999); Nellie McKay, "'Crayon Enlargements of Life': Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* as Autobiography," in *New Essays on Their Eyes Were Watching God*, ed. Michael Awkward (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990); "The Compelling Ambivalence of Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*," *The Southern Literary Journal* 27, no. 1 (1994); Joseph R. Urgo, "'The Tune Is the Unity of the Thing': Power and Vulnerability in Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*," *Southern Literary Journal* 23, no. 2 (1991).

<sup>594</sup> McKay, "'Crayon Enlargements of Life': Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* as Autobiography," 51.

<sup>595</sup> Ramsey, "The Compelling Ambivalence of Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*," 49.

<sup>596</sup> Davie, "Free Mules, Talking Buzzards, and Cracked Plates: The Politics of Dislocation in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*," 447.

<sup>597</sup> Urgo, "'The Tune Is the Unity of the Thing': Power and Vulnerability in Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*," 43-44.

<sup>598</sup> Curren, "Should Their Eyes Have Been Watching God? Hurston's Use of Religious Experience and Gothic Horror," 24.

<sup>599</sup> Lamothe, "Vodou Imagery, African-American Tradition and Cultural Transformation in Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*," 158.

<sup>600</sup> Holloway, "Holy Heat: Rituals of the Spirit in Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*," 129.

<sup>601</sup> Zora Neale Hurston, *Dust Tracks on a Road* (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott, 1942), 215-217.

<sup>602</sup> Robert E. Hemenway, *Zora Neale Hurston: A Literary Biography* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1977), 230, 44.

<sup>603</sup> Cornel West, *Prophesy Deliverance: An Afro-American Revolutionary Christianity* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1982), 86.

<sup>604</sup> Katie Geneva Cannon, *Katie's Canon: Womanism and the Soul of the Black Community* (New York: Continuum, 1995), 100, 127.

<sup>605</sup> Young III, *A Pan-African Theology: Providence and the Legacies of the Ancestors*, 116.

<sup>606</sup> *Ibid.*, 118. Charles H. Long, *Significations: Signs, Symbols, and Images in the Interpretation of Religion* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1986), 152. It is important to mention that virtuoso pianist and singer Nina Simone as well as other prominent black musicians of the 1950s, 60s, and 70s such as Duke Ellington were uncomfortable with the term "jazz." In 1964, Ellington had the following to say about the meaning of "jazz:" "If 'jazz' means anything at all, which is questionable, it means the same thing it meant to musicians fifty years ago – freedom of expression. I used to have a definition, but I don't think I have one anymore, unless it is a music with an African foundation which came out of an American environment." Quoted from Valerie Wilmer, *The Face of Black Music* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1976), 12.

We might also note here that the perception among jazz musicians of the inseverable relationship between jazz, other forms of black music, and various modes of black spirituality is evident in the following comments made by the great jazz trumpeter, innovator, and composer John Birks ("Dizzy") Gillespie:

Like most black musicians, much of my early inspiration, especially with rhythms and harmonies, came from church. Not my church though. In the Methodist church there wasn't too much happening musically – mostly hymns. But the Sanctified church had a deep significance for me, musically. I first learned the meaning of rhythm there and all about how music could transport people spiritually. Dizzy Gillespie and Al Fraser, *To Be or Not to Bop* (New York: Garden City, 1979), 31.

<sup>607</sup> Albert Murray, *The Omni-Americans: Black Experience and American Culture* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1970), 59.

<sup>608</sup> *Ibid.*, 142-170, 203-220. See also Albert Murray, *The Blue Devils of Nada: A Contemporary American Approach to Aesthetic Statement* (New York: Vintage Books, 1996); Albert Murray, *Stomping the Blues* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1976).

<sup>609</sup> For two articles that are appreciative of Murray's phenomenological and creative contribution to American literature and criticism, see Warren Carson, "Albert Murray: Literary Reconstruction of the Vernacular Community," *African American Review* 27, no. 2 (1993); Paul Devlin, "Albert Murray at Ninety," *The Antioch Review* 65, no. 2 (2007).

<sup>610</sup> Murray, *The Blue Devils of Nada: A Contemporary American Approach to Aesthetic Statement*, 3.

<sup>611</sup> Murray, *Stomping the Blues*, 1. Other critics have also identified the blues as a key idiom through which to interpret African-American life and cultural expression. For two outstanding examples, see Houston A Baker Jr., *Blues, Ideology, and Afro-American Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984); Leroi Jones, *Blues People: Negro Music in White America* (New York: William and Morrow Company, 1963).

<sup>612</sup> Murray, *Stomping the Blues*, 3-5.

<sup>613</sup> Zora Neale Hurston, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (New York: Harper and Row, 1937), 85-86.

<sup>614</sup> *Ibid.*, 85.

<sup>615</sup> *Ibid.*, 85-86.

<sup>616</sup> *Ibid.*, 86.

<sup>617</sup> Pinn, *Terror and Triumph: The Nature of Black Religion*, 173-174.

<sup>618</sup> *Ibid.*, 175.

<sup>619</sup> Hurston, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, 138.

<sup>620</sup> *Ibid.* One is reminded here of the much earlier reference in endnote forty-six to Charles Long's analysis of whiteness as American "civil religion." Long, "African American Religion in the United States of America: An Interpretative Essay," 17.

<sup>621</sup> *Ibid.*, 138-139.

<sup>622</sup> *Ibid.*, 139.

<sup>623</sup> Anthony B. Pinn, *Why, Lord?: Suffering and Evil in Black Theology* (New York: Continuum, 1995), 116, 122-127, 141, 148, 150.

<sup>624</sup> Ibid., 116-117.

<sup>625</sup> William R. Jones, *Is God a White Racist?: A Preamble to Black Theology* (New York: Anchor Books, 1973), 196.

<sup>626</sup> Pinn, *Why, Lord?: Suffering and Evil in Black Theology*, 141.

<sup>627</sup> Dianne Stewart (a.k.a. Diakité) advances a related critique of Pinn. She asserts that “Pinn constructs his argument too narrowly around a dichotomy between Black Christianity and Black humanism. It is here, I would argue, that both Black Christian theologians and Pinn, as a Black humanist, exclude African-derived religions from the conversation about theodicy and the Black religious experience.” Continuing her response to Pinn, she argues further that “African-derived religions offer life-affirming *theistic* resources that function in consort with *human* efforts in addressing multiple forms of suffering, evil, and oppression. Stewart, *Three Eyes for the Journey*, 201, 205.

<sup>628</sup> Hurston, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, 146-150.

<sup>629</sup> Ibid., 150-151.

<sup>630</sup> Ibid., 165-167.

<sup>631</sup> Ibid., 167-169.

<sup>632</sup> Ibid., 169.

<sup>633</sup> It was quite common for missionaries and colonial officials during this period and throughout the era of American slavery to question the authenticity of slave conversions based in part on the theory that slaves sought Christian baptism only as a means of manumission. The following remarks from seventeenth/eighteenth-century Virginia missionary James Blair are revealing:

I doubt not some of the Negroes are sincere Converts, but the far greater part of them little mind the serious part, only are in hopes that they will meet with so much the more respect, and that some time or other Christianity will help them to their freedom.

. . . notwithstanding all the precautions which the ministers took to assure them [slaves] that baptism did not alter their servitude, the negroes fed themselves with a secret fancy that it did, and that the King designed that all Christians should be made free. And when they saw that baptism did not change their status they grew angry and saucy, and met in the nighttime in great numbers and talked of rising. Quoted from Edgar Legare Pennington, *Thomas Bray's Associates and Their Work among the Negroes* (Worcester: The American Antiquarian Society, 1939), 42-43.

In an assessment of colonial missionaries' attempts at slave conversion from 1790 to 1820, Presbyterian minister and historian Charles Colcock Jones makes a similar observation when he reports that “On the whole . . . but a minority of the Negroes, and that a small one, attended regularly the house of God, and taking them as a class, their religious instruction was extensively and most seriously neglected.” Charles Colcock Jones, *The Religious Instruction of the Negroes in the United States* (Savannah: Thomas Purse, 1842), 64.

<sup>634</sup> See, for instance, Frazier, *The Negro Church in America*. Although not as strongly as Frazier, historian Albert Raboteau also seems to minimize the influence of African cultural antecedents in the North American diaspora. Raboteau writes, “While it is true that Africa influenced black culture in the United States, including black religion, it is also true that African theology and African ritual did not endure to the extent that they did in Cuba, Haiti, and Brazil. In the United States the gods of Africa died.” Raboteau, *Slave Religion: The "Invisible Institution" in the Antebellum South*, 86.

<sup>635</sup> See chapter three of Cone, *The Spirituals and the Blues: An Interpretation*. Another clear example of this is Dwight N. Hopkins, *Down, up, and Over: Slave Religion and Black Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000).

<sup>636</sup> James Baldwin, “The Fire Next Time,” in *James Baldwin: Collected Essays* (New York: The Library of America, 1998), 341.

<sup>637</sup> Tracey E. Hucks, *Yorùbá Traditions and African American Religious Nationalism* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2012), 15.

<sup>638</sup> Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993), 81.

<sup>639</sup> Johnson is one of the few scholars who gives center stage to the existential reality of the tragic in his interpretation of black religious experience, which for him seems to primarily mean “African American Christian consciousness.” He writes,

The stress and strain of titanic forces continue to threaten the African American community and the African American self with dismemberment and diffusion. African American Christian consciousness itself is everywhere threatened with its own disintegration and in many cases with the temptation to become a caricature of itself – the superficial joyous romp, in an ever-expanding ring of denial that many of its less intelligent and superficial students and critics have made it out to be.

Johnson Sr., *The Tragic Vision of African American Religion*, 162.

<sup>640</sup> Another important text we might mention that utilizes phenomenology in a less comprehensive manner is Theophus H Smith, *Conjuring Culture: Biblical Formations of Black America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995). Also, two texts that, while not phenomenological in nature, nevertheless adopt uncommon methodological approaches to the study of black religion that could easily integrate phenomenological analysis are Anthony B. Pinn, *The End of God-Talk: An African American Humanist Theology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012); Theodore Walker Jr., *Mothership Connections: A Black Atlantic Synthesis of Neoclassical Metaphysics and Black Theology* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2004).

<sup>641</sup> See Marcel Mauss, *The Gift: Forms and Functions of Exchange in Archaic Societies* (New York: Norton, 1967). Williams discusses an early twentieth-century cultic movement (which he describes as “madness) in Vailala (a region in Papua, New Guinea) in the following manner:

Originating in the neighborhood of Vailala, hence it spread rapidly through the coastal and certain of the inland villages. This movement involved, on the one hand a set of preposterous beliefs among its victims –in particular the expectation of an early visit from deceased relatives – and on the other hand, collective nervous symptoms of sometimes grotesque and idiotic nature. Hence the name Vailala Madness seems apt enough and at least conveys more meaning than any of the various alternatives.

Perhaps one of the most fundamental ideas was that the ancestors, or more usually the deceased relatives, of the people were shortly to return to visit them. They were expected in a large steamer which was to be loaded with cases of gifts – tobacco, calico, knives, axes, food stuffs and the like.

A feature of interest and importance is that in some places the returning ancestors or relatives were expected to be white and indeed some white men were actually claimed by the natives to be their deceased relatives. Frances Edgar Williams, "The Vailala Madness and the Destruction of Native Ceremonies in the Gulf District," in *Papuan Anthropology Reports*, no. 4 (Port Moresby 1923), 1, 14-15. Burridge has this to say regarding cargo cults:

Cargo movements, often described as millenarian, messianic, or nativistic movements, and also Cargo cults, are serious enterprises of the genre of popular revolutionary activities. Mystical, combining political-economic problems with expressions of racial tension, Cargo cults compare most directly with the Ghost-dance cults of North America, and the prophetist movements among African peoples. Typically, participants in a Cargo cult engage in a number of strange and exotic rites and ceremonies the purpose of which is apparently to gain possession of European manufactured goods such as axes, knives, aspirin, china plates, razor blades, colored beads, guns, bolts of cloth, hydrogen peroxide, rice, finned food, and other goods to be found in a general department store. These goods are known as “cargo” or in the Pidgin English rendering Kago. Kenelm Burridge, *Mambu: A*

*Melanesian Millenium* (London: Methuen, 1960), xv-xvi.

<sup>642</sup> Long, *Significations: Signs, Symbols, and Images in the Interpretation of Religion*, 129.

<sup>643</sup> Noel, *Black Religion and the Imagination of Matter in the Atlantic World*, x-xi.

<sup>644</sup> *Ibid.*, x.

<sup>645</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>646</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

<sup>647</sup> *Ibid.*, 7. E. J. Alagoa, "Fon and Yorùbá: The Niger Delta and the Cameroon," in *Unesco General History of Africa*, vol. 5, ed. B. A. Ogot (San Francisco: University of California Press, 1992), 229.

<sup>648</sup> Noel, *Black Religion and the Imagination of Matter in the Atlantic World*, 8.

<sup>649</sup> *Ibid.*, 12-13.

<sup>650</sup> *Ibid.*, 13-14.

<sup>651</sup> *Ibid.*, 15.

<sup>652</sup> Ibid., 16.

<sup>653</sup> Ibid., 21.

<sup>654</sup> Ibid., 22.

<sup>655</sup> Luis N. Rivera, *A Violent Evangelism: The Political and Religious Conquest of the Americas* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1992), 25.

<sup>656</sup> Noel, *Black Religion and the Imagination of Matter in the Atlantic World*, 34.

<sup>657</sup> Ibid., 57. Long, *Significations: Signs, Symbols, and Images in the Interpretation of Religion*, 60-61.

<sup>658</sup> Noel, *Black Religion and the Imagination of Matter in the Atlantic World*, 58.

<sup>659</sup> Ibid.

<sup>660</sup> Ibid., 75.

<sup>661</sup> Ibid., 78.

<sup>662</sup> Ibid., 152, 83-95, 121, 147.

<sup>663</sup> Ibid., xiii, 118, 172, 192.

<sup>664</sup> Ibid., 153.

<sup>665</sup> Ibid., 138.

<sup>666</sup> Ibid., 80, 173.

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