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The European Image in West African Masquerades and Spirit Possession

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Abstract

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Why do some West African ethnic groups dress up or role-play as Europeans in spirit possessions and masquerades? The theatricality associated with these practices goes hand in hand with a specific ideology. The image of a European as an additional character in masquerades or as a spirit that possesses mediums therefore serves a tangible purpose. Many scholars have long believed that the European image is used in a postcolonial context to reclaim African identity and reject or mock a European presence. The satire of the European is commonly misinterpreted, however, and the use of the European image is much more complex than this reduction. By analyzing the Igbo Ijele and Okperegede masquerades and the Gelede and Egungun masquerades of the Yoruba, the widespread possession cult of Mami Wata in West Africa, and the spirit possession cult of the Hauka in Ghana and Niger, it is clear that these performance rituals use the European or foreign image in a dualistic way that uses play and power symbols equally to portray authority. The use of the European image is used in a myriad of ways to promote a self-identity in these West African groups by identifying what is “Other,” and by extension, what is the self. Through transgressive and satirical depictions of colonial authority, these societies mock immoral behavior and what they see as European folly. Furthermore, the presence of the powerful colonial figure provides authority to the rituals being performed through mimesis. Clearly, the complex ways in which the image of the European is used in these cultures’ rituals deserves more study and understanding than previously given.

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Introduction

The multifaceted masquerades and spirit possession cults of West Africa have fascinated scholars, collectors, and western audiences for decades, even centuries. There is no single explanation for these rituals or means of understanding them. Instead, a study of particular groups can provide perspective and can illuminate a more general understanding of ritual practices through cross-cultural and regional comparisons.

The focus of this paper is on a particular character that appears in many of these masking and possession systems, a figure that links these cultures by their subjugation to its presence. This figure is the European. In many masquerades, men dress up or role-play as Europeans, as colonial officers in particular. The European also appears in spirit possession cults as an outsider spirit that possesses mediums in a ritual setting. These performative arts serve not only as entertainment but also, in some cases, as religious festivals. The theatricality associated with these practices goes hand in hand with a specific ideology. In masquerades, masks represent spirits or allegorical messages. The use of disguise allows maskers to become what they are representing. The image of a European, typically in colonial uniform signified by a pith helmet and notepad, therefore serves a number of tangible purposes, including both satire and a grudging recognition of the power the European possesses.

By satirizing the European, these West African groups subvert colonial authority. Many believe that the European is used in a postcolonial context to reclaim African identity and resist or mock a European presence. This belief has long been popular in the intellectual field. The truth of the matter is, however, that the use of the European image is much more complex.

The misunderstanding of the European's role in these rituals has been complicated by the historical and temporal problems associated with the scholarship on West African cultures. Since these images of the European are typically colonial in nature, the origin of their inclusion in traditional rituals is commonly believed have begun in the early 20th century. The origins of the entire rituals themselves, however, date to decades, even centuries, before colonialism. Furthermore, the colonial image is a symbol of the European, and therefore is changeable and adaptable. Symbols change over time, and therefore, the question of the origin and longevity of the officer in pith helmet and khaki suit as a symbol for the European raises issues of discrepancy, especially since Europeans arrived in Africa well before colonialism. Was the European character in these West African rituals in some other form such as a Portuguese explorer or Christian missionary before the district officer became a popular symbol? Furthermore, in conjunction with these questions, the majority of the Western research of these rituals did not occur until the 1970's, decades after the initial colonial encounter. The European image was most likely included in different symbolism before the 20th Century, but scholars have always associated it with colonialism yet studied it in only a postcolonial context. As a result, there is considerable confusion as to when these European figures originated or what they may have initially meant. In short, the discrepancy in the origin and symbolism of the European has long been a problem for the study of this foreign presence in West African rituals.

Another problem in deciphering the use of the European in ritual is the way Western scholars have typically understood ritual itself. The inclusion of a comedic European character seems too playful an element in serious rites. The Western

categorization and separation of ritual and play leaves no room for the understanding of the satiric European in these rituals. In Western thought, ritual is considered either serious or playful, as exemplified by the difference between a Christian Easter service and a frivolous Easter egg hunt. In West Africa, however, many cultures view serious ritual *as* playful.

“Play” is a loaded term in the Western world. It is seen as childish, opposed to important activity, and inconsequential. However, a different understanding of “play” can help explain the appearance of Europeans in West African rituals. In these cultures, play is used in a ritual setting to improvise, repeat, and sustain activity. Ritual and play are not mutually exclusive. The fine line between the two is perhaps best understood in that play can be “dangerous explosive, even subversive.”¹ The complex, multilayered West African understanding of play makes it difficult to define without a strong sense of specific context since it is so enwrapped in ritual. The two terms overlap and are interchangeable. In this paper, “play” is used to demarcate the transformational, make-believe process that maskers and mediums use to become or represent the European.

Most masking systems are play, but not all play is masking. To perform a ritual is to play it (as an actor plays on stage); therefore, play is not in opposition to work or serious rites. Play is hard work, it is not “unserious, frivolous, or impotent.”² It is not representative of ordinary or real life, yet the fantasy associated with it can be carried out with the utmost seriousness. For example, the play associated with the portrayal of Europeans ranges from humorous to subversive, from mockery to reverence. This play

¹ Margaret Thompson Drewal, *Yoruba Ritual* (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1992), 8.

² *Ibid.*, 15.

in fact creates order.³ There are rules to the illusion of play that determine power structure, actions, and stereotypes to fulfill the ritual being performed.

Play is prevalent and complex. As Margaret Thompson Drewal explains, to play is “to disorient and be disoriented, to surprise and be surprised, to shock and be shocked, and to laugh together- to enjoy.”⁴ Play has a place in ritual through helping to create both the illusion and the meaning of the spirits or powers involved in the activity. Through the knowledge that one is playing in a ritual, real life and fantasy combine to create a performance. In other words, play facilitates the narrative of the ritual. As Gregory Bateson explains in his collection *Steps to an Ecology of Mind*, “the message ‘This is Play’ ... sets a frame of the sort which is likely to precipitate paradox: it is an attempt to discriminate between, or to draw a line between, categories of different logical types.”⁵ These different logical types combine real world figures with fantasy symbols to create play in ritual.

Play is crucial to the actions involved in every ritual. In Johan Huizinga’s study of play in culture in his book *Homo Ludens*, he states, “gradually the significance of a sacred act permeates the playing. Ritual grafts itself upon it, but the primary thing is and remains play.”⁶ The centrality of play to cultural practices explains why Europeans are depicted the way they are in some West African societies. Play allows for one to become another, to understand differently, and metaphorically comment on real life issues. These cultures use play to define the European in their lives.

³ see Johan Huizinga, *Homo Ludens* (Boston: Roy Publishers, 1950), 10.

⁴ M. Drewal, *Yoruba Ritual*, 17.

⁵ Gregory Bateson, *Steps to an Ecology of Mind* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1972), 190.

⁶ Huizinga, *Homo Ludens*, 18.

By analyzing two of the most studied masking systems in West Africa, the Igbo of southeastern Nigeria and the Yoruba of Nigeria and the Republic of Benin, a rich description of the European in a ritual context can be attained. The Igbo Ijele and Okperegede masquerades and the Yoruba Gelede and Egungun masquerades utilize Europeans as supporting comedic characters or emblems in otherwise serious ancestral or powerful rites.

The European is also associated with powerful rites of spirit possession. Spirit possession cults are varied in West Africa, but the spirit Mami Wata is a widespread cult based on the worship of a foreign woman associated with Europe. She possesses her mediums to heal, bring riches, and communicate with mortals. Lastly, the Songhay spirit possession cult of the Hauka in Ghana is perhaps the best known of these European spirit possessions. This transgressive institution involves spirits associated with colonial officers who possess mediums, who, in turn, become European officers in trance.

These specific cultures share many similarities in how they use the image of the European. These similarities stem from not only their regional proximity and related languages but also their related experiences with Europeans. With its rich resources and easy access to ocean trade routes, West Africa has arguably faced the most persistent, domineering influence of the European since the 15th century exploration era. How these groups translate this presence into their cultural practices is therefore analogous due to similarly long-term contact with Europeans.

Furthermore, the Igbo and Yoruba have been two of the most deeply studied and documented societies by Western scholars. The added presence of Western anthropologists who visited both these cultures further enhanced their similarities in

using the European image. The Mami Wata and Hauka cults are arguably equally as well known as Igbo and Yoruba masquerades. Their trans-cultural, transnational ranges have established them as two of the most well documented possession cults in Africa. The depth and consistency of Western influence in and knowledge of these cultures links them in their shared exposure to the European.

The very fact that the rituals of these cultures and cults are so well known in the Western world makes them worthy of further study. A reinterpretation of these practices can be attained if a link is made between the masquerades and spirit possessions of these different cultures. The use of the European can finally connect these two types of ritual, which have for too long been studied as two separate entities. Masquerades have traditionally been seen as rituals in which a dance is performed for the spirit to arrive, while spirit possessions have been thought as spirits overtaking individuals in a dance. Art historians have conventionally analyzed masks, while anthropologists have been more prone to look at the rituals themselves. If these two fields are combined and the literature on both masquerades and spirit possessions are brought together, it is clear that the two kinds of rituals share many elements, both aesthetically and ideologically. For example, in Igbo and Yoruba masquerades, spirits awaken in masks through drums, dance, and sacrifice. Similarly, in the Mami Wata and Hauka cults, sacrifice, gifts, music, and dance call the spirit to enter the medium. Combining and comparing the symbol of the European in these masquerades with their appearance in possession cults by linking the literature on both types of ritual reveals a deeper meaning behind the presence of the foreigner in these West African societies. A binary approach to the understanding of masquerades and spirit possession does not reveal the reason why these

cultures use Europeans in their practices. Most often, masquerades and possessions have been viewed as separate activities by scholarly literature. However, if their similarities are realized, a series of clearly shared elements reveals a new way to understand the importance of the European in all facets of West African ritual.

In the masquerades discussed, Europeans are not spirits but emblems of asocial behavior or power. Oppositely, in the spirit possession cults, Europeans *are* spirits. The elements of defining the European connect the two. These subthemes include the unbridled authority of the officer, the frivolity of European extravagance, the prohibition of overt sexuality, the mockery of European worry over precision (such as note-taking and the administration of medicine), and the odd range of emotions exhibited by the European ranging from fear to laughter to worry. The combination of the mockery of the European and the admiration of his power and wealth appears in both masquerades and spirit possessions.

These performance rituals employ the European or foreign image in a dualistic way that incorporates images of power and play equally to portray authority. The use of play in ritual exists in the forms of power inversion, comedy, mockery, and imitation. The fact that play, especially caricature and power, go hand in hand in these practices is certainly ironic and complex.

Igbo Masquerades

The Igbo possess one of the most prevalent masking systems that has ever been studied. These masquerades especially make use of play and power in their presentation of European figures. As an inland people, the Igbo did not feel the effects of foreigners

until well after European contact with the coastal people of West Africa in the 15th century.⁷ Igbo masquerades with European characters therefore almost certainly evolved rapidly with the influx of explorers, missionaries, and, eventually, colonial officers beginning in the second half of the 19th Century. Europeans are supporting characters that appear in previously established masquerades; their presence was added when European influence became important in the daily lives of the Igbo.

The rich variety of Igbo masquerades rests on a male-centric hierarchical system that relies on initiation and age grades to perform the masquerades. Every mask of the Igbo is considered a spirit. Many are the incarnate dead returning to perform a regulatory or fertility function. The spirits that inhabit the masks are said to come from the other world where these dead ancestors reside. Herbert Cole and Chike Aniakor describe this crucial aspect of masquerades: “Spirit- maskers are believed to leave the ‘land of spirits,’ *animmuo*, and enter this world through anthills which are considered passageways for all reincarnating ancestors.”⁸ Every spirit depicted by a mask, including those that represent Europeans as characters in the masquerade or as emblems on other masks, derives from this spirit world and, therefore, holds agency over Igbo ritual and ceremony.

The theatricality associated with Igbo masquerades is high, ranging from events with hundreds of chanters to a secret society initiation. The Igbo have a multitude of figures, characters, and spirits in their masquerades. This rich cultural heritage is too often reduced by scholars to a dualism of male/ female, black/ white, beast /beauty comparisons. The Igbo are famous for their powerful, horned male Mgbedike spirits and

⁷ Herbert M. Cole and Chike C. Aniakor, eds., *Igbo Arts: Community and Cosmos* (Los Angeles: Regents of the University of California, 1984), 9.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 113.

beautiful patterned maiden spirits. The use of Europeans in masquerades is often neglected in the scholarly world in favor of the charismatic quality of these dominating figures. Upon closer examination, however, the Igbo usage of the colonial figure in their masquerades illuminates their worldview and cultural identity.

The most identifiable Igbo mask is the Ijele. Known for its size with a height of five and half meters and a diameter of two and a half meters, it is a giant representative of the returning spirits of ancestors. Ijele are rarely presented in Igbo life since they are considered extremely powerful and prestigious. Cole and Aniakor describe the prestige of Ijele masks: “[Ijele] is the apotheosis of Igbo display masks, the elephant among spirit-creatures, and overwhelmingly the most expensive to commission and dance.”⁹ It requires weeks of preparation to create meters of cloth appliqué, dozens of carvings, the cone under-structure and arches, as well as the tassels, mirrors, and other adornments required in its assembly. Furthermore, master tailors and carvers create the mask in secret. Its creation is a cause of community celebration and excitement. Its economic value is high: one cloth panel alone costs at least four hundred dollars, and twelve are used to cover the base of the mask.¹⁰ Its symbolic and spiritual value, however, is even greater.

With countless animals, humans, and spirits represented on its superstructure, the entire cloth figure is an anthropomorphized spirit itself. Attached to it are a series of circular objects said to be the eyes of the Ijele spirit. The spirit’s face is a panel that covers the bearer of the mask, and two arms protrude from its enormous sides.

⁹ Ibid., 139.

¹⁰ Chike C. Aniakor, “The Igbo Ijele Mask,” *African Arts* 11, no. 4 (1978), in *JSTOR* [database on-line], accessed November 17, 2009: 42.

Furthermore, the top of the mask is covered in flowers, streamers, and plumage, “implying birds perching in a tree rising out of a mounded base, with a much more prominent coiled snake [at the bottom] signaling mother earth’s domain.”¹¹ This image of the Igbo cosmos, in conjunction with the layers of meaning and detail of the mask and all its figures, embodies Igbo values and beliefs. These masks not only portray but also define power and status.

After the mask’s construction is complete, a live chick is tied to its base to awaken the spirit inside.¹² After its spirit is released, the mask emerges into the cleared center of the village and dances in slow, dignified, circling steps. One man alone carries the mask and balances it on his head. Although his identity is concealed during the dance, he is recognized as a hero after finishing this feat of strength, since the masks can weigh up to 200 pounds.¹³

The large superstructure is charged with meaning. Aniakor divides the many figures represented on this part of the mask into three categories: man and daily activities, the spirit world, and animals and nature.¹⁴ The colonial district officer is a prominent figure among the human and daily life sculptures. The beauty and grace of the mask stand in stark contrast to the surprising appearance of the district officer. He stands in solid white and is, in fact, the only monochromatic element of the mask. His presentation is directly opposed to the rest of the mask and emphasizes his strangeness. The many panels, sculptures, ribbons, and tassels of the mask are interconnected as one entity, yet

¹¹ Richard N. Henderson and Ifekandu Umunna, “Leadership Symbolism in Onitsha Igbo Crowns and Ijele,” *African Arts* 21 no. 2 (1988), in *JSTOR* [database on-line] accessed November 15, 2009: 30.

¹² Cole and Aniakor, eds., *Igbo Arts: Community and Cosmos*, 140.

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ Aniakor, “The Igbo Ijele Mask,” 44.

the European stands out as not touching anything. He appears alert in his pith helmet and khaki shorts, a jarring image of contrast. Always in uniform and sometimes on a bicycle or a horse, this European's inclusion on such a prestigious ancestral object has been debated among scholars.

One argument is that the presence of the colonial officer has an element of satire. The giant Ijele mask miniaturizes the tiny carving of the European, perhaps showing his inferior influence in Igbo life. This element of satire has been advanced to suggest that the presence of a European serves as a means of reminding the community of its values and as a corrective measure that renews the village.¹⁵ This playful inversion of size and power set within a ritual context comments on the social order. Inversion creates new status and, as Kasfir states, status inversions and reversals during a masking performance allow for a "framed disorder,"¹⁶ which in this setting of an important ancestral rite, brings an element of play to a serious and revered ritual.

A second argument is that this inversion is a caricature, designed to ridicule the colonial officer portrayed. Julius Lips' 1937 book *The Savage Hits Back* is the epitome of this school of thought and has influenced other scholars for decades into concluding that these rituals are simply satiric. Lips, whose work is clearly in alignment with colonial era thinking, wrote, "The non-European portrayals of Europeans often have an astonishing *likeness*; and this likeness [is] a means for *committed satire*."¹⁷ The idea of subversion is both believable and valid since the colonial officer on Ijele masks is no

¹⁵ Esiaba Irobi, "A Theatre for Cannibals: Images of Europe in Indigenous African Theatre of the Colonial Period," *New Theatre Quarterly* 22 no. 3 (2006), in *Academic Search Complete* (database an-line), accessed November 15, 2009: 269.

¹⁶ Sidney L. Kasfir, ed., *West African Masks and Cultural Systems* (Tervuren, Belgium: Musee Royal de L'Afrique Centrale, 1988), 8.

¹⁷ Fritz Kramer, *The Red Fez* (London: Verso, 1993), viii.

doubt inferior in power to the returning ancestral spirit, but this is not the only reason or explanation for the presence of the European in this masquerade.

Instead, the presence of the officer can be seen as imitation or mimesis. By having the powerful officer present, his authority is immediately transferred to the Ijele, who is bearing him. Paul Stoller observes:

Embodied oppositions to whiteness in West Africa took on many forms: armed rebellions, individual defiance, remarkable ruses, mocking masquerades, and mimicking plastic arts. The purpose of these defiant acts was not to make white men feel guilty about their colonial and postcolonial beliefs and practices, but to master whiteness through mimesis, a way... of tapping into circuits of colonial and post-colonial power.¹⁸

In this sense, the presence of the European adds to the power of the Ijele. He is placed on the superstructure not as a mockery but as a power symbol. He represents the unlimited authority of the colonial era and provides validity to the rituals being performed.

As the epitome of Igbo ideals “of achievement, authority, and status associated with the founding fathers/ ancestors,”¹⁹ Ijele are symbolically charged masks. The presence of the colonial figure does in fact add a dimension of caricature and playfulness to a serious and powerful ritual. The Ijele mask is not simply a political commentary on colonialism, however, because its main function is religious. It is a “symbol of the continuity and ritual well-being in the community of its owners,”²⁰ and, therefore, the presence of the European adds to the community’s definition of itself. This subtle use of the European creates a self-identity by showing what it the Other in relation to the self.

¹⁸ Paul Stoller, *Embodying Colonial Memories: Spirit Possession, Power, and the Hauka in West Africa* (New York: Routledge, 1995), 90.

¹⁹ Aniakor, “The Igbo Ijele Mask,” 47.

²⁰ J.S. Boston, “Some Northern Ibo Masquerades,” *The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland* 90 no. 1, in *JSTOR* (database on-line), accessed November 18, 2009: 62.

For many cultures in West Africa, founding spirits were said to be white. When Europeans first arrived on the continent, they were seen by these cultures as part of nature, especially because of their connection with the ocean, their method of travel. Furthermore, in many West African cultures, the wilderness, nature, or “the bush,” is considered dangerous and Europeans were therefore connected to nature, danger, and wildness. This link to life remote from the village made Europeans strangers or Others. Fritz Kramer’s treatise *The Red Fez* details this linkage. He states this linkage:

The European seemed to be a representative of some other people, a stranger or barbarian... Thus the images of Europeans could not have been an attack on civilization, as Lips believed, but rather the opposite: images in which another civilization gave plastic form to its ‘savage’ counterpart.²¹

In this sense, the presence of the colonial district officer on the top of Ijele masks serves as a personification of all outsiders or strangers to the Igbo.

This multilayered explanation for the presence of a colonial officer on this mask proves the complicated way in which the Igbo have viewed Europeans during the colonial and postcolonial eras. The small carving of the European serves a combination of roles of a playful inversion, of the adoption of a power symbol, and of the differentiation of the Other. These roles all add to the distinct authority and presence of the Ijele mask.

The Okperegede masquerade, on the other hand, uses an entire European character in its performance. The European is a comical figure in this masquerade, which is chiefly about a frightening male spirit named Asufu and his wives. The masquerade has an expansive list of supporting characters and requires many individuals to dance the parts and play the slit drum, which directs the dancers. As opposed to other Igbo

²¹ Kramer, *The Red Fez*, x.

masquerades in which age grades own and perform the masks, the entire community owns Okperegede masks and the dancers are chosen by skill and hold their positions for life.²² This masquerade is clearly a unifying, community-wide event.

The Okperegede masquerade occurs annually during dry season festivals or at funerals of important individuals of the community. Its purpose is the purification of the village and the community.²³ Consisting of four to nine characters that range from comedic to frightening spirits, the Okperegede masquerade is an ideal example of the rich Igbo masking system.

The sacred slit drum, also called Okperegede, receives the sacrifices usually reserved for masks and is acknowledged by bows or other signs of respect by each dancer.²⁴ The drum calls forth each masker in turn, thereby beginning the performance and providing the transitions between performers. The first mask is always Okorompku, the horned troublemaker. He is a young man who charges the crowds and makes way for other maskers. The number of the following maskers varies but can include a buffoon, an old man, and various warrior spirits. The only fixed order of the masquerade, besides starting with Okorompku, is that Asufu must come out last.²⁵

Asufu is the most powerful of the spirits present and has the authority to openly interact with the drum. He is a multi-faced warrior figure descended from the 19th century wars.²⁶ His senior wife, Eze Nwanyi, or Queen of Women, and his junior wife,

²² Bonnie Weston, "Northeastern Region," *Igbo Arts: Community and Cosmos*, eds. Herbert M. Cole and Chike C. Aniakor, (Los Angeles: Regents of the University of California, 1984), 145.

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 147.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 145.

Nwamma, or Child of Beauty, join him next. Men, as in most other West African masquerades, dance the roles of both women and embody the Igbo feminine ideal. The main action of the masquerade involves this triad. In fits of jealousy, Asufu drives all other spirits away from his wives. He asserts his authority through angry outbursts and violent movements. Despite these emotional excesses, Asufu is highly respected for his wisdom and is considered a representative of senior men in the village.²⁷

One of the figures Asufu routs is the colonial officer, known as *Onye Ocha*.²⁸ The European is a supplemental character who takes notes, asks redundant questions, and acts in socially inappropriate ways with others. He stands out as an outsider by his appearance and odd mannerisms. The rest of the Okperegede characters dress in geometric patterns and have white and black painted masks. Their faces are idealized with a delicate nose and ornamentation such as scarification or elaborate hairdo's. The officer, on the other hand, appears plain in an all khaki suit. His nose and eyes are miniaturized and his enlarged mouth grimaces, in contrast to the slightly parted mouths of the other characters. The officer's elongated neck accentuates his foreignness and emphasizes that he wears the symbol of colonialism: the pith helmet. His strangeness relates to his role in the ritual. As Cole and Aniakor explain,

[He] reads monotonously from a book of rules and jots down observations in a notebook. He also appears with his wife...affecting Western mannerisms: wrapping his arm around her, kissing her, and being, to Igbo sensibilities, overly familiar in public.²⁹

The officer considers himself completely civilized and is oblivious to his faux pas. His presence is satirical, yet his performance does not turn this masquerade into a comedy.

²⁷ Ibid., 152.

²⁸ Ibid., 149.

²⁹ Ibid.

Instead, his buffoonery adds to Asufu's power. By demonstrating unsocial and immoral behavior, the colonial officer is not only satirized but provides a model of the stranger from which the community can extrapolate its own identity. His presence in a purificatory and regulatory ritual serves a rejuvenating function. Furthermore, Okperegede occurs in dry season festivals, where families reunite after periods of separation and villages join together.³⁰ Its presence in this unifying time surely relates to its function.

Kramer's discussion on the use of the Other is relevant here. The caricature of the European unifies the community because it shows what the community is not. As Kramer explains, "the masked comedy parades this 'other' as a foolish deviation."³¹ This deviation in the form of the European heightens the community bond and adds a sense of moral superiority to Asufu's power.

The European satirical figure serves not simply to ridicule the colonial era. As Kramer points out, these masquerades were performed while Europeans were actually in the audience.³² This mocking is not just about the white man but instead shows villagers how not to act. Asufu, as the epitome of Igbo senior men, maintains power over this stranger. The use of this playful depiction of the oblivious officer in juxtaposition with a powerful male spirit is a dualistic practice that provides a sense of authority to the ritual being performed.

³⁰ Ibid., 152.

³¹ Kramer, *The Red Fez*, 165.

³² Ibid., 170.

Yoruba Masquerades

Yoruba masquerades are another example of a rich West African masking system that utilizes a supporting European figure in its ritually charged practices. Yoruba spiritual thought is complex and multilayered. As one of the oldest continuous art traditions in Africa whose kingdoms extend back nine centuries, Yoruba art has continually inspired and influenced foreign viewers. The Yoruba believe that their arts are “closely related and are often meant to be understood and seen as images in the mind’s eye. Such mental images (*iran*) are related to *oju inu* (literally “inner eye” or “insight”).”³³ Masks, therefore, represent a spiritual primacy related to the *oju inu* and the Yoruba cosmos. Furthermore, the Yoruba believe that the past is a model for the present and must be recalled in rituals to ensure the rituals are efficacious.³⁴ In this way, masquerades conjure up the past to improve the present and connect individuals’ inner minds to the spirits possessing the masks.

A key factor of Yoruba thought is the belief that the human body is animated by an internal force or soul.³⁵ The body serves as a vessel for this force to manifest. Since this force is located in the *ori inu*, the face is crucial as a representation of the spirit inside. Representations of the face therefore signify the character of the spirit inside the body. In this way, masks are the quintessential demonstration of these complex Yoruba

³³ Henry John Drewal, John Pemberton III, and Rowland Abiodun, *Yoruba: Nine Centuries of African Art and Thought* (New York, The Center for African Art, 1989), 14.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 15.

³⁵ See Babatunde Lawal, “Aworan: Representing the Self and its Metaphysical Other in Yoruba Art,” *The Art Bulletin* 83 no. 3 (2001), in *JSTOR* (database on-line), accessed March 20, 2010: 500.

beliefs. The mask is a portrayal not only of a face but also is a body that houses a powerful spirit used in masquerades.

Perhaps the most famous Yoruba masquerade is Gelede, a ritual of inversion. Originating in the late 18th century in the city-state of Ketu in western Yorubaland, Gelede pays tribute to the power of women known as “our mothers” (*awon iya wa*). These elderly women possess and wield *ase*, the Yoruba concept of life force. In this way, women are thought to control life and can use this force for good or bad. A woman who uses *ase* is known as an *aje*, which has several meanings, but can be generally defined as a woman with great, supernatural power. If this power is used for evil, she is considered a “witch.” Witches are often blamed “in matters of infertility, impotency and the death of children, for they control the flow of menstrual blood and semen.”³⁶ These powerful women are easily moved to emotion, especially anger. In this sense, women are thought to possess a duality: the ability to provide life and the ability to take it away. A major way to address this great power is through Gelede, which is danced for three consecutive days before the rainy season between March and May.

Gelede is thought to placate these powerful women. The power women wield is said to be “comparable to those of the gods, spirits, or ancestors,”³⁷ and is therefore a legitimate force to be reckoned with. In the festival, the male dancer wears a mask, head wrap, leg rattles, and bulky costume. This regalia “protects him from the negative propensities of the destructive mothers... [and] also provides pageantry which appeals to

³⁶ Henry John Drewal, “Gelede Masquerade: Imagery and Motif,” *African Arts* 7 no. 4 (1974), in *JSTOR* (database on-line), accessed November 1, 2009: 8.

³⁷ Drewal, Pemberton, and Abiodun, *Yoruba: Nine Centuries of African Art and Thought*, 219.

their positive dimension.”³⁸ This simultaneous warding off and praising of women is the central purpose of Gelede. Furthermore, the fact the males dance the roles of women brings an element of play to this serious ritual. This act of cross-dressing serves a purpose of “inverting and also transposing the male-female status hierarchy... and embodies the paradox that while Yoruba men may control women, they also fear their power.”³⁹ Gelede pleases and entertains these women in order to appease them. This double foundation of fear and respect is a duality that runs through every aspect of the masquerade.

The dance is presided over by a male and a female titled elder. The female, known as the *Iyalase*, organizes the Gelede cult and is the only female (except for the six members of her council) directly involved in the entire masquerade. She supervises each group of the cult including carvers, dancers, and drummers.⁴⁰ Each of these groups were originally based on lineage, but in recent times they have come under a seniority system. The *Iyalase*'s male counterpart is the *Babalase*, who takes orders from her. Both are in charge of six females and six males, respectively, who serve as organizers for the ritual.⁴¹ Rehearsals for Gelede are held every other night from eight to nine-thirty for several months before the time of the great dance.⁴² This practice ensures proper norms and emphasizes perfection of dance movements. This concern with accuracy relates to the

³⁸ Drewal, “Gelede Masquerade: Imagery and Motif,” 10.

³⁹ Kasfir, ed., *West African Masks and Cultural Systems*, 4.

⁴⁰ Margaret Thompson Drewal and Henry John Drewal, “Gelede Dance of the Western Yoruba,” *African Arts* 8 no. 2 (1975), in *JSTOR* (database on-line), accessed November 1, 2009: 38.

⁴¹ Emmanuel D. Babatunde, “The Gelede Masked Dance and Ketu Society: The Role of the Transvestite Masquerade in Placating Powerful Women While Maintaining the Patrilineal Ideology,” in *West African Masks and Cultural Systems*, ed. Sidney L. Kasfir (Tervuren, Belgium: Musee Royal de L’Afrique Centrale, 1988), 54.

⁴² Drewal and Drewal, “Gelede Dance of the Western Yoruba,” 38.

Yoruba use of the past as a corrective model for the present. The Yoruba dance must be the same every year to be effective.

The dance itself is highly ritualized. Drummers are the first to appear in the cleared center of the market. This location in the market relates to the dance's purpose of placating women, for women dominate and rule this domain. The market therefore serves as a microcosm of the entire Yoruba cosmos. Masks enter in the market in order of seniority, with the youngest entering first.⁴³ In the dance, males dress as either females or males and dance in identical pairs, perhaps relating to the spiritual supremacy of twins, known as *ibeji*, in Yoruba society. Elaborate costumes consisting of hoops and sticks under colorful garments elaborate the gender portrayed by the dancers. Females' breasts and buttocks are especially emphasized, and almost parodied, by wooden sculptures and delicate dance steps.

The masks worn on top of the dancers' heads portray the Yoruba cosmos and life. This all-encompassing mask, worn by a dancer who represents powerful women, demonstrates Yoruba women's power over all aspects of life, especially as they relate to social roles, animals, and foreigners.⁴⁴ These powerful mothers control the fertility of the land and the people; their power relates to the natural forces of the world and their special connections to the spirits must be commemorated.

A second dimension of Gelede is the condemnation of inappropriate behavior. As Kasfir explains, masks are a "highly elaborated technique for controlling social deviance through sanction, secrecy and deception."⁴⁵ In Gelede, each dancer demonstrates an

⁴³ Ibid., 36.

⁴⁴ Drewal, "Gelede Masquerade: Imagery and Motif," 14.

⁴⁵ Kasfir, ed., *West African Masks and Cultural Systems*, 9.

aspect of Yoruba life. Satirical stereotypes are shown alongside female and male characters to ridicule inappropriate behavior and offer “explicit commentary on social and spiritual matters.”⁴⁶ These satirical characters most frequently represent foreigners and societal outsiders, such as prostitutes and drunks, whose attributes are exaggerated to emphasize their strangeness and humor. In one particular Gelede mask from the British Museum that depicts a white foreigner,⁴⁷ the facial features are sharpened, elongated, and thinned to the point of caricature to emphasize the oddity of the stranger. In contrast, Gelede masks depicting Yoruba women use vibrant colors, have bright, open eyes and sport elaborate coiffures. Their faces and features are rounded (as their bodies are exaggeratedly robust) to emphasize their femininity and fertility. This mask, however, is not of a powerful female but of a European who is being mocked. His tiny mouth and closed eyes are sharply contrasted by normal Gelede masks. Furthermore, his sharp features, thick facial hair, pointy nose and whiteness contrast greatly in the sea of colors and rounded shapes of the festival. Lastly, the jarring image of his bared teeth stands out against the soft, supple mouths of the rest of the masks. Clearly, this mask of a foreigner serves as a symbol of the oddity, strangeness, and inferiority of the European.

Additionally, foreign innovations such as “cameras, sewing machines and cars may also fall within the realm of humorous Gelede masks.”⁴⁸ These white figures and foreign elements in the masquerade do not represent women’s power at all. Henry John Drewal interprets this inclusion of European elements: “the technological wonders are believed to be the result of the spiritual powers of white men channeled in a positive

⁴⁶ Drewal, Pemberton, and Abiodun, *Yoruba: Nine Centuries of African Art and Thought*, 220.

⁴⁷ See Drewal, “Gelede Masquerade: Imagery and Motif,” figure 15.

⁴⁸ Drewal, “Gelede Masquerade: Imagery and Motif,” 17.

direction.”⁴⁹ The power of the European is presented in this technology, which the Gelede dancers wield. In one particular Gelede mask of a 20th century car from the Nigerian Museum⁵⁰, the power of the European object rests on the head of a female. Its bright blue- green colors and the car itself, which forms the elaborate headpiece, constitute a powerful female mask. An African, not a European, drives the car, which completes the Yoruba appropriation of the power of this European object.

The European presence in the masquerade therefore not only serves as satire to voice community concerns but also to demonstrate borrowed power from this presence. This aspect of Gelede “documents social roles deemed valuable, while unworthy actions and attitudes are satirized through ‘anti-aesthetic’ statements,”⁵¹ such as the presence of the clueless, odd, angular European. The use of ridicule and satire compels community reform and unity.

Kramer’s analysis of the Other also has a function here. By including a comedic European in the rites of the powers of older women, the Yoruba identify the spiritual supremacy of Gelede. The European is satirized in comparison to the influence of the Yoruba mothers not as a simple mockery but to show that the European, once the epitome of power during colonialism, holds much less authority than the *iwan iya wa*. His presence in the Gelede festival adds to the women’s sense of power.

This ridicule adds to the harnessing of female power associated with the ritual. In this way, Gelede orders Yoruba society, confers authority to spirits, and gives power to women. Originally, Gelede ordered a different kind of society in the 19th century. As

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ See Drewal, “Gelede Masquerade: Imagery and Motif,” figure 13.

⁵¹ Debbie Randolph, “Yoruba,” in *I Am Not Myself: The Art of African Masquerade*, ed. Herbert M. Cole (Los Angeles: Regents of the University of California, 1985), 63.

evidenced by John Willis' PhD dissertation at Emory University, Gelede responded to a unique historical condition in the early to mid 1800's. At this time, Yoruba city-states were at war with each other. The conflict between Otta and Dahomey was so great, that the people of Otta created a Gelede mask called Idahomi to use in the ritual. This mask, said to depict the Dahomean army, served a purpose of alerting the presence of the enemy to its bearers and to terrify the enemy with its grotesqueness.⁵² At first glance, the use of this Gelede mask in warfare and its violent performance completely oppose the contemporary use of the masquerade. However, its use in the defense against others and its purpose of unifying the community in the face of the intrusion of an outside force is relevant to Gelede today. Furthermore, the caricature of the Dahomean as a misshapen, violent spirit demonstrated the superior moral identity and power of the people of Otta. In the 19th Century, the Dahomean presence was used in a similar way to how the European appears in later Gelede rituals, despite large differences in historical conditions, time, and space.

As Drewal states, in contemporary celebrations, "to dance Gelede is to understand [one's] role in society."⁵³ Today, Gelede not only placates powerful women but also serves as a unifier of society. Its social commentary includes Europeans depicted in a satiric way to bond the community through moral behavior. The masks themselves are deeply metaphorical and are meant for the audience to interpret. The playful nature of the characters, especially the use of foreigners, in combination with the seriousness of the purpose of the ritual, creates a distinct commentary on the power of elder Yoruba women.

⁵² John Willis, "Masquerading Politics: Power and Transformation in a West African Kingdom" (PhD diss., Emory University, 2008), 121.

⁵³ Drewal and Drewal, "Gelede Dance of the Western Yoruba," 45.

The Yoruba masquerade of Egungun similarly uses the comedic image of the European in an otherwise fearfully powerful ancestral rite. Egungun is extremely important to Yoruba culture. It is connected to the reverence of ancestors as well as the maintenance of societal norms. The Egungun cult is all- male and somewhat secretive. The festival itself occurs once or twice a year, lasting from one to two weeks between June and December; generally, however, it is danced in the last quarter of the year at the same time as the yam harvest, a portion of which is donated to the ancestors.⁵⁴ The ritual includes sacrifices at individual family shrines followed by a parade of maskers who perform an intricate, whirling dance that demonstrates great power and control. The Egungun festival is held within each lineage's compound with additional more public rites at the *igbale*, the forest of the ancestors, and in the market. Traditionally, the Egungun masquerade was held in front of the palace. Egungun is also connected to the god Sango and the Oyo kingship.

The Egungun costume is elaborate and expensive. It is made of brightly colored, voluminous paneled cloth that covers the dancer entirely and transforms him into the collective spirit of the ancestors. Some Egungun cults accompany these dancers with drums and masks. As the dancer whirls in his characteristic steps of movement, the panels of the elaborate costume flare out, revealing a solid colored lining underneath. This image represents a transformation into another being, like the masker transforming through his costume into the spirit of the ancestor. In the cults that use masks, the costume is part of the mask. The unified whole of the costume, mask, and spirit represents the Egungun.

⁵⁴ M. Drewal, *Yoruba Ritual*, 91.

The masks themselves can be single to multi-faced, zoomorphic to anthropomorphic, naturalistic to abstract.⁵⁵ The widespread variety of costumes and masks depicted results in confusion among scholars as to what exactly Egungun portray. All of these Egungun spirits pay homage to the ancestors, whether they literally depict ancestors or not. As Drewal concisely points out, the only types of Egungun that actually depict ancestral spirits are called *Baba* (Father), and *Iya* (Mother).⁵⁶ The rest of the Egungun honor the ancestor's power, traditions, and wealth, all of which they have passed to their lineage. All of the wide varieties of Egungun types across Yorubaland are connected by their shared reverence of ancestors and the fact that they exist in every Yoruba subgroup.⁵⁷

Egungun spirits are said to judge the living. Robert Farris Thompson explains, "senior Egungun come as ancestors to hear disputes, enforce tradition, and uphold moral standards."⁵⁸ In this sense, Egungun serve a social function. Their fabrics frighten and amaze while their masks range from metaphor to satire, all with the purpose of commenting on society. The varied Egungun cults across Yorubaland have made it difficult to unify and define every element of their practice. Every Egungun festival, however, is meant to assure the return of spirits, ancestors, or otherworld beings.

One of the most documented Egungun varieties is *Onidan*, or "Performer of Miracles." This type of dance involves visual tricks such as "the transformation of two

⁵⁵ See R.O. Rom Kalilu, "Role of Sculptures in Yoruba Egungun Masquerade," *Journal of Black Studies* 22 no.1 (1991), in *JSTOR* (database on-line), accessed November 17, 2009: 19.

⁵⁶ Henry John Drewal, "The Arts of Egungun among Yoruba Peoples," *African Arts* 11 no. 3 (1978), in *JSTOR* (database on-line), accessed March 20, 2010: 18.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

⁵⁸ Robert Farris Thompson, *African Art in Motion* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1974), 221.

sacks into a boa constrictor and the wounding of the serpent by the sword-wielding masquer.”⁵⁹ In addition to the whirling, powerful spirits seen in other Egungun masquerades, *Onidan* has supplemental, comedic characters, which involve Egungun’s social function. A European showing profane affection towards his wife by kissing her in public is especially popular in *Onidan*. Margaret Thompson Drewal explains this skit: “the European female laid her head on the shoulder of her male counterpart as he chucked her under the chin and clutched the sides of her neck with his hands, pulling her forward to kiss her on the lips.”⁶⁰ This public display of affection is comedic as well as absurd to the Yoruba. Furthermore, the strangeness of the couple in a festival of whirling, dangerous spirits makes them conspicuous in the ritual. The two hold hands and smile when in reality, they should be terrified of these spirits. Their expressions of amusement are completely culturally inappropriate for this rite. Furthermore, their European dress makes them obvious Others. His uniform is littered with medals and honors, European symbols of his power, while the Egungun costumed performers, symbols of a lineage’s power, dance around them. Lastly, the Europeans’ clothing is one color and not bright. Their presentation of European power, in the form of honors and medals, contrasts greatly with the Egungun spirits’ depiction of power through dance.

In another popular image, a frightened European female clutches her bag while the European man holds a pen, his mode of communication and, by extension, a symbol of his power during the colonial era. A third popular version of this caricature is the sad

⁵⁹ Drewal, Pemberton, and Abiodun, *Yoruba: Nine Centuries of African Art and Thought*, 179.

⁶⁰ M. Drewal, *Yoruba Ritual*, 176.

European visitor, who is homesick and lost in an unfamiliar country.⁶¹ The magic performed by *Onidan* dancers and the presence of satiric figures including the European, fighting animals, quarrelling co-wives, an overly pregnant woman, a drunk, and a prostitute, among others, creates a strong social commentary that the audience understands.

The use of a humorously oblivious European in the context of powerful ancestral spirits provides a certain apotropaic quality to the use of the European image. By laughing at what is the Other, the masqueraders identify what unites them as belonging to the same group. By satirizing the European sense of dignified modernity, the Yoruba show what they are *not*, thereby reinforcing community values and solidarity.

Furthermore, as Drewal and Pemberton describe: “as the satirical figures staggered, shuffled, or pranced about, the viewer had the amused, uncomfortable impression that caricature and reality were not easily differentiated.”⁶² Margaret Thompson Drewal has further studied the use of parody in her groundbreaking book *Yoruba Ritual*. She states that in Yoruba masquerades, parody indicates “both cultural continuity and change, authority and transgression, involving both creator and partaker in a participatory hermeneutics.”⁶³ The Yoruba use of play in their rituals is extensive and complex. It is not simple mockery but a more elaborate social commentary.

As a commemorative performance for the dead ancestors, Egungun is meant to call upon the power of the past to correct the present. The masquerade is about the presence and power of the Egungun spirits and the continuity of the lineage that

⁶¹ Drewal, Pemberton, and Abiodun, *Yoruba: Nine Centuries of African Art and Thought*, 182.

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ M. Drewal, *Yoruba Ritual*, 4.

possesses the costume. The Yoruba Egungun cult is complex and diverse, satirical and symbolic, imbedded in the past and present. Its usage of satirical figures, especially the presence of Europeans in *Onidan*, mocks the familiar to show a moral precedent in the form of the eminent Egungun spirit. The addition of the comedic presence of the European does not detract from the sheer power of the Egungun since “innovations in [Yoruba] ritual... do not break with tradition but rather are continuations of it in spirit of improvisation.”⁶⁴ Egungun honors the spirits of ancestors through physical representation and the condemnation of asocial cultural practices, especially those typified by the European. Egungun reshapes Yoruba cultural perceptions. The role of the European in this socially crucial ritual, especially in the *Onidan* variety of Egungun, presents both a satire and a powerful commentary on the authority and the power of the spirits to correct the community and enforce societal norms.

The Mami Wata Cult

Spirit possessions, although not choreographed like masquerades, show these same motifs. Although less studied and understood by art historians, spirit possession cults are more widespread than masquerade systems in Africa.⁶⁵ In these rites, the transformation of the individual is more personal. Instead of becoming the spirit that appears in the mask or representing the spirit in a dance, a possession trance merges the devotee with the deity. This slight distinction is central in understanding possession. Possession cults call upon the deity to arrive, take control of the body, and forge a special relationship, offer a special knowledge, or initiate a personal communication with the

⁶⁴ Ibid., 23.

⁶⁵ see Kasfir, *West African Masks and Cultural Systems*, introduction.

possessed. Only chosen and trained individuals may be possessed, which creates and identifies a distinguished and select group of devotees to the deity. This small group shares elevated status as having a special connection with the spirit. The purpose of their possession varies, but it results in a knowledge or ability they would not attain without the help of the spirit. In this way, spirit possession offers a direct contact between individuals and gods. It plays crucial roles in religious and cultural systems.

The worship of Mami Wata in West Africa is arguably the largest possession cult shared across regions on the continent. This cult centers on a female deity who is foreign born, said to be a European named Mami Wata, Pidgin English for “Mother Water.” She is a hybrid figure, half European, half fish, who promises riches in return for her veneration. Her worship is extremely diverse. As Drewal states, “Mami Wata is a varied, complex, and fully expressive system that has drawn inspiration from widely dispersed and diverse sources to forge a exclusively African faith.”⁶⁶ She is most famous for her seductive promises of money as well as her healing ability. Her ability to change lives by improving wealth, fertility, and health is the root of her power, although nothing can be attained if she is not honored appropriately. She bestows fortune and status, yet her power is dangerous and requires sacrifice. In some traditions, the life of a family member (for example, in certain parts of the Democratic Republic of the Congo) or a vow of celibacy (in Nigeria) must be paid to receive her beneficial powers. She is a being that is equally feared and loved. Mami Wata’s complex worship and roles in her cult demonstrate her great power.

⁶⁶ Drewal, Henry John Drewal, “Interpretation, Invention, and Re-Presentation in the Worship of Mami Wata,” *Journal of Folklore Research* 25 no. 1 (1988), in *JSTOR* (database on-line), accessed November 18, 2009: 102.

Mami Wata's hybridity is the source of this power. She is a trans-cultural, adaptable spirit that plays a crucial role in contemporary affairs. As a modern deity, Mami Wata helps in issues other spirits more rarely assist in, such as "gaining entrance to a school or university, passing exams, getting a lucrative 'post,' purchasing a car."⁶⁷

Della Jenkins sums up this role of modernity in her worship:

Mami Wata concerns well being and morally problematic wealth, especially wealth linked with trade, movement, and modernity. *Mami Wata* is involved in newer forms of material riches, power, and prestige, dangerous and conspicuous consumption and rapidly changing economic systems that bring sudden wealth to a few while deepening poverty and misfortune for many others.⁶⁸

Her promise of sudden wealth has repercussions for those who crave it. Her dualistic role of providing and destroying, protecting and punishing, makes her a unique spirit who can provide power in modern culture. She is truly an icon for the new multiple identities of modern Africa. Her many roles in everyday life demonstrate her importance to her worshippers in the modern world.

Africans initially identified Europeans with the ocean in the 15th Century, when the Portuguese first landed on the Guinea Coast. Early European explorers reported that coastal West Africans identified them with the sea at the sight of their ships, which were thought to be emerging from the ocean itself.⁶⁹ Furthermore, coastal West Africans interpreted the images of mermaids and women on Portuguese ship prows as aquatic spirits. As early as 1743, an African ivory carving of a copy of a figurehead from a

⁶⁷ Della Jenkins, "Mammy Wata," in *Igbo Arts: Community and Cosmos*, eds. Herbert M. Cole and Chike C. Aniakor, (Los Angeles: Regents of the University of California, 1984), 75.

⁶⁸ Henry John Drewal, ed., *Sacred Waters: Arts for Mami Wata and Other Divinities in Africa and the Diaspora* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2008), 6.

⁶⁹ Drewal, "Interpretation, Invention, and Re-Presentation in the Worship of Mami Wata," 103.

Portuguese sailing ship reached Europe, clearly showing the transference of the West African belief that Europeans were connected to water spirits.⁷⁰ The foreignness, wealth, and unpredictable behavior of these early Europeans were transposed on their images. These attributes became increasingly important to the West Africans view of Europeans and their female ship prows. As Europeans became associated with water spirits, their unique attributes became important aspects of West African aquatic cult practices and activity.

Mami Wata did not arise in one singular culture at any single moment. She represents a number of foreign-born water deities that with time became identified with her as her fame spread through the region. The most important image in the spread of the Mami Wata cult arrived in 1885 in the form of a chromolithograph. This image imported from Hamburg depicts the then popular theme of the exotic Indian snake charmer. Its arrival had an extraordinary impact on Africa. To those West Africans who first viewed the chromolithograph, the image was interpreted as an exotic European water spirit. Its first African viewers considered this naturalistic image of a female wrapped in snakes depicted from the torso up a real photograph.⁷¹ The woman's long, flowing hair, large hoop earrings, and light complexion stood out as completely foreign. The fact that European sailors brought her image to Africa made her seem European and important. Furthermore, her elaborate jewelry evoked the riches associated with a spirit, and her control of snakes demonstrated her power over nature. The most crucial aspect of this image is that half of the female's body is not depicted. This absence of a lower body was

⁷⁰ Kramer, *The Red Fez*, 227.

⁷¹ Drewal, "Interpretation, Invention, and Re-Presentation in the Worship of Mami Wata," 114.

significant for the African viewers, who believed that the absent part must have been her fishtail. They claimed that this spirit, whom they eventually named Mami Wata, was “hiding her secret” in the part of the chromolithograph not shown.⁷² A combination of factors, including the image’s European provenance, the female’s light complexion, full hair, and elaborate regalia, as well as the cropping of the picture itself, led to its interpretation as a European water deity named Mami Wata. Combining seamlessly with preexisting local water spirit beliefs, this chromolithograph singlehandedly spread the culture of Mami Wata throughout West Africa and beyond.

Whether Mami Wata is a completely new deity or a new form of indigenous water spirit is an ongoing debate.⁷³ What is certain, however, is her quick adoption by already existing religious systems. The Ewe and the Fante are especially noted for their inclusion of Mami Wata in their religious practices. The Ewe practice *Vodu*, in which many deities are integrated. In the 1930’s, Mami Wata was introduced from the Ivory Coast into their religion. Among the Ewe, both priests and priestesses serve Mami Wata. Males serve as spouses to Mami Wata while females are considered her followers. A Christian element is at work in the Ewe understanding of Mami Wata. Since she is considered European, Mami Wata is also believed to be a Christian. In many of her Ewe shrines, Mami Wata is depicted on walls dominating over figures of Catholic priests and even of Jesus.⁷⁴ In this way, she provides a subversive power capable of placating foreign powers or religions in her cult of the Ewe. Her European origins allow her both to have Christian elements and

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ see Drewal, ed., *Sacred Waters*, especially Nevadomsky and Jell-Bahlsen.

⁷⁴ Kofi Asare Opuku and Kathleen O’Brian Wicker, “Abidjan Mamiwater and Aba Yaba: Two Profiles of Mami/ Maame Water Priesthood in Ghana,” in *Sacred Waters: Arts for Mami Wata and Other Divinities in Africa and the Diaspora*, ed. Henry John Drewal (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2008), 179.

to control and dominate them. She incorporates the power of Christianity and of doing so without arousing retaliation or resistance. She is both subversive in her ability to control the European colonialists and their religion and more powerful because she can subsume them.

Mami Wata also arrived in the early 20th century from the Ivory Coast to the Fante in Ghana. An intriguing aspect of this cult is that she is believed to speak only English. Her followers are rigidly trained for three to five years until they are initiated fully into her cult. These two cultures' complete inclusion of Mami Wata into their preexisting religious systems offers two examples of how her cult spread throughout the region. This spread was swift in part because the beliefs were so easily incorporated. Mami Wata was introduced in the right region at the right time, which ensured its endurance and growth to become the large cult that it is today.

In Mami Wata's cult, she chooses her own followers. She communicates to her chosen initiates via dreams and to her mediums through trance. During these communicative sessions, her devotees journey to her home under the sea, where they are given instruction. If one is chosen to be a medium by Mami, she "troubles them in dreams" and makes requests of them, such as having them make her a shrine or carve objects for her veneration.⁷⁵ She chooses her devotees by dropping these signs in dreams or by appearing in disguise in person. Her most famous disguise is that of a beautiful woman in the market, and it creates a dangerous situation for her prospective devotees entering the marketplace. This danger is manifested when signs or "calls" are ignored. Just as she can bring great success if venerated, she can bring misfortune if ignored,

⁷⁵ Drewal, "Interpretation, Invention, and Re-Presentation in the Worship of Mami Wata," 108.

saddling the unfortunate with infertility, poverty, and bad luck. To determine if one has been called by Mami Wata, the candidate must consult with a diviner. If the diviner determines that the candidate has been chosen, he will advise the person to join Mami Wata's cult to appease her. This pattern of troubling dreams, odd run-ins with strangers, and a desire to go to the sea is repeated throughout Mami Wata's various cults. Her chosen worshippers become her initiates for fear of retribution and because she has chosen them for greatness.

When these chosen worshippers are initiated, they become Mami Wata's mediums. Instead of following her to her sea abode as chosen initiates, mediums are treated in quite the opposite way in that *they* call Mami Wata to her shrines. Her presence results in possession. Possession dances are held among her priests and priestesses to communicate with her. In these sessions, Mami Wata enters the bodies of her mediums, who become one with her. Drewal describes a typical Ewe trance:

Shivers, shouts, and disequilibrium signal the onset of possession... A priestess swayed and stared blankly into space... the possessed devotee leaned forward in a dance... the dance evoked paddling and swimming.⁷⁶

The Ewe medium's possession is marked by swimming movements that represent the journey to Mami Wata's water abode. The trance occurs after a dance and a request to speak with the deity. The Ewe coax Mami Wata to arrive, and when she does, she enters her priestess' body to communicate with her. This communication is private but externally shown by the paddling dance movements. This relatively controlled trance is quite different from many other well-documented spirit possessions in Africa.⁷⁷ Instead of some kind of frenzy, Mami Wata mediums become calmer, more in control, and in this

⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁷ See Stoller *Embodying Cultural Memories*.

way more powerful and more knowledgeable in her trance. This kind of possession demarcates Mami Wata's presence as powerful and controlled.

Mami Wata is called by the dance before the possession occurs. For example, in Atakpame, Togo, devotees dance the *Gran'bal*, a European style dance (in the fashion of a Grande Balle) that attracts Mami Wata in a similar way to the swimming dance among the Ewe. Drewal explains, "Gran'bal, [is] a gentle, ballroom-style dance often performed by couples, which takes place, appropriately, on Friday and Saturday nights."⁷⁸ Mami is called by the European dance, which pleases her European sensibilities and makes her devotees become European when they merge with her. The European dance forces the worshippers to disassociate with the self and become, for a moment, like Mami Wata. By becoming dignified vis-à-vis European standards, the followers allow themselves to be possessed by Mami Wata. Identifying with the Other by performing a European dance allows the worshipers to celebrate the power of Mami Wata. As a European born spirit, Mami Wata is an Other, yet she is linked to indigenous religions, which complicates her identity. By celebrating European elements, such as ballroom-style dancing, Mami Wata followers entice her to arrive. Yet, her arrival signals the celebration and the ascendance of indigenous religion over European religions. This complex interaction works in a distinct way to provide a sense of foreign authority to a traditional rite.

Mami Wata's power stems from her identity as a foreign spirit. The objects used to worship her include banquet tables filled with European dishes and food, sunglasses, and mirrors - all objects with a foreign connotation. These elements further promote the

⁷⁸ Drewal, "Interpretation, Invention, and Re-Presentation in the Worship of Mami Wata," 125.

idea of power and authority rooted in otherness. Her European modernity, epitomized by objects that are appropriated for an indigenous use, is a symbol of a hybrid African identity with a European influence. She represents the unapproachable power of the European that becomes approachable and even attainable through her worship with these foreign objects that are accessible to all.

The mirror is especially important to Mami Wata. In the mirror, which is used in ritual settings, “Mami Wata worshippers reflect their constructed image of the Other (the exotic, supernatural entity of Mami Wata) in order to define themselves and to assert control over their world.”⁷⁹ The mirror is thought to be a window to her spiritual realm as well as an object of her European vanity. Its identification with mermaid imagery is also of central importance in its symbolic role in Mami Wata worship. The mirror is another way to “call” Mami Wata to her shrine. Her devotees connect with her by recreating her world in a shrine with varied imported objects.

Devotees make this shrine into a European style table. To decorate her table, Mami Wata devotees place “white cloth, flowers, perfumes, and talcum powder containers.”⁸⁰ Drewal argues that this shrine evokes not only European ladies’ dressing tables, but European dining tables and Christian altars as well.⁸¹ The cosmetics placed on the altar of Mami Wata connect it to the dressing table, the white tablecloth, utensils, flowers, and fruits relate to the dining table, and a crucifix, candles, and flowers are similar to the Christian altar. There is also an emphasis on hygiene and organization, reflecting the foreign values associated with the shrine. High value is placed on the many

⁷⁹ Ibid., 104.

⁸⁰ Ibid., 118.

⁸¹ Ibid.

goods used and their odd range, from a telephone to lemonade, all of them relating to the cult's understanding of what constitutes a European. These objects are used to please and entice Mami Wata to appear and bring fortune. The objects are not random at all but carefully picked for their symbolic reflection of European values.

The Mina of Togo use this European style banquet as the climactic rite in honor of Mami Wata. After a morning of prayer and a day of sacrifice and procession, Mami Wata's devotees sit down to a traditional European dinner.⁸² Drewal explains this banquet:

The participants danced around the table counterclockwise before they sat. The meal began with a benediction followed by the first course- fresh green salad... sweet carbonated drinks were served while the initiates struggled with their utensils as they ate the series of European- style dishes... Conversations seemed stilted and subdued in the formal atmosphere.⁸³

This banquet may seem comical, but its activity is anything but. The Mina devotees act European in honor of Mami Wata. They connect to her power by appealing to her otherness.

This altar is used in a myriad of ways in Mami Wata worship. Another use for the altar occurs before the Mina devotee is initiated. She constructs and decorates the shrine table and writes notes to Mami Wata, which she leaves on the table. These notes are normally requests or questions, which Mami answers by replying either in writing or in the initiate's dreams.⁸⁴ The altar emphasizes literacy and the use of notebooks, the symbol of the colonial district officer. Another way the altar is used is by placing money

⁸² Ibid., 125.

⁸³ Ibid., 126.

⁸⁴ Ibid., 122.

on it. A portion of one's salary is left to Mami Wata on the shrine.⁸⁵ This offering of money could be interpreted through the lens of taxation by colonial administrations. Paying taxes to already wealthy, powerful officers during the colonial era was a required act. The act of giving money for something in return such as infrastructure, education, and stability (although colonial practice did not carry out these promises), was a kind of sacrifice for modernity. Likewise, giving part of one's salary to Mami Wata echoes these same sentiments. The re-appropriation of colonial note taking and taxes for the worship of Mami Wata is certainly ironic and a statement about her power and authority.

To attract and represent the power of Mami Wata, her devotees transform European symbols of wealth and culture into their own. These foreign objects are reinterpreted for an indigenous use. As Drewal states, "Everything is...re-symbolized...in order to control and exploit a force that holds out the hope of wealth and well-being in... Africa."⁸⁶ The power of the European is transformed and appropriated to further empower Mami Wata. Even though her worship is extremely varied and widespread, across the cultures that celebrate her emphasis is placed on her foreign nature. The elements used to worship her epitomize foreign values. By taking control of these foreign elements, Mami Wata's worshipers effectively take control of European power. This symbolic appropriation of the European provides the Mami Wata cult a unique authority. As Kramer discusses, when devotees ask for possession by the foreign presence of Mami Wata, they become the Other, thereby transcending European power in the process.⁸⁷ European power defines Mami Wata as she and her followers eclipse it by

⁸⁵ Ibid.

⁸⁶ Ibid., 132.

⁸⁷ See Kramer, *The Red Fez*, 232- 234.

appropriating its authority. The complex interaction of the foreign and the Other in a possession trance results in an inimitable sense of power in the Mami Wata cult.

The Hauka Cult

Although less widespread than Mami Wata, the Hauka cult is certainly as well known for its association with Europeans. Originated by the Songhay in Niger in the 1920's, the Hauka cult is a political, transgressive movement that was long persecuted by British and French colonials and frowned upon by anthropologists and African academics for its content. The Songhay have an extensive history of spirit possession. Their possession dance, the *holey hori*, has been a continually changing cultural form. To become possessed among the Songhay, music played on the monochord violin (called a *godji*) and the calabash drum (the *gasi*) must be combined with the recitation of a verse of praise poetry for the spirit along with the movement of the mediums in specific dances.⁸⁸ The many spirit possession dances of the Songhay demonstrate the importance of trance to their religion.

The Hauka cult is their best-known form of spirit possession. In the early 1920's, Hauka spirits originated as a response to French colonialism in Niger. Hauka spirits are in fact the spirits of Europeans, mostly colonial officers. There are over fifty Hauka spirits, ranging from doctors to lawyers to generals, who possess mediums in a powerful trance. These spirit possessions are held in times of suspected witchcraft, Hauka initiations, and annual festivals welcoming the return of the Hauka spirits. The multilayered Hauka cult is a rich addition to the famous Songhay spirit possessions.

⁸⁸ Paul Stoller, "Horrorific Comedy: Cultural Resistance and the Hauka Movement in Niger," *Ethos* 12 no. 2 (1984), in *JSTOR* (on-line database), accessed February 5, 2010: 173.

The Hauka cult has a complex history tied to the presence of colonialism. “Hauka” is from the Hausa word for “craziness.” In 1898, this craziness arrived in the form of the French, who completely overturned Songhay culture. The first Hauka dance recorded occurred in 1925 in the village of Chikal, where Hauka spirits possessed a group of sixty males and females. The earliest Hauka spirits clearly related to influential European figures. At this possession were the spirits of King Zuzi, a colonial chief justice, and Gomno Malia, the governor of the Red Sea. The French were horrified by this mockery and expelled the mediums from the area for inviting insubordination, which effectively spread the group’s influence through migration. From this one dance, the Hauka cult spread. Declared enemies by the French, the Hauka movement was exiled and soon spread to Ghana in 1929 with migrant laborers from Niger.⁸⁹ Under a new colonial authority, the British, the Hauka movement met the same resistance as in Niger. It was repeatedly banned, but Hauka possessions occurred nonetheless, perhaps spurred by this resistance. Despite Ghanaian independence in 1960, the Hauka movement remained strong as recently as 1994. The continuation of the cult beyond the end of colonial rule indicates that its rituals are not simply about anti-colonialism. Other factors are at work in the Hauka movement, such as the definition of traditional culture, the gain of political power, and the elevation of the spirit to a higher realm.

The most famous documentation and interpretation of the cult is by Jean Rouch and his controversial ethnographic film *Les Maitres Fous*.⁹⁰ In the film, a group of men meet outside of Accra under pieces of cloth they call “Union Jack.” Some wear pith helmets and hold wooden rifles. These men are mediums of the Hauka and are trying to

⁸⁹ Stoller, *Embodying Colonial Memories*, 126.

⁹⁰ Jean Rouch, dir. *Les Maitres Fous*. Les Film de la Pleiade, 1955.

become possessed. The ceremony starts with a public confession of bad deeds or thoughts followed by a payment of fines, perhaps evoking colonial taxation. A whistle signals the mediums to line up in two lines: those who are innocent and obedient to the Hauka and those who have made a public confession. Officers with whips and rifles maintain order. As they pass the ranks and aim their rifles at a medium, he becomes possessed for a brief period. After a sacrifice of a goat and hen, only those who are obedient to the Hauka remain present.

Musicians begin to play as the mediums march in a circle. Slowly, men become possessed. This possession takes many forms. Kramer explains the various possessions, “one portrayed a locomotive, driving back and forth with mechanical movements; another did drill practice, walking with the gait of the British soldier, while others saluted or inspected something.”⁹¹ Many of the men froth at the mouth and perform feats of strength such as burning their skin with fire. The Hauka speak French, order others around, and make instructions to all present. The possession is a play on British and French colonial activity, including military parades. The possession climaxes as the Hauka spirit governor calls a conference. The conference decides to kill and cook a dog, which the possessed men eat from a boiling pot. This aspect of the film shocked viewers and made the British and French ban the film as offensive.

The sacrifice of the dog has appalled many and has been continually misinterpreted. The dog’s killing is not a simple sacrifice or metaphor for British colonial savagery but instead serves as proof of possession. Before the cult moved to Ghana, the climactic rite in Niger was killing and eating a pig, an extreme taboo for this

⁹¹ Kramer, *The Red Fez*, 135.

largely devout Islamic area.⁹² This act of breaking a taboo proved they were no longer Muslim men but instead had been transformed into Europeans. After the move to Christian Ghana, the act of eating a dog, beloved by the British, likewise demonstrated the power of the Hauka spirits. Furthermore, the resistance to pain the possessed men show by reaching into a boiling pot demonstrates this transformation. The film ends with the same mediums the day after the possession. The men show happiness and tranquility over their actions on the previous day. The nature of the possession is not simply a “savage” a demonstration but rather a statement of power.

The Hauka cult is difficult to categorize. Originally spread by a group of Nigerian migrant workers, strangers to Ghana themselves, the Hauka movement plays into the ritual use of the Other. Furthermore, the spirits that possess the mediums are powerful beings like the colonials they portray. These spirits transform the Songhay into a spirit just as they transform the dignified, stoic European into an ecstatic and humorous figure. This transformation demonstrates the power of the Hauka, who can permeate African culture like the colonial officers, but can then be released. This cathartic practice allows the Songhay to be ruled by European spirits yet effectively control them within their bodies and regain their identities after the possession.

This possession involves a wide range of behavior. Jean Rouch’s film shows only one side of the Hauka possession. The complex nature of the movement is revealed if one looks at all aspects of its practices. For example, Paul Stoller describes another Hauka possession:

Suddenly, a young man... vomited up black liquid. I thought he was about to die... He threw himself to the ground, threw sand all over his

⁹² Ibid., 136.

body, and then put large amounts of sand into his open mouth. Seeing me, he spat sand in my direction... his eyes were bulging and a blood vessel in his forehead was throbbing. He groaned like a beast and saliva was frothing from his mouth.⁹³

Stoller's observation of a frenzied, violent possession is similar in some ways to Rouch's observations, but the militaristic qualities of *Les Maitres Fous* are absent. Furthermore, Stoller's account later points out that once the Hauka spirit was greeted formally, it did not harm but instead threw only verbal insults, such as: "Your father has no balls" and "Your mother has no tits."⁹⁴ In Stoller's observation, the dignified European officers turn into crass, comedic characters. This Hauka possession marks a series of transformations. The first is a transformation of the medium into the spirit. Next, the spirit becomes a fearful, violent European. Lastly, the spirit changes from frightening to comedic. The possession that Stoller recalls was meant as entertainment for the audience. Its purpose was to create laughs. This possession first horrifies onlookers as any frenzied action might but is soon transformed into a comedy. The use of laughter in the face of an aggressive spirit is apotropaic and brings an element of play to the serious Hauka possession.

A second possession witnessed by Stoller is much calmer and centers around a meeting of the Hauka spirits. This convergence, called a Roundtable, plays on a meeting of European officers. In this particular possession, a trial was underway for a male who had an affair with a friend's wife.⁹⁵ This possession is held to decide the method of discipline. The Hauka are called as judges for the community problem. In this way, the mediums reinforce the power of the Hauka by asking them to solve community-wide

⁹³ Stoller, "Horrorific Comedy," 166.

⁹⁴ Stoller, "Horrorific Comedy," 166.

⁹⁵ Stoller, *Embodying Colonial Memories*, 5.

problems. The European identity of the Hauka makes them possess European values such as efficiency, education, and discipline. This use of the presence of European spirits provides the mediums with authority to decide social issues.

The terrifying aspect of the Hauka possession is crucial to its interpretation and should not be understated. Jean Rouch's film demonstrates this element in its portrayal of British colonial officers killing and eating a dog. Stoller's violent, frothing medium further demonstrates this fearful aspect. Despite these horrifying events, the Hauka are also comedic. They mock European dignity in many forms. This playful aspect satirizes the European with his ridiculous military goose-stepping and by the use of ritual insults, which ridicule the formality of Europeans. Other mockery comes from stereotyping Europeans. For example, a doctor Hauka spirit injects everyone with a syringe, ill or not, and as Rouch observed, some Hauka drink perfume instead of wearing it.⁹⁶ The inversion of roles and the reversal of status are key to the Hauka movement. Violence, fear, comedy, and reversal all play into the role of the Hauka cult.

The Songhay use the Hauka cult in a myriad of ways, all tied to the creation of a self-identity in a complex world. Acting as Europeans in a violent or flamboyant way clearly serve a purpose. Stoller interprets this role-play of violence and comedy as a form of cultural resistance but the Hauka cult is actually much more complex. By acting European, there is certainly an aspect of resistance. The Songhay are critical of the European presence and demonstrate that by mocking its formality and stereotyping its violence. But there is also a commentary on power and authority many scholars

⁹⁶ John Marshall and John W. Adams, "Jean Rouch Talks about His Films to John Marshall and John W. Adams," *American Anthropologist* 80 no. 4 (1978), in *JSTOR* (database on-line), accessed February 5, 2010: 1008.

overlook. The power of the colonial officers is metaphorically “borrowed” by the Songhay mediums that become possessed. They demonstrate this power in marvelous feats of strength and in breaking taboos. This appropriation of European power, in conjuncture with its ridicule of European conduct, brings a unique aspect of play to the ritual. The Songhay tap into the power of the European and redefine this power to master it. They use a powerful combination of mockery and respect to make sense of their own cultural identity in the face of a European force. By symbolically being taken over by powerful European spirits, the Songhay use the Other to create a sense of authority, even as they undermine that authority.

Conclusion

The presence of the European in such culturally important rituals has long puzzled scholars. The European can be seen in many other cultures and regions of the African continent, including the Luvale- speaking people of Zambia, the Mende of Sierra Leone, the Shona of Zimbabwe and Mozambique, the famed Asante of Ghana, the Cokwe of the Democratic Republic of the Congo, and countless others. Traces of the European are felt from colonial encounters across Africa. How these cultures and groups interpret this encounter in their cultural practices varies, but in each case they express a deeply felt response to the foreignness and the power that so disrupted their lives.

The Igbo and Yoruba use the European in powerful masquerades to add a sense of authority to those they venerate. Lengthy studies of these cultures are numerous but the usage of foreign characters or representations in cultural activities is often not researched. Those that have examined this presence have often understated its significance. The

European image is complex and multilayered in these masquerades, requiring many perspectives to understand the intricacies of its meaning.

As opposed to masquerades, the possession cults of Mami Wata and the Hauka certainly have been studied and their usage of the European analyzed, but this foreign element is commonly misinterpreted as a simple attack on the Western presence. Mami Wata and the Hauka both provide a controlling presence that unifies mediums under an authoritative spirit that promises success. Mockery and veneration, self-loss and self-discovery, and reclaiming European emblems and values as African are key elements in both cults. There is an element of subversion in these cults, but other concerns such as appropriation, mimesis, and self-reflection play into their practices.

The study of masquerades and spirit possession cults in tandem reveals that these two kinds of ritual utilize similar elements to portray and incorporate the European. Subthemes of European ridiculous self-absorption and ideals of dignity play into every masquerade and spirit possession discussed. These extravagances of status are also commented on by the portrayal of inappropriate European emotions. For example, the laughter and smiling of a European couple in Egungun, the smiling European Gelede mask, the grimace on the European Okperegede character, and the comedic insults thrown by the Hauka, all demonstrate inappropriately lighthearted behavior in an ancestral or critical rite. Sexuality is another theme used in these rituals. In Okperegede, a jealous Asufu chases a European from his wives, Mami Wata orders some of her male followers to be celibate, and the Egungun European couple kiss and hold hands in public. The sexuality associated with the European plays into his mockery or depiction as an outsider. Emblems of the European's foreign nature are also used in many of these

rituals. The Gelede mask of a 20th century car and Mami Wata's altars with various foreign objects both use emblems of European power to add potency to their rituals. Other ways to depict the stranger include speaking in a foreign language, such as the Hauka spirits who speak French and Mami Wata's cult in Ghana, whose deity speaks only English. Lastly, the symbols of colonialism are used throughout these rituals to depict the European. The pith helmet and khaki suit of district officers appear in Ijele masks, the Okperegede masquerade, and in the Hauka cult. Likewise, the notebooks of officers appear in Okperegede and Mami Wata altars. These various examples of shared elements across cultures and ritual types reveal that if regional groups are compared and masquerades and spirit possession cults are studied together, a deeper understanding of a shared presence, such as the European, can be attained.

These varied West African masquerades and spirit possession cults use the European in a complex way that is often overlooked or simplified among scholars. The presence of the European among the rituals of the Igbo and Yoruba, the cults of Mami Wata, and the Hauka movement cannot be explained as simply as an angry response to colonialism. There is no single way the European is perceived or represented in these cultures. Instead, the European image is used in myriad ways to promote subjectivity in these West African groups by identifying what is the "Other" and so, by extension, what is the self. The use of play and power in the appropriation of a foreign image leads to a distinctly African theatrical experience that derives authority from this duality and defines a new modern identity based on a synthesis of African tradition and European images of power.

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